



Curiosity: re:collect interventions

a collaborative arts and heritage project

2014-2015

SHREWSBURY
MUSEUM
& ART
GALLERY

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Museum and Art Gallery

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The Cabinet of Curiosity

Introduction

In 2011 Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery (SMAG) and Shropshire Council invited eight local artists to participate in an 18-month 'professional development' project co-funded by the Arts Council England (ACE). The project involved support for visits to exhibitions, mentoring, and exhibiting work inspired by heritage. When it ended, six of the artists decided to apply for further ACE funding to develop their skills in making art in a heritage context, working collaboratively and exhibiting. They called the group *re:collect*. This report is part of the evaluation of that partnership so far, an accounting for funders and supporters, a celebration of achievements and a review of the lessons learnt. The six artists embraced evaluating their work and partnerships with the same idiosyncratic enthusiasm with which they took on the challenge of making and promoting site-specific artwork in a variety of heritage venues. However, this report has been collated and written by myself as one of the artists and as a professional evaluator of creative projects; so it may sometimes reflect a tension between insider and outsider, and remains a personal view.

Dr Sue Challis³ 2016



A visitor writes a poetic response to *re:collect's Cabinet of Curiosity* at the Much Wenlock Poetry Festival April 2015

Summary of project aims and activity



Elizabeth Turner discusses her work in the Museum context on a public Artist's Tour during the first group show, *Curiosity:re:collect interventions*

The project had three formal aims:

- to create new artworks inspired by heritage settings
- to promote them to new audiences
- to facilitate the artistic and professional development of the *re:collect* artists' group.

Over 63 new pieces of artwork were created during the project for six different venues – from tiny interventions and 'found' collections to elaborately crafted objects, installations and films – some presented in a specially made wooden '*Cabinet of Curiosity*'. It began with a planned group show as part of the launch of the new Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery in 2014. Subsequently, Shropshire Arts Officer Alexa Pugh commissioned another group show *The First Casualty of War is Truth*, to commemorate the anniversary of the start of World War I. Later in 2015, as the *Cabinet of Curiosity* toured, it also featured in an exhibition organised by one of the *re:collect* group in Powis Castle. *The Elephant in the Room Conversations*, curated by *re:collect*'s Jill Impey, featuring ten artists responding to the Castle's heritage collections. Following the end of the initial Arts Council funded project, *re:collect* went on to make work in the *Cabinet* for Wrexham Museum in Clwyd, taking the group's collective activity into 2016. During the project two *re:collect* artists co-founded Shrewsbury's first collective art studio and exhibition space, *Participate*, in an abandoned town centre supermarket.



Wrekin View (detail) Installation at Shrewsbury Museum, *Curiosity: re:collect interventions* (Cotton fabric, found objects, map; 1500mm x 2500mm x 150mm);

Julie Edwards

Overall, *re:collect* estimates that more than 51,000 people visited the various artworks and exhibitions during 2014-2015. The first group show, *Curiosity:re:collect interventions* at Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery (SMAG), ran for longer than the few weeks planned and several artworks were retained for over 350 days (to date) amongst the museum displays, including in a free-entry gallery which attracts 'non-traditional' museum and gallery visitors. The Museum estimated that 30,700 visitors passed through the exhibition and artworks sites in this period. The National Trust estimated that 14,655 people passed through the Powis Castle exhibition areas. The Participate exhibition was in a town centre shopping arcade and attracted high numbers of passing people (2,000 plus), especially families, many of whom (in discussion with artists) said they were not habitual gallery visitors. Visitor feedback collected by *re:collect* and the venues was detailed, mostly thoughtful and generally positive. This feedback and the experience of working together with SMAG and the museum Friends voluntary group was undoubtedly a factor in the subsequent commission for the group to mount a successful WWI themed exhibition in the Museum which raised the group's profile further.

Such a high level of activity was intense and challenging. The group met frequently. The experience of meeting fairly rapid deadlines for site specific work was highly valued by the artists for artistic and professional development. The project (especially the *Cabinet*) required artists to extend their practice and experiment, using new materials or genres, including interactive pieces. To a greater or lesser extent, the artists felt they could show evidence that their professional skills and confidence had increased – and almost all identified ‘making collaborative work’ as a new skill. The most significant learning may have been a better understanding of the time and cost of producing new artwork. In an online survey, project partners and venue staff and volunteers rated the group’s professional organisational and communication skills as ‘mostly effective’ or ‘very effective’, specifying ‘quick to solve problems’, ‘good at communicating’ etc, saying they would like to work with the group again.

Comments from the public about the quality of the artworks were detailed and more varied, for example in a wide range of views about how the work and the venues interacted. All of the artists valued the occasional structured ‘group crits’ discussing individual artworks between them. However, although a highly reflective project, with formal discussions of artistic aims and quality, generally it was felt that the balance of group activity tended too much towards professional and practical issues and, in retrospect, more time for shared reflection on arts practice would have improved its quality. This evaluation also recommends that artists would have benefited from input from an external professional curator.



Detail of **Jill Impey's** *Being Human Project* in the context of the collection in Shrewsbury Museum for *Curiosity:re:collect interventions*

Summary of findings

1. The project met its aims for producing and exhibiting new work inspired by heritage and for facilitating the professional development of its artists and the group
2. To a lesser extent it also met its aim of developing its artists' aesthetic practices
3. The opportunity to develop collaborative aesthetic practice was not as fully explored
4. It exceeded its targets for making new work and reached far greater audience numbers than expected
5. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that it met its aim of promoting arts and heritage to *new* audiences
6. It produced a solid legacy of individual and collaborative participatory arts practices which have continued to develop after project end
7. Lessons about working in a heritage setting were clearly learnt and shared by the group
8. Collection of qualitative data about the experience and the impact of the project was rich and varied, although of variable quality; good use was made of venues' quantitative data collections

Recommendations for future projects

1. The balance of artistic development and the exigencies of exhibiting collaboratively needs to be protected in a structured way
2. The artists' and visitor experience of exhibitions would benefit from the input of a professional arts and heritage curator
3. Greater attention should be given to the concept of collaborative aesthetics, particularly the opportunities offered by combining disparate practices
4. The lessons about good practice in a heritage setting described in this report, which intensify the impact of the work for visitors and meet the aims of the sector, can be taken forward
5. Evaluation can be an integrated process welcomed and undertaken by artists but to be fully effective may require further training

The artists

This is how the artists described themselves and their work for *re:collect*'s first group show in 2014 in the new Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery



Jill Impey, film and installation artist, explores the formation of human identity and culture in relation to place, heritage and our collective history of migration. Focusing on the role of the artist revealing truths, through notions of shifting borders, boundaries and thresholds. Exhibiting ACE funded 'beinghumanproject' a 3-screen installation featuring young people from the West Midlands responding to their local art gallery collections, and revealing their relationships with the wider world through moments of recognition of identity, community and cultural exchange. Edited clips from the films are presented as QR coded postcards installed around the museum in vitrines they form a commentary on museum objects highlighting youthful concerns and associations.



Jacqui Dodds' practice revolves around memories of places visited. Jacqui then retraces, relives images and feelings of these spaces and with these ideas in mind creates her own narrative and essence of the place and objects within them in print and painting. *The Space Between* was a response to the snow laden landscape, the herringbone floor and the artefacts in the Museum at Wroxeter Roman City. Jacqui lives in Shropshire, is a member of Birmingham Printmakers, her work is exhibited nationally and in 2014 Jacqui was a finalist in the neo:print Prize, and the Nottingham Castle Open exhibition.



Julie Edwards is an installation artist and sculptor inspired by the natural environment, social history and place. Themes of time, change and renewal can be found in her work. Materials are carefully chosen for their relevance to the idea or site. Julie's work is challenging and questioning, subtle and emotive with a powerful presence.

She produces sensitive work that presents the viewer with something that could have been overlooked. The poetic presentation of the work also holds a concept of the negative and the journey from the negative. Essentially her work is about change, the transience of time; moments on a collective journey.

Elizabeth Turner's artwork explores ideas about memory and personal mapmaking of the landscape. How we remember places and journeys not as a whole but as a collection of fragments that constantly change. Her sculptures often combine architectural forms with fragments of imagery and create a dialogue between object making and distances viewed. Her artwork has been exhibited in Newcastle, London and Glasgow.

From Wyle Cop to the Moon is inspired by Henry Blunt a 19th century Shrewsbury chemist who built his own telescope. Blunt's electrotype models of the moon's surface brought large areas of a very distant landscape within reach.





Ann Kelcey is a ceramic and mixed media artist with a studio workshop in Clun, South Shropshire. Her work is inspired by European Bronze Age artefacts, and by her experience as artist in residence at a 'tell' settlement in Hungary.

The sense of direct connection with people from a bygone age through this experience has made her appreciate more than ever that an object or fragment has a whole history and cultural story beyond the tangible. Ann hopes to cross the boundaries of time and inspire others to appreciate the skills and artistic sensibilities of prehistoric makers, and to ponder on the wider social and domestic contexts of such artefacts.

Sue Challis' work explores the way we try to make sense of the past through our contemporary experience, always looking for connections and fit. *Unguided Tour* was inspired by a visit to Pompeii and reading Sontag's essay of the same name; *Tap Tap* (for the Much Wenlock Poetry Festival) is a textual riff on this theme, questions we might ask the long-dead if we could about the objects they leave behind.

Sue lives in Shropshire and works nationally and internationally. Her artwork, often about the translation of ideas through forms, 'languages' and genres, has shown in London, the US and Cairo.



The Cabinet of Curiosity

Cabinets of Curiosity, Wunderkammer, were C16th or earlier precursors of museums, associated with uncategorisable or as yet undefined collections. The concept offered *re:collect* a chance to make a collective artwork separately. Each artist made her own investigation of each new venue and her own response to the heritage and to the spaces and possibilities of the *Cabinet*. The *Cabinet* design evolved during the project, as artworks were added, but essentially it offered small platforms, drawers, video screens, boxes and surfaces. Lids were lifted to trigger sound recordings, lights shone in tiny drawers. Visitors must touch and experiment in order to see everything and most things could be handled.

re:collect artist **Elizabeth Turner** built the Cabinet with help from her *Sculpturelogic* partner Keith Ashford



How did the cabinet 'work' ?

The diversity of the artworks in the Cabinet was often unexpected or new to visitors (feedback suggested): printmaking; textiles; mixed media installations; ceramics; digital design; photography; video; light/sound; text pieces; interactive and 'hands on' works. The theme of *collections* ran through each exhibition, with a number of 'found objects – plastic toys, second hand amateur paintings, feathers, stones, photographs, little boxes and bones – some 'rectified', some 'as seen' – appearing and disappearing from the Cabinet in each iteration. Conversations and comments suggested that the concept of the Cabinet, and the immediate link many people made to their own cherished or hoarded objects, enabled the presence of these sometimes subversive objects in a piece of 'art' to remain unchallenged and possibly unchallenging. Even when the artists' intentions were quite different, the Cabinet theme focused attention on the tactile, material qualities of the pieces. (This was not obvious in the WWI exhibition without the Cabinet).



Textile installation in Cabinet (detail) , inspired by Unitarian Church organ pipes, Ann Kelcey



Curiosity re:collect interventions
@ The Music Hall, Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery
November 8th. 2014-February 28th. 2015

Although for each new venue checks were made about the availability of the two video screens, on the whole artists added work without reference to the group. Artworks in the Cabinet were varied in terms of emphasis and intent - to please, to shock, to intrigue - conceptual alongside traditional. Time taken and skills used varied too: cheap plastic dinosaurs (in Darwin's church) sat alongside highly crafted tiny handmade ceramic shoes or blind embossed prints; textile installations alongside digital prints, sound and video (some sophisticated high-definition, some mobile phone); interactive alongside visual. An important impact of this disparate collection must have been a result of the interaction of the pieces with each other and the faux antique wooden Cabinet itself. British artist John Murphy's 2004 exhibition *And Things Throw Light on Things* at the Ikon Birmingham used a similar juxtaposition of his own work with 'old Masters' to provoke new readings and implicit comments on relationships. However, this was a conceptual potential unexplored in re:collect's group and individual statements, where the Cabinet was represented as a set of individual works forming a random collection responding to heritage stimuli and echoing the Wunderkammer of the past. Except perhaps in a poem left at the Wenlock Poetry Festival which referred to two pieces suggesting an interaction¹³ but

Flier for the *Curiosity, re:collect interventions* and Cabinet exhibition in Shrewsbury Museum designed by **Jill Impey**



Interrelationships between heritage collections and artworks were more easily explored than those between the artworks themselves.

Detail: **Ann Kelcey** in *Cabinet*

didn't comment on it (see P19), visitor comments (perhaps because of this) were framed in this way too. More importantly perhaps it was also largely unexplored in *re:collect* group discussions.

There were two consequences of this. Firstly, the Cabinet definitely did work as a charming and engaging – sometimes thought-provoking – heritage-inspired collection. But the potential to explore the interrelationship between the works and ideas of the different artists in the group was lost. Visitors were invited (in artist statements) to consider the relationship of the individual artworks which sometimes accompanied the Cabinet with the heritage collections and venues (particularly in Shrewsbury and Wrexham Museums and the Unitarian Church), and they often did; but they were not helped to make this connection *within* the Cabinet.

Second, this lack of what may have potentially been quite challenging discussions about individual artists' intentions, concepts and practices reinforced the failure to fully grasp the opportunity to develop artistic practices through aesthetic collaboration or reflection. Lack of understandings and sharing ideas were played out occasionally instead through tensions about curation and commitment which remained unresolved throughout the project.

It may be that the Group Crits challenged 'visitor feedback' as the key criteria for the artworks' success: this depended of course on what individual artists in the group hoped to achieve. Artists particularly valued visitor feedback which described 'engagement', that is, emotional or intellectual responses. This relates to the artists' desire to 'connect' or convey meaning, expressed in their original aims.

Comment books were left at all the exhibitions but received few comments without active encouragement. Even so, these tended to be general statements of praise which, although sometimes heartwarming, were of less interest to the artists than the more detailed feedback sheets asking specific questions, or similar face to face pleas. At the first *Curiosity* exhibition at the Shrewsbury Museum and Gallery, a detailed questionnaire was completed by 25 people and another 30 detailed written comments (i.e. at least three paragraphs) in response to personal requests were handed in.

Public feedback on the artworks



Ann Kelcey gives a public Artist's Tour of the artwork in the context of the Museum collection during *Curiosity:re:collect interventions*

'The approach is to address and challenge audience expectations and preconceptions by producing contemporary projects that are imaginative, engaging and encourage further investigation into context and history'.

Arts and Heritage 2012

Audience feedback made it clear that the Cabinet of Curiosity was a very accessible introduction to the link between contemporary art and heritage collections. Nevertheless, challenging and powerful work formed a part of each new Cabinet, alongside more familiar 'collections'. It may have served as a bridge between the heritage sites and the individual works *re:collect* members exhibited, some of which challenged some Museum-goers. Despite this, audience feedback repeatedly commented on how the artworks resonated with objects in the Museum collection or visitors own histories, provoking them to 'look at things differently'.

However, depth or quality of engagement – or the 'newness' of visitors to contemporary art, was harder to measure. The collection of visitor feedback was a constant if variable feature of the project. This ranged from detailed questionnaires, requested open-ended written comments and brief surveys, each designed by different artists in the group and asking different questions. This evaluation recommends that more training is needed to help artists produce relevant and



Trilobite (detail) (Blind embossed print) **Jacqui Dodds**

'The Cabinet, open to exploration, touch, with mysteries: counterpoint - C19th glass cabinet on lower floor with birds eggs, seashells'

'A bit hard to know where all the art pieces are in the Museum – but maybe that's the point?'

'Art should be a dialogue like this'

comparable feedback that could be aggregated in a complex project and accumulated over time. We concluded that face to face exhortations for feedback produced the most interesting qualitative data and that quantitative data about the audience was not of prime concern of the group. However, the venues themselves (although veering towards a white middle class visitor demographic) were diverse; the church congregation and highly accessible shopping centre venue was recorded as attracting non-arts audiences, as were some of the workshops, and the poetry festival and heritage venues exposed contemporary art to audiences not expecting to see it - many of whom changed the artwork by adding to it or interacting with it.



Animated discussion of **Jill Impey's** *Being Human Project* videos in *Curiosity re:collect interventions* exhibition at SMAG which received much praise for 'inserting' young people into heritage settings



'Incredible how something which looks so simple [lino prints in Roman Gallery] can have such a deep and long-ranging history. Love how all the mediums sit alongside each other'

'I'm looking forward to how the Cabinet develops on tour!'
(Extracts from written visitor feedback)

(Left) The Unitarian Church congregation responded to the *Cabinet* by making their own – and first – exhibition. We regarded this as a palpable endorsement of the quality of the *Cabinet* as engaging art.

Much Wenlock Poetry Festival, April 2015

Several new pieces of art were made for the two-day Much Wenlock International Poetry Festival, and visitors were specifically invited to make a poetic response to the Cabinet. This was the first time the Festival had hosted an interactive visual artwork.

Although labour intensive (artist-invigilated), this was a highly successful venue for the work. Organisers estimated that around a thousand people passed through this prestigious event. Over 100 were logged as actively interacting with the Cabinet and the artists, including Ann Kelcey's clay 'poetry bowl' workshop. Visitors were invited to write their own poems in response (many did), read a pull-out tape poem and listen to a recording of poet Mary Williams, winner of the 2013 Hippocrates NHS Prize for Poetry and Medicine. Mary met with the group beforehand and worked with the public alongside the Cabinet for some of the Festival, encouraging them to write their own responses to the Cabinet – for an example, see the poem in the picture overleaf.

Visitors were asked to suggest further venues for the Cabinet (none of which were taken up at time of writing). Almost all felt that the Cabinet was a positive addition to the Festival because of its tactile, visual or interactive qualities, for some a contrast with other events- 'Not sitting down!', 'The tapes with poetry because it was nice to move something to read it'. There was some expression that the material objects in the Cabinet *extended* the literary imagination.

Engagement was linked to the 'hidden' nature of things in the Cabinet – 'I opened the cupboard with the knob and heard some talking!'; the 'rich and varied' collection - 'I handled the stereoscope and it reminded me of one we had at home when I was a child'. People made links to their own experience of objects – 'It reassures me about clutter I can never deal with'; and vowed to make their own collections.



*'I saw freaky little people with
colourful hair'*

*'I love the random nature of
the things'*

'Opening drawers, lifting lids'

'I wrote a poem in response'

From written visitor feedback

diversification of structure. In an extremely small area, especially if freely open to immigration, and where the contest between individual and individual must be very severe, we always find great diversity in its inhabitants.



Memory ratchets
back
a tape
of words
not seeds or
teeth but tiny
shoes
Jean Atkin



Memory ratchets
back

a tape
of words

not seeds or
teeth but tiny
shoes

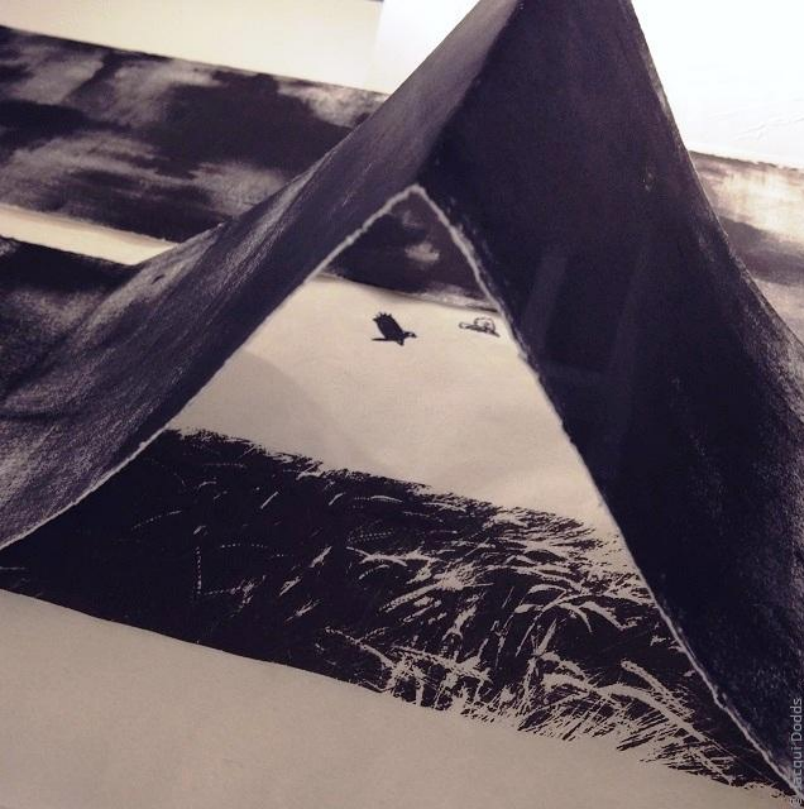
Jean Atkin
Poem left in Cabinet

The First Casualty of War is Truth **re:collect group show June-July 2015** **Artists' comments**

I approached this piece of work through the WW1 poem 'Lost in France' by Ernest Rhys and in an abstract way as the 'truth' is what people hold to be true in their lives, their characteristics, way of living, beliefs, thoughts etc. and war brings all these to a standstill, ideas with which the poem resonates.

This exhibition enabled me to contribute to local and national remembrance of the First World War through referencing a poem in my work, something new for me, whilst touching on the casualty of war and its losses.

Jacqui Dodds



Lost in France, (detail) Jacqui Dodds

My mixed-media installation 'Known only to God' was a tribute to the many thousands of men who lost their lives fighting in the First World War, and for whom there is no known grave. I found the entire process from my research through conceptualizing then realizing my installation to be a profoundly moving, and at times distressing experience. I felt a huge sense of responsibility to create something that would be thought provoking, and that would sit well as part of a group exhibition. The subject matter as well as the approach I took were a huge challenge.

Ann Kelcey



Known only to God, (detail), Ann Kelcey

BoG Standard is inspired by the current revisiting in the media of the incomprehensible scale of casualties of the Great War. Statistics about dead, wounded or missing soldiers as percentages of each army involved (35.5% of British forces, 76.3% of Russian and 64.9% of German) underline how British centric our media coverage continues to be to this day.

The origin of the phrase “Bog Standard” dates from between the World Wars when the only precision engineering facilities in Europe were in Britain and Germany. Instruments were therefore calibrated to 'BoG' (British or German) Standard.

The artwork also refers to the fighting of 1917 at Passchendaele, where the scale of the fatalities was so great that for each individual death only two inches of ground was re-taken by the Allies. As the Allied soldiers emerged from the trenches into the German fire, the German army aimed for their knees as the most effective way to stop the advance; a scythe formed of lead bullets.

It was exciting to be given the opportunity to create and exhibit work as part of the WW1 commemoration events. Although the subject was extremely daunting at first, it not being the type of area I have previously explored in my artwork, I felt it challenged me in a positive way. I have already further exhibited my artwork in another venue, and have been asked to show it along with an artwork by a printmaker on a similar theme, next year

Elizabeth Turner



BoG Standard (1m x .5m. cast iron, tin, soil) Elizabeth Turner

The work *Our* is about personal loss of loved ones and the family as a casualty of war. It is inspired by the artist's family mementoes of WWI, consisting of medals, photographs, memorial ribbons and some drawings from a small notebook. It was nice to be invited to make some work and be given a budget, rather than having to fight for funding. We had several months to research and make the work, which was good, but didn't find out that we would have to provide our own display cases until the last minute. In future, I will plan and budget for display equipment. Fortunately, we were given funds for lighting which really helped to show off the work. In the run up to the exhibition we were only aware of each other's work through sharing initial proposals, so when all the work was installed it looked amazing: it worked together really well.

Julie Edwards

Right (detail) *Our* (mixed media), Julie Edwards



Below (detail) *Pack up your troubles* (graphite mono- print with acrylic panels, 1mx4m), Sue Challis



Pack Up Your troubles (in your old kitbag and smile, smile, smile) was a massive hit at home and in the trenches during World War 1, playing a role of suppressing dissent and raising morale; pianolas (mechanical pianos) were a significant medium for their dissemination. For this work I bought and had restored a 100-year old pianola. Experimenting with the perforated music rolls led me to this long, map-like piece where the notes form tracers punctuating desolate landscapes created by graphite powder and circular 'blasts'. It was interesting to make on-site work, adapting to sudden changes in available space and acoustic issues, being pushed by practical problems to abandon a superfluous sound recording.

Sue Challis



No trees were harmed in the making of this lie (installation with wood, film and sound), Jill Impey

The First Casualty of War is Truth evoked many positive responses in written and verbal feedback from visitors and staff, particularly as a group show which, although inspired by a familiar theme, produced 'highly personal and wildly different interpretations' which 'left room for my own thoughts' (visitor comment).

Jill Impey's installation stands in contradiction to *The Old Lie* – the propaganda, call to arms "Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country." referenced in Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et decorum est, Pro patria mori*. The waste of young lives in WW1, is represented using the metaphor of trees as both witnesses and participants; witnesses that can out live humans by hundreds of years; and that have been present through all the squabbles over land and shifts of power engendering wars before and since 1914-18; whose limbs, have historically been put to service made into ships for trade and war. Cut sections of various trees are exhibited to show a timeline of 100 years of British engagement in conflict since WW1, the war to end all... a Heart of Oak, references ideas of heritage, reverence and longevity.

Bringing the piece into the present, voices of contemporary youth deliver the message of loss in a specially commissioned arrangement of *Anthem for Doomed Youth* by Wilfred Owen; devised and performed by Mollie Grant and Jack Clorey, Music students from Shrewsbury College, sung to film of a lone oak in an empty wood, while webcam footage of Galipoli, and other 'surveillance' views draw attention to the notion of bearing witness, being conscious, singing out; the truth about war is that one begets another.

Jill Impey

The Unitarian Church Shrewsbury, September 2015



This was a highly successful and, again, labour-intensive, artist-invigilated exhibition in a non-traditional venue, which clearly intrigued a new audience for art. The Church, renowned for being Charles Darwin's family church, was celebrating its own Heritage Open Weekend. All *re:collect* artists were inspired, for example, Julie Edwards created an almost Biblical 'dictionary' of key words and Liz Turner took photographs of textual details around the Church, to be seen through a stereoscopic viewer, a reference to the Unitarian creed. Nearly 300 people visited in the two days.

The impact on the congregation was significant. Many made their own 'Curiosity' Collections to display and the Sunday service focused on the Cabinet, memories and personal 'objects of significance'. Liz Turner (who attended and spoke at the Service) wrote: 'People talked about the personal significance of objects they brought in, an uncle's darned socks, a mother's birthday book noting the birthdays of people long dead, a seed collection – one member of the congregation even spoke movingly about the death of their baby many years ago' (emailed comment).





“Religious teaching tends to minimise the importance of things as materialistic, superficial, but things often help us to make sense of life, deal with pain, make connections, express wonder”. (Comment about the *Cabinet of Curiosity* exhibition from the Unitarian Church, Shrewsbury, Facebook page). The group were invited to exhibit again at the 2016 Darwin Festival.

The Elephant in the Room ***Conversations, Powis Castle,*** **September to October 2015**



The Elephant in the Room, **Jill Impey** (life size, wood and mixed materials) installed in Powis Castle

The Elephant in the Room Conversations, curated by *re:collect* artist Jill Impey, featured ten Borders artists and new work in the *Cabinet of Curiosity*, all responding to the Castle's heritage collections, and four artists' talks and tours. The National Trust estimated that 14,655 people passed through the Powis Castle exhibition areas during the 40-day show.

Written visitor feedback, collected by the Trust, reflected the challenging (for example, conceptual) nature of some of the artworks and the surprise provoked by encountering unexpected contemporary pieces in this setting. However, the vast majority of comments (80/116) were positive and many were sensitive to the exhibition theme of unacknowledged colonialism: eg 'India meets Wales. Past meets present. Creativity meets people'.

Jill Impey felt that the skills learnt during *re:collect's* group shows and the WWI commission gave her the confidence needed to organise such a complex exhibition across such varied spaces. Each room threw back powerful and unique challenges to the artworks. Although occasionally these were swamped by the settings, once spotted it was impossible in most spaces to ignore them.

Visitors were sometimes perplexed or annoyed, but more often intrigued. Signage indicating the presence and purpose of the show was probably inadequate; and although some visitors were critical of 'explanations' ('art should speak for itself'), it seems that in this non-gallery setting the 'project' of using art to 'make strange' heritage needed more accessible signalling. Similarly, more work was needed to engage the commitment and sympathy of regular volunteers, some of whom struggled with this as a new (or inappropriate) aesthetic model. Nevertheless, as part of our evaluation reflection, Jill directly linked her resolution of a difficult situation in a *re:collect interventions* workshop to her better handling of a similar problem in Powis.



The Cabinet at Powis

Curiosity of the Collection, Wrexham Museum, Clwyd **November 2015 – January 2016**

Museum curator Jonathon Gammond was highly supportive of the group's proposal to show the *Cabinet of Curiosity*, although art exhibitions are not a regular feature of the Museum's work. The group was given access to the collection and most made new works, many of them inspired by the heritage of the Welsh borders and the objects on show at Wrexham Museum. The Museum funded publicity and a Private View, produced relevant new signage, and arranged for staff to meet artists to discuss ways of talking about the work to visitors. The show was curated by 'young curators' with a volunteer 'Manager of the Day'. An entire gallery was populated. All this contributed to the Wrexham event being perhaps the most well-integrated arts and heritage activity of the project, and consequently possibly the most meaningful outing of the *Cabinet* for visitors.



'I would like to find out more about the doll and teddy' Lesley

'An amazing, innovative exhibition from the museum team' Jo

'The elephant on the box is creative and silly' Lane

'I want to know when they were made and what of' Hamett

'I liked the monkey that says hold me and I like the rhyme in the jar lid' Rhianna

(From written visitor feedback indicating engagement)

Participatory Workshops

re:collect artists (not all of them) ran 14 participatory workshops (including sculpture, printmaking, installation and contextual studies, all using museum collections) and six artist talks and tours of Museums. At the Wenlock Poetry Festival visitors took part in clay and writing workshops and worshippers made their own collections at the Unitarian Church: altogether about 270 people engaged actively.

Feedback from workshops was not collected in a standard way, but was very positive, specifically mentioning new skills and insights into museums as 'inspirations'.

The group didn't carry out any in depth research to explore the market for the fee-paying workshops, instead offered aspects of their own practice: this may have contributed to overall numbers being lower than expected in the funding bid. Our evaluation also reflected on shortcomings in publicity for the workshops and recommended that marketing workshops should be a whole group responsibility. However, in terms of professional development, the need to run a workshop, gather feedback and make an evaluation was cited by some of the artists as very useful. Artists learnt that recruiting for participatory workshops is more effectively done through existing contacts.

For example, existing links with a textiles group were successfully exploited and links were extended with a local FE college where a *re:collect* member taught. Therefore the majority of workshop participants were young people aged 16-25, many of whom were new or seldom museum or gallery visitors, meeting a key project aim.



Participants in a *re:collect* sculpture workshop led by **Elizabeth Turner**



Local art students reflecting on the artwork in the heritage context

The impact of taking part on the artists

re:collect was conceived as a developmental project for artists and their artwork. The group aimed to reflect on each exhibition, individually and collectively in the following ways:

- Regular (almost monthly) meetings to discuss the project
- Invitations to written feedback from exhibition visitors
- 'Group Crits': structured discussions about each other's work
- Structured discussions during some public workshops
- Online surveys for artists and partners (such as curators, Museum staff and volunteers)
- Emailed reflections to the evaluator

Looking back, several *re:collect* artists wistfully echoed the comment that 'we should have focused more on the artwork' (emailed comment). The insistent practical demands of organising the Cabinet tour and exhibitions, particularly of managing this process collectively, dominated group meetings. The handful of Group Crits squeezed into busy schedules were identified by some as the most useful developmental input: 'I learnt more at one Group Crit about how to curate my work than all the public feedback, because it was peer to peer' (emailed comment). Possibly because the group had worked together for over a year at project start, the Crit discussions were perceived as supportive yet usefully critical: 'I really valued the Group Crit. I've changed my artist statement bearing in mind what was said, less arty-farty...' ; 'I will certainly consider magnets in future projects and I've made some more explicit references to artefacts' (emailed comment). Crits took a fairly formal 'art school' pattern, the group describing what they could see, interpreting and commenting on its aesthetics, and only then the artist responding.

The impact of the project varied depending on individual starting-points and degree of involvement. This range of skills in the group was useful: eg skills in digital and social media were shared, resulting in a much higher level of online profile than expected (and a better understanding of the effort these require to generate activity especially using QR codes and FaceBook). But it was also frustrating for some participating artists with more experience of partnerships and exhibitions.

The group's evaluation recommended that some activities (eg marketing workshops, producing appropriate publicity/leaflets for non-gallery venues) may have been more effective as whole group/expert rather than individual responsibilities.

Artists reflected in writing and in discussions on the impact of taking part. For example, feedback from the group crits and meetings was generally seen as positive:

'I found it mostly very supportive and confidence building, and was able to have open and honest discussions around financial/ budget as well as creative matters in a supportive way'.



Butterfly (detail) for Cabinet tour **Julie Edwards**

'I found group comments interesting, they picked up on the artwork looking like a science exhibit, and being dominated by the museum's graphics in background behind. Someone picked up on how the artwork made them look at a part of the Collection they would otherwise not have noticed.'

'How the museum lights made the relief cast "glitter and look magical" - the comments reinforced my own thoughts and feeling of disappointment about where the artworks were placed and constraints of environment: lighting, info labels placement, graphics walls etc.'



The artists' experience of arts and heritage

Artists reflected extensively on their learning with regard to working in a heritage setting, both in terms of curation:

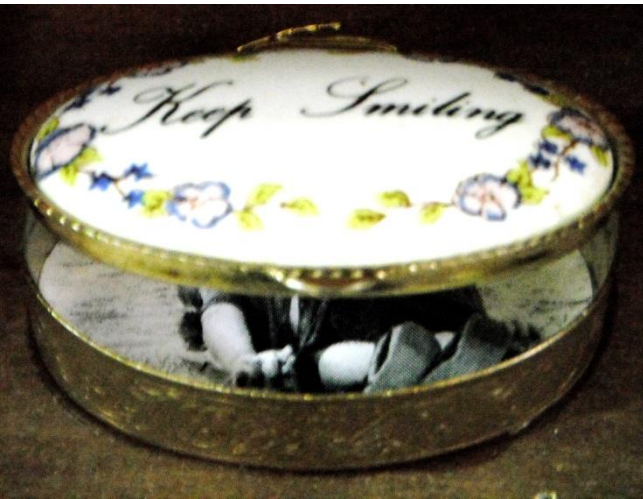
'The experience made me think more about incorporating artwork into a museum setting. Ideas around whether it stands out as an artwork or blends in as a "heritage" object. A stronger realisation that exhibiting artwork in a museum needs to be a collaboration with the collection, place and people. I felt this didn't really happen successfully with the Curiosity exhibition as from the start the group's artworks were rather squeezed into corners almost as inconveniences. Perhaps this could be solved with a longer period of collaborative curation between finishing the artworks and installation so more conversations could take place?'

And partnerships:

'Try to be sensitive to internal 'politics';
Before agreeing to make work in a heritage setting, make links with *all* key people, and get some feel for the internal culture, including communications. Some people may not be in key positions officially, but may be powerful allies – or enemies!

Try to gauge the attitude of all key people – individuals and groups – to the place of contemporary art in their specific setting;

Try to establish, in writing, the parameters of the project (location, lighting, display furniture, constraints etc) as well as firm dates for set-up, exhibition run, break-up etc.
establish, in writing, date/time for PV with *all* concerned'.



Keep Smiling, (found pot, collage) for *Cabinet*, Sue Challis



The *Cabinet* at the Darwin Festival 2016, Unitarian Church, Shrewsbury

The impact of public engagement

The extent to which artists engaged with visitors through workshops, talks and invigilating varied enormously but was consistently identified with changing practice and ideas:

'The most notable impact for me was being with the Cabinet of Curiosity on tour and talking to people who visited it , especially at Much Wenlock Poetry festival and the Unitarian Church, Shrewsbury, where the public / congregation /poets were invited to contribute to the cabinet, and *re:collect* artists were there to see this unfold, and the conversations, connections and meaning that came from it were greater than the sum of its parts'.

Some artists spent a lot of time discussing their work with visitors and made changes, particularly to interactive activities, identifying this as a major factor in the development of their work and/or curation:

'When asked if my exhibit inspired them to reflect on the nearby prehistoric artefacts, or to think differently about the past, responses included "Not particularly", "Not really", "I'm not sure it has", and one respondent said that they "...saw them separately" or that it made them "... reflect on art more..."...Other comments were that "It has made me think more about links and influences".'

'I added a new element to the interactive activity, raising the ceramic arrow-head shapes so that sheets of paper could be placed underneath, enabling people to trace the shadows formed onto paper, which people could then take away with them if they chose. Returning to the museum on several occasions to check on the display, it



Jacqui Dodds' Powis Castle printmaking workshop inspired by patterns in the collection

was apparent that several people had chosen to do this, but it was difficult to manage the supply of paper etc, and on one occasion all of the white porcelain 'arrow-head' shapes had been scribbled on.

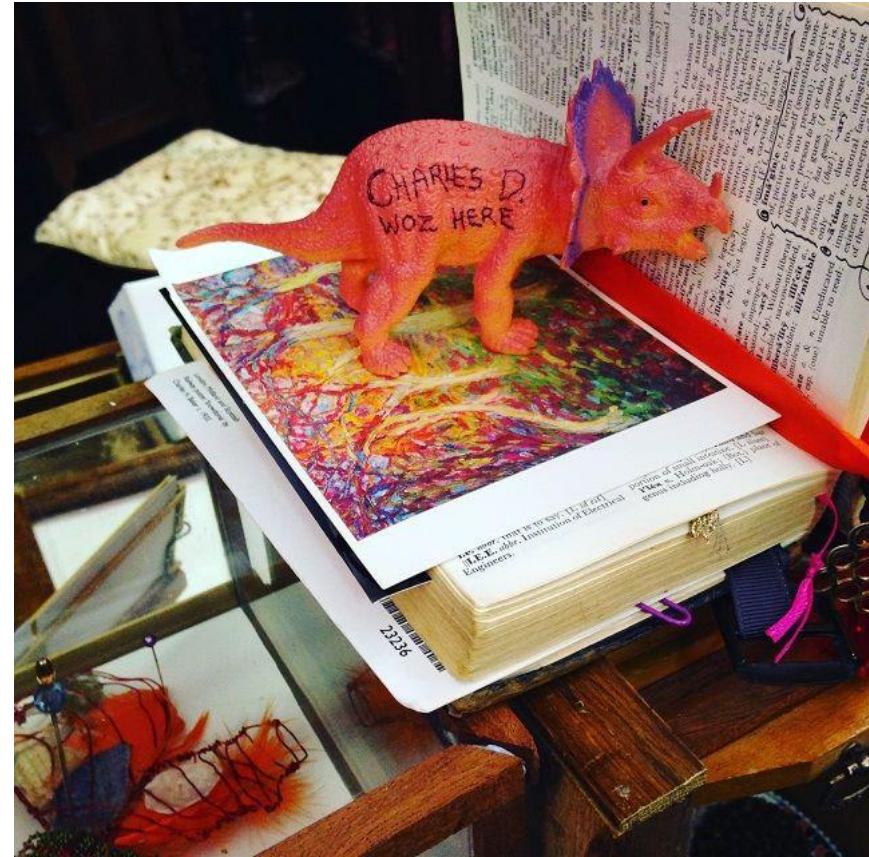
'This posed a dilemma – should I accept that this was someone's artistic expression, in which case it should be seen as a positive act, (and be left) or should it be seen as [vandalism]? I decided to remove the 'graffiti' and restore the pieces to their original state as I felt that they would deter people from taking part in the intended activity. It did raise some interesting issues for me though'.

Almost all group members increased their participation in other exhibitions, online promotion and selling or commissions during the project and completed the project with new activity planned. At the end of the project, one group member left her teaching post in order to work fulltime as a self-employed artist: she relates this directly to the experience of the project. Another made an overseas visit to pursue an arts opportunity and is currently negotiating a further international residency (again related to this experience) .

Two members of the group formed an artists' Community Interest Company during the project, again relating this to the experience and connections made during the project (they had not worked previously together). This CIC now involves more than ten other local artists and has secured a large studio/gallery space in a Social Enterprise Zone, attracting thousands of visitors to a year-round residency and exhibition programme. Using skills and contacts developed in the *re:collect* project, they are supporting the CIC to apply for Arts Council funding. Two artists are currently applying for or have secured further funding from a range of sources for heritage-related work; another has secured a residency in the University AA2A scheme.

Perhaps because of its success in boosting individual skills, confidence and networks, the *re:collect* group is unlikely to continue in its existing form, but as an occasional collaborative project around making new work for and exhibiting the *Cabinet*, which may draw in other artists from time to time. In fact, at time of writing, this had already happened more than once.

Taking the experience forward

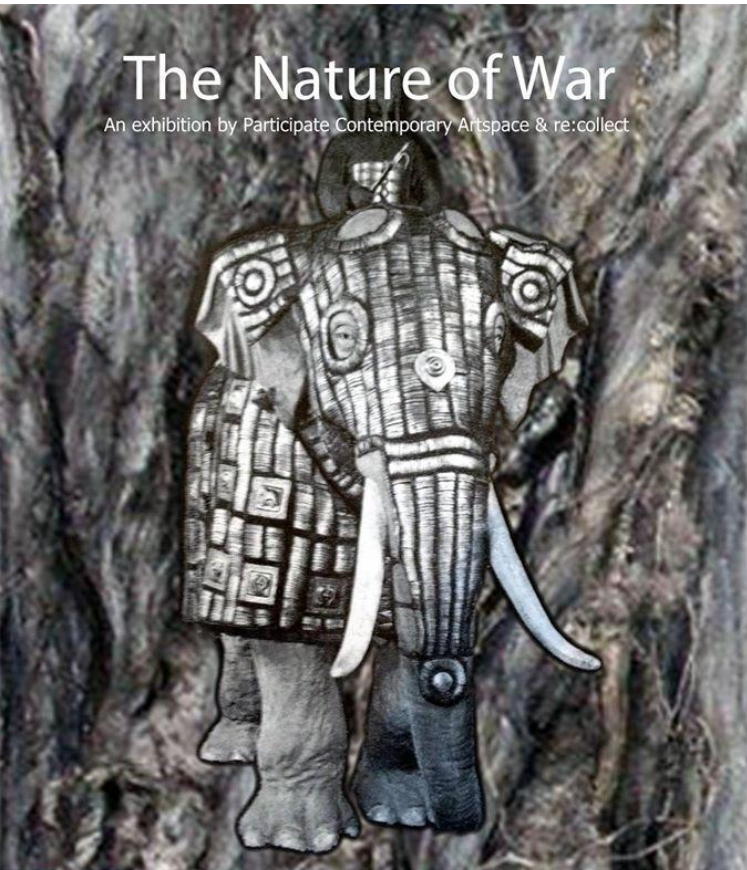


The Cabinet at the Darwin Festival 2016, Unitarian Church, Shrewsbury

'The whole project has encouraged me to develop my own artwork and try to create more space in my professional practice for making and exhibiting'.

re:collect artist

'The opportunity and funding to make the work for this exhibition enabled me to develop new partnerships with 3D printing workshops at "Enginuity" in Ironbridge and the Engineering Dept. at Wolverhampton University. It was exciting to use this process in my work for the first time and both departments have encouraged me to return and work with them again, possibly as an Artist in Residence `.



The Nature of War

An exhibition by Participate Contemporary Artspace & re:collect

'Since *re:collect* I have left my teaching job to pursue my own creative development as an artist, and while I am currently operating on a voluntary basis, developing exhibition opportunities and co-directing Participate Contemporary Artspace CIC – I feel very much that I am advocating for the Arts, and producing work that is participatory: engaging with an audience – it's how my work comes to life'.

From *re:collect* artists' project evaluations



'This exhibition was also only the second time my work was 'ideas led', (other than my MA show), with implications for conveying the ideas in a concise artist's statement. I particularly valued feedback from other *re:collect* members in this respect.'

How we evaluated the project

We wanted evaluation to support positive change and become more or less embedded into individual practice. The extent to which this happened has been variable, as described in this report. This is partly because it was such an unexpectedly complex and lengthy project with a relatively small evaluation budget; however, since these are qualities of many participatory arts projects we can only comment that we took evaluation seriously and had moments of intense focus.

We evaluated this project in many ways throughout. The evaluation strategy was co-designed by the group and coordinated by myself, Dr Sue Challis, a professional researcher/evaluator. We produced individual artist and partner aims and a group mission statement about our professional and artistic development which were the basis of regular reviews alongside 'group crits' of our work. This continual structured reflection, although sometimes challenging and intense, became an acknowledged factor supporting positive change in our group. Our initial aims offered criteria for measuring change, although not always adequate methods.

We kept in close touch with the Local Authority Arts Officer who was supportive throughout in our review process. We circulated an online survey to baseline our partners, venues and sponsors' views of our professional and artistic competence, and a return survey at project end (15 respondents). We asked venues to provide audience figures and feedback about our professional and artistic impact. We collected and reviewed detailed written audience (77) and participant feedback and interviewed key partners.



This evaluation report will be disseminated to partners, sponsors and the sector as an illustrated online report. This will include through our *re:collect* and individual online, website and social media outlets (including professional networks), and those of partners/venues, Local Authority, local arts and culture networks (eg VAN, Border Arts, Rural Media, MediaActive, Turning Point West Midlands).

Appendix 1 Activity timeline

Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery: *Curiosity re:collect interventions* group show and *Cabinet of Curiosity* 7.11.14 – 28.2.15 partially extended to current [approx 400 days]

Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery: 14 participatory workshops (incl sculpture, installation, contextual studies using museum collections); 6 artist talks and tours Nov 2014 – June 2015

Much Wenlock International Poetry Festival : *Cabinet of Curiosity*, new work plus interactive spoken word and 3-d making workshops 24.4.15-26.4.15 [3 days]

Participate Contemporary Artspace : *Cabinet of Curiosity*, new work plus invigilation 27.4.15-12.6.15 [45 days]

Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery June – July 2015, *The first casualty of war is truth*, re:collect group show, WWI commission [37 days]

Unitarian Church Heritage Festival: *Cabinet of Curiosity* new work plus invigilation 10.9.15-13.9.15 [4 days]

Powis Castle: *Cabinet of Curiosity* new work and *The Elephant in the Room* group show; 4 artists talks and tours 20.9.15-30.10.15 [40 days]

Wrexham Museum, Clwyd, *Curiosity of the Collection*, new work in Cabinet [26 days]

Appendix 2 Audience figures

A factor in the high visitor numbers may have been the increased time spent with curators and Friends' to develop understanding of the work in context, reflected in higher than expected attendance at and demand for Artist Talks and Tours (10 well-attended sessions).

Online audience: we set up a Facebook page, our own website, Eventbrite account, and Twitter account. In addition, the artists individually used all these social media to promote the group and individual works/exhibitions; exposure therefore ran into thousands, but has been hard to track.

We asked all partners' venues to promote online too, which they did. It has been difficult to capture this data from all partners so any figure might not include the full impact. For example, the Local Authority's online newsletter (STAP) and the Shropshire Visual Arts Network featured *re:collect* several times.



Special thanks to Shropshire Council Arts Officer **Alexa Pugh**, who was a constant and attentive support to this project throughout and remains so for everyone involved.
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Photographs by *re:collect* artists.
This evaluation was written by Dr Sue Challis 2016 and does not represent the views of any other person

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Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Thanks also to
Friends of SMAG and SMAG
staff, Jonathon Gammond
and staff at Wrexham
Museum, and members of
the Unitarian Church
Shrewsbury, and the Arts
Council England.

