



The Creative Producers

Meaning Making and Action
Research with Young Adults
and a Fine Art Display



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Executive Summary

The Creative Producers was an action research project exploring how young adults make meaning in the Fitzwilliam Museum, and how the Museum could become more meaningful and valuable to them. The group went behind the scenes of the display National Treasures: Botticelli in Cambridge and intervened by co-designing interpretation and hosting an event. The project illuminated how the museum could become a space of safety, care, and community for young adults through collaborative delivery and attentive relationship building.

Project team

The Creative Producers: Yasmin Brem-Sheppard, Chloe Coles-Smith, Rose Dolan, Christopher Joseph, Jessica Ip, Louise Nichols, Elena Ooijman, Alexander Payton, Aino Sinioja, Sophie Smout, Sara Williamson Balaguer, and Martha Wallace.

The Fitzwilliam Museum project team: Alex Fairhead (Exhibition Lead), Kaitlin Ferguson (Artist Lead), Nadine Langford (Interpretation Lead), Holly Morrison (Learning Programming Lead), Kate Noble (Research Lead), Molly Stock-Duerdoth (PhD Student and Creative Producers Programme Lead), and Luke Syson (Curatorial Lead).

Research Supervisors: Prof Sandra Dudley and Dr Nuala Morse at the University of Leicester and Dr Kate Noble at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Photography: My Linh Le
Illustration: Aino Sinioja

Why Work with Young Adults?

The Creative Producers is an action research project that explored how the Fitzwilliam Museum could become valuable and meaningful to a group of 12 local young adults aged 18 to 25.

Taking the display *National Treasures: Botticelli in Cambridge* (10th May – 10th September 2024) as its impetus, the project used creativity and dialogue to explore how the young adults experienced fine art and the Museum and how the Museum could serve them better. It supported them to pilot the changes they would like to see by intervening in the display.

Museum work with young adults conventionally takes the form of youth collectives that seek to make programming more accessible to young people, or work experience and internship initiatives that position young people as emerging professionals in need of skills development (Sim, 2019). **The Creative Producers project sought to convene a different sort of space for young adults in the museum, in which they were valued as active agents and treated with care and thoughtfulness (Morse, 2020).** In the young adults' terms, the museum emerged during the project as a third space in which they could relax, connect, and forge community.

This research builds on institutional expertise in participatory research (Noble and Wallis, 2022; Dryzek, 2024) and responds to the Fitzwilliam's desire to work more closely with its local youth and student communities.

The Creative Producers were convened as part of Molly Stock-Duerdoth's PhD study, supervised between the Fitzwilliam Museum and the University of Leicester. Molly's study looks at how theoretical approaches to visitors' experiences and emotions can inform, and be informed by, participatory museum practice and research.

I loved how we all came together and we always had food and drink. It felt like anyone could say whatever they wanted and everyone would listen to them and support them. I think we should call it the tea party method.

(Sara, Creative Producer)

Research Questions

How do young adults make meaning through participating in and engaging with a university museum over time? What qualities does the meaning they make have?

What does understanding the museum as an affective assemblage illuminate about how young adults make meaning in this context?

How can an understanding of how young adults make meaning, and the forms of meaning they make, in the assembled museum inform participatory practice and research going forward?

Approach

The Creative Producers project used participatory action research (e.g. Banks, 2024) to work with the young adults to understand how they made meaning in the museum, and test out interventions and forms of collaboration that were valuable to them. Through workshops with the young adults, researchers, educators, and artists, it used practitioner methods to explore different ways of making and sharing meaning (Pringle, 2020). The team developed their approach iteratively and actively created opportunities that responded to the young adults' skills and interests. This approach aimed to create a space that was creative, reflective, and less hierarchical, allowing the young adults to direct the shared inquiry. The Creative Producers were invited mostly from the student bodies of Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Cambridge and brought varied forms of knowledge, expertise, and lived experience.

This approach was informed by paying attention to the affective qualities of museums (Waterton and Dittmer, 2014), and positioning the young adults as those most able to make, and articulate, meaning. Through regular creative interviews, they shared how their experiences with the museum unfolded over time.

What We did

What We Did

- Creative and discussion workshops between February and September 2025.
- Hosted *Get the Gossip*, an event for young adults centred on the inquiry the group developed around *Venus and Mars*.
- Intervened in the display with a creative activity booklet, gallery seating in the form of pink cushions, creative tours linking the display to the collection, event photography, and live illustration.
- Collaboratively analysed comments left by visitors into the display, inspired by methods developed during *Connections through Collections*.
- Collaboratively disseminated results through co-authored blog posts, presentations, and articles.

Data Collected

- Recordings and transcripts of workshops.
- Ethnographic notes and observations made by the staff team.
- 36 semi-structured interviews with young adults and staff.
- Creative observation produced by the young adults.
- Photography and visual data of practice.



The Creative Producers in the gallery

You just feel very cared for, you feel that you're actually doing something and playing a part and being looked after.

(Rose, Creative Producer)

Findings

Qualitative analysis¹ revealed five key aspects of how the young adults found meaning in the Fitzwilliam. These forms of meaning making illuminate the special affordances of the Museum, and how it became valuable to the group:

- Undercutting prestige
- Rest and relaxation
- Making connections and building community
- Play and silliness
- Feelings of safety and care

Undercutting Prestige

The young adults' initial interest in the Fitzwilliam was characterised by a desire to feel part of a special, elite form of culture. However, as they spent more time in the Museum, they became more interested in undercutting prestige and creating spaces that were welcoming to all. In our first conversation, Chris said that he valued museums 'because they are for educated people, and only educated people can access them'. This shifted dramatically in later conversations, when he reflected that he now valued museums because 'it's not just about what you learn, it's more about the feeling of being there ... and feeling comfortable and safe'.

Making Connections and Building Community

The Creative Producers became committed to convening a space where visitors could make connections with each other, with objects, and ultimately build community. Many reflected on the joy of making friendship across the universities; in Louise's words 'we never, never cross paths and I think it's a class issue. People tend to look down on [my university] ARU. ... But now I have friends [at the University of Cambridge]'. At the end of the project, Sara hoped that in the future 'more young people will feel like the Fitz is their home ... that's really important'. This idea of community led the group to consider how the Museum could become, in their terms, a 'third space' to think and be together without the usual pressures of work or home.

Rest and Relaxation

The young adults found that the museum, its buildings, the collection, and the painting at the centre of the National Treasures display, Sandro Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, were conducive to moments of rest and relaxation. They thus wanted to create a space that allowed for 'slowing down' and contemplation' (Chloe)

and 'recharging' (Louise). These ideas informed their inventions into the display; a booklet of restful, creative activities, and a set of cushions on which visitors were invited to lounge.

This emphasis on rest went against sector assumptions that young adults want exciting, vibrant museum experiences (Bowyer, 2024), and opened new pathways for exploring the affordances of the museum space, building, and atmospheres.

Play and Silliness

The young adults saw playfulness and silliness as an essential part of rest, relaxation, and community building. Play in museums is often framed as a means of facilitating learning for young children and families, but is increasingly understood as a quality of gallery experience in its own right, for all kinds of visitor (Holdgaard & Olesen, 2023; 2024). The *Get the Gossip* booklet included deliberately silly activities including a truth or dare game and a dress up doll. Many of the group developed connections to objects through a sense of play; for Elena and Sophie, the Apollo Belvedere became a fun trinket, emblematic of people's love for silly and decorative objects through time.



Safety and Care

The Museum thus emerged as a space where the Creative Producers felt they could care for each other, and receive care in return. Care ethics are essential to socially engaged museum practice (Morse, 2020), and the young adults explicitly articulated the importance of care in the project, and how it was essential to them developing long-term, invested relationships with the Fitzwilliam.

¹ inspired by motif (Rowsell and Trzecak, 2020) and facet (Mason, 2011; Woodward, 2020) approaches.

Recommendations

Attending to the Museum's Unique Affordances

The young adults found that the Museum created opportunities for rest, playfulness, and community building that other places in their lives could not. Exploring the museum together in different ways, and fostering a welcoming project atmosphere, were essential to unearthing these affordances. The shared spaces of the project supported young adults and staff alike to reconsider what and who the Museum is for.

Creating Opportunities for Young Adults

Some of the most joyful and generative moments of the project came from unanticipated opportunities that responded to the young adults' own interests and skills. Such moments can be created and celebrated by welcoming spontaneity with flexible project plans and building relationships across museum staff.

During the project, some of the Creative Producers went behind the scenes of the reframing of Titian's painting *Venus and Cupid with a Lute-Player*, Martha co-designed the *Get the Gossip* booklet alongside the designer of the display, and Aino carried out live illustration at the display's opening. The young adults have continued to work with the Fitzwilliam since the project. For instance, staff have supported Chloe to deliver her own set of creative workshops to young people, Elena filmed a music video in the Museum, and six took part in *Happy Place*, a wellbeing project led by Becky Jefcoate, as peer mentors to a newly convened group of young adults.

It gave me confidence to allow myself to talk like an expert, and engage in the art like I'm an expert. ... So when I go to museums in the [future], I'll just feel more of a confidence and reassurance of my right to exist in them'.

(Yasmin, Creative Producer)



Live illustration from the *Get the Gossip* event

Multiple Voices

The project's co-delivery between researchers, educators, and artists allowed multiple forms of meaning making and knowledge to surface. This approach increased the project's accessibility, by catering for different forms of contribution, and enriched the data collected by supporting facilitators to learn from, and reflect on, one another's practice. It also fostered a network for the young adults in the Museum; many reflected that they felt they knew, and were comfortable working alongside, lots of people across the Fitzwilliam.

Next Steps

- Co-authored publications and presentations
- Supporting further collaboration with the Creative Producers in their own projects
- Supporting the Museum's ongoing participatory practice with young people
- Dissemination through practitioner and research networks and conferences
- PhD thesis publication

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