

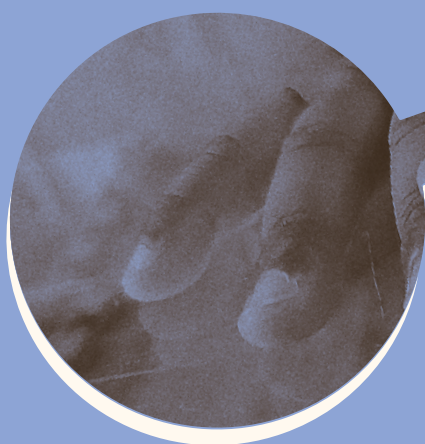
Things

of

*Lively
exhibition-making
with children
under 3*

the

Least



Manchester Art Gallery
October 2025 – November 2026

There was a collection of tiny things:

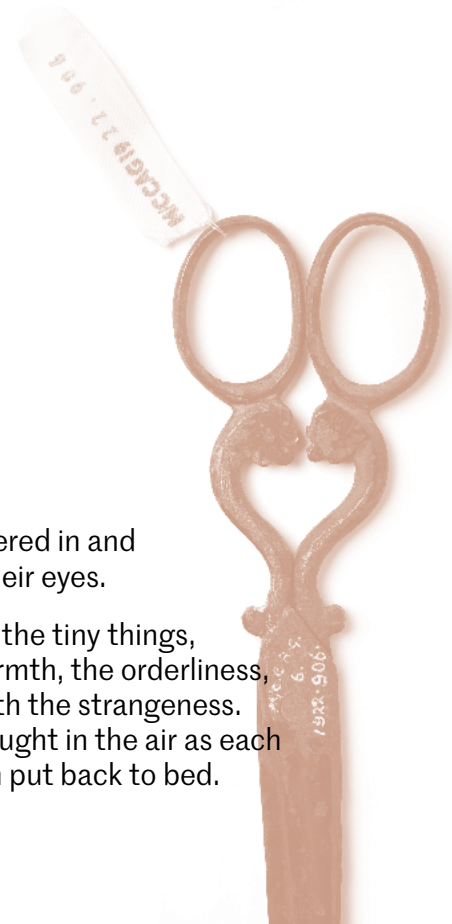
Shiny things,
smooth things,
hard things,
squishy things,
brittle things,
bright things.

They waited
nestled in boxes,
snuggled in tissue,
wrapped in cloth.

The boxes were opened,
drawers were pulled out
and their dark dusty home
was filled with light.

A crew of curious people peered in and
lifted the tiny things up to their eyes.

They felt the weightiness of the tiny things,
felt the smoothness, the warmth, the orderliness,
the ordinariness mixed in with the strangeness.
Colours, textures, sounds caught in the air as each
tiny thing was lifted up, then put back to bed.



The crew held on to what they had felt. They began to make things. The new things were smooth or tiny or bright or shiny, they were ordinary and strange.

They brought these new things to the babies.
And they brought these new things to the toddlers.
The babies and the toddlers:

rolled,
squeezed,
carried,
dropped,
collected,
ordered,
spun,
ran,
wobbled,
watched,
pushed,
hid,
slid,
slipped
and
scattered.



The crew went back to the boxes and drawers.
They lifted out the tiny things again. This time they saw the tiny things in a new way. The babies and the toddlers had shown them new ways to look.

They gathered friends around them, people who knew how to hold tiny things in their hands, how to look after fragile fragments, how to protect them from light, movement and touch.

They carried the tiny things out into the open, across the city and laid them down in a new space. They put the tiny things in places that the babies had shown them. They hoped this would be a place where people would:

roll,
squeeze,
carry,
collect,
order,
spin,
run,
wobble,
watch,
push,
hide,
slide,
slip
and
scatter.



Things of the Least Story
By Ruthie Boycott-Garnett

- 3 **Things of the Least Story**
Ruthie Boycott-Garnett
- 7 **The Project**
Things of the Least Collective
- 9 **Children Under Three Years of Age**
Christina MacRae, Ruthie Boycott-Garnett
and Rachel Holmes
- 10 **The Mary Greg Collection**
Liz Mitchell
- 15 **Dust: The Microscopic Suburbs of Smallness**
Rachel Holmes
- 16 **Making a Show**
Becky Shaw
- 20 **A Structure for Verbs**
Becky Shaw
- 22 **Welcome Little Stranger**
Things of the Least Collective
- 29 **Stuck in the Middle with You**
Katy McCall
- 32 **Stay and Play at Platt Hall**
Naomi Kendrick
- 35 **Dust Particles**
Rachel Holmes
- 36 **The Children's Centre Perspective**
Debbie Keary
- 38 **The Murky Gregs**
Jackie Haynes
- 40 **Dust and the Wake**
Things of the Least Collective
- 42 **Making Films Together**
Andy Hardman and Sophie Everest
- 45 **Dust Unfurling**
Rachel Holmes



The Project

Things of the Least Collective

Things of the Least: Lively exhibition-making with children under 3 is a collaboration funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2023–2026). It is led by Manchester Metropolitan University, bringing together co-leads from Manchester Art Gallery and Birmingham City University, partnered with Sure Start. The project aims to open up the Mary Greg Collection of everyday objects from the 18th and 19th centuries by working with the shared spatial, material and embodied knowledges of artists and children under 3.

Experimental exhibition-making disrupts divisions between product and process fostering a sense of 'aliveness' akin to, and capable of grasping, exploring and communicating how under-3s 'work' with the material world. Building from an infant's expressions of vitality that do not depend on consciousness, language, or reflection, we wanted to learn from their more-than-verbal capacities to encounter a collection's aliveness. We hoped this would help us to better understand how under-3s' ways of knowing can contribute and have a positive impact on gallery practices.

Six artists created a prototype Mary Greg 'play kit' based on the qualities and 'thingness' of some of the objects from the collection, for example paper-mâché spoons, wax thimbles, cases for objects, cardboard doll's houses, a banquet of small things, an orange, site-specific fabric wrap as a gathering space and a toddler tunnel. The 'kit' became the centre of play sessions with families living in temporary accommodation and attending a Stay and Play session at Platt Hall. Ongoing observations and discussions about how the under-3s and their parents encountered the play kit has iteratively informed the ways it has been re-worked over time.

This exhibition includes the documentation of the many processes involved in its production; objects from the Mary Greg Collection; a collective artists' play kit; three structures in the gallery space that foreground how those exhibits relate to one another, as well as encourage particular movements across the collection in interaction with its audience.

The project attempts to touch what remains elusive but nonetheless can be felt in the collection's re-animation and aliveness.



Images: © Belle Vue Productions

Children Under Three Years of Age

Christina MacRae
Ruthie Boycott-Garnett
Rachel Holmes

The very youngest children belong to one of the many minoritised global communities whose knowledge has never been officially recognised or regarded. Babies belong materially to the sensuous world that we (as adults) educate older children to interiorise, neglect and exploit. They exist in resonance with the world they seek to know, bringing into focus a kind of infant subjectivity that merges as 'bodymindmatter' (Murris, 2022). Young children live in experimental encounters between human and more-than-human bodies that emerge in the here and now. This project draws on the capaciousness of babies as minoritarian subjects with alternative modes of becoming to reconfigure new forms of exhibition-making that transverses socially engaged, activist art practice, post-developmental early childhood studies and critical museology. In the convergence of these fields, we find the opening of a minor space that we could describe as 'post-developmental early years gallery education'.

As we developed the exhibition, we set out to examine how we could articulate the value of babies' wisdom, ways of knowing and experimenting, as entangled forms of cognition, feeling and perception that are grounded, and grounds them, in the material world. We hoped this wisdom would help to undo the weight that (adult) museum visitors might typically give to reason and ocularcentrism, played out via the harmful hierarchical separations between their mind-body, subject-object, meaning-matter and words-things. Based on the wisdom of this age group and a collective of artists, our experimental exhibition desires to enable all gallery visitors to flow with their own situated and embodied knowledge of the material world manifested in Mary Greg's objects that they long to grasp. We are committed to actualising babies' 'minor' or nomadic knowledge (Braidotti, 2018) as the breeding ground for possible gallery futures.

Braidotti, R. (2018). 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 0(0) 1-31. DOI: 10.1177/0263276418771486.

Murris, K. (2022). *Karen Barad as educator: Agential realism and education*. Springer Singapore.



The Mary Greg Collection

Liz Mitchell

The Mary Greg Collection is housed at Platt Hall, one of three sites, including Manchester Art Gallery and Queens Park, that make up Manchester City Galleries. † The collection is a curious beast in the context of an art gallery. Can old keys and cutlery, pin cushions and playing cards really be called art? If Marcel Duchamp can place a urinal, and Tracey Emin an unmade bed, then the answer must be yes, in the right conditions. Perhaps what matters is intent.

Images: © Ben Blackall & Belle Vue Productions



Smallness of space. Tiny versions of the big wide world, impossibly folded in on themselves, and thus oddly huge, in a make-believe world of their own. Contained spaces, in tea caddies, snuff boxes, pipe cases, sewing boxes. Boxes within boxes, hidden compartments and secret drawers. Even clothing, made to contain the body. An interiority that invites imagining.

Smallness of focus. Of detail and decoration, and the pleasures of twiddly bits and doodles. Tiny stitches on a doll's petticoat, messages pricked out on pincushions, scrolled and curled paper flowers in fancy patterns and coloured straw mosaic. A focus on the moment, in all its curiosity and wonder.

Over 30 years, from 1920 to 1949, Mary Greg gave approximately 4,000 objects to Manchester. Her intent? In the aftermath of the First World War, to foster curiosity and creativity as a form of hope and care, in the present and for the future. To explore change not as devastation but as innovation, incremental and continuous. You can see it in the spoons, a family of similar things that belong together but shift and adapt with each generation. Children increasingly became her focus – the 'little people' to whom a world in recovery would eventually pass. So, she collected children's things and playful things and miniature things that might delight and inspire both young and old.

I've known Mary Greg a long time. I have come to know her in the assemblage of objects she gave to Manchester City Galleries – a curious assortment of the everyday, the domestic, the homemade and handmade. Things that make up the intimate, sensory, playful and profoundly personal landscapes of daily life. What Mary described as 'things of the least'.

The Mary Greg Collection is a collection of smallness. Smallness of voice. Of things unnoticed but there, until one day they aren't, and you wonder where they went. The modest companions of daily life. Things meant to be useful, held close, touched and felt and filled and worn. Things of the body.

Smallness of gesture. The movement in the scoop of a spoon, the spin of a wheel, the pour of a jug. Personal, intimate and repeated until absorbed into the body and the self. Its objects exhibit the traces of making and the wear and tear of using, openly. And in so doing, offer a provocation to enact the gesture oneself.



For, as she put it in a letter to her friend, Assistant Curator William Batho, in 1928:

'I am glad indeed to hear so many visitors have seen... the collection. How glad I should be... if we could know if any of them ever make a single thing as a result which will be a delight to themselves or their children and, also for those who come after. We must leave the answer to the future!'



MARY GREG.
(MRS. THOMAS TYLSTON GREG)



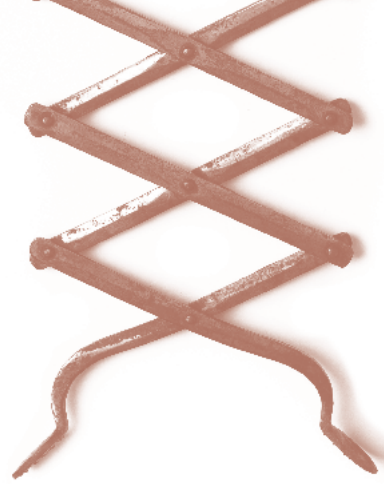


Images: © Andrew Brooks
Ben Blackall & Belle Vue Productions



Drawn into the dusty weave, straw interiors, decaying threads, faded tones, ragged edges, collapsed forms and snared fabrics, we sensed the always changing, partial, irreconcilable and agitated mix of this collection.

Dust: the microscopic suburbs of smallness
Rachel Holmes



Making a Show

Becky Shaw

Things of the Least involves trying to find a new exhibition form so that two opposing principles might live together. ‡ The first principle is that very young children discover and inhabit the world through touching, mouthing, moving and looking. ‡ The second principle is that a civic museum has a responsibility to protect its artefacts for the future. Making sure the collection is safe requires no touching, no mouthing, no moving and not too much looking (or at least not too much light). ‡ If *Things of the Least* was going to be more than idea, then we needed to find the material possibilities of incompatibility. While we felt very sure this endeavour was a worthwhile thing to do, we had absolutely no idea how to do it.

We formed The *Things of the Least* Collective – a group of people with different skills and perspectives: researchers, artists, curators, educators and designers. Between us we have a lot of experience of organising space, people, time and resources for research projects, artists, galleries, events and students. These things always involve uncertainty. However, for *Things of the Least* it was critical that we did not know how to do it in advance. This is because it could *only* be done by pushing space around, by working out how to work together as a collective, by banging one material up against another and by seeing how babies and toddlers do this too. By working it out in our minds in advance we would have made decisions based on our existing ideas. Instead, we knew we had to let our encounters with objects and children lead us.

Trying to find a form for something that exists in mind – especially how we imagine the amorphous interaction of objects and people – posed risks. The first risk was that our ideas would constrain us and lead to a repetition of clichés about babies or heritage. The second risk was that material reality would in no way meet the fantasies in our minds – risking disappointing everyone! To avoid both, we tried to do something in between. We sought to stretch across time and space, transferring qualities of the untouchable Mary Greg objects into things that babies could play with. We hoped that by focusing on actual material encounters, we could transform what we had in our minds.

The process of making *Things of the Least* is research in every single pore, at every stage. The research doesn't lie only in books read or papers written, or even babies watched, it lies in each practical step. We are making an exhibition to try and understand what has *happened* in the past (through the commissioning of artists to study the strange vibes of the collection and to make new forms in response). At the same time, we are making an exhibition to understand what is *happening* (when children under 3 play with the artists' objects).

We are also making an exhibition to see what will *happen* when visitors engage with the exhibition and then, making an exhibition to see if we can keep it alive as a *happening* – where the interaction between objects, space and people are what we experience when we visit. To do this, *Things of the Least* not only draws on the Mary Greg Collection but is helped by the strategies of experimental artists. These include Celine Condorelli (2009), whose contemporary 'support structures' blur the distinctions between artefact, space and institutional furniture. It also includes Allan Kaprow's (1950–60s) making of event not object (1959), and the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and his 1960–70s whirling costumes of rag 'Parangolés' (2007) that connect people and place.

The exhibition is a collection of thousands of decisions. Each tiny decision is a microcosm for the big decisions, and the wider show asks what it means to hold the tiny decisions together. Each practical decision, such as how to join one material to another, experiments with how to bring child and artefact together. Examples include the design of the 'scatter' where Mary Greg objects sit in a hexagonal landscape, next to artist Naomi's hand-made objects. While us artists and academics might fantasise about letting children scatter artefacts around the gallery, this is in no way possible. The objects are too fragile, too 'cared for' or present a danger to a child (such as choking). Through experimenting with forms of display, we moved towards a use of space that could activate other movements and forms of contact instead, including *climbing, walking, scrambling, and lying*.

We all longed to exhibit three breathtakingly beautiful and delicate four-inch-high glass birds. However, tram vibrations, risks of transportation and light bleaching all meant that these objects must stay in store. Instead, inspired by our encounters with babies gathering around boxes as if gossiping in a village square, artist Charlotte Dawson explored how to make a giant glass bird, flipping the relationship between tiny artefact and children's body.

Artist Jackie Haynes spent many hours working with families in the community, making incredible collaborative collages out of sticky plastic offcuts. Jackie was rigorously resistant to making the encounters into any form of representation. We knew we couldn't have lots of little objects endlessly circulating in the gallery as that would pose a real challenge to the practical day-to-day care of the space and visitors. Jackie drew on her experiences of scattering and flowing to form a solution to small objects in the gallery, making a drop of squashy textile 'Spillicans' from a net. The drop happens at key times, animating visitors in catching, carrying and putting away.

Artist-Researcher Amijo Horrocks looked for ways to take the collection outside: an impossible wild proposition for those who care for the heritage collection. Instead Amijo made Mary Greg patchwork structures, and heritage forms that could shape sand and grass, bringing the two together.

Artist Josie Hepplewhite had always been drawn to one of the tiniest objects in the collection, an inch square pin cushion that was in poor condition and could not be exposed to long daylight. Instead, Josie carried the imagined movements of the tiny pin cushion and the real-life movements of the smallest children through her body and into films made with Belle Vue Productions.

Artist Josie Flynn loved to watch the children struggle to carry too many objects, and to shove balls in any of the holes in her cardboard structures. She followed one ball all the way around the spaces we had worked in, but instead of filming in smooth real time, she chopped up time, making it jerky and odd. Appearing alongside Josie's videos, are Mary Greg's collection of praxinoscope reels where sequential pictures of children blowing bubbles or rolling logs judder too: two judders, across two centuries.

Versions of this spatial and material clash guided every single part of *Things of the Least*. Graphic Designer Ashleigh Armitage insisted on the need to bring together both sans-serif and serif typefaces, in a format which was somewhat discordant with the edges of MAG's templates. The text sat alongside visuals that banged abstracted artefact up against photographs of children. The edges between conflicting components is where *Things of the Least* is activated.

Designer and Fabricator Daniel Dainton Simpkins was tasked with the problem of making an enveloping area where babies on tummies could play and carers could rest, but which encircled the village square of the giant bird. Deep under the seats and around the bird, Daniel added mirrors, so the babies could see their own hands and faces appear to grasp and touch the Mary Greg objects.

And the rest of us, what did we do? As early childhood researchers, Sure Start leaders, gallery educators, families, curator-poets, collection managers, technicians, communication managers and lead artists, we did a lot of things. We made drawings, we mapped out in real space, we got excited, lobbied for artefacts, argued about priorities, resisted hierarchies, worried about accidents, grappled for the right words and glued artists' works and artefacts together with spatial encounters. We simultaneously felt the joyous synergy of collaboration while wriggling in interdisciplinary discomfort. We pushed and pulled at the social fabric we had created while making a material exhibition.

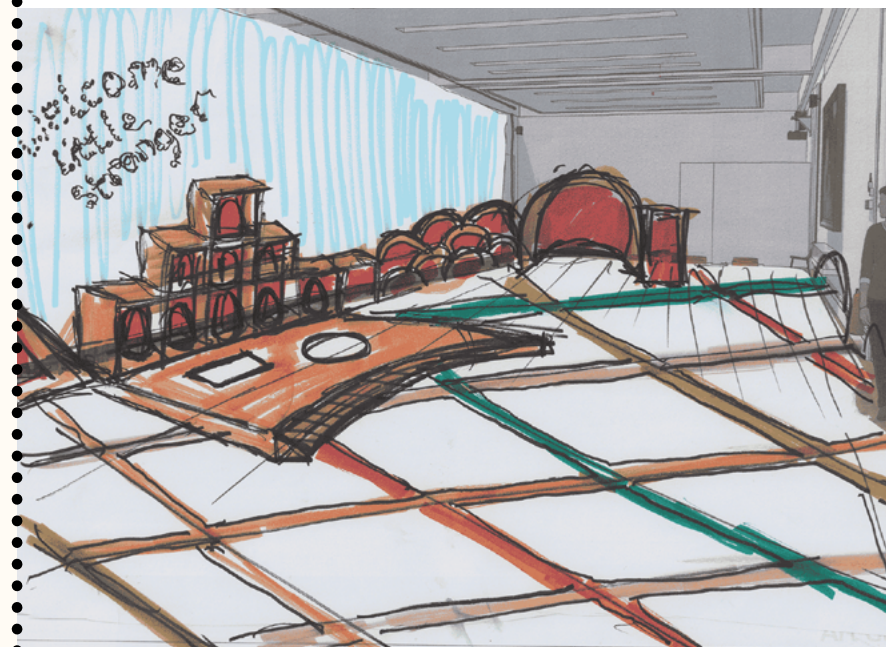
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Condorelli, C. (2009). *Support Structures*. Sternberg Press.

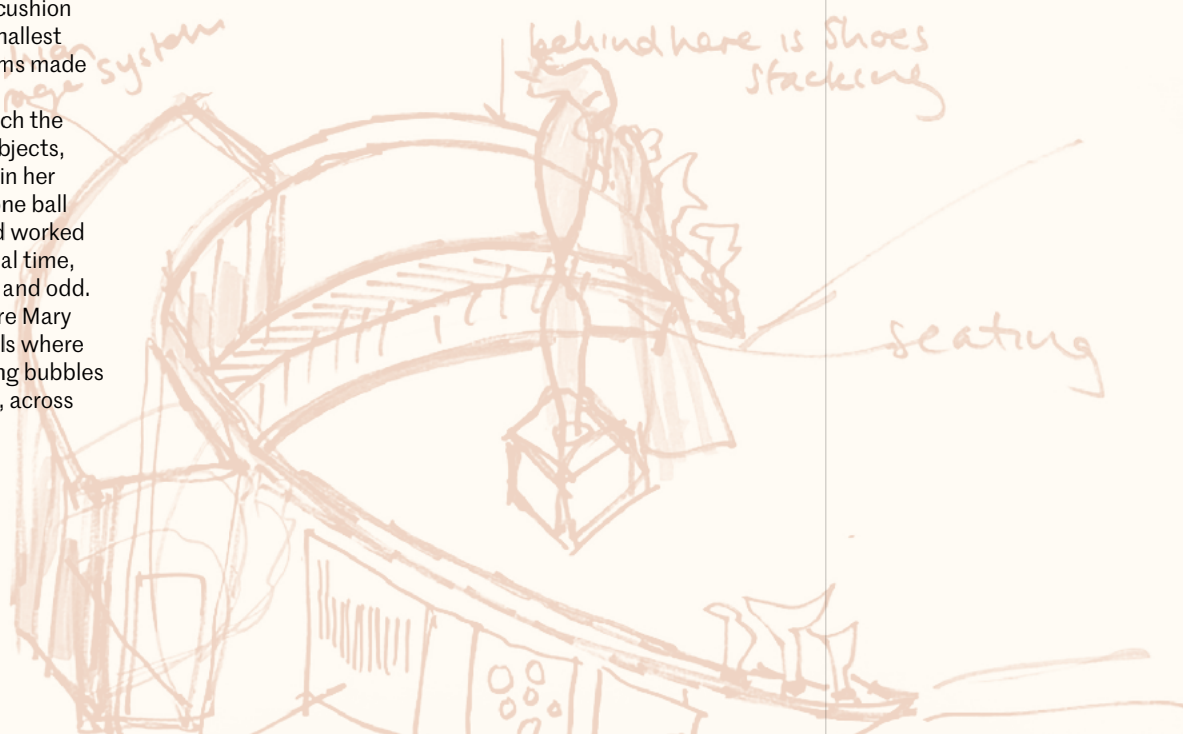
Kaprow, A. (1959). *'18 Happenings in 6 Parts'*. 4-10 October 1959, Reuben Gallery, New York.

Oiticica, H. (2007). *Hélio Oiticica 1937-1980, Parangolés*. Tate Modern's The Long Weekend, 25-28 May.

19



Images: © Becky Shaw



A Structure for Verbs

Becky Shaw

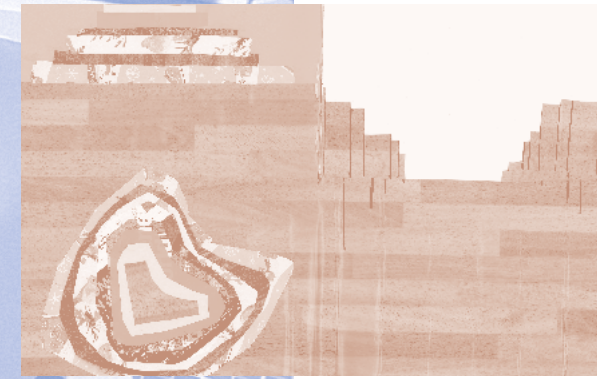
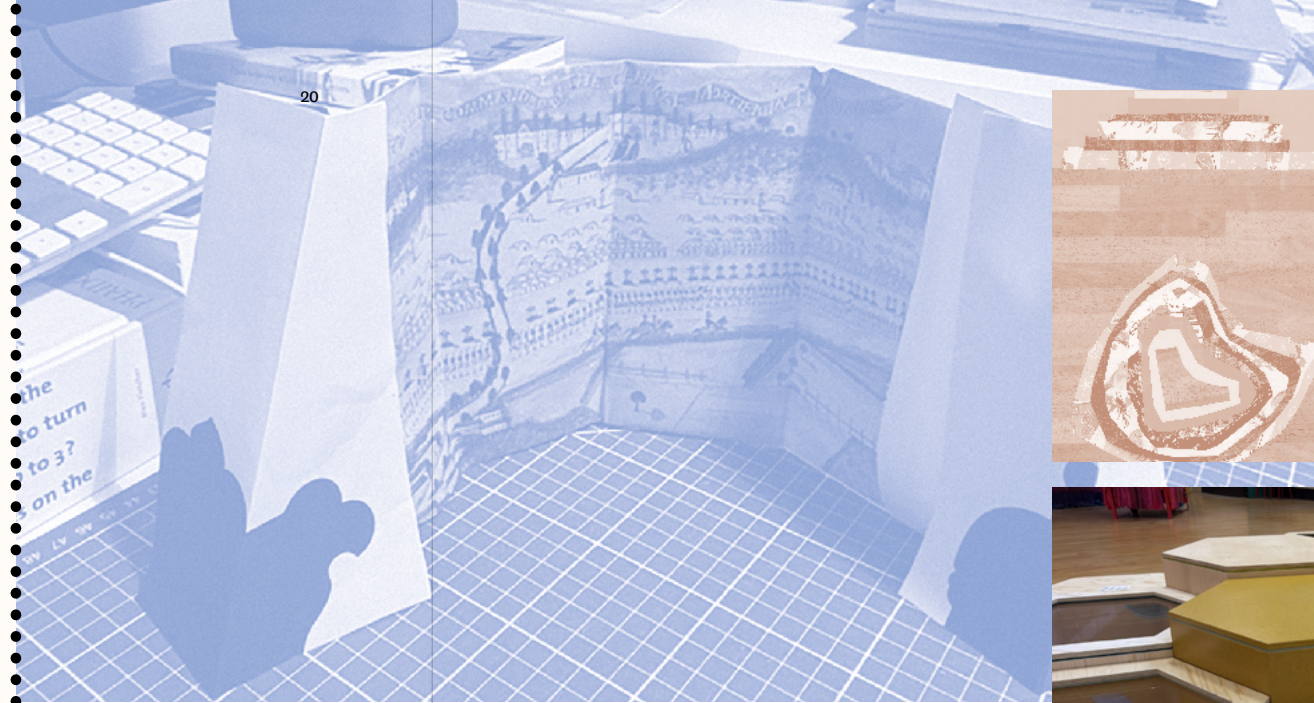
The exhibition includes three main structures that were built to 'be verbs'. Most Mary Greg objects were made for moving verbs: *scooping*, *opening*, *rolling* etc. As the collection's objects had to remain still, the artists incorporated these movements into their objects. Then the youngest of children added their movements, animating the artist's objects. The melding of movements into verbs then guided our design, forming into three exhibition structures.

Our designers, Ashleigh Armitage and Daniel Dainton Simpkins (Kunstruct) worked with our initial ideas and experimented with ways to carry the verbs into the space inside the gallery and also outside through a visual identity.

In the gallery the first structure is a 'scatter' of hexagons containing Mary Greg objects and artists objects (by Naomi Kendrick), intended to energise *inviting*, *connecting*, *collecting*, *arranging*, *scattering*, *animating*, *ordering* and *performing*.

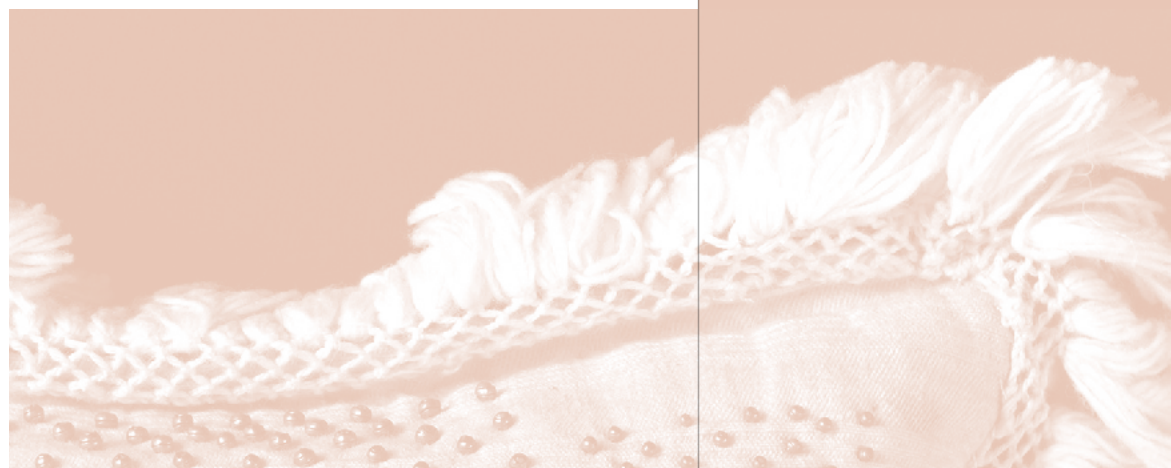
A second form is an encircling arc and a giant bird gathering post (made by Charlotte Dawson). The design was built to invite the smallest babies and carers to be *gathering*, *noticing*, *reaching*, *resting*, *stroking* and *spinning*.

The third space holds transformed artefacts and videos of gestures from artefacts and babies (by Josie Hepplewhite with Belle Vue Productions). This is built to invite *entering*, *inhabiting* and *enveloping*. Using all these forms of making, we sought ways to create a space where we all moved with the still collection.





Images © Andrew Brooks



Welcome Little Stranger

Things of the Least Collective

Mary Greg's 'Welcome Little Stranger' layette pincushion carries a timeworn softness, its surface dulled with dust and studded with rusted pins. We selected this pincushion as an exhibited object to welcome audiences to our exhibition. Pincushions like this materialise 18th and 19th century practices commemorating the birth of a baby. However, releasing this cushion from its dusty shelter at Platt Hall also foregrounds the difficult relationship the word 'stranger' has with the UK's 'hostile environment' policies (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021).

The sentiment on the layette pincushion welcomes a baby who is referred to as a *stranger*—perhaps a stranger because, as a newborn, they are a relatively unknown entity to their family. As researchers of early childhood, we find ourselves pushing up against a sense that babies are often rendered unrecognisable in their 'barely human' state and their, as yet, 'uncivilised' bodies (Holt and Philo, 2023, p. 819). Some babies will eventually be recognised: via health checks they may be deemed to be 'developing typically'—whereas others never quite reach a state of legibility or belonging. It is this sense of the baby as alien, before it is recognised as fully human that brings us also to the politics of *strangers* as foreign beings. The feminist writer Sara Ahmed reminds us that it is precisely through our efforts to 'know' the stranger that we make them other to us. If a stranger is someone 'we already know as strange' (2000, p. 5), then being a stranger or strange has a stable and fixed identity, conjuring a split from those who do belong, or are more familiar.

To help us to think about the category of *stranger*, and the strangeness of babies, we have turned to the idea of 'the right to opacity' as proposed by Édouard Glissant, a French writer and poet from Martinique. Challenging a colonial impulse to comprehend and grasp the 'strange' other, Édouard's idea of opacity can help us to resist the desire to understand 'strange' others. This idea can help us to think about both the politics of migration as well as the politics of early childhood.

Childhood researchers David Shannon and Abi Hackett (2023) suggest that while this desire to *know* infants through the prism of developmental stages seems benign, not only does it have the effect of fixing identities, it also produces an overriding paranoia, a future-oriented affect, that might obscure us to the aliveness of an obscure present.

Édouard Glissant's 'right to opacity' (1997, p. 189) resists colonial impulses to comprehend the stranger, but instead to welcome the uncertainty and transformational effects of our encounters with what is strange to us. Reframing opacity as productive (Shannon and Hackett, 2023) can also make us think anew about the museum and their collections. Thinking back to the dirty pincushion with its dusty pinheads, that spells out 'Welcome Little Stranger', maybe we can also re-orientate ourselves to dust as vital matter. This dust that smothers the pinheads across the layette cushion welcoming every little stranger, enables us to recover something of what might otherwise be drowned in a linguistic life that seeks transparency and explanation. Being an unknowable stranger therefore holds a strong sense of difference, of always being in movement and irreducible to the gallery's colonising mindset.

Ahmed, S. (2000) 'Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangeness'. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15(31): 49–68.

Glissant, E. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press.

Griffiths, M., & Yeo, C. (2021). The UK's hostile environment: Deputising immigration control. *Critical Social Policy*, 41(4), 521–544.

Holt, L. and Philo, C. (2023) 'Tiny human geographies: babies and toddlers as non-representational and barely human life?' *Children's Geographies*, 21(5), pp. 819–831.

Shannon, D.B. and Hackett, A. (2023). 'Opaque reciprocity: or theorising Glissant's 'right to opacity' as a communication and language praxis in early childhood education'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 45(1), 118–130.

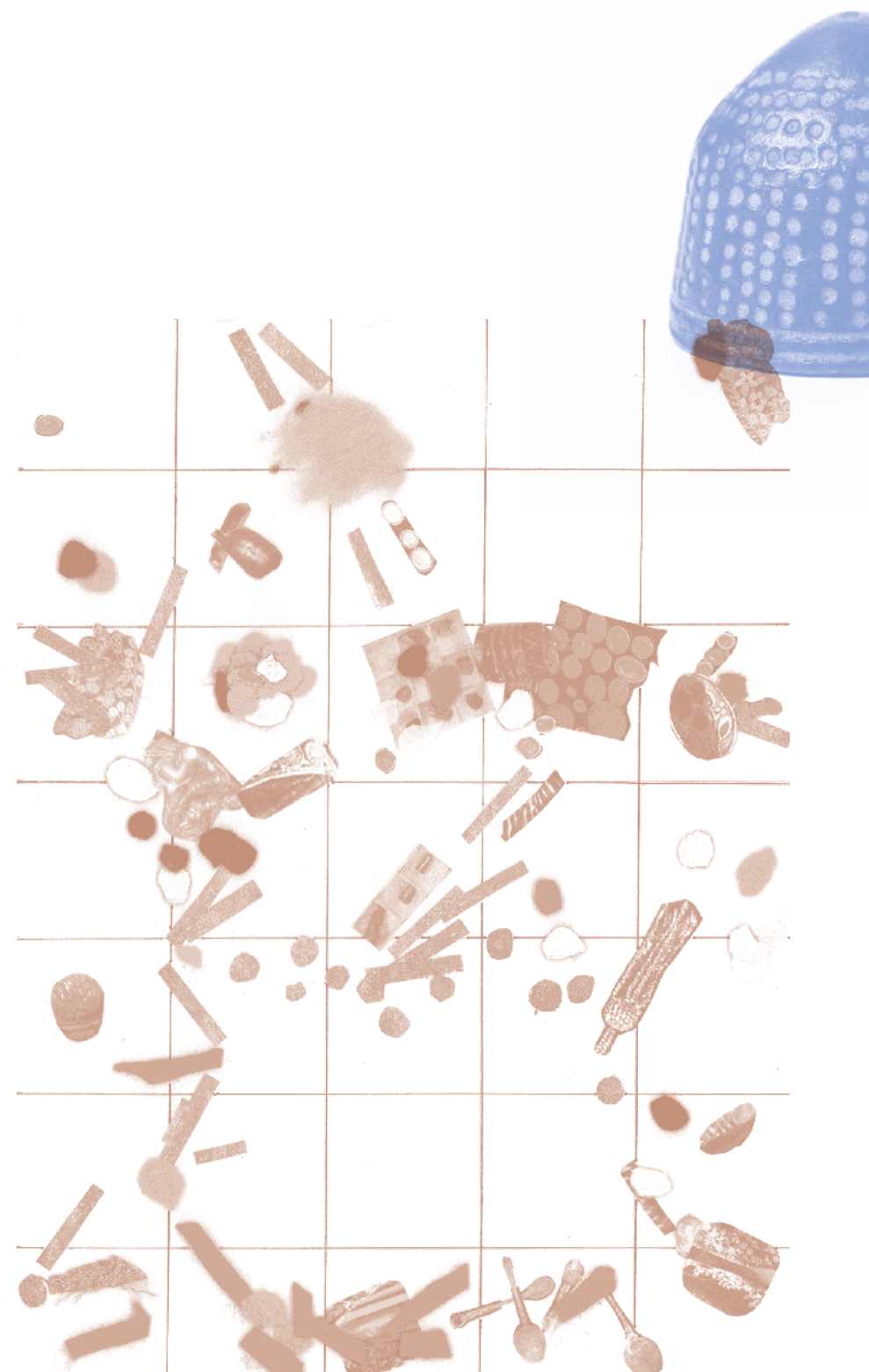


Images: © Andrew Brooks & Ben Blackall



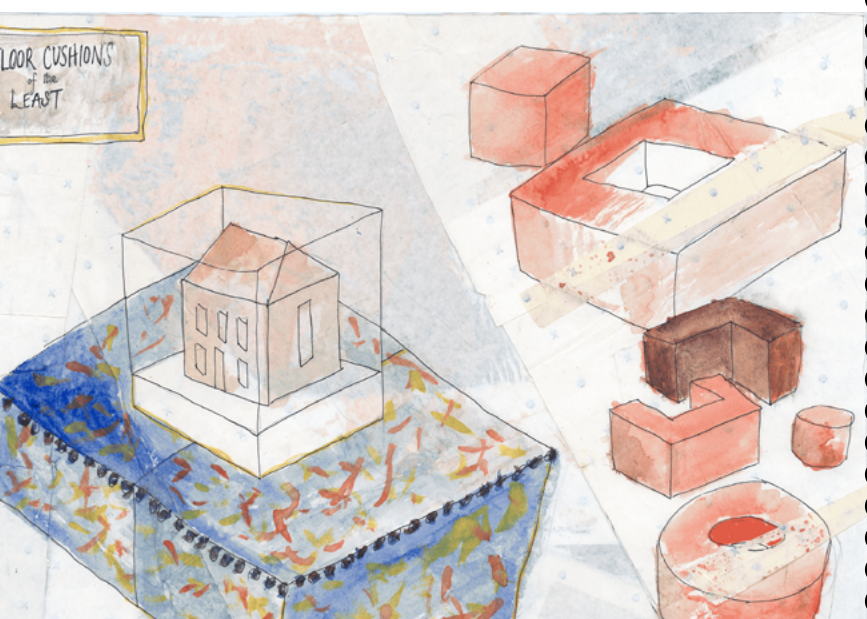
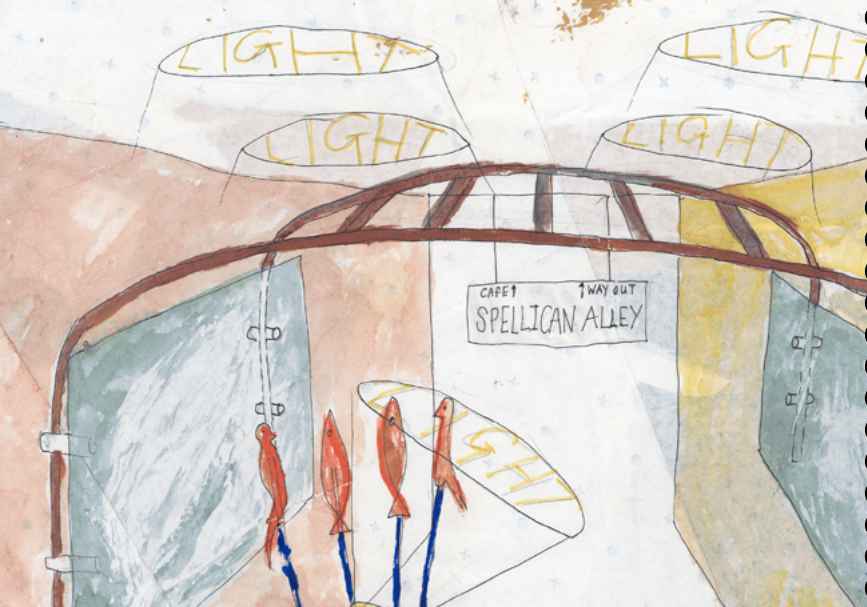


Images: © Andrew Brooks, Naomi Kendrick & Ben Blackall



Stuck in the Middle with You

Katy McCall



Images © Jackie Haynes

Malaguzzi, L. (1953). Illustrated leaflet for the international exhibition of children's drawings. In P. Cagliari, M. Castagnetti, C. Giudici, C. Rinaldi, V. Vecchi, & P. Moss (Eds.), (2016). *Loris Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia* (pp. 42-44). Routledge.

I've worked in gallery education for 25 years since leaving art college. In 1997 the government pledged to make entry free to museums and the opportunities for artist educators grew. I've always found working in galleries exciting and full of possibilities but also difficult navigating complex rules and hierarchies.

In the early days of gallery education, the role was to make the art on display accessible to new audiences. I loved welcoming groups, standing in front of paintings and hearing what people saw and felt. Making drawings with children; lying on their tummies, noses close to sculptures.

Organisations like engage and Tate pioneered what gallery education could be. They trained artists, to understand how people interpreted art and build confidence in cultural spaces.

In the mid-2000s the sector was about working with 'hard to reach' communities, a term I hate. One of my first jobs working with excluded young people, I was tasked with taking anyone I could persuade to museums in the hope (the funders' not mine) that they would magically want to engage in some kind of education or employment. There were many awkward interactions with Directors, who had given up time to meet us and then the young

people would stroll off mid conversation leaving me to fill the gaps and make excuses. We had some of the best adventures, made some great exhibitions and I still keep in touch with some of the young people today, none are working in museums.

Since working in my role at Manchester Art Gallery, I have very purposely upended the family offer as I have placed my energy on developing more targeted programmes that include people that maybe wouldn't feel welcome in a cultural venue. I think hard about how we market our programmes, who is invited and who isn't, and who will come anyway.

Developing the early years offer at Tate Liverpool between 2008-2017 was an exciting time, having the freedom to experiment in amongst a world class collection. Over the course of 5 years we brought children from Kensington Children Centre to Tate and played with aesthetics of early years art education. Testing out ways of working, from the purest Reggio (Malaguzzi, 1953) to making teddy bear hunts amongst the Rachel Whitereads, Carl Andres and Mona Hatoums.

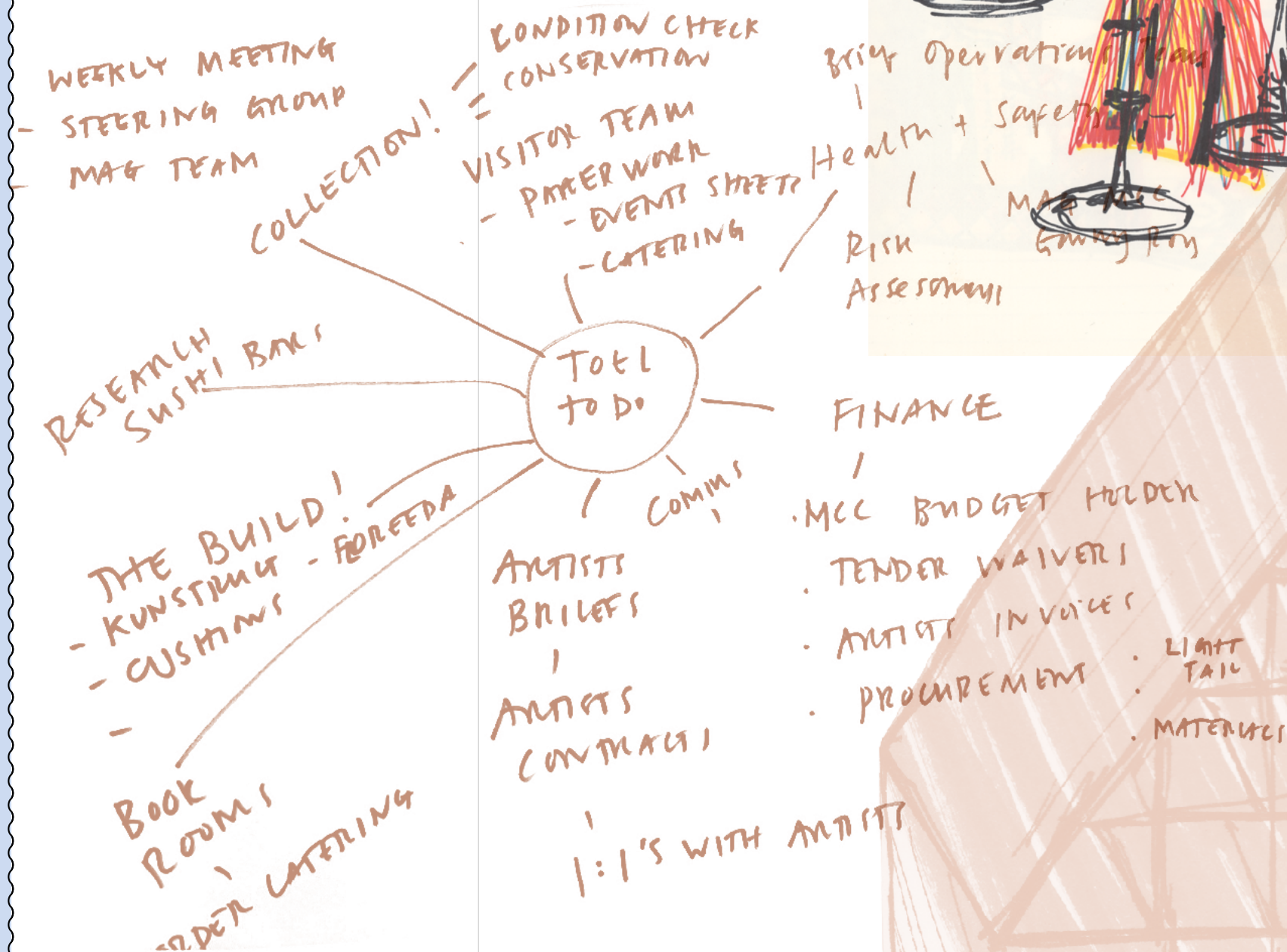
What I've learnt over the years is if you want to connect with people; be relaxed and approach every interaction with generosity. Remember people's names, how many sugars they have in their tea, don't make judgements yourself (and art) too seriously. Building trusting relationships with your colleagues is vital, so they don't freak out when a toddler slides too close to a Picasso or a when you say 600 babies are coming to the gallery next week.

Things of the Least has pushed my practice; spending 2 years understanding how babies and toddlers interact with materials and space has been invaluable. However, my to do list has been immense, I have been responsible for recruiting, procuring, risk assessing, negotiating, scheduling... I have had hundreds of meetings across MAG and Platt Hall teams with my skilled and generous colleagues from Conservation, Visitor Experience, Operations, Digital and Technical, asking them mad questions like can we have a sushi bar that transports collection objects do you think?

There have been difficult pinch points in the project where I have been stuck in the middle of my colleagues at MAG, Platt Hall and the *Things of the Least* artists and academics, where I have had to breathe deep, trust the process and manage expectations. All while ensuring we don't overspend.

The families are at the heart of everything, we run long term programmes not projects, we build communities and will continue to work with the families involved in the project long after the exhibition is over.

**It's been a crazy ride,
I hope nothing breaks
or hurts anyone.**



Images © Joise Flynn & Katy McCall



**Stay and Play
at Platt Hall**

Naomi Kendrick



The Toddler Tunnel



The Gathering





Images: © Naomi Kendrick



The Scattering



- Amato, J.A. (2000). *Dust: A History of the Small & the Invisible*. University of California Press.
- Parlati, M. (2011). Beyond Inchoate Debris: Dust in contemporary culture. *European Journal of English Studies*, 15(1), 73-84.
- Parikka, J. (2015). 'Dust and Exhaustion: The Labor of Media Materialism'. *CTheory*. Accessed 02.09.25 at journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/issue/view/850

Things of the Least is inspired by those things typically 'swept to the edges' (Amato, 2000, p. 2) and considered least in gallery spaces and practices. These include for example the wisdom of the youngest children so often overlooked in knowledge creation; the opinions, thoughts and ideas of families who are minoritised typically absent from the sector; the tension of bringing the youngest children together with a collection that cannot be touched; and the challenge of exhibiting the idiosyncratic Mary Greg Collection of domestic and childhood objects that are in poor condition with a distinct curiosity, but little 'art' value.

Aligning with our focus on things of the least, including the collection's absent yet present traces of so many bodies of matter and lives barely visible, we draw on dust as a mode of interrogation, rehabilitating the minimal and the banished (Parlati, 2011).

Jussi Parikka prompts, '*we rarely count [dust] among things that matter, but what if we did? What if we followed dust as a trajectory for theory—theory that is concerned with materiality*' (2015, np).

Dust Particles
Rachel Holmes



The Children's Centre Perspective

Debbie Keary

My name is Debbie Keary, and I'm the head of centre at Martenscroft Nursery School and Sure Start Children's Centres. I lead a group of Children's Centres that cover the neighbourhoods of Hulme, Moss Side, Rusholme and the city centre.

At the beginning of this project, with the artists and researchers, I was invited to take a look and handle the everyday objects in the Mary Greg Collection. Many of these are familiar domestic items, for example spoons and keys. Encountering the Collection was exciting and motivating. The diversity of the objects in the collection reflected both the diversity of the communities served by our Children's Centres, but at the same, the objects are things that lie at the heart of all our everyday lives. It was inspiring to be involved with a research process with very young babies and children that would inform the design of *The Things of the Least* exhibition.

Having artists as co-researchers offered interesting ways of responding to children. The artists responded to the Mary Greg collection by offering artefacts and materials that they were drawn to that were brought to our play sessions for families in a variety of venues. Artists joined these sessions to learn from the children. They responded to the ways that the children interacted both with the artefacts, as well as in the space and with each other: children and objects moved, touched and made spaces for each other. This has been a highlight for me as an early years practitioner because artists bring something different to the table.

It's easy as an adult to have something very clear in your head, but when you actually test the prototypes and materials with young children, they take on completely different lives all of their own. It's been wonderful to witness how different children have worked with the prototypes and how that interaction has informed the design of the exhibition. It's been a way of giving our very youngest children a voice: they have been involved with the design all the way through their responses and what the artists learn from the children.



Often families feel that you need to be quiet in that gallery, or children can't touch or can't do this or that. In *Things of the Least* that's absolutely what we want children (and adults) to do. It's a way of being respectfully creative with the collection. We have built something where we can be on our backs, looking at the ceiling; something where we can see exhibits from underneath or be on top; created places to gather and places to rest. This builds on children's worlds and it makes the museum space a way to value the everyday but extraordinary experiences of under-3s.

The Murky Gregs

Jackie Haynes

**Suitable
for all ages**

These spongy shapes add flavour and texture to any storage net placed high up and then prodded so that the shapes scatter. From the Murky Gregs' roots as an exquisitely carved box set of the 'Spellicans' pick-up-sticks game in the Mary Greg Collection, to all manner of versions made, tried and tested at Sure Start Stay and Play sessions with the under-3s—this new haul is made from mainly murky shades of soft fabric for a delicate landing on the exhibition floor. Sink your new teeth into the spongy softness.

Ingredients

**1 box of Mary Greg
'Spellicans'**

**6 months of
Stay & Play sessions**

**6 artists, including
1 lead artist**

50 families

**1 early years
research team**

**A bunch of
bamboo sticks**

**A haul of left-over
sticky back plastic**

**Assorted fabric
and thread**

A wodge of wadding

1 sewing machine

A clutch of scissors

**1 fully kitted-out screen
printing studio**

Method

1. View the Mary Greg Collection at Platt Hall. Select 'Spellicans' as an item of interest from 1000's of fascinating objects.
2. Make collages from sticky back plastic as an all-ages Stay and Play workshop activity.
3. Make new scaled-up versions of the original 'Spellicans' from the collages, fitted onto bamboo sticks. Rename them 'Spillicans' to reflect the messiness of play and to evoke the playful sound of cans clattering down the street.
4. Bring the new Spillicans to the Stay and Play sessions.
5. Observe what happens when the under-3s play with them. Note how they carry them around from one place to another, hide them, use them as hair brushes and things to poke around with.
6. Reflect on the above and bring into the overall exhibition design process at Manchester Art Gallery.
7. Screen print fabric using Spillicans as stencils.
8. Cut, make and trim 80 Murky Gregs to fill the storage net attached to the gallery wall.
9. Launch *Things of the Least* exhibition featuring the daily release of the Murky Gregs from the storage net.

Dust and the Wake

Things of the Least Collective

The ideology, ethics and wealth that underpin the Mary Greg Collection are the product of 19th century industrial prosperity. Mary Hope Greg (1850–1949) was born into a wealthy and well-connected Liverpool family whose money came from textile brokerage and banking. † The Hope family were one of several elite Liverpool families whose wealth and standing afforded them the luxury of civic influence, motivated by Liberal Nonconformist values including a belief in working class education and the abolition of slavery. † In 1895 Mary Hope married into the even more influential Greg family of Quarry Bank Mill in Styal, just south of Manchester. The Greg family made their fortune through the production and distribution of cotton cloth and ownership of a sugar plantation in the West Indies worked by enslaved labour. They too were influential in the cultural and civic life of the city that fuelled their prosperity.



The Mary Greg Collection, financed by the accumulated wealth of two North West industrialist families, motivated by the ethics of 19th century philanthropy, created by a non-professional woman, and situated in one of Manchester's most significant historic civic institutions, is thus implicated in complex and contradictory histories of power and influence, presence and absence, voice and silence.

In recent years Manchester City Galleries has been grappling with how to address its history as a tool of the British Empire and an agent of transformation, turning the dirty work of commerce into the rarefied realm of culture. In March 2025 a residency project by artist Holly Graham culminated in *The Warp/ The Weft/ The Wake* (Graham, 2025), an exhibition that interrogates some of the shared histories, untold stories and silenced dialogues that are foundational to the Galleries' existence. She draws from Christina Sharpe's text about the metaphors and materiality of 'the wake' (2016) – the path behind a ship, keeping watch with the dead and coming to consciousness – to examine how Black lives are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery, delineating what survives despite such insistent violence and negation.

Graham's work responds to aspects of Manchester's collections, including the Mary Greg Collection. She worked with Serena Robinson, a researcher from *Global Threads*, a public history project exploring under-represented Manchester cotton industry stories around colonialism, enslavement and global movements of people and goods. Robinson's research project 'Hillsborough and Manchester: Tracing profits and recovering lives in the archive' (2025) investigates the history of the Greg family plantation interests, piecing together the human stories of enslaved men, women and children from the ledgers and inventories of the business archive.

Saidiya Hartman notes the importance of using story to imagine and retrieve what typically remains dormant in the scraps of the archive of Atlantic slavery to 'represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known... to bridge the past and the present and to dramatize the production of nothing – empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste' (2008, p. 2). The connections between dust, the wake and lives reduced to waste are strikingly important for us as we consider ways to animate the irreconcilability of the history of Mary Greg with an exhibition of her collection produced with babies and families who are so often minoritised.

Graham, H. (2025). *The Warp/ The Weft/ The Wake*. Exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery 2025–2026. Accessed 11.10.25 at globalthreadsmcr.org/the-warp-the-weft-the-wake

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.

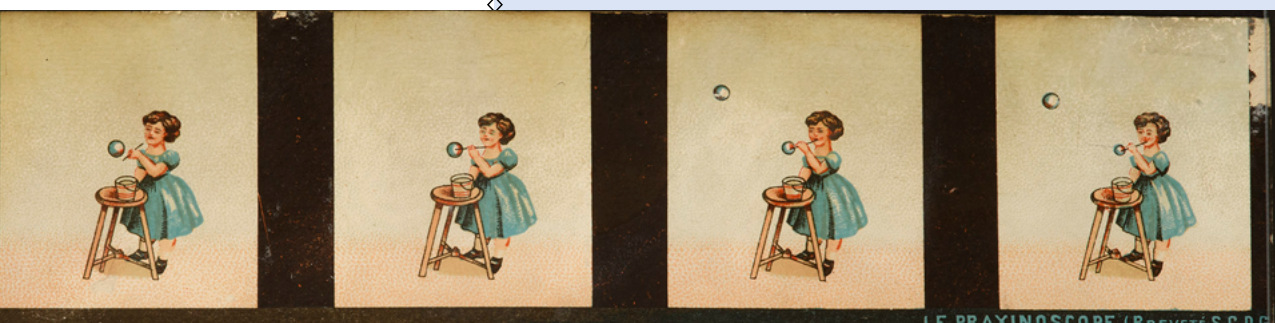
Hartman, S. (2008). 'Venus in Two Acts'. *Small Axe*, 26(12, 2): 1–14.

Robinson, S. (2025). *Hillsborough and Manchester: Tracing profits and recovering lives in the archive*. Accessed 11.10.25 at globalthreadsmcr.org/hillsborough-and-manchester

Making

Films Together

Andy Hardman
Sophie Everest



Things of the Least is a valuable model for socially engaged museum projects'. It demonstrates the twenty-first century transformation of museum practice from a primary concern with collected things and their care and display, to the museum as a platform for encounter, participation and shared knowledge.

We have been a part of this collaboration since its beginning, using filmmaking to document the exhibition-making processes and the relationships that have developed across the project. We filmed early encounters between the project's artists and objects from the Mary Greg Collection, facilitated by the team at Platt Hall. We filmed artist workshops where creative ideas, sparked by those early encounters, were formed, proposed and debated, and where exhibition plans started to emerge. We filmed 'stay and play' sessions in which babies and families interacted with prototyped objects and environments the artists had generated. Throughout the project, we also recorded interviews, providing a space for individuals to reflect on their own and others' contributions to the process.

In addition to capturing film, the sharing of film throughout the project has been a way to enhance collaboration and communication. For this purpose, we hosted rushes on a secure website, allowing the *Things of the Least* team to see what we had seen and heard in filmed sessions and interviews. This ever-growing project archive has been used by the team to look back, track developing conversation, study behaviour and map shared aims and objectives.

Perhaps most fruitfully, this shared film resource has been used to increase the influence of the most important design consultants on the *Things of the Least* project: young children. With the permission of guardians, we filmed the collaborating children as they interacted with exhibition prototypes during dedicated play sessions. Rather than behaving as neutral observers from a fixed distance, we aimed to use our camera (and our own bodies behind it) to respond to the spatial, temporal and sensory aspects of individual play encounters. The footage revealed the close-up dimensions of touch, action, and interaction as well as movement through space and response to different environments, information that would not have been possible to generate through other methods.

Making films together in this way has ensured that fleeting moments of action, reflection and connection – these transient 'things of the least' – have continued to resonate throughout the project. As museologists and filmmakers we care above all about the capacity of filmmaking to contribute to effective community collaborations in the museum. Here, that has meant tracking the progress of an exhibition-making project; and enabling that film content to contribute to an iterative design process and end results. Beyond the project, filming this collaboration has resulted in a production archive of practical knowledge around establishing co-creative projects with and for the communities that civic organisations like Manchester Art Gallery strive to serve.

As well as being about creating wonderful spaces and experiences for the youngest users of the gallery, *Things of the Least* has been about nurturing the youngest users of the gallery as collaborators. Documenting and sharing observations of what would otherwise be ephemeral moments of connection, through filmmaking, is about valuing the contribution that this collaboration has made.



Images: © Andrew Brooks & Josie Hepplewhite

Édouard Glissant insisted on
*'the ungraspable specificity of
 a world in which all elementary
 particles were interrelated'*
 (cited in Dash, 2011: 673).

For Deleuze the chaos of the
 world expresses itself through
*'infinitely minute elements...
 a lapping of waves, a rumor,
 a fog, or a mass of dancing particles
 of dust... endlessly furling and
 unfurling in every direction'*
 (1993, p. 86).

Our interest in such
 tiny elements is manifold,
 particularly how they express
 the interconnectedness of
 materiality, time and social
 relations, whereby the past
 is understood as continuously
 influencing and shaping
 the present through its
 material traces.

Dash, J. M. (2011).
 'Remembering Édouard
 Glissant'. *Callaloo*,
 34(3): 671-75.
 Deleuze, G. (1993). *The Fold:
 Leibniz and the Baroque*.
 Continuum.

Dust Unfurling
 Rachel Holmes

Project Team

Babies, toddlers, parents and carers at Platt Hall and living in temporary accommodation

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Arts and
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Manchester
Art Gallery



Sure Start
Children's Centres



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It is led by Manchester Metropolitan University, bringing together co-leads from Manchester Art Gallery, Birmingham City University and Sure Start.

The project aims to open up the Mary Greg Collection of everyday objects from the 18th and 19th centuries by working with the shared spatial, material and embodied knowledges of artists and children under 3.

thingsoftheleast.co.uk