

Swords Into Ploughshares: Knives Into Jewels: Curated, Dauvit Alexander and Norman Cherry (2017-present)

Swords into Ploughshares: Knives into Jewels (SiP) is a touring exhibition of work by 38 international jewellery and metals artists. It uses knives sequestered from the street by West Midlands Police to comment on the current epidemic of knife-crime amongst young people in the UK. The exhibition has been shown in 6 venues across Scotland and England and has been seen by over 30,000 people. Each outing of the exhibition has been accompanied by a locally-devised workshop for young people to allow them to experience their own version of 'craft-activism' (Craftivism).

Dauvit Alexander, Norman Cherry

Touring Exhibition - https://www.instagram.com/swords_into_ploughshares/

Keywords: Jewellery, metalwork, craftivism, community, violence

[fig.1 near here]

Background

'In the year ending March 2024, there were around 50,500 offences involving a sharp instrument in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester). This was 4.4% higher than in 2022/23 and 2.8% lower than in 2019/20.'¹

Inspired by responses to violence in the work of Boris Bally (Fig. 1) and Dauvit Alexander (Figs 2-3), *Swords into Ploughshares* came about through a conversation at the conference of the Association for Contemporary Jewellery in 2017 where the curators, Alexander and Norman Cherry, discussed the idea that Bally's project *ENOUGH Violence: Artists Speak Out* could be expanded and developed into something with a deeper impact which moved beyond the traditional gallery venue in which Bally's exhibition had been seen.²

The curators sent out knives from surrender bins in Birmingham to selected artists in 13 countries, inviting them to consider the problem of knife-crime in the UK and turn the blade into an artwork commenting on the subject.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue containing essays by the curators and Professor Alistair Fraser (University of Glasgow, Criminology), a foreword by Professor Mark Miodownik (University College, London, Material Sciences), an epilogue by Professor Martin Glynn (Birmingham City University Criminology and Black Studies), as well as commentaries on the work by the artists themselves.³

Each venue hosting the exhibition is required to work with local communities on a project of relevance which has been inspired by the work of the exhibiting artists.

Delayed by COVID and several funding rejections by the Arts Council, the project launched in 2023 at MAKESouthwest . As a result of the funding issues, the curators created a Community Interest Company (CIC) to seek alternative funds and process gallery fees.

[fig. 2 near here]

[fig. 2 near here, alongside fig. 3]

Philosophy

‘Crafting and craft objects intersect with all cultural domains: economic, social, political, and ritual. Craft goods are social objects that assume an importance beyond household maintenance and reproduction.’⁴

Building on basic theories of Craftivism, the curators developed an exhibition around the principles that it would:

1. Showcase work by artists noted for their high-quality work, creativity and their commitment to community activism;
2. Be of interest to a wide general public;
3. Generate workshops for young people which introduced them to craft practices and raised awareness of issues in their own communities.⁵

A key feature of the supporting workshops was that they would be devised locally and in response to the interests and needs of the community in which the exhibition was shown.

Mariana Mazzucato identifies the importance of

‘bringing arts to people where they are and investing across the entire arts and cultural ecosystem, spanning industries, public programming, and education’

and continues,

‘In the UK, it is estimated that up to 93% of children are excluded from arts and cultural education due to lack of funding in state schools.’⁶

Within this context, Swords into Ploughshares (SiP) is a project which seeks to engage young people in creative practice through the three elements outlined above while encouraging them to think about the issues of knife crime – and its solutions – from a different perspective: most young people are frightened to talk about the problem and worry that they will be viewed unfavourably for talking about it.⁷ This project gives them permission to discuss these themes in a creative and safe manner with a different set of individuals.

Young people are often reluctant to talk about their fears, especially with their peers and we know that knife crime is a major issue for young people in the West Midlands.⁸

Conversations with local organisations working in this field – West Midlands Police, PlayHouse Theatre in Education and The James Brindley Trust, amongst others – show that there is a real need to get young people talking about their fears and that it is not enough to lecture or sloganise. Fear is a key factor in escalating the problem – young people often don't think about carrying a knife until someone is attacked locally.⁹

The concept of the exhibition was informed by the presentation which Bally gave at the 2017 conference, where he described his project as one which sought to raise awareness of the issues of gun-crime in the United States. That project did not have a social-engagement element and Alexander and Cherry felt that this limited the project to the usual people who would visit a gallery; by building in social-engagement, the new project would actively invite the most relevant viewers to participate, creating a space to discuss and to think creatively about their responses, using craft as a catalyst.

Before commencing the project, the curators secured a small amount of funding from West Midlands Police to test out their theories and they worked through a pilot project with Broadway Academy in Aston, Birmingham, the structure of which has subsequently shaped the social-engagement programme delivered alongside the main exhibition.

The artists who created the works for the core of the exhibition were selected for a range of criteria, primarily for the quality of their work: many of them are very well-known within their field. The curators also aimed to have a broad cross-section of backgrounds represented – achieved by engaging artists from across the world. As both curators are also educators, they decided that they would include a number of emerging artists – recent graduates selected for the quality of their work and to bring a balance of perspectives, the new artists alongside the established. In terms of the project brief, it was important that the artists themselves understood the background to the objects that they were to rework and that they responded appropriately. The curators are pleased to report that they received thoughtful and considered work from all the artists they invited.

Outputs

Exhibition

The exhibition comprises 44 physical objects by 38 artists from 11 countries (Fig. 4). Some of the artists also chose to create video or sound pieces as primary or supplementary exhibits. An illustrated A4 card with descriptive texts by the artist accompanies each exhibit. The venues were given freedom to display the exhibition as they felt appropriate, and most worked closely with the curators to develop their displays.

[fig. 4. near here]

The exhibition has been shown at the following venues:

2022 - MAKESouthwest, Bovey Tracy

2023 - Vittoria Street Gallery, School of Jewellery, Birmingham

2023-4 - 20:21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe

2024 - Tees Valley Arts, Redcar

2024 - Walsall Library Creative Hub, Walsall

2024 - Walsall College of Further Education

2025 - The Reid Gallery, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow (Fig. 5)

The exhibition was also scheduled to be hosted by The Atkinson in Southport in December 2025 but as a result of the violence and social unrest in the town the previous summer, it was decided, in conversation with the curators, not to proceed.

It has been seen by over 30,000 people and has generated a community-facing project at each venue, working with around 200 young people and creating paid employment for some of them.

[fig. 5 near here]

The social-engagement focus of the exhibition has been different at every venue to ensure that the theme is relevant to the locale: SiP becomes the catalyst for these engagements, giving a framework for action. These engagements have included jewellery-making, blacksmithing, photography and a community symposium. It has been critical to the project that the artists engaged in delivering the workshops have been local to the venues to ensure relevance.

Catalogue

A high-quality print and digital catalogue have been produced, featuring photographs of all the works included in the exhibition (Fig. 6) alongside expert articles rooting the work in materiality, youth culture and criminology, essays by the curators and statements from the artists. These elements are critical to fully understanding the exhibition and the artist commentary is displayed in the gallery space as well as in the catalogue.

Excerpts from the artist statements:

‘... the stainless steel ‘Engagement Rings’ (available in ring sizes ‘R’, ‘I’ and ‘P’ only) utilise the thin nature of a knife blade, generally unfamiliar in traditional rings, to instil an associated subconscious jeopardy for the wearer of the ring. Building a direct connection to the original form of the material as well as a reminder of its previous context.’ (Tim Carson).¹⁰

‘I guess this is my quiet comment that providing people with education and opportunity is the best way to counter knife crime.’ (Jeff Durber).¹¹

‘The blade in its functional state does not exist anymore, it cannot be used for slaughter yet the material, shape and the body remains. The knife turned into a jewel is a representation of its alter ego whose aesthetics can be admired and explored with interest but in its liminal state, becoming a piece of jewellery doesn’t take away its true past.’ (Taavi Teevet).¹²

[Fig. 6 near here]

Community Workshops

Each venue agreed to host community-facing workshops around the exhibition, to create issues-based work of relevance to the hosting locale:

MAKESouthwest – workshops with prisoners at Dartmoor Prison; work by the prisoners was subsequently stocked in the MAKESouthwest shop;

School of Jewellery – jewellery workshops with Broadway Academy, Jewellery Quarter Academy and Bishop Challoner Catholic College;

20:21 Visual Arts Centre – blacksmithing workshops with local schools;

Tees Valley Arts – photography project featuring work from the exhibition being worn by Redcar citizens - the photographs have subsequently become part of the SiP touring exhibition; craft protest project with Bloomin Youth Collective, a group of marginalised and disparate young people from the Redcar area who self-organised into a collective in the gallery space;

Walsall Library Creative Hub - guided visits to the exhibition by James Brindley Foundation; three local young people were trained as Gallery Assistants and received significant positive praise in the visitors’ book, ‘Saqla has been very helpful and had a remarkable knowledge’¹³ while Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council formally employed these Gallery Assistants as part of the project;

Walsall College – Photography, video, drama and graphics projects with students at Walsall College;

Glasgow School of Art – Creative Responses to Knife Crime symposium (see below); workshops with Flourish, migrant women's collective.

Portable exhibition: Birmingham – 'Exhibition in a Suitcase'

As explored further below, funding from The John Feeney Trust enabled the creation of a portable version of the exhibition for use in Birmingham schools:

2025 - Jewellery Quarter Academy, Jewellery Quarter

2025 - Bishop Challoner Catholic College, Kings Heath

Symposium: Creative responses to knife crime, Glasgow School of Art

Glasgow School of Art (GSA) hosted a symposium on creative responses to social issues featuring a panel chaired by Ross Birrell, Professor of Contemporary Art Practice and Critical Theory featuring the curators and Prof. Alistair Fraser. It was attended by around 90 people – including educators, sociologists, collectors, curators, students and the public – and broadcast online. This led directly to a number of outcomes, including the development of a podcast by Fraser, interest in the exhibition from a number of potential partners and a further seminar at GSA as a part of the Scottish Curator's Network devoted to the development of creative solutions to pressing social issues.

Podcast

Further to the symposium above, the curators have worked with Fraser and SiP has featured in an episode of his podcast *Young Warriors* in which 'criminologist Alistair Fraser travels to six cities where he passes the microphone to young people and youth workers, who tell him what they think needs to be done to resolve the issues they face.'¹⁴ This episode of the podcast was recorded in Birmingham and Walsall.

Virtual workshop: Milan Human Rights Week, 'Human Zone'

The curators presented an online version of the exhibition to a group of students in Milan in Autumn 2024 as part of the city's annual celebration of human rights. This was at the invitation of one of the exhibitors, Eliana Negroni and the event was held at her workshop, Archivio Negroni. Around 40 young people – all studying English language – attended the presentation and then made work using collaged scrap materials in response to the works that they had seen. The curators hosted a second session, later in the day, to discuss the work that the participants had made. This proved to be a lively event and significantly overran the allotted time as all the participants were keen to tell their stories.

Swords into Ploughshares Community Interest Company (CIC)

In 2022, the curators set up a CIC as a means of accessing funding from sources other than from Arts Council England, something which proved invaluable as three applications for funding from ACE were rejected. The CIC has had the advantage of allowing a much more agile approach to the project and allows the application of the core principles to future projects.

[Fig. 7 near here]

Craftivism and craft skills

The project is comprised of two separate parts: the exhibition (Fig. 7) and the community-facing programme based on the themes and practices of the exhibition.

Alexander and Cherry drew on craftivist practices to develop the engagement programme, using the ideas of community making as a tool to engage participants in conversations, and think about the issues which concern them personally and communally while they make. This kind of approach to making is often seen as a political act:

Pairing craft with rebellion is a curious phenomenon, yet a shockingly enduring one. Craft—or rather, a distancing from it—has consistently incited a passionate populist outcry. Its role as a foe to mass marketing and commercial enterprise charts a straight line from early Industrial dissent to twentyfirst (sic) century post-industrial disillusionment.¹⁵

This project is political because it engages with the human condition but it does not seek to engage with the broader sense of politics as it is generally understood. The key to this is the idea that when the hands are engaged, conversation follows and community builds.¹⁶

There has been explicit criticism of craftivism as producing low-quality products. Authors such as O'Neill have suggested that craftivist outcomes actively devalue the works of craft-makers; Gauntlett states, in the context of the finished object, that 'it is the *doing it* which really counts.'¹⁷

The authors believe that this criticism is justified in certain - but by no means all – cases but in the context of SiP, they strongly defend the quality of their outputs by the artists and makers in the exhibition, as well as by those participating in the exhibition's related activities. The current project has always sought to teach craft skills to a high standard alongside the consideration of issues-based thinking.

Projects such as SiP need to include a level of co-production and not every venue has pursued a theme of knife-crime, choosing instead to build creative projects around local

issues. Within SiP, the overarching theme of the 'craftivist' element has been developed through locally-relevant themes with secondary considerations – such as recycling – emerging from the practice or the needs of the local communities.

Responses to the project

The exhibition has been featured in a number of publications, including the *Journal of Jewellery Research*, *Artmag*, *The Scotsman* (both the Newspaper and their video Bulletin) and other local media. The exhibition in Redcar was used as the backdrop to a Mayoral Hustings which was covered on local television.

The project has sparked constructive conversation and positive responses. Writing in the *Journal of Jewellery Research*, Iona McCuaig describes the exhibition as 'a fantastic example of an intersection built between political debate, social challenges, creativity and radical education.'¹⁸ As already noted, Fraser's *Young Warriors* podcast featured the exhibition, and in this, he recorded young people discussing the work.

It makes me feel a lot more reassured because it shows what good can be done with knives, and when they're handed in, what it can be done with, it makes me feel reassured that they are being taken off of the streets and are being used for good after all of the bad that they come with.¹⁹

In response to the exhibition (Fig. 8), the work produced by the participants in the craft events is to a very high standard and some of the material produced has been included in the main touring exhibition, a tribute to the range and quality of the work in the exhibition, the commitment of the participants and to the community mentors and teachers.

[Fig. 8 near here]

The Portable Exhibition

In the summer of 2025, the curators secured funding from The John Feeney Trust to create a 'portable' version of the exhibition comprising selected works which were robust enough to be removed from the gallery format and toured around schools as a handling collection (Fig. 9). Working with students from the HND Jewellery and Silversmithing programme at the School of Jewellery as paid mentors, the curators delivered a seven-week programme to groups of Y9/10 pupils in two schools, Jewellery Quarter Academy and Bishop Challoner Catholic College.

The structure of this intervention was:

- Week 1 – Introduction to the exhibition – handling exhibits
- Week 2 – Handling exhibits and thinking about personal responses to the objects
- Week 3 – Design of personal projects
- Week 4 – Design of personal projects; beginning to make – jewellery hand-skills
- Week 5 – Making jewellery to personal designs
- Week 6 – (At School of Jewellery) Finishing work; photography
- Week 7 – Presentation of work and project to school peers/teachers/etc.

A key feature of this portable show was that it was possible for the pupils to handle the original works created for the exhibition, and this proved to be key to engaging them with the thinking behind it. The objects lost their abstract quality and gained a physicality, becoming more real than if they had been in a classic display-case.

[Insert fig. 9 near here]

Although these two schools are very different in their catchment and ethos, there was a commonality in the way in which the participants progressed through the programme, being curious about the exhibition objects – especially as they were allowed to handle them – photographing each other wearing them and asking questions of the mentors and curators. The engagement fell off a little as they were then asked to think about their own lives in the context of what they'd seen and to make drawings of their own ideas, but it returned with vigour when they were given tools and shown how to make their own pieces. In one of the schools, the difference between these phases was clearly marked and could be measured simply in terms of the volume of sound the group were making.

These projects each concluded with a presentation by the pupils to teachers, head-teachers and others in which they talked about their experiences and the meaning of the work that they had made. The comments were, without exception, positive and the feedback from the teachers at the schools has been overwhelmingly positive. Jo Short, class-teacher at Bishop Challoner, said

Thank you so much for delivering such a fantastic and inspiring workshop with our Year 9 pupils. The jewellery exhibition exploring knife crime was incredibly powerful, and your passion and depth of knowledge really brought the theme to life in a way that resonated strongly with the students. They have absolutely loved the project from start to finish, choosing themes that are deeply personal to them and showing real confidence and ambition in their designs. It has been a valuable and memorable

experience for our students, and one we would be absolutely delighted to repeat in the future. (Jo Short).²⁰

The success of these interventions relied heavily on the mentors from the School of Jewellery having a clear understanding of jewellery from both a technical and philosophical point-of-view. They were briefed in depth beforehand and given copies of the catalogue for further reference.

Conclusions

Swords into Ploughshares: Knives into Jewels is both an exhibition of exemplary contemporary jewellery by some of the major names in the field and is also a socially-engaged project giving the participants access to the tools of arts activism. The quality of the exhibits is key to ensuring audience interest: the potentially controversial theme is treated sensitively by all the artists, encouraging thoughtful and considered engagement and this is supported by accessible catalogue essays and gallery materials. The success of the exhibition is proven by the comments left in the gallery visitors' books and by the universally curious and thoughtful interest shown by the participants in the social engagement events.

The enthusiasm for the craft and making parts of these events, especially in our portable exhibition programme, shows that there is a real appetite for this kind of education and a need for young people to connect with materials and processes - the lack of this kind of input into schools in the UK is well-documented.²¹

The questions arising from this project are not simply those of knife-crime but the wider one of arts- and culture-poverty: the two are not unrelated.

Projects such as this can only ever offer a temporary focus a space to explore ideas. It would be a nonsense to suggest that craftivism could cure knife crime or arts-poverty, but the curators hope that their overwhelmingly positive experience of putting this programme together will inspire others to try something similar.

The power of craft to engage audiences lies in the pride people feel in having made something themselves. Society is generally removed from production, from materiality and there is real enthusiasm amongst non-craftspeople, non-artists, to address this, as evidenced by the enormous rise in participants in amateur craft.²² Good craftivism harnesses this creative urge and focuses it: while the hands are engaged, the brain is ticking over, conversations happen and themes emerge.

Jewellery in this context functions as amulet or talisman: a 'container' for the memory of the process and the thinking around the process. When worn, it becomes a part of an embodied identity, becoming a vessel for ideas and feelings.²³

In these workshops, the knife and the idea of the knife is transformed (Fig. 10) and the curators hope that lives are transformed, even in some small way.

[Fig. 10 near here]

The future

The exhibition will be part of the inaugural Manchester Jewellery Week in September 2026.

The curators are currently in discussions with Jupiter Artland – contemporary art park and gallery near Edinburgh – and their education/outreach organisation Jupiter+ about a potential project partnership with Dundee City Council and Dundee University Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design.

The curators would welcome interest from other venues.

Dauvit Alexander is Senior Lecturer and Researcher at Birmingham City University, School of Jewellery. He has an independent jewellery and medals practice.

Norman Cherry is an independent jewellery artist, curator, former Head of the Birmingham School of Jewellery and Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln.

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