



CASE STUDY:

# WHITWORTH ART GALLERY 2024/25

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FUND

**Why Art Matters | Sarah B. Davies**

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# Whitworth Art Gallery

## Project details

	School Project	Community Project
<b>Project title</b>	Art Works: In Real Life (IRL)	Art Works: IRL – Rekindle summer school
<b>Partners</b>	Manchester Academy	Rekindle School
<b>Participants</b>	51 students aged 13-15 years (Year 9 and Year 10)	9 young people aged 14-16 years
<b>Artists</b>	Mishka Henner	Izzy Pye
<b>Project team</b>	<p>Andrew Vaughan, Education Partnerships Manager (Project Lead) and Steven Roper, Schools Producer. Direction and support from Ed Watts, Head of Civic Engagement and Education.</p> <p>The project is also supported by a Programme Steering Group which includes the project team, three school staff, artist Mishka Henner and Whitworth curator Valentin Diakonov.</p>	
<b>Programme details</b>	12 sessions between 2 and 5 hours each	4 sessions at 5 hours each
<b>Project activity</b>	AI, digital media, journals, photography	Filmmaking, creative writing, editing

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

*Art Works: IRL* is Whitworth Art Gallery's three-year partnership with local secondary school Manchester Academy, supported by The Mildred Fund. The project aims to "recalibrate young people's relationship with art and their everyday lives ..."<sup>1</sup> Through this work, the project intends to strengthen young people's confidence, creative agency, critical thinking and wellbeing through sustained engagement with artists and the Gallery.

The Whitworth developed two projects with the school: one term-time project based at the Gallery during spring and summer term, and one week-long summer school during the holidays, held at Rekindle, a supplementary school for young people outside formal education.

The project is supported by a Programme Steering Group which oversees the strategic and logistical needs of the partnership between the Gallery and the school.

*"The initial process of applying to be included in this national programme ensured a strong buy-in from school senior leadership and Headteacher. This validation for the ambition of the project allowed us to recruit three members of staff to be involved ... Excitingly, this is the first project between the Whitworth and Academy to have such significant buy-in from the school ..."* (Whitworth Art Gallery, April 2025)<sup>2</sup>

## ENQUIRY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### The Whitworth's overarching enquiry question is:

1. How can young people use art as a tool for positive community change?

### This broad enquiry also examines:

1. How sustained engagement in the arts can deepen understanding of art's value and shape GCSE or career decisions.
2. How creativity and reflection support emotional wellbeing and resilience.

The programme had a strong research and learning dimension. Reflection and evaluation with students were embedded, and art was not only utilised for its creative processes but also as a research method: the team employed the 'Drawing as Thinking' model<sup>3</sup> as an additional dimension to support the students' reflections. They made drawings over time to record their own journey and reflect on changes in their learning and understanding. This provided data for the Whitworth to triangulate against other sources such as critical conversations and observations, but the model is also an important tool to embed a practice of reflective and critical thinking for the participants themselves. This model is explained further by the Project Lead: "[We] use it as a way to not necessarily evidence or interpret people's drawings, but [as] a way to represent their [journey through] drawings over a period of time ... as a memory recall or a sense of the familiar. And then [we] also look at the difference in change ..." (Project Lead)<sup>4</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE

The project worked mainly with Year 9 students (aged 13-14) from Manchester Academy, and a small number of year 10 and 11 students who joined the Rekindle summer school. The students have mixed experiences and appreciation of the arts: some had initially chosen not to continue with art and design in their GCSE options, and the Whitworth was keen to see if there would be a shift in how they value art and its place in their lives and education. For some this affected how they would engage – Art Works: IRL consisted of predominantly full-day sessions, and some faced external pressures affecting their participation in the project such as academic choices and family influence.

## ART ACTIVITY

Over a series of term-time workshops, the students worked with digital artist Mishka Henner to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to question what is real and what is constructed in the images that shape how society — and especially young people — perceive the world.

Using the Whitworth's collection, its spaces, and their own experiences and imaginations as starting points, students generated digital artworks by feeding ideas, word prompts, hand-drawn sketches and photographs into AI systems. The process produced surprising visual results that sparked questions about the boundary between authorship and automation. In doing so, the project encouraged students to debate and interrogate concepts at a level more commonly encountered at A Level, challenging assumptions about how young people learn, what they are capable of learning and raising expectations of the topics they critically engage with.

**"The initial process of applying to be included in this national programme ensured a strong buy-in from school senior leadership and Headteacher. This validation for the ambition of the project allowed us to recruit three members of staff to be involved."**

*"The idea of a counterfeit was something all students were aware of but had never applied to a museum or to art. [It] ... proved an effective way of introducing teenage students to what art can be, while also prompting them to question and critique the content they consume every day." (Artist)<sup>5</sup>*

Together, the students created a fictional group exhibition complete with AI-generated titles, artist statements, curatorial texts, and exhibition layouts. These were compiled into a professionally designed 'bootleg' exhibition catalogue branded as though the show had taken place at the Whitworth. 150 printed copies of the catalogue now exist, deliberately playing with ideas of authenticity, belief, and the *"myth of visual truth."*<sup>6</sup>

A small number of the AI works have been physically produced to be displayed both at Manchester Academy and in the Whitworth's Everyday Art School space, a dedicated gallery area for its school and participatory programmes. Viewed together, the catalogue and the framed works further embed the conspiracy and form a provocative enquiry into image making in the age of AI.

*"Mishka and the pupils are interested in questioning truth, and if by having a digital footprint and a physical printed catalogue, does it become believable and therefore real?" (Whitworth Art Gallery, September 2025)<sup>7</sup>*

Filmmaker Izzy Pye and Rekindle School developed a short summer school programme as part of a community strand within Artworks IRL. The artist introduced the project through art assemblies for around 500 Year 9 and 10 pupils at Manchester Academy, and a core group of nine students took part in the summer school.

The students created three short films on the theme of 'imagined futures', exploring ideas of hope, AI, and the value of art. The films premiered at a community sharing event at the Whitworth for participants and their families to celebrate their work.

## VALUING ART AND CREATIVE PRACTICES

"This project exemplifies the value [of] art and creativity for young people. It has inspired students who might not have always seen the value of art themselves and has reinforced other students' passion for art." (Teacher)<sup>8</sup>

A key shift achieved during Art Works: IRL was a remarkable transformation in how students valued art and artmaking.

Many students began the project seeing art simply as a school subject and/or skill-based pursuit focused on drawing or painting. Yet through collaborative experimentation across the group and focused, enquiry-led programming that sought to expand the meaning of art, students across the school and summer projects expanded their thinking.

Through its research, the Whitworth found that **art rose from the eighth to the second most valued school subject across the participating students**. The project team found that when it was time to choose their options, 60% of the participants chose to continue art at GCSE, with many recognising its transferable skills and understanding that art could also be a form of questioning and a way of **paying attention to the world** in new ways.

This shift from art as doing, to art as noticing and questioning, became a central part of the students' creative development, and the growth of meaning and value they placed on the arts.

"Over the course of the project, young people's understanding of art evolved to recognising its deeper emotional, social, and imaginative value. Through sustained engagement with an artist and reflective activities, their ideas grew in sophistication and confidence."



Art Works: IRL, Year 9, Change Makers project. A light in the dark, exhibition catalogue presentation (Ray Chan photography)

## A CATALYST FOR CRITICAL DIALOGUE

During the development of the AI art works, one student chose to challenge the very premise of the project, refusing to take part.

"Machines have no ability to make art — they can't capture the human soul." (Young person)<sup>9</sup>

The Whitworth team and artist welcomed her critique, recognising this as a crucial moment to **connect** with the student. This protest could have been taken as disruptive but rather than allowing her to leave the programme the team chose to treat this as an **act of agency and authenticity**, demonstrating **independent thinking and ethical awareness**.

This highlighted the project's unique approach, which perhaps differs from traditional education environments by allowing for more flexible, inclusive and responsive decision-making. By **listening and honouring** her perspective, the project team turned this act of resistance into a new focus. Together with the school, they invited the student **to lead a new after school club at the Whitworth**: a Digital Detox Art Club, that will utilise hands-on, non-digital art to explore mindfulness, observation and wellbeing.

This student's stance redefined the role of the art project, and indeed the institution: to **listen, pay attention and relate**. What began as protest was nurtured into an act of **voice, agency and leadership**. It highlighted that an ethos of **attentiveness**<sup>10</sup> means not just noticing positive outcomes that affirm the work but **noticing what challenges/what is challenging**. By paying careful attention to one student's conviction, the Gallery acted on a commitment to co-creation and care, demonstrating a deep reflective practice across the project team.

"This is where the real learning of a programme like this happens." (Project Lead)<sup>11</sup>

## WHY ART MATTERS

*“Art matters because it’s a place where you can express your feelings and much more. Another reason is the freedom you have with art.”* (Young person)<sup>12</sup>

Over the course of the project, young people’s understanding of art evolved to recognising its deeper **emotional, social, and imaginative value.**

Through sustained engagement with an artist and reflective activities, their ideas grew in sophistication and confidence. Students began to see art as a means to **express individuality, explore emotions, and connect with others and the world around them.** One Year 9 participant explained, *“It allows us to be able to express ourselves like in no other way, art lets us break the rules, which makes us easier to stand out and be our authentic selves with nobody allowed to judge our art and just sit there and watch in awe.”*<sup>13</sup>

For some students, the marked change was profound. One participant’s reflections developed from stating that art *“helps me draw and show my emotions”* to

*expressing how “It helps us create new ideas that never existed. [Art] ... makes us think deeply about our emotions.”*<sup>14</sup> The student went on to join the summer school with Rekindle and the project team observed that the film narratives she created demonstrated a **“greater depth of thinking”**<sup>15</sup> as well as **honing her reflective and attentive skills:** *“Sometimes we stop, we think, we look more closely and something catches our eye, we do not need paper and a pen to create art, we just need to stand still and observe.”* (Young person)<sup>16</sup>

This growing appreciation for art culminated in the student’s decision to apply for a year-long **citywide creative arts leadership programme,** motivated by the Artworks: IRL project.

*“A realistic ambition for the project isn’t to turn all students into artists, but for all students to find positive connections when thinking about the value that art has in all walks of life.”* (Valentin Diakonov, Gallery Curator)<sup>17</sup>



Art Works: IRL, Year 9, Change Makers project. A light in the dark, artwork presentations (Ray Chan photography)

## PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND CREATIVE IMPACTS

**“Grit.”** (Project Lead)<sup>18</sup>

The Whitworth’s enquiry research revealed that **art practices outside of the structure of school** can nurture **confidence** and **emotional literacy**. It also opened space for **critical debate, resistance** and **acts of agency**. It demonstrated how **art can help young people make sense of complex digital realities** while supporting personal growth and academic engagement.

The research drew out three key outcomes that span across personal, social and creative development.

- **Wellbeing and self-expression**

*“Drawings made by participants and context conversations to reaffirm meaning, describe that our group of young people positively identify that that making art impacts on emotional intelligence.”* (Whitworth Art Gallery, September 2025)<sup>19</sup>

Repeated ‘Drawing as Thinking’ activities showed that more than 80% of participants view art as an **important tool for supporting mental wellbeing**. Throughout the project, students pushed their ideas through reflective conversations and utilising technical methods to support their creative expression. The Whitworth observed that students built awareness, thoughtfulness and emotional intelligence. Art was consistently described by students as aiding *“mindfulness, positive mental health and as a meaningful way to process feelings and emotions.”* As one student shared, *“People can draw their feelings, especially if they can’t find the words to communicate their emotions.”*<sup>20</sup>

- **Confidence and agency**

*“I have come out of my shell more. I share my art more and am now willing to try new things.”* (Young person)<sup>21</sup>

Working in an attentive, non-judgemental environment, in contrast to the structures of schooling, helped encourage the students to build a strong sense of confidence and agency. They **communicated openly, shared opinions, and increased their understanding of the value** in creative exploration and questioning. Each student took ownership of their learning, maintaining sketchbooks that documented their reflections and progress. No one lost or forgot their sketchbooks demonstrating the value they placed on them and their responsibility. During moments of critique for AI, one student demonstrated the confidence to speak out, turning personal reflection into an act of **leadership and agency**.

*“The exploratory nature of arts activity in our workshops is a learning style less familiar in school environments. Traditional education often favours assessment, judgement and accuracy whilst our processes have championed creative exploration and learning through doing.”* (Whitworth Art Gallery, September 2025)<sup>22</sup>

- **Connection and belonging**  
Shared exploration and individual reflection, either through the creation of films of imagined futures or the development of a conceptual conspiracy through a hoax exhibition, fostered a **strong sense of trust, connection, and belonging** amongst the students. The project supported them to see themselves as **part of a community of thinkers** and part of something bigger where their voices and ideas matter. They were also supported to make connections with art practices and with the Gallery as a welcoming space. As one artist explained: *“Finding ways to introduce new ideas and show how art connects to their lives was, for me, the most enjoyable part of the whole project.”* (Artist)<sup>23</sup>

Attentive practices that sought to find ways to nurture interests, deepen engagement and inspire thoughtful responses, helped the students to describe art in terms of connection: *“Art explores reality in a creative and different ways, allowing people to connect and explore.”* (Young person)<sup>24</sup>



Art Works: RL Rekindle, “Imagined futures: Digital filmmaking summer school (Jason Lau)”

## KEY LEARNING POINTS

*"Our school has gained a community partner with whom we hope to work with for many years into the future."* (Teacher)<sup>25</sup>

Attentiveness emerged as a defining quality of Art Works: IRL – not only in how art was developed, but in how relationships were built, underpinned by an acknowledgement of the **realities** for teachers and students, the **rhythms** of the project's pace and the **reflective practice** embedded across the students, teachers, artist and project team.

## REALITY

*"Learning from bumps in the road."* (Project Lead)<sup>26</sup>

Through Art Works: IRL, the Whitworth gained a clear picture of the realities of teaching within schools. The team reflected that teachers had a *"built-in default setting that puts the learning and opportunities for their students first,"*<sup>27</sup> often working within PPE time or lunch to ensure the project's success. Despite the challenge of releasing students for full-day sessions, teachers engaged out of personal enthusiasm and professional curiosity, recognising the Gallery's value as a community partner for the school. The project highlighted the contrast between school systems focused on assessment and technical skill, and the Gallery's emphasis on art as enquiry, reflection, and social change – a learning point for the partners as well as the artists.

## RHYTHM

*"Understanding project pace – It spans three years and is not a race"* (Project Lead)<sup>28</sup>

The nature of the Mildred Fund support, which is enabling the Whitworth to develop its project across three years, has considerably helped the **development of the relationship** between Manchester Academy and the Gallery. Continuity was crucial for **building trust and**

**confidence** through repeated contact with the artists, consistent staff, and day-long sessions to deepen engagement in the project. This long-term approach enabled young people to form a **connection** at their own pace, whilst allowing the teachers, project team and artists to notice **subtle changes in engagement**. The Whitworth reflected that these slower rhythms can help **enrich the outcomes**. This highlights a valuable role played by the Mildred Fund, which creates the support, space and time to enable a longer-term perspective. This allowed for one student's opposing perspective to be explored constructively – something that many other projects are not typically able to offer. Art Works: IRL also allowed these partners to reflect on their own rhythms, recognising that the rhythm of the project differed greatly from classroom teaching. Working at a **slower, more attentive pace** created space for *"a different sort of learning."*<sup>29</sup>

## REFLECTION

*"Embracing a culture of action research and enquiry to sharpen focus."* (Project Lead)<sup>30</sup>

Art Works: IRL created a rare space for **reflection** shared by students, teachers, and the project staff alike. The enquiry research approach supported a deep reflective culture across the partners and the students, aligned with the intentions of the project which aimed to support students to develop creative thinking and critical reflection.

For artists and educators, reflection enabled responsiveness, adaptability, and recognition of subtle forms of personal, social and creative growth that would not usually be assessed in formal school environments.

Through open questioning, critical debate, and creative exploration, the students moved from quick consumption to conscious reflection, developing deeper understanding

and wellbeing. **Attentiveness – listening, noticing and observing closely – became a central part of reflective learning.**

*"The first year has enabled a culture of coproduction to emerge which has encouraged participant voice and valued difference of opinion ... here [students] are free from the constraints of the curriculum and the rules of the classroom and engage through personal choice.*

*One student decided that they were unable to continue because the programme did not align to their own personal principles about AI. It was important to recognise this as a choice and not simply as a protest of defiance. Asking them to describe and document their decision by making a piece of artwork enabled them to communicate their feelings visually. We wanted to use this moment as a learning opportunity and reflect on how their voice could be woven into future programming. They have been invited to help lead on the formation of an after-school club that will operate purely as a 'non digital' art environment, offering a space in school that encourages mindfulness and positive wellbeing through hands-on making.*

*Through reflective practice and by standing back as a project observer has enabled me to identify this as a learning opportunity – rather than simply something that happened as an outcome."*

Andrew Vaughan, (Project Lead)



Art Works: IRL, Year 9, Change Makers project

## Endnotes

- 1** Whitworth Art Gallery's Project summary document, April 2025.
- 2** Whitworth Art Gallery interim report, April 2025.
- 3** Drawing as Thinking is an arts-based research method that employs drawing as a reflective and exploratory process.
- 4** Presentation given at annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 5** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 6** Whitworth Art Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 7** Whitworth Art Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 8** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 9** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 10** We have found that attentiveness is a quality across the Mildred Fund programme model, explored in depth through the programme's annual research report 2024/25.
- 11** Interview with Project lead, July 2025.
- 12** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 13** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 14** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 15** Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 16** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 17** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery interim report, April 2025.
- 18** Presentation given at annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 19** Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 20** Quotes from Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 21** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 22** Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 23** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 24** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery interim report, April 2025.
- 25** Quoted in Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 26** Project Lead's reflections on learning, shared at the annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 27** Whitworth Art Gallery annual report, September 2025.
- 28** Project Lead's reflections on learning, shared at the annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 29** Project lead interview, July 2025.
- 30** Project Lead's reflections on learning, shared at the annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.

The Mildred Fund would like to thank all the young participants, artists, teachers and learning team members involved in this project.

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