

# The Vessels Project

Evaluation by Liz Firth and Anne Pirie, October 2015



## 1. Introduction

Vessels was a collaboration between Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS), Crisis Skylight Oxford (Crisis) and the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM). It involved a group of homeless people using Crisis services (called members throughout this report) in a free hands-on ten-week pottery course, using objects from the Museum for inspiration. The project was led by a professional artist, with support from Crisis and AOFS staff and volunteers and involved both guided visits and study time at PRM. It ended with a 7 week public exhibition in the AOFS gallery, organised, managed and curated by the artist and the AOFS arts team. 16 members were involved in one or more of the 12 sessions offered and 15 developed work which was shown in the exhibition. On the opening day, AOFS organised a public access session with the artist – called ‘Clay for All’. Based on a stall in the market outside the Fire Station, 45 people made small clay sculptures for display in the window of the gallery.

This short evaluation report captures key areas of learning from the project to assist AOFS and its partners in assessing its benefit and developing their work in the future. It looks at:

- The aims of the project
- Methodology
- The experience for homeless people
- Development of early career artists
- Artistic quality and audience response
- The partnership



## 2. The aims of the project

The collaboration between AOFS, Crisis and PRM was designed to increase homeless people's access to the arts, to enable them to express and develop themselves creatively and to build their skills. For PRM, the specific aims were to broaden access to and understanding of the Museum's collections and increase the sense of ownership amongst a disadvantaged group of people, through hands-on experience and self-expression. For Crisis, the project offered a challenge and opportunity to its members outside its more structured arts education classes, supporting them to further develop and build the skills and confidence to move on from homelessness. And for AOFS it spoke to its three overarching aims – of creating an inclusive, high quality artistic and cultural public space; supporting early career and emerging artists; and enabling homeless people to become more stable and resilient. AOFS and Crisis work together closely and had past experience of this kind of project, leading to the successful 2014 ‘Making Tracks’ exhibition. PRM and Crisis had co-operated on smaller educational projects in the past.

## 3. Methodology

The report is based on learning drawn from:

- Attendance data and pre and post monitoring questionnaire completed by 8 members and case study work by the Crisis art tutor
- Feedback questionnaires completed by 32 members of the public attending the exhibition
- One to one interviews with the lead artist, Crisis arts tutor and arts volunteer
- Informal interviews with six members
- Observation of the exhibition opening, including feedback from lead staff from PRM and AOFS, exhibiting members and members of the public

This was a light touch evaluation – both because of the time and resources available and to minimise its impact on members' experience of the project. There were particular challenges around collecting data from

members through pre and post questionnaires, designed to assess individual expectations and outcomes. Although half provided some information, only three completed both. And, as might be expected, much richer data was achieved by one to one and group interviews and discussions.

## 4. The experience for homeless people

### What worked well?



#### Flexible artistic leadership

This was an artistic project, led by Georgie Manly (left), a young professional artist. She is interested in questioning the idea that ceramics as a craft should be valued on the basis of making technique and skill. 'My philosophy of education is to create a learning environment where the individuals involved can experiment freely and learn through their own exploration and discovery, supported and guided by a facilitator.'

Georgie was selected from an open submission by project team representatives from Crisis, AOFS and PRM. All were impressed by her open and enquiring approach to ceramics and her potential for encouraging a wide range of responses to the PRM collection, with opportunities for in depth exploration of both technical skills and meaning in the making process. Throughout the project, she concentrated on finding a course between gaining sufficient skills and having the freedom to experiment, playing to everyone's strengths. This

approach worked well, enabling everyone to participate:

*'I found the process described by the artist very mind opening in a very literal sense'* (Member)

*'She led it in a very flexible way and was open to everyone's ideas. People responded to not having a direction imposed. The way she led it allowed for different strong characters to work well in the group'* (Crisis)

*'(I liked) the inspiring title and its depth. The visiting tutor was great company and shared with us well'* (Member)

#### External source of inspiration

Guided access to the PRM collection added great value for those participants that were able to attend – even though many had visited the museum in the past. Time at the museum helped members to experience and understand it in entirely new ways:

*'The tours given by Maya intrigued members from the start'* (Artist)

*'Being taken round was a completely different experience – I saw things I hadn't seen before'* (Member)

At least one has become a regular visitor:

*'The visit to the Pitt Rivers for me was the catalyst for creating the clay work. It created a kind of foundation for new ideas. I have been back many times since the talk. The visit has also taught me not to try and take the museum in as a whole but approach it more gently and to concentrate on small parts at any one time...then I can truly enjoy the experience and be amazed by what's on display'* (Member)

All this speaks well to PRM's aspirations for the partnership:

*'Our aim was to spark curiosity and inspiration for their project, as well as introducing Crisis members to the collections in a more focused and accessible way, instilling their confidence to hopefully visit the museum again independently in future. We visited cases containing some of the varied pottery and ceramics from around the world, and also challenged the group to think about the concept of a 'vessel' from a different perspective, which led us to visit some of the hunting cases (including the rat traps!), food containers and baby carriers to view the theme from a different angle.'* (PRM)

#### Exploration and experiment

The project was seen as a very distinctive opportunity from those available through the Crisis education programme – with exploration and experiment at its heart. For many this was the primary motivation for being involved:

*'It wasn't like a class. I liked it being experimental – to learn enough technique and then be set free. This was the real motivation – although it was good to have the exhibition to share the work with others'* (Member)

*'This is very personal but what I got out of the Vessels experience was freedom! Sounds big... but it's true! If I was to sum up in a few words what it meant to me on reflection – Vessels was life affirming'* (Member)

Members appeared to respond quickly to clay as a medium with some adopting highly experimental approaches, with the support of the artist:

*'Clay seems to speak to people in a different way – they get comfortable with it very quickly and there are lots of different ways to work with it'* (Crisis)

*'I think it's fascinating that this experimental practice has developed out of the ancient pottery collection from the Pitt Rivers Museum. Such an inventive exploration of material and interpretation on the theme of the vessel'* (Artist)

### **Working as a group**

The project was structured to encourage group reflection to develop people's ideas – particularly around the idea of vessels:

*'Making was combined with pausing for thinking, discussion and reflection. Session 6 – where we looked at and talked about contemporary ceramics – changed people's ideas about what the course was about'* (Artist)

*'It was good working as a group – we all saw things in other's work that we wished we had done'* (Member)

*'The group situation enabled me to call in from time to time to see how the project was progressing without being too much of a distraction. There was usually a very calm atmosphere, with people quietly absorbed in their work, which was very encouraging'* (AOFS)



Even when it was challenging, most found this a positive experience:

*'I enjoyed being part of something where we could explore thoughts and disagree with each other but it was always done in a constructive way. I found it very useful being in a creative, positive and open environment. The part I found most helpful mentally was being part of a creative group but being able to focus on my own piece of work and individuality. It was both motivational and inspiring working alongside other creative people'* (Member)

*'I suffer from social anxieties and found working in a group in a collaborative sense very difficult. I have found the course has been structured in such a way to be very inclusive even for those who have difficulties such as mine. This has helped me to feel I am able to contribute to the whole and individually. I have enjoyed the process although it has been challenging for me'* (Member)

But – despite the additional support provided by Crisis staff and volunteers throughout the project – some struggled to gain confidence:

*'I'm feeling nervous and insecure but hoping this will improve'* (Member)

### **Ambition and achievement**

Artistic quality was important throughout the project, which aimed to deliver work of sufficient quality to stand up in a professional gallery. The project and exhibition were conceptually ambitious, reinventing the idea of the vessel by considering ideas of inside and outside, negative and positive, boundary, skin and 'contained-ness'. The project had considerable success in encouraging members to explore their own boundaries and make their own judgements about quality and value:

*'I wanted to make something fragile and ephemeral – to play and to have fun – to make something containing air, containing reflections'* (Member)

*'I think everyone is happy with what they have done – but three people are quite taken aback by how good their work looks. There is a real sense of achievement and pride...and this isn't just about other people liking it'* (Crisis)

### **Skills and experience**

Members talked about gaining new skills and confidence both artistically and personally:

*'I'm not an artist – I've never done anything before. And now I'm taking all the classes I can'* (Member)

*'...working on a theme like in a college setting, construction of the piece of work, self-control and conflict'* (Member)

*'I learnt about time management of a project and completing it – and that a lot of work can be done in that time'* (Member)

Staff and volunteers reflected on the changes that they saw in people in a few short weeks:

*'The art room is somewhere where people open up...Getting qualifications is great but, in a class like this, you really see the difference in people'* (Crisis)

Part of this appears to reflect the 'real life experience' of working with clay:

*'Will it work? How's it going to turn out? We don't know! And if it doesn't, that's part of the learning process – and was dealt with very well in the project'* (Crisis)

*'I liked the unpredictability of it – the drips, the glazes, the sculptural shapes – and not knowing if it was going to work out'* (Member)

And staff and volunteers talked about the value of everyone working together – members, staff and volunteers:

*'We were making art alongside each other – all making mistakes or having bad days, which demystifies the process'* (Crisis)

Although this departure from normal practice within a Crisis education class raised questions for one member:

*'The volunteers and tutors spent most of the sessions doing their own work rather than facilitating our learning, which seemed a little inappropriate'* (Member)

And there was a clear sense that it is the whole experience rather than any individual element that speaks strongly to some people:

*'These projects are intensive – with a high density of creative people working with members...It challenges them to engage intellectually and emotionally and helps them to let go of their preconceived ideas. For some this really unblocks them. They take control, feel liberated and empowered, become really inventive – and just let go... Connecting with this creativity can be transformational'* (Crisis)



### **The exhibition**

Although not creatively driven by the exhibition, aiming towards a professional quality show for presentation to the public was in everyone's minds.

*'Working towards an exhibition is a real commitment...it's not 'let's pretend'. And, if you are investing in people, they feel invested in'* (Crisis)

*'The exhibition was a very important outcome for AOFS as it is one of the ways in which we support the work of emerging artists – and Georgie Manly, volunteers, Crisis members and Crisis staff all potentially fitted in this category. Also it showcased some of the important work we do with Crisis'* (AOFS)

There was clearly some scepticism about how a quality show might be achieved with such diverse input:

*'People worked at such different levels – I was genuinely*

*surprised by how good it looked'* (Member)

And staff and volunteers – with more personal experience of exhibiting work – expressed some of the anxieties more explicitly:

*'An exhibition is a very exposing experience. When you are in a difficult place, it's even harder.... but it comes with great benefits. Complete strangers coming up and sharing their response to your work is amazing'* (Crisis)

But there was genuine delight from most participants at both the professional look and feel of the show and the way that the artist and the AOFS team created an exhibition that was both coherent and inclusive:

*'I felt very proud and included in the wider community'* (Member)

*'I never believed I was going to be in an exhibition like this!'* (Member)

## **What could have been improved?**

### **Length of the course**

Largely driven by a funding requirement, the 12 week turnaround time for the project was very tight – especially taking to account the many stages involved in the project and, in particular, the need to dry and fire the work off site. This certainly caused practical challenges:

*'It needed a lot of goodwill from all of us to make it happen... [AOFS] were great at organising and keeping things steady'* (Crisis)

*'There wasn't time to organise access to a kiln before the project started – it was a huge job finding a school willing to fire the pots, driving everything there, getting it back and then getting the exhibition in good shape and up in time for the opening'* (AOFS)

And there were concerns that it stood in the way of more effective relationship building within the group – something identified as a positive benefit of the 2014 Making Tracks project, which ran for 24 weeks:

*'There was a lack of time to engage and gel the group – it could work better over 2 terms'* (Crisis)

And of making full use of the partnership with PRM, engaging participants more deeply with the collection and enabling more people to attend:

*'I missed that session and there wasn't a chance to go again'* (Member)

*'The initial plan was for the groups to have two visits to the museum – one towards the beginning, and one half way through the project to refresh memories and for those who missed out on the first visit. Unfortunately this was not possible due to the tight schedule of the project in the build-up to the exhibit. This meant that after week 2, the PRM did not have any further contact with the Crisis group. If we were to do a similar project again, we would try to arrange for the exhibit to come to the museum for a short period of time following the Old Fire Station, to bring the participants' work back to its source of inspiration'* (PRM)

### **Engagement throughout the process**

The biggest casualty of the tight time frame was member involvement in decisions around the show. For some, the separation of the curation from the making process was fine:

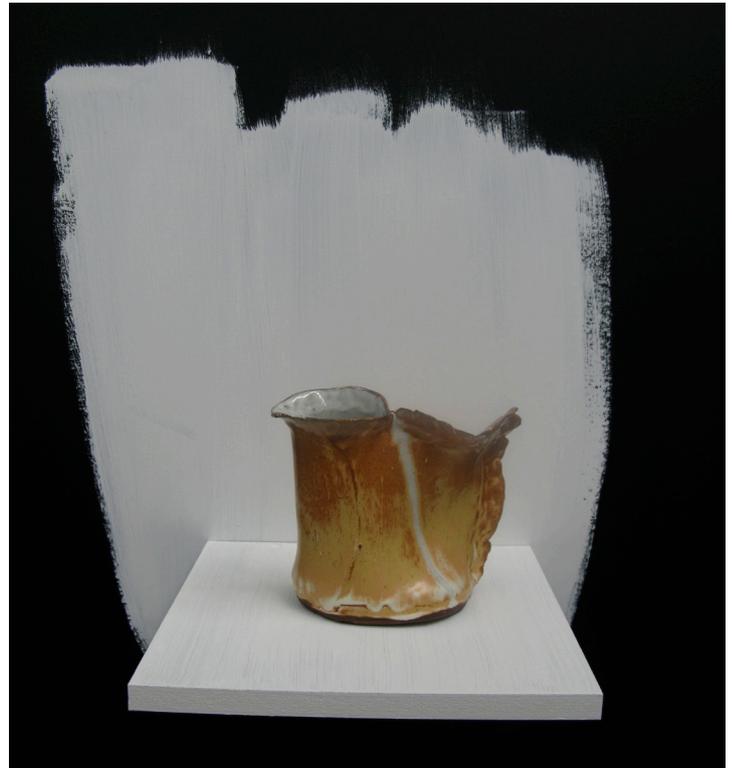
*'This is what would happen in a professional exhibition – it's real life'* (Member)

Others had concerns that their views had not been properly sought or reflected:

*'I would have liked some of the exhibition to look more like the PRM – with its jumble of pieces'* (Member)

*'I didn't feel the exhibition was a particularly good showcase of all work...we were encouraged to partake in discussion about how our work would be exhibited but most of our ideas were ignored'* (Member)

More time to focus on this part of the process would have allowed members to feel more engaged without



compromising the professional nature of the final exhibition:

*'Ideally, we would have liked to have more discussion with everyone when planning the exhibition – for example to discuss the practical constraints in relation to a variety of proposals. But time constraints meant we had to go ahead quite swiftly with ideas that developed out of discussion during some of the workshops. And the reality with group exhibitions is often that it's necessary to compromise and settle on one strong idea so as to achieve a coherent presentation'* (AOFS)



## 5. Development of early career artists

One of AOFS's core offers to emerging and early career artists is the opportunity to work creatively alongside homeless people to deliver high quality work for the public. Although skills development is an important part of this offer, AOFS believes that the mix of people engaging within the Old Fire Station is itself stimulating and supports better art.

Georgie Manly's reflections on the project were positive on both these fronts. Some highlights were:

**Challenging preconceptions:** *'I had preconceptions about the likely attitudes and approach of members – but everyone was very open minded about what the project was about'*

**New skills and career ideas:** *'I had a new experience in working with homeless people, which has made me think about tailoring my career in that direction – maybe working with people around mental health. It added new opportunities that I didn't know about from college – I had no idea that this kind of job existed'*

**Creative development:** *'The project invigorated my practice. I made a new body of work...and I continued to learn about making and glazing. I could come up with ideas and see them through – like the 'Clay for All' event to engage the public with the exhibition...I want to do research on how to work with clay in education without overemphasising the technical'*

**Freedom and structure:** *'I felt I had a lot of freedom but also enjoyed having the support of colleagues and working within an existing structure...working in a team was a new experience for me'*

And feedback from both professional colleagues and members was equally positive:

*'Georgie was there as an artist not a teacher – and her own work is quite conceptual, which has been an interesting part of the process. She's young, with fresh ideas – and people have responded really well to that'* (Crisis)

*'She was both patient and informative... She brought both professionalism and enthusiasm in her approach to working with us. She steered us all in the right direction. I think this made the final show coherent'* (Member)

*'As the project developed I was interested to see how it was impacting on Georgie's own practice. I was very impressed with the new work she made, inspired by the PRM collections, and informed by her discussions with Crisis members. The decision to display her work amongst the project participants' work in the exhibition, rather than in a separate section, added to the even-handed approach we took to displaying the work. Alongside developing her art practice, Georgie works as a gallery educator ... it's good to note that the project, and the public event, supported her professional development, providing her with useful insights and ideas that she can build on'* (AOFS)

## 6. Artistic quality and audience response

### What worked well?

#### Quality

The exhibition was strikingly presented, with a strong art aesthetic rather than a traditional presentation of craft objects. The drama of the black wall excited comment, as did the effective use of the full height of the

atrium-like gallery space. Visitor comments included:

*'Successfully reinvented old forms and reinvented forms of traditional display – I love the blackboard wall!'*

*'Beautiful, spare presentation of intriguing and thoughtful pieces...a dizzying array of techniques – beautiful and interesting'*

*'The curation is playful. The slightly phallic piece high up on the white wall is funny'*

### **Audience reaction**

Feedback from visitors was both positive and considered. They were invited to sum up their reaction to the exhibition in a few words or short phrases. People clearly found it stimulating, with reflections focusing in particular on thinking about materials in a new way and on new understandings of a 'vessel':

*'Makes me think about the different and new ways that clay and glazing can be used... the vessel as a place for something to live'*

*'Vessels can be porous and some can be human and some can be almost sickly'*

*'Interesting – grey but warm – makes you think and wonder'*

And they were invited to comment on two key themes of the work – the idea of playfulness and of reinterpretation of old forms – giving feedback on specific works to be shared with the artists:

*'They look to me like open arms, a way to invite someone to come and play or be part of something with another being'*

*'Reminds me of ornate vessels from grand homes but on a much more domestic scale – humorous and covetable'*

*'It's sweet and funny and a bit dark'*

*'A thoughtful and focused investigation of material, quietly and gently playful – a fragile reinterpretation of vessel'*

### **Feedback to artists**

Without any orchestration, each artist represented in the exhibition received feedback on their work from members of the public. The importance of this – and of the overall response to the exhibition – was summed up by a member in her presentation to a Crisis members' celebration event:

*'What was fascinating about this experience was the public response to our work in the exhibition...These comments were really important to us as a group'* (Member)

The overall comments on the show that she chose to share were:

*'Flowing, responsive and amazing - thank you I enjoyed seeing your work!!'*

*'Funky and stimulating'*

*'It looks like the artists found their voice'*

*'Fragile... looking both ancient and modern'*

*'The composition was awesome – loved the colours'*

*'Exciting and free'*

*'Adventurous. Dazzling and full of fantasy'*

*'Explorative, inventive and above all revealing the artist's inner world'*

*'A really professional exhibition – congratulations'*

For her *'that says it all'*.

### **What could have been improved?**

The only suggestions for improvements from the audience were around matters of opinion, with people expressing an interest in having more contextual information about:

- The project and process
- The process of making





- The individual artists – what they did and why
- The PRM vessels that had been used for inspiration.

## 7. Organisation, management and partnership

### What worked well?

Everyone spoke positively about the partnership – the complementary skills brought by the different partners and the high level of good will shown by everyone in completing the project and achieving such a high quality exhibition in such a short time.

**Funding** from the PRM made an essential contribution. Enabling the recruitment of an external artist added real value for everyone

**Organised visits** to the PRM challenged members' thinking and inspired their ideas

**The artist** brought creative ideas and fresh perspectives – for example, the decision to make all the glazes was both engaging for members and helped deliver a coherent exhibition

**Crisis staff and volunteers** kept the process safe and accessible for members, working alongside the artist throughout

**AOFS's visual arts team** provided the practical and artistic support necessary to turn the project into a public exhibition

**The AOFS/Crisis partnership** provided a firm foundation for a sensitive and inclusive process.

*'People in the arts world tend to get too caught up in the aesthetics – not understanding people's fragility and complexity. But (the AOFS team) have been very supportive and involved – and they understand the boundaries with members'* (Crisis)

### What could have been improved?

Most of the ideas for improvements relate to timescales and constraints on resources:

**Planning** – more time to plan the project in detail may well have saved time later

**Timescales** – a 12 week programme put additional pressure on resources, as well as making it difficult to take full advantage of the opportunity for members to work within the PRM

**Member engagement** – decisions not to involve members in the development of the exhibition were based on timescale rather than a proper discussion of the pros and cons of different approaches

**Evaluation** – evaluation methods were designed to be relatively quick and simple to use but it was difficult to engage members with questionnaires. Despite pressure on time and resources, planning for greater emphasis on one to one or group methods throughout the process may be a better option.

## 8. Thanks

This report could not have been produced without the help of: Ada, Annette, Catherine, Georgie, Heather, Helen, Iris, Lucy, Marianne, Maya, Rebecca, Robert and Sarah.

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