



STEP
into the
Smithsonian

A collection of experiences from a cultural exchange

Introduction Abouts

Set over a six week period in July 2019, the immersive development programme connected four young east Londoners to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. ahead of their move to the East Bank on Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in 2020.

The group visited renowned cultural institutions in London, Washington and New York through a series of workshops, conversations, meetings and visits. The aim, to inspire the group to understand a little more about how they can contribute to and influence the content produced, created and showcased by cultural institutions globally.

The STEP into the Smithsonian participants were asked to document their experiences. Their creative reflections manifested as essays, stories, quotes, images, illustrations, poems and other creative pieces. This zine presents some of the great material they produced, capturing a sense of the project and illustrating their experiences.

The programme was funded and developed by London Legacy Development Corporation, Foundation for Future London, the Smithsonian Institution, the London boroughs of Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest and Create Jobs at A New Direction.

Mohammed Rahman



I'm Mohammed and I'm a 21 year-old creative from Waltham Forest. I studied BA in Social Anthropology at SOAS University of London. Studying anthropology, with its global and interdisciplinary methods, combined with my experience of living in London, has nourished my practice, across events production, youthwork, zine-making, nature-conservation, and food culture, with a broad range of perspectives.

Being a curious person, I like to approach disciplines in a holistic way. For example, as an independent zine-maker and artist in the A Show arts collective for untrained artists, I went on to gain experience in arts festival production through Create Job's Arts Festival Leaders course; as a result I was able to both produce and exhibit my work in the Tate Modern at a Uniqlo Tate Late. STEP into the Smithsonian is a unique opportunity to learn how to apply my background in anthropology in a more practical way. I think museums are beautiful because they open up academic fields, like anthropology, to everyone. I want to develop my curatorial practice, building on my existing background in arts festival production.

Abundance Matanda

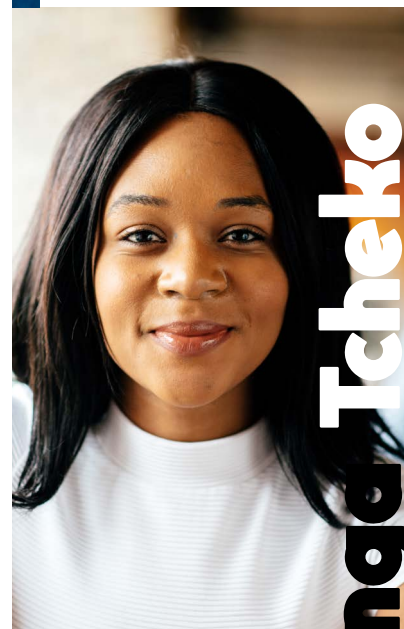


My name is Abundance Matanda and I live in Hackney. I mostly present my experiences of growing up in London through poetry, curation, art and conversation. Since 2014, I've been building skills in museums, archives and galleries, exploring ideas linked to personal, community and institutional interests across art, music, heritage and culture. In October 2018 I was triple-nominated as a changemaker in the creative industry, for creative network The Dots, by trailblazers Jenn Nkiru, Ibrahim Kamara and Tanya Compas. I was so excited to go to Washington D.C. to grow my network, develop my career in the cultural sector, and to make all the people who believe in me proud.

I'm Chess, I've always loved telling stories, and living in east London has been a constant inspiration with a strong and dynamic culture intrinsic to my identity. As an artist and digital-designer, I've tried hard to find a space to kickstart my career. STEP into the Smithsonian provided me with invaluable experience and networking opportunities, as well as the chance to develop my ideas. I enjoyed learning about culture in the USA. I'm looking forward to bringing what I've learnt back to east London, using this to influence and improve my community here.



Chess Charles



Iranga Tcheko

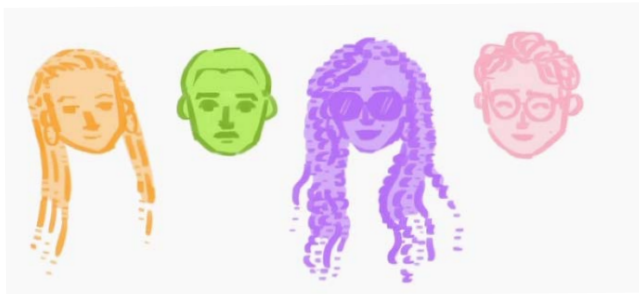
I'm Iranga, an ambitious young professional from Tower Hamlets, I'm an avid reader and outspoken public speaker. I graduated from Warwick University with a degree in History and Politics and during my time there I also managed events and produced projects as the Ethnic Minorities Officer and Director of Talks at the Africa Summit. I'm committed to immersive storytelling, developing and designing forward thinking content, and organising successful events. I was excited to go to Washington D.C. to learn more about telling better stories across different cultures and histories.

Pre-departure reflection

Let's chuck rationalisation out the window for a sec. Bottom line, how am I feeling? Excited. At least that's the best word I can find; I can't make heads or tails of it yet. I've never been to the U.S. despite the fact I was raised on The Fresh Prince of Bel Air and Malcolm in the Middle, A Tribe Called Quest and Nirvana, Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin. Honestly, it has the place of a strange, absent parent in my life- I've been reared on its images and lyrics, but America doesn't know me.

Now, here I am, en-route to one of the cultural hearts of the nation, Washington D.C. There's something of an overdue reunion about this...

I've been reflecting on the STEP bootcamp which ran in London from April 23rd-25th, preparing us for our departure for The Smithsonian on May 12th. The STEP participants (Chess, Iranga, Abundance and myself) got an insider look into museums and archives of varying scale, by speaking



to people representing The Smithsonian, Tate, YOUTH CLUB and the Black Cultural Archives. We discussed all the burning questions: What makes a good museum? Why are museums important? What kind of work goes on in museums?

Here was my pre-departure take:

Museums are for the living! On our first day, we spoke to Dr. Thomas Wide who is the manager of the Smithsonian programme in London. We came to this idea after discussing the Freer Sackler Museum of Asian Art and some changes made to its programme. To celebrate its reopening in October 2017, the Freer Sackler hosted IlluminAsia, a festival which consisted of live music, food and arts events, all in the form of a night bazaar. The hubbub and interactivity of events like IlluminAsia marks an emerging trend in the lives of museums.

People are scrapping the idea of the museum as something dead, a fossil collection, a crumbling house of snapshots. All good museums also have a life of their own and breathe new life into the future. In this vein, a recent and relieving move made by big London institutions like the V&A, Tate and the Wellcome Collection, has been to run late events. By reframing the museum as a place to hang out, a more diverse crowd is engaging with collections and the buildings that house them.

The digitalisation of collections is also adding to this trend. We spoke to Jen Aarvold, Head of Digital Content and Nikta Mohammadi, Assistant Producer at Tate Digital. We gathered that not only do virtual tours and digital archives let the public navigate collections on its own terms, but also how digital teams use data and feedback to update and curate on the fly. I'm a fan of this conversational way of curating, because in theory it yields PHRESH ways of engaging with collections. It was helpful to clock how culture is becoming increasingly personalised and decentralised. Digital teams are the real MVPs in making a place people want to be both IRL and URL.

I think by growing apart from the traditional institution ruled by rigid tours and Do Not Touch signs, we're jumping out of a flaming bus. In doing so, institutions aren't 'dumbing things down' as the old guard might grumble. The question of complexity isn't it, chief. When we lift the glass boxes, mass media has just as much if not more social significance than what is considered high culture; the two interact and are consumed together. If 'dumbing things down' means taking the mic away from an affluent academic elite that considers others a subject of study and nothing more, then so be it. Let them flinch at the cacophony. Institutions need to realise that it's not just their reputation, but the quality of their work which is at stake. Platforming unexpected, conflicting and plural ways of reading culture, spells something altogether more sincere, interesting and (yes for God's sake) complex. If culture reaches our museums, in ways that silence, alienate and marginalise us, then we're doing something wrong.

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For conscious curation, we need to understand our own experience and bias around how history is presented vs. how it's lived. Dominant narratives can be dangerous! From my own experience growing up in the UK, I've been taught that history is linear, sequential, based on cause-and-effect-events and that it's just about the past- cue the primary school Tudors' timeline with the tacky WordArt headings. When you think you're done with those cringey reductions, heavily past-oriented collections *ahem British Museum ahem* sneak up on you in adulthood.

In my humble opinion, the bad news about this way of presenting the past, is that it silences other voices, doesn't meet us in the present and makes us forget that we're making our own histories all the time!

Our visit to YOUTH CLUB, a youth subculture photo archive at Printworks, helped us think beyond museums as places that present a straightforward past. YOUTH CLUB are doing amazing work in bringing marginalised histories to the fore. Lisa Der Weduwe and Jamie Brett told us about the scanning days and exhibitions YOUTH CLUB runs with all sorts of communities considered subculture. Lisa and Jamie also mentioned how these events bring people together as they allow lived memories to surface in the present.

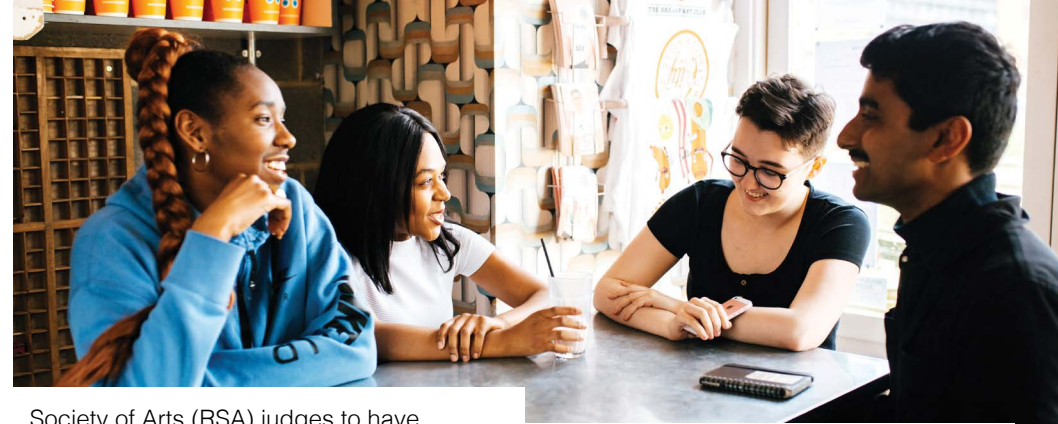
During our discussion at Printworks, Iranga made a point, when she saw pictures of people



in the '70s dressing for Carnival; how sometimes it's startling to be reminded that once upon a time our uncles and aunties had swag. We see ourselves, our present aspirations in them.

The importance of alternative histories is key! Maybe the past can seem irrelevant in traditional museums, not because we don't relate to the subjects represented, but rather, we don't relate to the curators that speak over them. It was so refreshing to take family and friends' photo albums seriously. I think the answer to engaging exhibits lies in letting people speak for themselves.

A good exhibit lets us plot ourselves in relation to places, things and people on the timescape. Knowing our own place in history can be really empowering. We saw this on our trip to the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton with trustee, Patricia Hamzahee FRSA. The Fellowship of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (FRSA) is an award granted to individuals that the Royal



Society of Arts (RSA) judges to have made outstanding achievements to social progress and development. Patricia gave us a tour of the current photo exhibition, RADIATING GREATNESS: STORIES OF BLACK LEADERSHIP (part 1) A Portrait study by Franklyn Rodgers – it's part of a series. Here we got the backstory behind inspiring black women at the top of their industries, including Lawyer Sandie Okoro, Dr. Samantha Tross, and Baroness Valerie Amos CH. Each portrait was symbolically presented on doors, as a gesture towards the future and growing representation for POC women across sectors.

We also had a talk with archivist Hannah Ishmael and looked at some primary materials from the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) from the '70s and '80s; pamphlets, books, letters and their meeting minutes, doodles in the margins included! It was great to see the human touches like drawings on these resources. There's something very grounding, knowing that this kind of community organisation has been done before, by people just like us (who get bored at meetings) against the institutional racism and sexism that persists decade after decade in the UK. Knowing where we stand historically helps us adapt more thoughtfully to patterns in our present and future.

With this in mind, when I go stateside, I'm interested in the Smithsonian's treatment of painful and violent histories, namely in the National Museum of African-American

History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian.

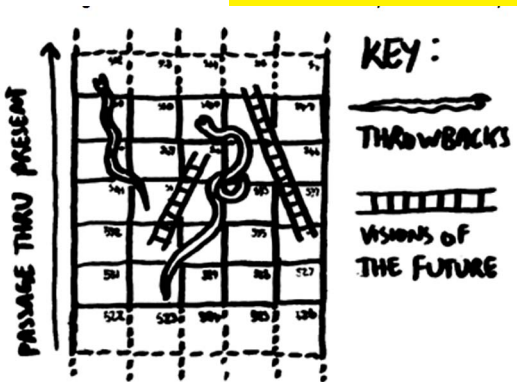
It'd also be great to speak to people raised in the U.S. and compare what they're taught at school versus what the museums say.

As archiving technologies are getting better and more accessible, the patterns between generations are becoming easier to trace and the past is increasingly easier to delve into from the present. People are unwittingly self-archiving on social media in greater numbers than before. It's funny, knowing we're the first generations to do this new kind of time, on this scale.

I've been thinking how our experience of history is less a timeline and more a game of snakes and ladders. Throwbacks, dreams and déjà vu jump us at every corner. Visions of the past and future are mingled with each other and the present.

The snakes in the board game analogy are those triggers of nostalgia that take us into the act of remembering, the sneaky polaroid taken at a wedding, the smell of frying garlic or a song from three summers ago, thumping out of a speaker. We experience throwbacks overlaid with our present, which are likewise multisensory and speak to us through a shared point of reference.

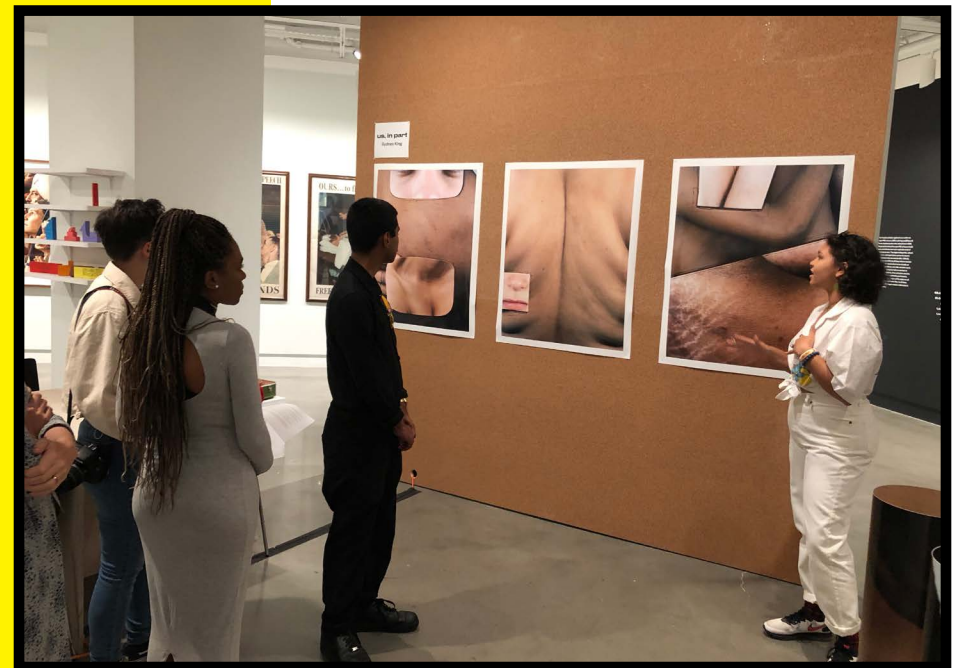
Now the ladders. We also encounter visions of the future. I'd like to see more futurism in museums. When visions of the future are showcased, they serve as interesting tools, not only to derive hope for immediate social issues but also retrospectively, to study the zeitgeist of the past through what people's dreams were at the time. We need to bear in mind these interactions when we curate. All futurisms become retrofuturisms, and they are important indicators of how we express our place in history.



Futurisms are always in the image of the present from which they spring. Let's look at the example of Morbo the News Monster in Matt Groening's Futurama. A staple of the show, set in the year 3000CE, is the Planet Express team being notified of sudden world-events by televised newsflashes. If we appreciate how Futurama was made in the '90s and '00s, a time where reality television and the newsroom had become a hallmark of the technological age, we can see how the newsroom stakes a central place in that universe.

Today, barely two decades later, the newsroom and our friends Riz Lateef, Jon Snow and Morbo are but one small part of the news. People are increasingly taking their news from on-the-ground posts and tweets, from multiple and simultaneous news sources. Fact-checking has become an integral part of conversation, I mean, how many times has a heated debate ended with "shall we just Google it?". Futurama's inability to foresee this shift, is telling- we find it difficult to relate to or imagine a future massively removed from our present. I imagine that the current wave of pop futurism a la Janelle Monae's and FKA Twigs' Afro-futurist aesthetics will look very dated someday as has been the case with Sun Ra before them.

By Mohammed Rahman



Four W's:

Self Representation, Community, Politics and Photography

Who, what, how much of something we see and when we see it in art, media and cultural spaces matter and have the power to influence our sense of self and politics.

I don't know quite how to explain, but I wanted to show African Americans in the communities/neighbourhoods that historically HAD to create for themselves. Just being themselves, chilling, dripping in sauce being unapologetically them.



Rockwell's four paintings are accompanied by a short call to arms/ aims from Franklin D Roosevelt's State of the Union address: Save our freedom of speech: buy war bonds, OURS...to fight for: freedom from fear, OURS... is a fight for freedom of want and finally Save freedom of worship: buy war bonds.



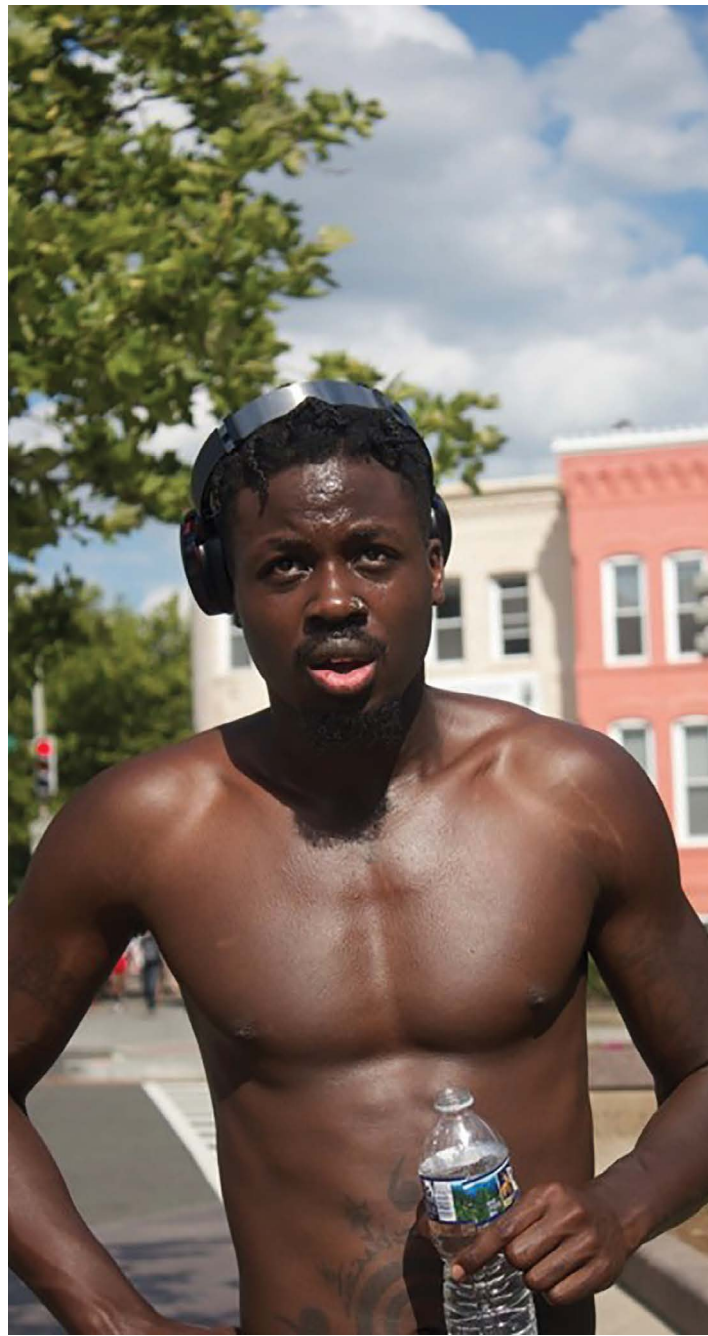
The exhibition highlighted the importance of interrogating existing narratives and pushing for collaborative and inclusive approaches to art as tools for community through modern interpretation of Rockwells painting. Emboldened by the line 'Concrete Jungles where dreams are made of ' from Jay Z and Alicia Keys single titled after the city, some tips from Amber from Magnum photos and a growing frustration at the people/s who were largely missing from the museums and cultural spaces we visited I decided to try my hand at street photography – Gass level 1000 at this point. Photographing locals in Brooklyn and U Street in DC.



The 'OURS' Rockwell portrays of white apparent and a stark reminder that minority groups are often excluded or exist in the margins of national narratives, matters of national security and the nation as a whole.

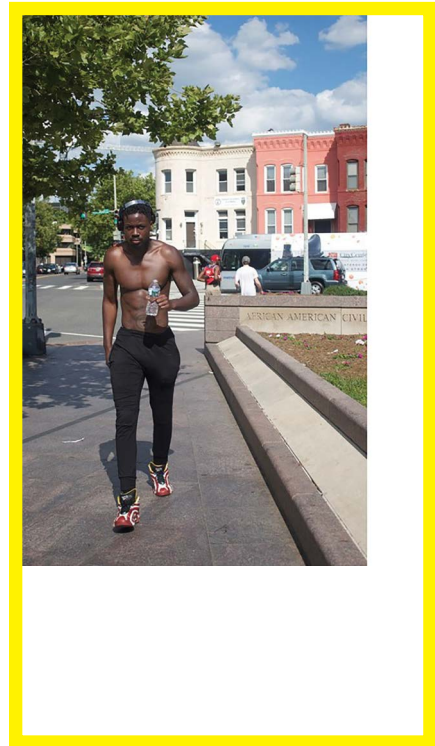












Photos by Iranga Tcheko

Smithsonian live comments

So much has happened this week and a bit, that writing this feels like digesting a Popeye's boxmeal, calorie by calorie. The weekend has been welcomed to sit with this knowledge-food baby and reflect.

I'll give you my impressions of D.C. (pronounced: FOOD) and then two lessons learnt from my observations on the STEP into the Smithsonian programme.

We're slap-bang in the middle of D.C. We walk past the Capitol Building every day and let me tell you, I've never seen so many suited adults on scooters in my life.

D.C.'s layout is way more spaced out than London's, but people walk at half the pace. D.C. is also much greener, with a potpourri of well-tended gardens lining the sidewalks, giving an unexpected air of suburbia. Maybe not so surprising, considering how it's built on former swampland.



Given that our visit coincides with National Police Week and Memorial Day, the police and military presence has been especially visible. It's been a huge culture shock to see so many guns! Museums also have much heavier security than the UK, with the constant frisking proving a real downer at times.

Food here, though expensive, bangs. We were particularly impressed by the Sweet Home Cafe at the NMAAHC. Serving regional specialities of African American cuisine, including gingery candied yams, crisp battered catfish, buttermilk fried chicken, cornbread and collard greens, the

Sweet Home Cafe churns out food made with love. Given the herculean task of making the phrase 'museum canteen' sexy, the Sweet Home Cafe COMES THRU.



In an age of Instagram food-porn and great television like Chef's Table, The Great British Bake Off, and Ugly Delicious, food traditions are finally getting their due in the public sphere. This trend has also been echoed in cliquier spheres including academia, and in DIY subcultures among the zine-making community. When I mentioned in my pre-departure posts, how Lates are a great strategy to revive the museum, the NMAAHC gets the memo and goes one step further, immersing its visitors in a bittersweet history through their stomachs. Not only does this revivify a museum as a community space, but it also throws in the notion of eating as an act of remembering, as a vehicle for traversing non-linear time. Hot sauce obviously provided. Another gem we discovered was Hot N Juicy Crawfish, a southern-inspired seafood spot by Woodley Park Zoo/ Adams Morgan Station Metro. These guys don't play and do hot seafood by the bucket; bibs, gloves and table lining included!



Biscuits were also a revelation. On one of our breaks we hit Church's Chicken at L'Enfant Plaza. While the chicken itself fell short of Bossman's back home, the soft, glazed fluff of the biscuits came through. The cognitive dissonance between calling them 'biscuits', expecting something crispy and then biting into buttery cake-like softness is a madting.

Leaving D.C., my dreams on the return flight will likely be a sad deluge of Guy Fieri memes...





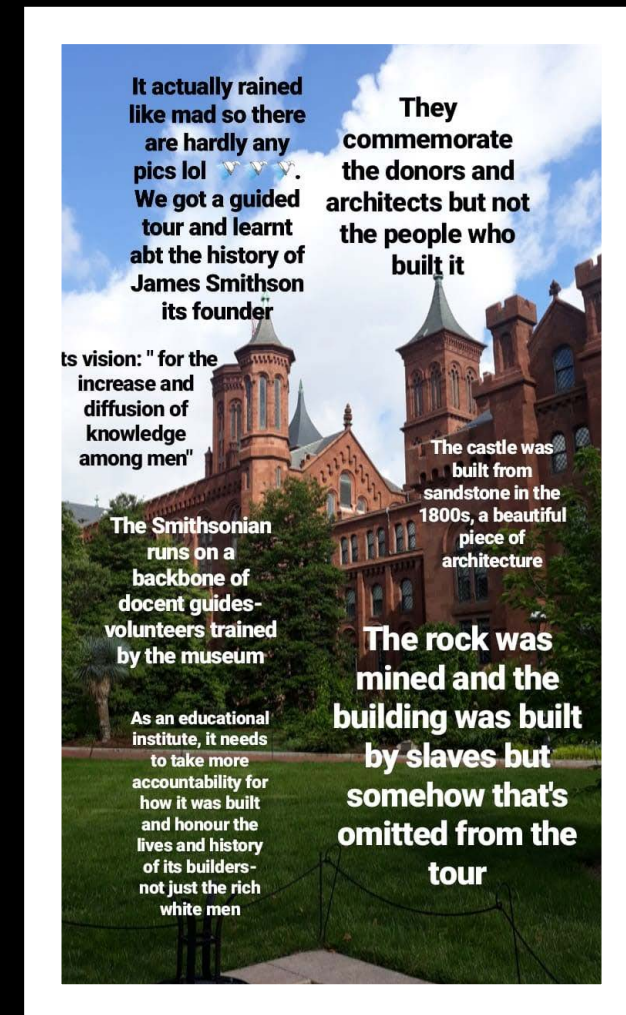
The Smithsonian is a many-headed beast. It's a small town in its own right. We've visited *deep breath* the Smithsonian Castle, the joint National Portrait Gallery (NPG) and Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), The National Museum of American History (NMAH), The National Postal Museum (NPM), The National Museum of African-American History and Culture (NMAAHC), The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and then some...

Yep, it's taken us a while to swallow all the acronyms.

After a diverse range of behind-the-scenes tours, we can say if there's one thing the museums share, it's a logo. Despite the occasional loaning of collections between themselves, the Smithsonians all operate fairly independently from one another. Be it the nature of the collections (frail biological specimens versus chunky vehicles) or the curatorial thrust (from dusty traditional, to family friendly), many factors play into what facilities and staff make each museum- which in turn determines what and how that museum can exhibit.

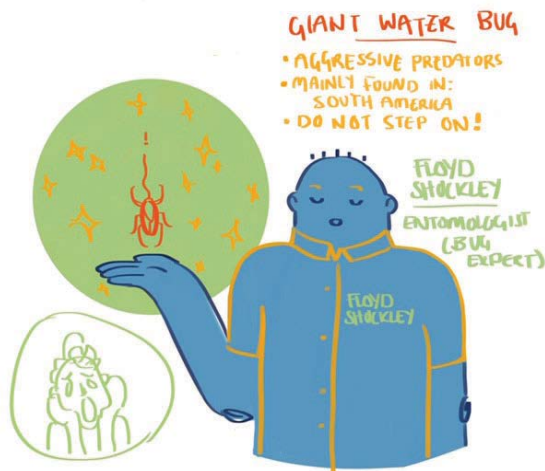
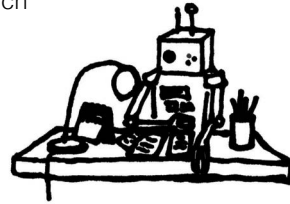
This chimerical approach has pros and cons. If we look at the Smithsonian Institution as a huge organism, with museums for organs, this is a good thing, since compartmentalised museums can be more specialist with their collections, catering to the needs of one audience in a way that might alienate another. Knowing that most of its crowd has a pre-existing interest, a specialist museum can move beyond 'hey-look-at-this-shiny-rock' tactics to the nitty gritty.

For instance, the NPM, one of the more niche museums, serves as a quiet, sanctuary for stamp collectors to contemplate innovations in transport as applied to the post, whereas the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) has a way broader scope and is very popular with schools, attracting hordes of MAGA-capped students, with its flashy interactive installations and IMAX cinema. While both museums may feature planes, they have very different levels of footfall, engagement, curation and accessibility. If we look at it like an organism, we can say that the Smithsonian is accessible in that it engages different levels of interest-but we need to remember that the Smithsonian IRL is verrrry spread out. We can't assume that the general public has a 360° view of the whole institution cos, well, it's a MISSION as we found out ourselves



A cool side effect of specialist collections paired with cutting edge research is that it attracts a solid, passionate faculty. Many of our sessions ran over as collections managers were so generous with their time, to discuss what they love in sincere, detailed and sometimes eccentric ways. To give one example of many, let's look at the entomology collection housed at the NMNH shown to us by collections manager, Floyd Shockley. The biggest entomology collection in the world, with over 35 million specimens, Floyd was kind enough to show us around and delve into everything from storage methods for wet specimens, to hazards during acquisitions in the field, to the collaboration between

the entomology and forensics departments- apparently bugs tell us a lot about murder mysteries! Floyd has literally put his flesh and blood into the collection, and it shows in his eagerness to share knowledge. And yeah, I was serious about the whole flesh and blood thing- Floyd intentionally reared two bot fly larvae to maturity on his own skin, which feature in the collection!



On the other hand, specialism can be isolating. If we're not careful, stories are sectioned off and crammed into arbitrary boxes. When materials are separated across museums, it gets easier to overlook how info and objects are equally important to multiple collections, skewing the narrative. Accountability can then be avoided, and the public can be fed propaganda. In my opinion, the role of the museum is to make information available for the public to make their own political decisions for themselves- like good journalism.

In this vein, I take issue with museums putting on an air of singular objectivity, knowing that they're huge collaborative efforts, with a cacophony of voices behind them. With such a vibrant and interesting faculty, it's a shame at how many behind-the-scenes conversations are often anonymized- the final edit written as though it all came from one mind. And that's just internally within each museum- gaps in the narrative inevitably pop up here and there across museums. For instance, who exactly built the Smithsonian Castle was omitted from our castle tour- instead our docent guide delved into the stories of its architects and patrons. However, the NMAAHC a few blocks away covers the fact that the Smithsonian

Castle, the Capitol Building and the White House were all built by slaves.

Is Black history not also the history of the Smithsonian, if not American history writ large? Edits like this may indicate a faculty unwilling to reckon with ugly histories and frankly an unwillingness to reconcile with the communities affected. The info is out there...

From another front, voluntary docent guides, the backbone of visitor experience, take enough pride in the institution to work for free and are unwilling to put its name in ill repute. For that reason, I'd recommend more curatorial collaboration/ guide training between the museums- a kind of peer review if you will.

A parallel is true of the NMAI (the name, a

problematic vestige from its previous incarnation in NYC) in relation to the NMAH (again, sorry about the acronyms!). The latter is a museum presumably tailored towards a mainstream audience, while the former has become a site of pilgrimage for families and a living memorial, given the controversial number of human remains and histories of genocide housed in the collection. Given this sensitive content, one thing the NMAI does particularly well in some of its display descriptions, is it clearly credits the individual who wrote them. In crediting the academics who write the display captions, they invite the Google-happy public to do their own research and add their own pinches of salt as required- an act of trust which, many other Smithsonians can learn from.

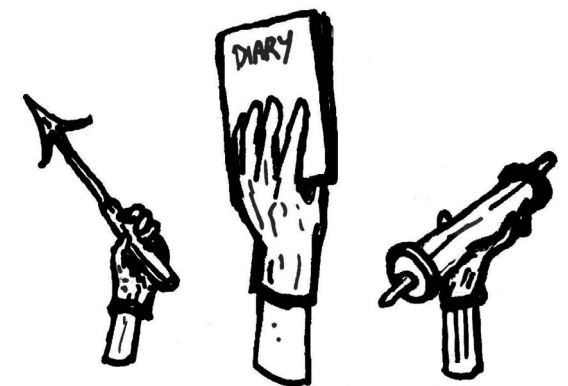
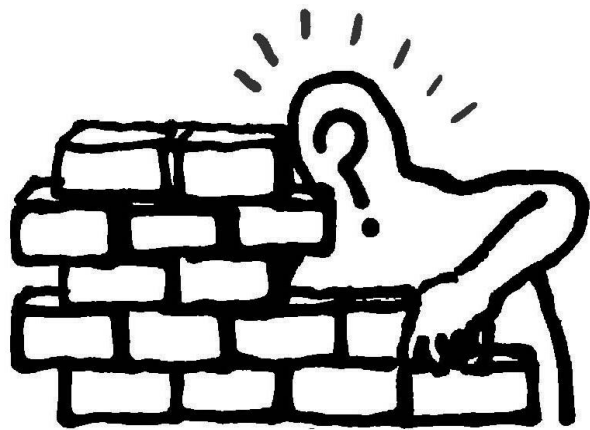


Illustration by Chess Charles

Built in 2004, before a wave of indigenous rights discourse hit the mainstream in the 2010s (notably with the widespread renaming of Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day) the NMAI is a patchwork of conscious and insensitive curation. Steered by a well-intentioned curation board, the NMAI is phasing out curatorial faux pas and gradually repatriating its collections. On our backstage tour at the NMAI, led by collections manager, C. Cali Martin, we learnt of the collaboration between communities, collections managers and the executive board to represent a history sidelined from dominant US historical narrative. Cali spoke about the museum's openness to taking on suggestions from members of the nations represented in the public- for instance the removal of medicine bundles from public view or making sure ceremonially male-handle-only objects are dealt with by exclusively male staff.

Of course, these nuances could be more readily implemented without first offending someone if there was better representation on the in-house curation team. However, Cali told us with regret that a mere 30% of the executive board and curatorial body is of indigenous heritage in the NMAI alone- meaning an even lower representation elsewhere in the Smithsonian. Poor representation in museum staff is the bitter fruit of wider social issues in employment and education among US indigenous communities. Maybe it's an idea for museums to run traineeship/scholarship programmes, to sow sustainable stewardship of histories back into the communities from which they came.



Illustrations by Mohammed Rahman and words by Chess Charles



I think now more than ever, the whitewashing histories undermines the authority of educational institutions. Fact-checking comes as second nature to many in the age of fake news. If something looks sketchy in their collection, any member of the public can just Google it and make a mockery of the institution on social media, right there on the spot. Art thou dizzy cuz?

During a few of our discussions on issues of decoloniality, community engagement and repatriation, the issue of some UK institutions being colonial as hell was raised. YES! WE AGREE! London institutions for instance, the British Museum and the V&A contain collections built on imperialist wealth. While moves are being made towards transparency on their collections, there's a great deal of euphemism there. For example, with the case of John Sheepshanks (1787-1863) art collector and patron of the V&A. Credited as the "son of a wealthy cloth manufacturer" in the freely available V&A archive research guide. We need to bear in mind that his inheritance was from a pre-abolition period, where the UK's cotton was grown by exploitative labour in India and slaves on American plantations.

Point being, it's in my hopes that better acknowledgement that larger museums in the US and UK have both profited from an interlinked imperial apparatus is the way forward as the Smithsonian and V&A come together on this upcoming project. History can be ugly, but the importance of sincere reconciliation ought to be respected if museums are really for the people.

Speaking of difficult histories, given the many voices of the institution, one thing that we noticed across many exhibits were their perspectives on war. Maybe it was because our visit coincided with a triple patriotic whammy of Memorial Day, National Police Week and the upcoming 75th

While present in the NMAH, NPM and NMAAHC, it wasn't a universal, as demonstrated by the Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975 exhibit at the SAAM.

After seeing the harrowing Don McCullin exhibition at the Tate Britain during the STEP bootcamp a few weeks earlier, I was especially shocked walking through the NMAH's exhibit *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War* with its triumphant orchestral soundtrack. The McCullin show told a story that was altogether more rounded albeit harder to swallow; of the soldiers, on all sides naturally frightened to die and kill, of families, brutalised, and starved by military action beyond their control. I wonder if there's something in the way galleries, in my experience, have had a generally more critical stance on war than museums.

Words such as 'Bravery' on a waving US flag were projected onto the walls of the NMAH and there was almost no talk of the atrocities committed to civilian populations nor on pacifist groups in the US, persecuted by conscription drives. There were opportunities to take pictures by a helicopter tho.

On a brighter note, senior reference specialist, Megan Harris, gave a workshop and talk at the Smithsonian Material Culture Forum at the NPG and SAAM in celebration of the 75th anniversary of D-Day (also quite pro-war in places). We got to look at the pictorial diaries of American POWs- a great way to engage with history, hands on. These were made from makeshift materials found in the field, including flattened cigarette boxes, and gave very intimate personal histories- doodles, humour and horror included from a first-person source. It was really cool to get a perspective of history directly from the front line and to humanise experiences of war. I think opportunities and workshops like these should play a bigger role in presenting exhibitions. As a zinemaker myself, it struck me as super relevant in a time of zine subculture revival- people have been at it for decades! It's grounding how in the end, the bustle of museums aside, history is written by our own hands, in our own voices.



"Our conception of what constitutes the best that can be done in artwork still revolves around those paintings that are the foundation of art history. And those paintings all have a European origin, so that our concept of what's beautiful and what's important operates within that realm as well. For me, as an African American or a black person going to the museum and looking at those works, even though I like a lot of the things I might be lookin at, there really is a limit to your ability to appreciate things that don't include you as a fundamental part of their value system. For me, the only way to really come to terms with that is to introduce images that contain black figures. And not black figures that were marginal in terms of their position in the narrative, but central to the narrative. I committed myself to only making black figures in my paintings because there are not enough paintings in museums, anywhere really, that have black figures as the central subject of those pictures." - Kerry James Marshall, 1st August 2013.

I'm sat on a black 2-seater sofa in da Smithsonian American Art Museum's Modern & Contemporary Art section on da 3rd floor, and to da right of me is a Kerry James Marshall portrait painting called SOB, SOB. It's so mad how I found it like it called me or sutten cah Jah knows I weren't lookin 4 it - I were tryna go sit down by da Luce Centre where we woz 4 dat conservation tour, get sum work dun on dis Macbook, but here I am, chillin. I come up in da lift, accompanied by da portrait of Toni Morrison on my way up & one security guard smiled at me & said hi when I got out, so much more friendly dan most of dem. I nearly asked him where's dat place I were lookin 4, but decided I'll jus follow my feet.

I recognised it as a KJM straight away from da way da subject's skin woz so dark n lovely like da



relaxer lol so it weren't even a question to come up n tek a look proper. I'm preein it now after I've taken in how dere's 2 outta 8 clouds above my girl's head goin {SOB...} {SOB...} Da 1st & da 4th ones. & she's sat on da floor now wid a book facin her "AFRICA SINCE 1413" or sutten. Da text is white & dere's a yellow illustration on it on da black background n it reminds me of da Kikongo Cosmogram jus cah dere's circles so I wonder if it's a spiritual symbol. Dere's

a whole book case wid 8 shelves, so dat's 1 for every cloud, & I'm recognisin sum of da titles n authors in dere. Sum's familiar n sum's new...
If I woz 2 buy dis paintin 4 anybody it would be my brother cah dat's my guy. Dis is how I felt when I took in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at her solo show at da Corvi-Mora Gallery in South London a couple years ago, cah I could envision havin one of dem pieces up on da wall in my personal library at some fancy imaginary home soon come.

"If you came to my house and looked through my library, you would see, my wife and I have a huge concentration of books that are on African history; African American history; American history; African culture - all of those different aspects of the history of black people from around the world. And if you look through the titles of the books, you'll see that the range of subjects that they cover, relative to black history, culture, and also the kinds of stories that black people tell, is really broad. So part of the reason some of those titles are there is to introduce some of those authors and some of those books to the art-viewing public, because the painting is as much an invitation to also come to know, as it is a demonstration of the kind of conflicts in knowledge that somebody who has already arrived at this knowledge might experience."

I deeped how da girl's still got her shoes on n aint took out her hairbands or nuthin, n she's got on a nice long light blue skirt, periwinkle type shade dat kinda matches da sliver of sky on da top left side ah da paintin out da window n da accents next 2 da white staircase. Her orangeish brownish shortsleeve shirt matches da girl's eyes n da frame of da paintin still. It's so big. I luv dat. Cool, so my theory is yeah, my girl's come home from work now, she ain't even had time to unwind yet, she's jus walked in2 one ah dem impromptu history lessons and she's gazin at whoeva's deliverin it - dey must be sittin on da sofa opposite da bookcase n she's proper listenin n it's feelin like a wise elder, n she's jus soakin it all up. See how her face set serious. She either picked up dat book n dere tellin her bout it, or dere talkin bout dat title so she grabbed it...

But tru say dat don't look like no familiar or typical black home like u'd see in a Njideka Akunyili-Crosby paintin - da lady who woz commissioned by Art On Da Underground n had her ting up in Brixton Station, n who's show I saw at da National Portrait Gallery in Central London dat Sunday couple months back now. But yeah, da ceiling's hella high, window's so big & I like da floorboards, but tru say dat ting dat looks like it could or should be a rug's jus weird n ugly. I wonder if she's even at a black person's yard doe cah like say how u couldn't tell from my bredrin Joseph's book collection dat he's white, dat can't be da only clue init, but da way she's sprawl out so comfy on dat floor, I only rllly sat like dat in Aunty Molly or Nana's house yano. So she's deffo safe init, no matter where she is, she's good, she's comfy, so dat's cool.

The frame: it's a way of kind of locating it amongst um the kind of common, popular vernacular approach. It seems like something that's more familiar to people who often think of museums and artworks as reallyreally distant from their experiences. And if you come up to a thing, it's got this really ornate gold frame on it and stuff and you look at the picture inside and you don't like it, then that becomes that thing where people say well I just must not be smart enough. And those people don't come back to the museum, more times than not.

Anyhoo, see how she's mentally sobbin yeah. Listen. Dis paintin is a real life accurate representation of how I be feelin after I jus took in dem six lectures from da Smithsonian's Art Fellows Conference Ting: FLOORED!!! I'm jus so in awe and real talk I woz finkin about wot it is 2 be African n black n local n jus doin u, workin, learnin... See how she's not in school uniform. My girl ain't been forced to learn, nah. If she aint fully chose to tek a seat n let da skl of lyf do its ting wid her, den she's in dat dreamy state where u jus gotta succumb n get 2 kno da fings u woz born 2 know... See how she's gazin dere, 2 da left of da paintin now, Kerry's come paint da scene like say he's sittin on da other side of da couch n jus preein da ting n probly chippin in his 1, 2 cents every now n again lol, maybe she even walked in2 dose 2's convo - da elder & da painter. If I woz 2 rename disartwork, tru say I'd call it WISE CHILDREN. She's seriously so stunning. When dis girl in da painting goes sleep 2night, she's gunna have sum crazy arse dreams boy.



I wanted to try to convey or at least give people access to was a certain level of ambivalence (I didn't know wot dat word meant but Google's tellin me: the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone. I hear that.) in what the character or the figure was thinking, after having read through and gone through some of those books, because the thought balloons there and the phrase SOB, SOB... Yes, it's on the one hand a kind of sad sort of uh, sad recognition of some sorta painful insight maybe, but on the other side of it, it's a fairly powerful rebuke of some of the things you might've come to learn in history. And I think that's, that ambivalence, that place in-between (Ay I was at this artist discussion a couple years ago for Alicia Reyes McNamara at South London Gallery and I learnt another word for that in-betweenness: liminal. Get to kno.), where you're both, where you experience both a certain sadness and also a certain kind of anger about the things that you've discovered, this is really a part of what the picture is about. And then the question becomes, after you begin to know those things that one cannot not know uno, then what do ya do with that information? What do ya do with it? What do ya do about it?

The work that the Smithsonian does can only be done by humans. I think there's something reassuring about that, at least with my interest in the cultural sector. Remember when automated self-checkouts at ASDA became a thing? Now with the unveiling of a robotic visitor experience team for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the future of employment and automation is changing fast.

Early in our trip, we visited the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage for their series of Tuesday talks. We sat in on curator of Asian Pacific American history, Dr. Theodore S. Gonzalves' talk: Taking June Millington on a Tour of a Graveyard of Guitars at Our National Museum of American History. Theo spoke passionately about the revolutionary life of Filipina-American rockstar, June Millington, giving a racial and gendered analysis on the rise and disappearance of Millington's band Fanny in the 1970s relative to other rock groups and Asian-American movements of the time. During his talk, Theo emphasised the importance of intergenerational empowerment, community gatherings and representation in cultural institutions like the Smithsonians, things that can never fully be automated. It was really powerful stuff- some tears were even shed!

In the Q&A that followed, when asked why he thought his work to revive histories like Fanny's was important, especially in our tech age, Theo responded, saying he wants future generations to "play it forward", paying homage to their predecessors by starting DIY live music subcultures themselves; to keep live music alive. A golden piece of advice Theo then dropped on us was to focus on honing skills that will not be replaced by machines in the future.

In my experience, the arts and cultural sectors have often been dismissed by pushy parents as an unstable career path and are the first to face government cuts in times of austerity, but given its resistance to automation, maybe it is a good basket for one's eggs. It was so validating to hear Theo bring that up, deffo gonna bust it out in the next awkward family gathering...



Smithsonian live comments

Of course, I stress that the sector is resistant and not immune. On the issue of automation in the museum sector, as with any sector, I think there is a hierarchy-based element to it. The majority of visitor tours are run by docent volunteers and these service-based unpaid positions face the biggest threat of automation in my opinion. Given the recent deployment of Meet Pepper at the Smithsonian Hirschhorn Museum (HM), a friendly AI robot who provides information and participates in conversation, it wouldn't be surprising to see these AIs more widely deployed across museums in the future as things get a bit more Blade Runner.

While the prestige and well-oiled operations of a big shiny institution like the Smithsonian can be daunting, during our experience, it often evaporated at the one-to-one warmth and frankness of the faculty. For example, Shari Stout, Collections Manager for the Division of Work and Industry, took us behind the scenes at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to show us how their collections are stored. Shari opened drawer after drawer, showcasing everything from sinister whaling guns and harpoons to Krispy Kreme rolling pins and chocolatier's casts. All the while, Shari gave a critical and nuanced take on the ecological nightmare that was whaling, in light of present day extinction. She shared some of her storage best practice, using cotton ties instead of wool which release tarnishing acids (who knew?!), as well as her pet peeves about receiving shoddily handled donations. Any questions we had, Shari tackled in a thoughtful, detailed and honest way, including her personal opinions and anecdotes. She even pointed us to D.C.'s best doughnuts after telling us some history about the Krispy Kreme utensils!

We were very impressed by how the collections tours across the museums, given their wild variation, were informative but also heartfelt and sincere. Many an interesting conversation was had.

Reflecting on the privilege of being selected for this course, I think it's important for museums to show this side of themselves to the wider public, because exhibit descriptions often give the wrong impression of the people behind them in that they're so scripted. Going back to points made in my pre-departure pieces about the museum being a place that is alive- museums are made of people, and people have voices- and jokes.

An underlying theme of STEP into the Smithsonian is an exploration and insight into the workforce that exists within creative and cultural institutions. We know that progression routes are confusing and far from linear, involve continued education and professional development and that many organisations still rely on unpaid internships. The sum of perceived (and very much still required) experience, skill, knowledge, networks needed to successfully gain employment in the sector can appear unattainable, resulting in something that is elitist. And yet across all this, when placed within a project that optimises the experience of the participants and works closely with partner organisations, we very quickly begin to see the immense value that such experiences can bring. London has such great talent in it's young people and when connected to projects that set out to encourage curiosity and critical questioning without judgement, exciting and new thinking emerges.

STEP into the Smithsonian came about with the help of a lot of people and their institutions without whom the project would simply not have taken place. The project was funded and developed by the

The forward thought

London Legacy Development Corporation, Foundation for Future London, the London boroughs of Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest, Create jobs at A New Direction and the Smithsonian Institution.

This project has shown what can happen when independent agencies come together with a common goal; to connect young Londoners with opportunity. We hope that STEP into the Smithsonian shows the ability for a more connected approach to the creative and cultural sector and is the beginning of an international way of working with exciting collaborations on the horizon.



Thnx

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