The Agency of Visible Women present

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A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn



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2019

By Damien Robinson and Ruth Jones Supported by
a-n
The Old Waterworks

With special thanks to
Warren Harper, Jilly Reid, Natasha
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our best femmes

With contributions from

Charlotte Hamilton
Denise Deakins
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Emma Mills
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Natasha Carter
Paige Ockenden

Ronnie Lambert
Ruth Hazel
(AKA Fanny Von Beaverhausen)
Sophie Thomas
Val Monks
and many more

The images used in this publication come from work that both Damien and Ruth have developed from The Agency of Visible Women exhibition in 2018. The helix on the reverse of this page is by Damien and the map on this page is of Southend as interpreted by Ruth.

This publication uses the typeface Mrs Eaves as part of the original concept design of the Agency of Visible Women printed matter by Stefania Woznarowycz. Designed by Zuzana Licko in 1996 and named after Sarah Eaves to honor one of the forgotten women in the history of typography.

You can read this first, but you don't have to

Ruth founded The Agency of Visible Women in 2018. Initially intended as a play on words for a group exhibition, The Agency's positive impact on its members in its capacity as an artist network resulted in Damien and Ruth's determination to develop it into an actual institution.

As part of our desire to expand the Agency beyond its initial stages as a collaborative, exhibiting group of women artists, we applied for funding with AN to conduct research in our home town with the woman and femmes we know and those we haven't yet met.

The result of the collaborative process between us has formed a treasured working relationship where even a chat and a cup of tea result in more work done than any of the meetings either of us have ever attended. And that's when we realised we didn't need nor want to perpetuate the methods of working that almost every other institution models. So, we didn't.

What you're looking at in this "publication", is a direct result of how we thought a "report" on our "findings" could be presented. As artists and women who value each other's labour, time and skills sets (frequently more than we value our own) we wanted to explore how that could be part of the very structure of everything we did together. So, we made a point of valuing womxn, what they had to say, how they said it and when and where. With coffee, cake and a chat, rather than a "consultation", and a non-hierarchical format to present the conversations that came out of it all.

This snapshot has 52 of the most important, common and frequent points that were raised by the woman and femmes we talked to. Some of them are statements, some are questions, some are positive and some could be solutions. We've paired them back and front so you can lay them out how you like and read them in the way they make the most sense to you. There's no ONE way to read this, just like there's no ONE way that woman and femmes experience the cultural landscape of Southend and beyond.

For us, this project is still ongoing and probably always will be until we've sorted out the patriarchy, white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ageism, ableism and coloniality, but for now, this is a snapshot of how things stand for womxn artists in Southend.

With love and solidarity, Ruth and Damien.

Disclaimer*

*A Snapshot of Southend as a Cultural Environment for Womxn is just that, a snapshot. We don't claim that this is by any means a definitive survey of the state of Southend's cultural community as it stands in 2019. An exhaustive survey might be achievable if long-term community projects were valued by funders and local authorities, indeed this was a point raised by many of the womxn and femmes who contributed to this snapshot.

Art = Admin.
(Emails, applications, taxes, social media posts, networking, budgeting)

Women are encouraged to take on supporting roles in the arts rather than pursue their own artistic career.

Time spent reaching communities is usually underpaid or unpaid and undervalued despite being integral to ANY project.

Because we look after EVERYONE ELSE, where is our time?

Our creative time and energy goes on work not on our own practice.

"We are the domestics of the art world"

"Career break" is not a break, it's a shift in priority.

How do we value what we do? What each other do?

Womxn carry the mental weight of having to think about all the eventualities, remember all of the steps in the process, of doing all the "thinking"

If you don't work for an organisation, what other choice do you have?

Local call outs. Ask for a pair of artists.

Or two lead artists.

Promote

collaboration.

Signing vocabulary for feminist and art specific terminology should be available.

We need
sustainable
resources and
practices.

Projects that build relationships with communities and audiences over the long term need to be invested in by funders.

Women remind one another that they are worth more

More than one project should run in a space at a time to optimise access to resources for community and audience engagement.

Value womxn's skills and pay for those appropriately.

We could create a directory of arts/skills audit for woman in Southend.

We need co-operative art spaces, to exhibit and to make.

We want short-term,
open call residencies
which suit womxn's
lifestyes as carers, art
workers and
practitioners.

Explicit inclusion is necessary.

Leave nothing to interpretation

Personal circumstances can bring
about emotional
difficulty and increase financial
and emotional responsibilities
*Bereavement
*Carer
*Parenting
*Sickness

Remove the Palatable Ideal!

The "palatable womxn"
achieves the most in the arts.
They're thin, pretty, married,
have teenage children, are
middle-class, polite.

People need to be accountable for their own learning.

Language used against women:
Witch:

- I. A woman thought to have magic powers especially evil ones

 2. An ugly or unpleasant

 woman (informal)
- woman (informal)

 Both from Google Dictionary

Internalised 'phobias' are holding us back.

We should build on success of proven projects

A lot of us feel we are "too old" or we need to get a "proper job".

When did you last achieve something (award, job, commission, anything) and truly, honestly feel you deserved it?

Are men feeling the same?

"Art is not a job, not a real thing"

We don't feel deserving of opportunities.

We always feel we need to justify & explain what we are doing, to family members, friends, society etc.

We're expected to only make pretty things?

We feel imposter
syndrome – at every
level and from all
angles.

As a woman my technical skills are doubted

"An art degree is free therapy." "Why are you doing that at your age?"

If a good idea works, let it carry on!

Provide one another with mutual support.

Devaluing womxns voices and womxns groups through specific language such as "coven" or "mothers meeting".

Class and Age – working class womxn are not encouraged to be confident, but as you get older it is easier to be yourself.

Not taking space and opportunities that could better help someone else. Pass on opportunities to other woman, especially in the identity intersects that receive the least opportunities.

The middle classes in the arts have the confidence to 'make it up' and call it speculation.

People employ people like themselves

We'll NEVER pay our student debt off We need more opportunity to develop tech skills as woman.

Higher value
placed on arts and
culture – support
each other.

"(dis)ouevre – working/ concentrating on periphery rather than an art making oeuvre" University is difficult to cope with. There's a lack of emotional and financial support.

We are judged by our marital status.

Who is accountable in these systems/organisations?

It is assumed that we make art as a hobby.

As woman artists we get

pitted against one
another, if we try to
boycott institutions,
where does that leave us?

Institutions seldom
invite the
opportunity for us to
feedback – they don't
want the feedback

Financial cuts mean institutions cut their training budget and that impacts women as the highest proportion of admin workers in the arts.

We often lack the confidence to apply for funding.

Arts admin are not being listened to, despite greater experience working with the audiences and systems of the institutions.

Elitism in the arts over our accents, our elocution and the language we use, especially as Southend/Essex residents/ natives.

Women doing the ground work have to answer to the men because they're accountable to the bosses



There is tension for womxn between working to pay the bills and working to create art.

We need more
cross -organisation
conversations. What are
we each good at and how
can we impact one
another positively?

We don't want title indicators of our "marital" status.

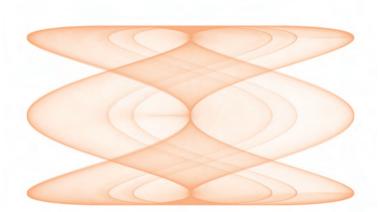
Miss/Mrs/Ms

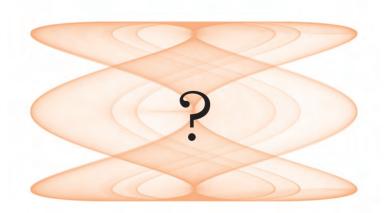
Can we bank time as currency for mentoring?
We sacrifice money and earning more for something we enjoy.

We need more opportunities to make mistakes and learn.

"Skills shares as a Modern Womxn's Institute" (FVB) Community
over
Institution

Collaboration over competition





How you speak
has nothing to do
with your
intellect.

"We are the domestics of the art world"

Do you feel valued in the arts? Monetisation devalues everything, not "saleable"

Monetised products "art"

Arts opportunities are hard to find and not straightforward to apply for.

Institutions are not explicit in directing us towards support that's available or to which we are entitled at university.

Self-funding
education is
expensive and a
barrier to learning.

How do we value ourselves outside of the
commercial business
model of artist or self
employed creative?

Unpaid internships are not feasible, there are very few paid work experience opportunities and they are often precarious

The 'Interview "best self"' is not supportive of the learning that happens.

Education doesn't set you up for the real world

When you're
self-employed
there isn't a lot of
support.

Women will take on precarious roles to ensure better wellbeing

Senior school can
change your
confidence

Womxn educate others on a regular basis.

Group purchasing/ bulk buying. Can we reduce individual costs by collective means? "I feel there is a great group of womxn artists in Southend who support each other."

There should be funding for mentorships.

"Can I even call myself an artist if I'm not selling my art?"

We want
mentoring for
early career
artists

"Doubting myself"

"Stupid questions"

"Letting yourself down"

"It's not for me – it's for someone else"

We want safety from precarity

Leverage your success by insisting that you work with other woman artists.

Women deserve reparations for their unpaid labour.

Opportunities to show skills can improve womxn's confidence.

Working class
practicality means we'll
work minimum wage jobs
to get by but have major
untapped
capability.

Business plans, skills. Selling yourself.

Womxn aren't allowed complex multiple identity points – such as having a disability AND being a working-class person of colour.

Is my identity just a box ticking exercise or am I valued for what I do?

Womxn's mental health isn't taken seriously.
Often conditions go undiagnosed, if at all.
Especially autism.

Working class imposter syndrome:
Code switching
"faking the middle class in the arts"

White people in
Southend need to be
reminded that black
women and women of
colour artists exist here.

Diversity lumps together so many identities it becomes utterly unhelpful.

Age discrimination against womxn in the form of mental and physical health. E.G. restricting HRT after retirement.

Queer women are on more equal footing with one another

Motherhood – where's the time to make art?

You can only make work about your identity or the perception of your identity for consumption by the middle class cishetwhite audience

Womxn are not a monolith.

Working class artists miss the simplicity of class identification.

Opportunities to collaborate so we don't feel like we win when others lose

"I wish I could be able to stim publicly."

Is the arts actually liberal?

We need opportunities for greater visibility

We accept anecdotal
evidence by womxn as
a valid form of
evidence from lived
experience.

Mature students are expected to be traditional in their arts learning.

"Under-represented
groups building
communities and
supporting each other will
change the world."

Intersectionality as foremost strategy for womxn working together.

We don't want patronising sympathy

We have to maintain safe spaces for ourselves.

Be soft.

Studios!* More of them! Short term lease, flexible costs, sharing spaces, sharing resources.