



The Agency of Visible Women  
present

**A Snapshot of Southend  
as a Cultural Environment for  
Womxn**

2019

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a-n

The Old Waterworks

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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  
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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 womxn 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 womxn 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 womxn 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 womxn in Southend.

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

We want short-term, open call residencies which suit womxn's lifestyles 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:

1. A woman thought to have magic powers especially evil ones
2. An ugly or unpleasant 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 womxn's voices and womxn's 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 womxn, 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 womxn.

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

“(dis)oeuvre – 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 womxn 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 art-  
ists 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 womxn artists.

Women deserve  
reparations for  
their unpaid  
labour.

Opportunities to show  
skills can  
improve womxn's con-  
fidence.

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.