



# ESCAPE THE SLICK

DUCHAMP & SONS  
WHITECHAPEL GALLERY  
EVALUATION REPORT

JUNE 2023



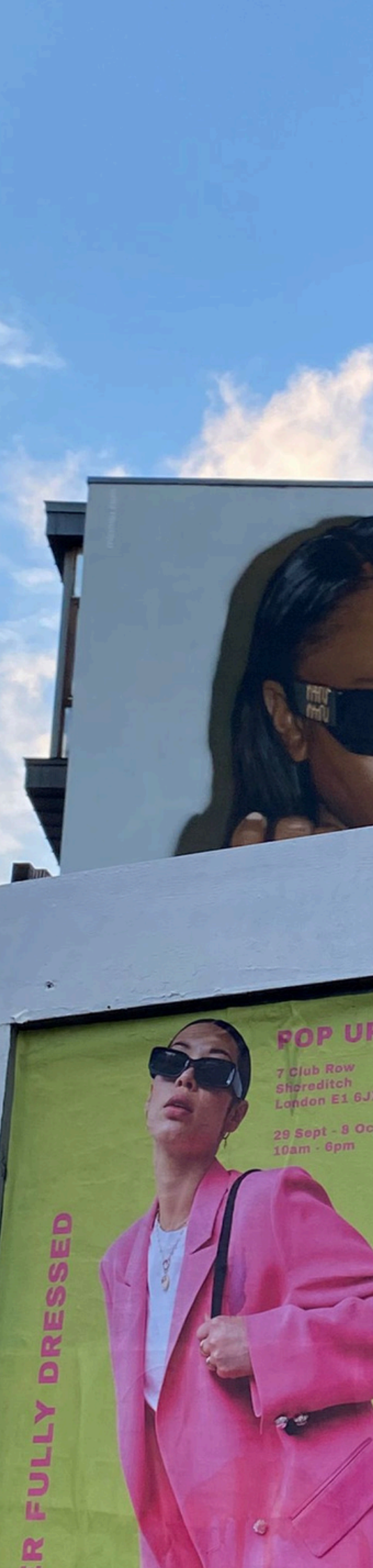
# INTRODUCTION

Over several months of workshops, walks, and conversations, the Duchamp & Sons Collective examined the immediate environment around Whitechapel Gallery, considering the value systems local public spaces are built upon, and asking questions about access, affordability, and the lack of spaces for young people to hang out and express themselves.

Collaboratively they curated an immersive exhibition space which rejects the slickness and polish of modern architecture, and instead embraces comfort and self-expression, blurring the lines between public and private space. There are sofas and armchairs which you're encouraged to sit down in and take a rest. Visitors are invited to contribute to the community notice board, chat to a friend, make a new one, think about what public space means, or simply take a moment to pause.

In the space, there are various references to the local environment including graffiti, shelving inspired by local wholesale shops, a sound piece mixing together atmospheric sounds and music tracks, and a community notice board populated with parody flyers created by the group. There are also interpretation panels for the exhibition in both English and Bengali, the two most commonly spoken languages in the local area.

Throughout the curatorial process the Collective focused on addressing the lack of comfortable environments locally, both physically with places to sit down inside and outside on the street, but also psychologically feeling unwelcome inside galleries. *Escape the Slick* is their response.





***We wanted to create a place that didn't feel like traditional gallery spaces in London. So many contemporary galleries follow the "white cube" ideology. We wanted to actively reject this. This space tells our stories and experiences, from the graffiti on the walls to the worn in sofas. We've created a space that feels warm, inviting, and homely. And most importantly, this space doesn't feel exclusionary. We want people to come down and enjoy the space - use this as a temporary studio, a refuge from the busy high street or just a space to read. This is \*our\* space.***

**- D&S Member**





# BACKGROUND

Duchamp & Sons (D&S) is a collective of 15-24 year olds from East London and beyond, who meet regularly at Whitechapel Gallery to experiment with art, curate exhibitions and events, and share space for food and conversation. The *Escape the Slick* project was led by artist Gaby Sahhar, who devised the initial concept that the young people went on to explore and develop throughout the exhibition and takeover process.

Gaby Sahhar is a French-Palestinian artist based in London, working across painting, film, and installation. Their work deconstructs the representation of queerness within public spheres to understand its wider impacts on queer consciousness and communities. Drawing on language and vulnerability as tools, their work aims to generate conversations around value systems, affordability and access within inner city cultures. They employ speculative storytelling to outline the different ways in which cities serve the interests of patriarchal capitalist identities to the detriment of others. Gaby is a former D&S member who lives in Tower Hamlets, making them a perfect fit to lead on this exhibition.

The title 'Escape the Slick', which was chosen by the group, was employed as a term counter to the traditional limits of many galleries that restrict the presentation of work to white walls within an institutional framing. While most galleries and museums employ this aesthetic, it can often perpetuate elitist notions that art spaces are only for certain people while others feel excluded, particularly many young people. Further, in an area as vibrant as Whitechapel in East London, there is a large demographic of people who are active in the spaces exterior to the gallery though would never step foot inside. There is also a lack of comfortable public spaces to sit down in the local area, so it was important that there were sofas to relax and that the space felt inviting for people to sit down and rest. The exhibition is also partly participatory, with an invitation for visitors to contribute to the exhibition by writing on the walls or adding a note to the questions posted by the group on the noticeboard.

To 'escape the slick' was to challenge these minimalist, elitist notions, challenging young people to take the lead in devising how they can make the space more accessible bringing elements of the public spaces outside the gallery into the gallery space. This counter narrative created a maximalist exhibition of sorts that was inviting and comfortable, busy and collaborative, but most important of all, co-designed with young people from the Duchamp & Sons Collective.



***Just outside the gallery, it's chaos. Whitechapel is so ethnically diverse and this area, alongside Isle of Dogs, has one of the biggest wealth gaps in the country. [...] The show was a way of addressing the huge social pressure for young people to assimilate, to conform, to compartmentalise parts of their identity to gain social mobility and financial stability. So we spoke a lot about those components, the aesthetics that that [slick, corporate] culture embodies and how to reject it essentially. This is where the Escape the Slick comes from- escaping the corporate, capitalistic structures of inner city living- employment, housing, all that stuff, just encouraging self-expression, reimagining a different type of public space, a different type of live narrative.***

***-Gaby Sahhar, Lead Artist***





# APPROACH

In terms of methodology, the Whitechapel Gallery team and Lead Artist, Gaby Sahhar, adopted an asset-based, youth-led approach to the project, allowing young people to be more in the driving seat of designing the exhibition they wanted to create. They began with the initial theme of 'public space' and were offered facilitated provocations touring around the space and being exposed to new ideas and ways of creating, though how the exhibition was curated was up to them. This required a shift of power and a letting go from the staff team, encouraging the Collective to think freely without fear which led organically to the outcome of the exhibition.

In the beginning, many in the Collective had a narrower view point about what art could be, which focused on more traditional mediums of visual art, performance, etc but also was more focused on product over process, rather than finding a marriage between the two. Some of this thinking was from the rigid school settings many of them came from which took some time to dismantle but ultimately demonstrated the incredible value of having programmes like this to shape their thinking in new ways. This dismantling process began gently with showing them different ways of making work, exploring themes and challenging what can be seen as art and a creative practice. This created more of a dynamic of exchange, rather than the top down, 'expert' artist and more passive participant model, where there was a more mutual environment of learning and participation. The Collective encouraged to be vulnerable, led by the environment created by the lead artist. The Lead Artist also showed their work, both at present but also when they were about the average age of the Collective, at 18. Even though their work has evolved since then, it was important as part of the process to share their work at a stage that felt relatable to the Collective, creating a positive space so they could be themselves.





***There are all these different interests in the group: many have their own visual or creative practice, some don't. Across the sessions we always tried to mix things up. We might do some big visual drawing together so it's more anonymous and engaging, and then we would do some research, or trial the participation board element so that different skillsets could come out. We'd break out into smaller groups where they could do things they wanted to do so they felt less self-conscious if they didn't think of themselves as an 'artist'. We'd always share back to the whole group after this (but we don't do 'crits') and focus on what we want to take forward in the project as part of a reflection process.***

-Amelia Oakley, Whitechapel Gallery Curator: Youth Programmes





# PROCESS

## PART 1: EXHIBITION

*We did experimental walks and workshops to make the group more politically conscious of their own identities and to be more politically conscious of space in general, thinking about spaces they spend more time in such as flat shares, university halls, and libraries. This turned into ideas of comfort, self-expression, replicating the immediate architecture and public space in the local gallery. Slowly this turned into separating different elements of the room- comfort halls, vinyl walls, etc. Throughout the whole time, I just thought of myself as a facilitator. I wasn't interested in pushing my own aesthetic on the group. I was more interested in having discussions and creating a new generation of conscious youth. That's more rewarding than to contain it all into a box and just have my work on the side responding to that which is what I think happens a lot in educational projects.*

-Gaby Sahhar, Lead Artist

Over the course of 10 sessions, the D&S group explored the idea of public space, and in particular, the immediate public space in and around the gallery on Whitechapel High Street. They considered what kinds of images and behaviours are present and valued in these locations, and what they'd ideally like public space to be like. They explored questions such as:

- What types of images, behaviours and experiences are valued in these two public spaces (the local area immediately outside of the gallery, and Whitechapel Gallery itself), and how might these differ between the two environments?
- Where can we find space for rest, comfort, and creative collaboration in these spaces?
- What are the different value systems at play in public space?



The sessions leading up to the exhibition involved:

- Research about the local area
- Guided walks around the area
- Collages around the theme of public space
- Audience analysis- who do we want to visit? Why?
- Concept mapping
- Exhibition design
- Photography as research
- Graffiti wall painting
- Exhibition installation
- Group discussion
- Experimentation with materials

The Collective was encouraged throughout to examine the area and the concept of institution in a deeper way, as well as themselves as creatives and the world they would like to construct for the future. On the local walks and even in their time outside of sessions, the Collective were encouraged to take inspiration from the local area provoked by questions such as, 'What was the aesthetic present?'; 'What are the behaviours, images and features you observe?'.

Towards the end of the sessions, the group came together to support with the install by using one of the sessions to paint one of the walls, 'the graffiti wall', in early January, which was one of the main collaborative spaces in the exhibition. The technical team led on most of the install because of timing over the holiday period, but the decisions of how the space should be designed and what should go into the space was decided by the Collective.

The opening of the exhibition took place on 13 January, 2023 with the exhibition running until 6 August, 2023. By the time the exhibition closes, it will have been running for 29 weeks.





# PROCESS

## PART 2: TAKEOVER



After the exhibition, the focus of the D&S sessions turned to planning a gallery takeover event on 6 April 2023, inspired by *Escape the Slick*. The group emphasised they wanted the event to feel safe, inclusive and representative of young people and the issues relevant to them. The sessions were led by Amelia Oakley with some guest speakers offering specialised insight to support the planning of the Takeover. The sessions focused on the following key areas:

- Learning about public programming
- Audience development and marketing
- Atmosphere and Content
- Programme Planning and Development
- Event Preparation
- Evaluation and Archiving

In total, there were about 250 attendees to the Takeover event, with about around 40 young creatives contributing formally to the event including the D&S members who curated the night, a panel of early career artists, plus poetry, new writing and musical performers. Many other young people also participated informally on the night by creating collages and artworks and contributing questions and ideas.



The *Escape the Slick* Takeover featured the following activities:

- A panel discussion of early career creatives exploring access routes and journeys into the arts
- Live performances in the *Escape the Slick* exhibition space of poetry and new writing inspired by the themes of the exhibition, all written and performed by young artists
- A collaging workshop where visitors could generate their own parody flyers to add to the community notice board in the *Escape the Slick* exhibition
- Playlists and walking routes created by the collective
- A social space for young people, featuring large scale drawing activities, photo opportunities, a supermarket inspired tuck shop, and a closing DJ set





# IMPACTS

## NUMBERS

Collective members: 25

Total Number of Sessions: 20

Approximate total visitors per week: 5502 visitors

Estimated visitors for the 29-week total: 159,558 visitors

Approximate visitor contribution to the community notice board: 17,400

Approximate visitor contribution to the gallery walls: 32,000

## AUDIENCES AND ATTENDEES

The exhibition has had an incredibly positive response by staff, visitors and the Collective themselves which is reflective of the extension of the exhibition beyond its original planned closing in May 2023.

For visitors, the space as a calm respite, a place to relax in a busy gallery space with not many places for people to sit down and take a breather. Some stayed for a short time and some stayed for awhile, spending hours in the space reading, listening to music or doing work on their laptop. There were people of all ages and walks of life who used the space- from mums with prams and babies, to older people, university groups, team meetings, and more.

The exhibition blurred the lines between a home or living room space and a gallery which was outside of the comfort zone of some visitors who had more conventional viewpoints about what a gallery should be. Visitors enjoyed that the space was interactive in that they could contribute by drawing on the walls or write on a post-it to respond to one of the prompts on the noticeboard. There was no explicit invitation to contribute aside from the noticeboard, though there were not barriers to do so either, demonstrating a need for more interactive, welcoming spaces for collective creating in a more traditional gallery environment.

***The gallery has an instant atmosphere & powerful presence.***

***People were really just relaxing in the sofas which was nice.***

-Gallery visitor



At the Takeover event, the feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive. As most of them were young people themselves, they found comfort in seeing themselves reflected in the choices made for the exhibition. The disruptive nature of the exhibition was felt immediately by visitors, taking notice to the bright colours, the unconventional opportunity to draw on the walls and even the club-like atmosphere of the event.

***It's fun but it also says a lot about youth culture, London youth culture specifically. It brings together everything that's going on for most people like the funding cuts. It says a lot but it's so fun. All the panellists were amazing. All the performers were amazing.***

-Escape the Slick Takeover Attendee

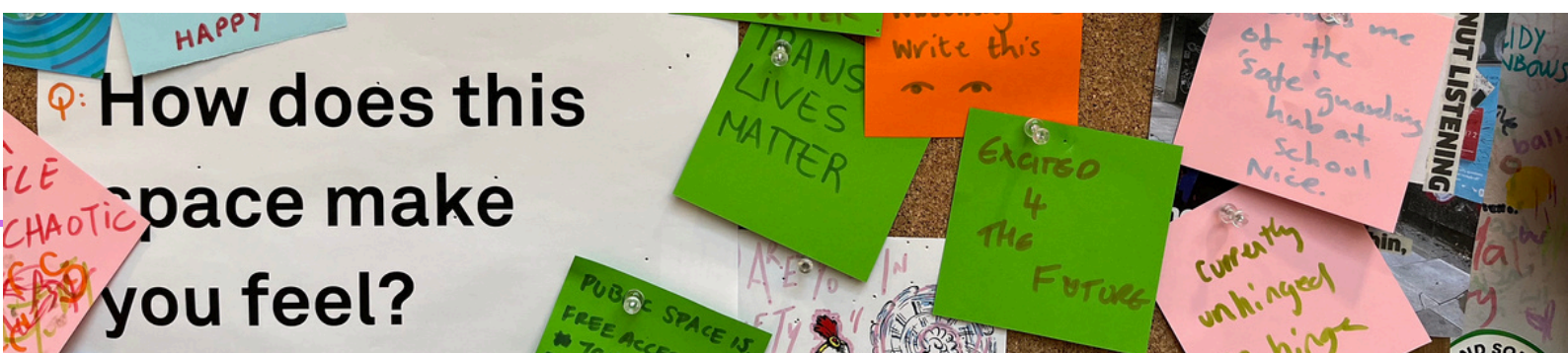
***Very good experience. I like the colours. It's quite nice when it feels like young people.***

- Escape the Slick Takeover Attendee

The fact that it was so youth-led is testament to the openness of staff and the Gallery to letting young people be in the driving seat of decisions made for the exhibition and takeover event. Young people were trusted with key decisions, and they felt that trust which led to them feeling like they had more agency and autonomy to make the work in alignment with their own self-expression. Staff have embraced the exhibition through supporting the Collective to have this sense of self-expression throughout the process. Youth collectives from other arts organisations have come to visit to take inspiration from how D&S has curated *Escape the Slick*.

***It feels wrong somehow, but we have no supervision. We wanted to have a party without any surveillance. That was an important part of the exhibition.***

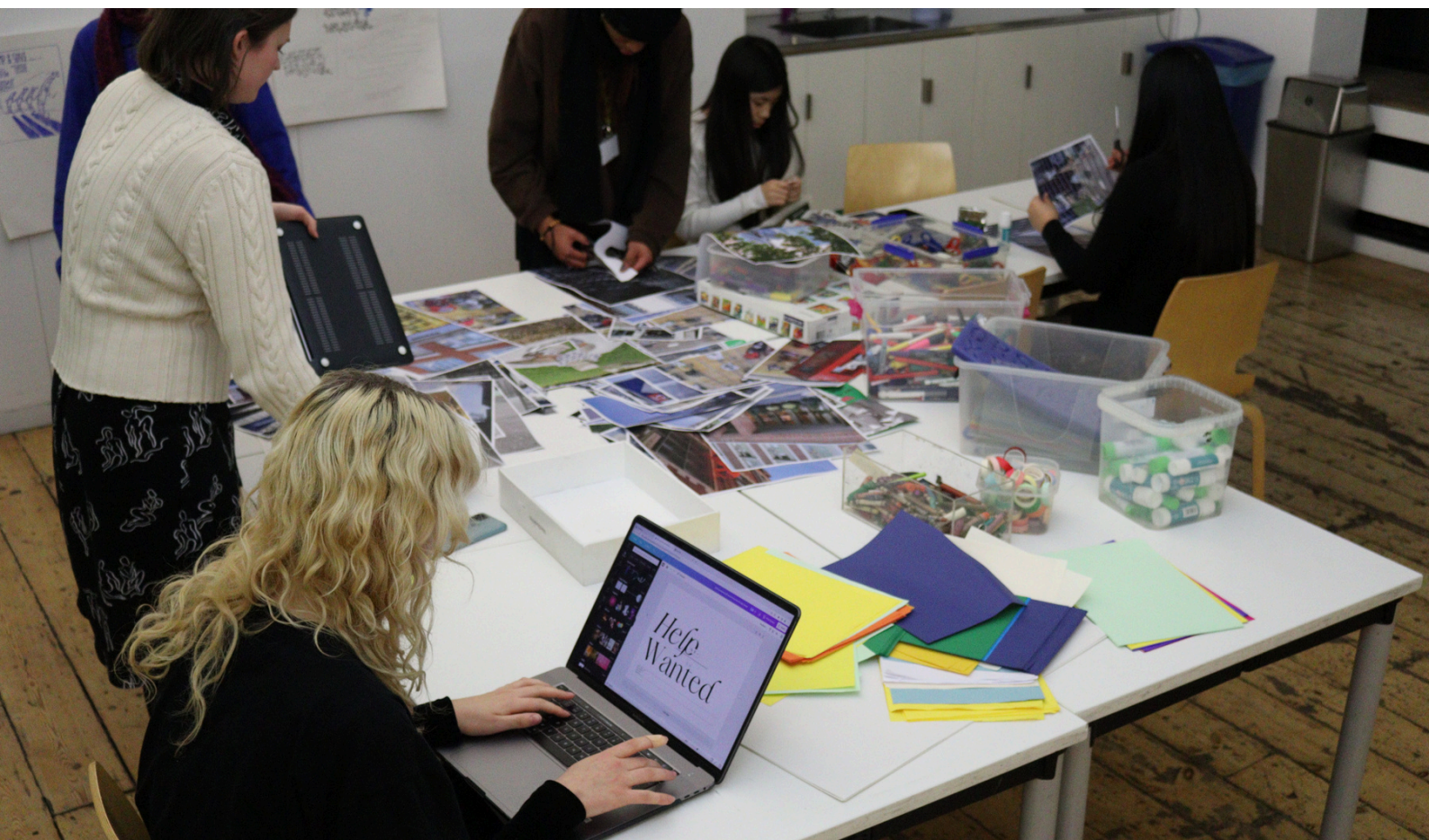
-D&S Member





## D&S COLLECTIVE

The most significant impact of the *Escape the Slick* exhibition was on the collective of young people themselves, mostly through the active involvement in many decisions made for the exhibition and takeover event. Young people felt a sense of community and like their ideas were valued in developing the exhibition and takeover event. The group is a mix of ages, from 15-24, from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As stated by the group, everyone brought something unique and different to the table and the workshops were designed so that each young person could bring a piece of themselves into the process. There was a wide range of activities involved in planning to allow for the group to feel safe and supported to learn and build skills based on their strengths and interests, particularly for those who might not identify as artists. It was also a way for young people to make new friends and connections with like-minded people in a space that is outside of school, which was a very valuable aspect for many of them.



***Ever since we started working on the exhibition when I go out and see small things, I think, 'This would be great for the exhibition.' The exhibition sums up public space really well. Everywhere I go, I see the exhibition around me.***

-D&S Member



Taking part also helped them to see the world around them in a different way. Through the activities and provocations of going out into public spaces and using them as inspiration for the exhibition, this helped the Collective to expand their viewpoints of public space as well as institutions, finding ways to bridge the two together. This process helped them to see the world in a different way, even finding inspiration for the exhibition regularly around them in their everyday lives, uncovering things they may not see through these new perspectives and expanding their preconceptions about what art can be. It also challenged their perceptions about arts institutions- what and who they are for and who gets to decide what is valuable enough to be on display. They recognised that these spaces are institutional and with that comes constraint and limitations, but the project challenged them to think about how they can be creative within these structures, and more importantly, their role within that process.

The Collective also gained practical skills as part of their participation including:

- Social and communication skills to work with others
- Working as a team
- Tools for collaboration
- Networking
- Project and event management
- Producing and curating an exhibition
- Public engagement
- Audience development
- Confidence to express ideas

Taking part in the collective was intentionally not meant to feel like school and more like a youth club, so the importance of having fun and expressing themselves was also a key aspect that young people reported as something that was important to them. The structure of membership of the Collective allows for continuous engagement up to the age of 25 so given that many of the group have just joined, these skills will no doubt continue to develop with future projects.

***Here at Duchamp and Sons, we are a community, it's what I like about D&S. We all get to express ourselves and we get to collaborate to make an exhibition out of it. We all come together like friends and family, and we listen to what each other are talking about, asking questions. It's pretty much like this- we question and give opinions to make it better.***

-D&S member



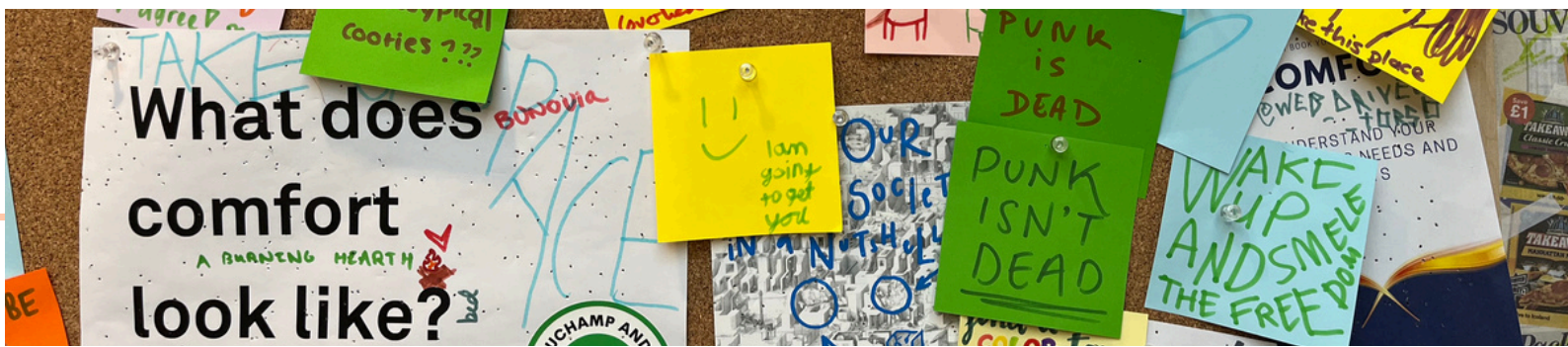
## CHALLENGES

Based on feedback from young people, the following were a list of challenges that could be reflected upon for future exhibitions and projects.

1. **Space in between sessions-** often the space in between the sessions hindered the creative process with the Collective. As they often had 2 weeks in between sessions, sometimes the momentum was lost with that much time in between.
2. **Give young people even more agency-** Due to the timing of the install over the holiday period, it meant that the Collective could only have a limited contribution to the install which some noted they would have liked to be more involved with. There is also the possibility to allow young people even more agency with them deciding the theme of the project rather than the lead artist, coming to the programme with a completely blank slate.
3. **Further space for disruption-** the Collective was invited to takeover Galleries 5 & 6 with their exhibition as well as the Creative Studio, Study Studio and the Foyer for the takeover, though if even more agency was provided to the Collective, there could have been even more spaces given over to young people in the Gallery to be even more disruptive. Especially for the Takeover event, the whole Gallery could have been used as a space for visitors to engage with, offering an even more of a youth-led approach.

*When you deal with art at a young age who have old dealt with it as part of a governmental system, there's a lot of reprogramming- a sofa can be art, you can draw on the wall, there can be drips. So, dealing with the psychological elements and blocks and people not realising or connecting the dots that their current cultural environment can also be viewed through a contemporary art lens. Some of them said oh it's so conceptual and worried at times they didn't have the vision so just encouraging them of that vision they were working towards an exhibition.*

-Gaby Sahhar, Lead Artist





# RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of *Escape the Slick*, there were a number of key areas that emerged as things that went well and should be continued forward in future projects.

1. **Trust young people in their process-** often with youth engagement in the creative industries, there is a lack of trust and agency handed over to young people to make creative decisions and make work that is of the quality that arts institutions want to see. This project was a demonstration that with the right balance of facilitation and freedom, young people can be trusted to create a high quality, creative output and they learn a lot more in the process.
2. **There is power in showing process in product-** *Escape the Slick* has evidence of the creative process in the final 'product' of the exhibition. This is clear through the 'living' graffiti wall and noticeboard that are constantly changing through contributions from visitors. This breaking open of the creative process to show more of the process side can be a powerful tool in making art and these institutions more accessible to people who do not normally enter and engage with them.
3. **Arts Institutions as alternative learning spaces-** The impact the project had on the D&S Collective was powerful, particularly in the avenue for expression the Collective offered that was not school or home, but a more open space for them to express themselves and their identities.
4. **Giving young people agency to reimagine the future of the art world-** Building on trusting young people with their creative process, arts institutions can go a step further to engage young people more actively in reimagining the art world that they would like to see and be a part of. This is important for the vibrancy and success of young people, but also for the health and success of arts institutions to continually stay relevant for and accessible to as many walks of life as possible.
5. **Continue developing more spaces for collective creation and comfort-** The overwhelming contribution of the public to the living aspects of the *Escape the Slick* exhibition and the active use of the space by a dynamic range of people confirmed a further need for more of these sorts of invitations within more traditional institutional settings. This challenges convention but also makes the spaces more accessible to more people in the longer-term.



***Escape the Slick* was collaboratively curated by Gaby Sahhar**

**and Duchamp & Sons Members:** Amir, Cartier, Constança, Danielle, Elizabeth, Elliott, Emily, Erika, Freya, Georgie, Iarla, Jasmine D-C, Jasmine S-A, Jemila, Joshua, Josserose, Michael, Miranda, Ruth, Shannay, Shree, and Yulin.

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