

## Picture this

**In April 2010 six young people from North Glasgow were given the unique opportunity to explore life in a completely different way and to interpret what they saw using photography within contemporary art.**

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Collaborative Practice / Collaborative Relationships / Socially Engaged Practice*

**Youth worker Chrissie Miles and artist Lindsay Perth developed a series of intensive workshops researching the meaning in imagery and interpretations of other artists' work. Through collaborative discussions with Lindsay and Chrissie the group of six developed awareness and skills to explore and interpret their own thoughts and feelings, their perception of themselves, others and the world around them. Here Lindsay and Chrissie reflect on developing a project in which these young people could express their world through photography.**

When Lindsay and I first met, I was both impressed and slightly envious of her calm, no-nonsense and assured manner. She had an open and warm approach with no conceit. I immediately knew that I wanted to work with her, and that young people would respond positively to her.

Lindsay had previously been working on a film with a group of young females as part of the Red Road project. From that, a seed of an idea was born around imagery which the group and I thought would be worth exploring. This became the basis of our project. Before the project could begin, we had a lot of preparatory work to do and not much time if we wanted to meet deadlines for funding applications and envisaged timelines. So Lindsay and I had to get to know each other quickly via frantic calls and e-mails!

We worked very well together throughout and learned quickly that we both shared a belief in the project with equal care, commitment and enthusiasm. There was also the need for us to be able to communicate honestly and transparently – no room for showboating or indeed a lack of enthusiasm from either side of this collaboration!

Despite several hiccups thrown our way, I believe we both took equal responsibility to problem-solve and make it happen. Much of that is down to personalities as much as professional expectations. That said, it was important for us to ensure that the creativity was balanced with the less 'sexy' but crucial aspects: company protocol, budgets, health and safety, risk assessments, evidence gathering and evaluation processes, which are where my strengths were required to lie. Ultimately there needed to be a realisation and an understanding that, regardless of our working partnership, it was our young people who were not just the key but also the very eye of the storm in this collaboration. Without them, there would be no project.

As a Community Development Worker in the field of youth work for Glasgow Life Communities in North Glasgow, I have cause to search out a range of agencies and individuals to bring specialist skills and activities into our programmes for young people. I always look for a person who, along with their specialism, actually likes to work with young people and can demonstrate a balanced level of communication with them – not a school teacher, but not their best friend either. Therefore recommendations are a crucial element of our research when looking for any specialist workers. It is always good to know a person's or agency's track record, especially when they are likely to be working with vulnerable individuals and groups.

Collaborators need to be able to allow young people to touch things, try things out, to explore concepts and materials, ask questions and make mistakes, especially with art-related projects. Many young people I work with believe they have no creative talent because they cannot draw a perfect still-life apple at school. Projects like this totally challenge these self-beliefs and, given the right people and resources, produce outstanding self-achievements. This practice came naturally

and easily with Lindsay and it was evident that young people were interactive participants from the very start. This went a long way towards the relaxed and creative vibe culminating into six amazing pieces.

I don't think it has ever been easy for visual artists to make a living. Add to this the costs of upkeep and updating equipment amongst the rapidly changing technologies, we risk losing many talented people to what is commonly known and rather derogatively termed as 'real jobs' in this current economic climate. This will be our loss and in the wider community, a tragedy of compromise.

## **Christina Miles**

I had recently done a narrative film project with young people through my residency with Multi-story/Street Level Photoworks. During my residency I had been thinking of using narrative in photography as a platform for young people's experiences but I wanted it large scale and fashion shoot 'glossy', almost hyper-real. I didn't have the funding at the time to develop it so I put the idea aside. My residency host, Street Level Photoworks, knew I wanted to do more collaborative work with photography. When Chrissie and I crossed paths she was looking for an artist for a photography project with her young people. I immediately liked Chrissie and felt we both understood how a photography project might benefit a group of young people as a platform, giving them access to contemporary art and offering high-end quality results with the right budget.

We had many developmental conversations long before the funding wheels were set in motion. This meant Chrissie knew exactly what was required from my point of view when it came to the time and materials needed for prep/post production, workshops, photoshoots, and other outcomes. I strongly feel an important reason for this project's success was Chrissie's positive approach, her belief in the importance of creativity for young people as a platform, and her feedback to my ideas. She is an excellent collaborator. Chrissie and I worked hard together to get the project delivered in a manner that would best benefit the young people and collaborative process. Her drive to get the project funded and make sure it reached its full potential was amazing.

We also worked closely to ensure the photographic artworks had high quality printing and presentation – the kind I would expect for my own artwork. I felt it was imperative to have the work exhibited and presented in a manner so the young people could see the impact not only in their own community but also in a professional setting and context. Chrissie supported this implicitly.

Every collaboration is unique, whether it be with a community, an individual, an arts and cultural organisation or a business. There are varying agendas everywhere, including your own. And it can be a formidable task to remain true to yourself as a collaborative artist and your creative ideas but remain flexible so you can constantly reassess the best way forward for the collaboration. It is simply not always possible for the collaborative process to unfold in a manner your experience tells you is best. I've not always experienced such transparency in communication or direct involvement at developmental stage as I did with Chrissie and Picture This.

There was a common respect for our own professions and professional approach, as well as a respect for the collaborative process. I sometimes come to collaborative projects where the agenda is already set, the targets defined and the artist is left to fill in the blanks. I don't think this approach always provides a creative situation for a collaboration although I understand parameters are often set early on to secure funding. But for many types of projects, an experienced artist should be consulted early on in the developmental stages. I've never understood why they aren't on principle, considering their key role. This would give more clarity to partners' roles, the project framework and delivery so all partners and collaborators get the most out of the experience. It would also help remove many of the mistakes that sometimes cause collaborative projects to fall short. I look for projects that have an awareness and a comprehension of collaborative art and recognise the

dynamics of such creative processes. They have an intent to support this kind of work within a contemporary art context. You can tell this quite quickly from a project description or brief.

If a project is short-term (less than three months) I look for a realistic framework, support and budget for prep-time, materials, workshops, post-production and project outcomes, if any. There needs to be at least a few bare essentials in place with a flexibility for me to tweak the project where I feel it's needed to get the most collaborative potential. I also look for a supportive partnership with the organisation. That doesn't mean they have to understand what I do, but there is an acknowledgement of my creative approach and intent. I've done a few projects where I felt like a button pusher or part of someone else's agenda, and that's not a nice feeling.

I also look for longer projects and residencies that allow time to build relationships with collaborators because it is these relationships that will create the foundation for dialogue and creative partnership. Long-term projects provide opportunities for certain dialogues to take place and shape the artwork(s). Many kinds of conversations and connections may not necessarily take place in a short-term collaboration. In saying that, the collaborative period with the young people for Picture This was only a week. But it was intensive and that was important. There was a great dynamic within the group of young people, and a very self-aware and open dialogue between us all. That partly came about because of the preparation and creative framing Chrissie and I developed and delivered but its also because the young people were active and committed collaborators.

### **Lindsay Perth**



