**From Outside the Frame**

**How it came about**Back in October 2014, writer Rommi Smith, Leeds Art Gallery Curator Nigel Walsh and myself, Rachel Feldberg, Director of Ilkley Literature Festival, were all involved in an innovative seminar at the Henry Moore gallery. At this session, Rommi and the actor/academic, Damien O’Keefe gave a compelling reading of T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land.

We’d all been asked to bring images which resonated with the poem and we talked about what they meant for us. It was a stimulating afternoon, and in the break I chatted with Rommi about who wasn’t in the room (who might have been invited, but wasn’t there; whose presence might have offered rich insights, especially in terms of diversity) and how we wished we could ‘play’ in this kind of positive, creative way more often.

And then suddenly in January, Creative Case North was offering the time and space for ‘experimentation and exploration on the theme of the Creative Case for Diversity. ….a re-imagining of the Arts Council’s approach to diversity and equality….’ It’s something we had all been committed to for a long time; we had worked together in various combinations before which, given the short time scale, would enable us to get in deeper quicker, and we all had cross art-form interests- so, with the addition of musician and composer, Kenny Higgins (Rommi’s long term artistic collaborator) it seemed an ideal opportunity and partnership.

# What we did We decided to take Leeds Art Gallery’s spring exhibition, *One Day, Something Happens: Paintings of People,* (selected from the Arts Council Collection) as a starting point. Our notion was to explore the works and our responses to them, pushing at notions of difference around ideas of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, exclusion and inclusion, by way of conversation, practical experiments and discussion. We planned to document our thoughts and experiences in blogs and a short video.

We began very simply, just giving ourselves permission to be in a room together and talk and think - in a free ranging and sometimes even playful way- about what the creative case meant to us. We considered, how, from our different perspectives, diversity informs our thinking. We looked at selected images from the exhibition and shared our initial readings of them, exploring how they resonated with our individual experience. We brought in articles, had differences of opinion, reminded each other of a raft of diverse images and ideas we had encountered and tried to identify who was in the frame and who was left out, whose perspective we saw things from and why.

Rommi introduced the possibility of creating a new kind of archive, which creatively filled in the gaps and absences of official, curated archives of thought. After a couple of sessions she suggested that rather than restrict ourselves to conversation we could workshop with each other, bringing our skills in writing, curation, music, art history and theatre to bear by each setting a creative exercise. By common consent, and inspired by Ryan Mosley’s canvas, *Northern Ritual*, Rommi got us started, asking us to write about an example of ritual**.**

At our next session we decamped to the gallery. We looked inquisitively at the painting propped up against the wall, laid out flip chart paper and notebooks and watched as the curator and gallery technicians, (dressed in black and wearing white gloves), started to hang the exhibition. As they worked, Kenny played his interpretation of the images, specifically, the colour, characters and narratives depicted in the paintings; it almost became a piece of contemporary dance.

Using my experience as a theatre director, I asked Rommi and Nigel to let me sculpt them into the physical shapes of people in the paintings and then to speak from that character’s perspective- as if they were coming out of the frame to engage with us.

Nigel asked us to consider how the colour red spoke to us in the paintings**.** Without conferring, Rommi and I found we had both responded to the same self-portrait by Milly Childer, a painter who lived through almost a century of change for women from the time of Mrs Gaskill to women’s suffrage and WW1**.** In the painting, Childer stands before us, the spectator, in her red painter’s pinafore, with palette in hand, defined by her trade rather than by any domestic role. Rommi posited that the artist creates themselves in the process of creating the work and, in that process, preserves their narrative (and in Childer’s case, image) for future generations. We discussed the notion of art being a means of ‘writing’ or in this case, painting, oneself into the frame.

We explored the metaphorical resonances of the red of Childer’s pinafore: red = dawn, dawning, morning, the beginning of the world, blood, birth and so on and inspired by these thoughts Rommi wrote the following poem:

**Red: the painter as god**

**By Rommi Smith**

**July 2015**

First, I anointed the brush

in the colour of sunrise,

(when the score of the larks

trades places with starlight);

and I saw myself, a

blur in the mirror of earliness -

yet, minute-by-minute

coming into focus;

til my image was there,

flesh, clear-edged, in view,

and I knew what I had to do

**What has happened since**At the Creative Case feedback session we were surprised - and slightly embarrassed - to discover that no-one else had chosen to address the issues through creative practice. As artists engaged in a process, we found exploring the issues through our artforms exciting and energising.

But it was rewarding to see people at Leeds City Art Gallery engaged and intrigued by seeing something cross-artform which asked unusual questions with participants from very different, mixed heritage backgrounds and perspectives. Staff came in to hear Kenny’s music and he was asked to play at the opening- and to interpret one of the paintings by the artist as she stood beside it. Since then, the gallery has been keen to invite other musicians in to play.

Ann Jones, curator of The Arts Council Collection, in collaboration with The Poetry Library at the South Bank, saw that our project was utilising poetry as a means of interpreting the paintings, and immediately commissioned Rommi and two other poets, Emily Berry and Richard Price, to write new work inspired by the exhibition. All three were invited to be part of *Art Poetry*, at the Southbank Poetry Library, London; a premiere of new poems in response to the exhibition, *One Day Something Happens*. Their readings and performances were followed by a discussion with all three writers, chaired by curator Jennifer Higgie and both the event and poetry are archived on [Soundcloud](https://soundcloud.com/rommi-smith/sets/emily-berry-richard-price-and) and the Southbank Poetry Library’s [website](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/artpoetry-poets-respond-to-paintings-1000954).

Subsequently, Ilkley Literature Festival staged two events about the project: one at Ilkley Literature Festival’s Words in the City poetry weekend in June, and one at the main Festival in October.

**Comments:  
Rommi:**“Inspired by the fruit of discussion at The Henry Moore Institute’s celebration of The Waste Land, I began to see the huge potential in collective curation as a strategy for challenging prejudice and promoting diversity. I saw collective curation as a method by which to engage with ‘outsider’ narratives and voices. Creative Case NORTH offered an opportunity to explore collective curation as a resistance strategy, combative of prejudice. Working in collaboration, we, in essence, curated our own diverse, artistic, creative response to a major exhibition. In doing so, we organised our own alternative collective curation of the exhibition, writing poetic and narrative-based texts functioning as alternative ‘nameplates’ for the exhibition.

As the scholar and thinker, Theodore Zeldin states *‘I particularly value conversations which are meetings on the borderline of what I understand and what I don't, with people who are different from myself.’*

Creative Case NORTH provided a space, both literal and conceptual, for us to explore the borderlines of understanding and experience, and venture, creatively, into what is new, or unknown.”

**Rachel:**“Having the chance to explore without restriction made me feel creatively re-energised and I went back to ingapproaching the case for diversity with new enthusiasm.”