GLOBAL CANVAS

Peshkar

Peshkar's International Journey (2010-2025)

Edited by Jim Johnson & Steph Meskell-Brocken
With contributions from: Nick Ahad
Claire Burnill-Maier David Holden-Locke
Foreword by Abdul Malik Ahad

JIM JOHNSON

Jim Johnson is a multiplatform artist, theatre director, and arts consultant with a strong foundation in participatory arts and intercultural engagement. Through his work with Peshkar, he has championed innovative digital and theatrical projects aimed at amplifying the voices of marginalized young people.

His editorial leadership on publications like Peshkar 25 reflects his deep involvement in the organization's international initiatives, including projects such as FutureDesh, Youth On Air, and Under 25 Routes. With a Master's in Journalism and extensive teaching experience across UK and European institutions, Jim brings both critical insight and creative flair to his work. His career spans adaptations of classic literature, music performance, digital arts, and board-level arts governance, making him a pivotal figure in documenting and advancing Peshkar's global impact.

STEPH MESKELL- BROCKEN

Steph Meskell-Brocken is a British arts and heritage engagement specialist, researcher, and youth theatre practitioner with over 15 years of experience across the arts and cultural sector . She is the Artistic Director and co-founder of Minerva Arts, an organisation established in 2009 that focuses on providing access to contemporary performance and art for young people in Cheshire West.

In addition to her role at Minerva Arts, Meskell-Brocken serves as the Programme Director at Peshkar, an Oldham-based charity that supports young people from marginalised backgrounds through arts engagement . She has also held positions such as Engagement and Access Manager at The Met in Bury and has worked with organisations like Street Style Surgery and Manchester Histories. Meskell-Brocken's academic contributions include a chapter titled "First, second and third: Exploring Soja's Thirdspace theory in relation to everyday arts and culture for young people" in the book Developing a Sense of Place: The Role of the Arts in Regenerating Communities. This is her third contribution to a Peshkar publication following her work in the 'Peshkar 25' and 'Our Teenage Years.' Through her multifaceted roles, Meskell-Brocken continues to advocate for inclusive arts participation, aiming to empower communities and foster a sense of place through creative expression.

NICK AHAD

Nick Ahad is a British writer, broadcaster, and journalist whose multifaceted career spans theatre, radio, television, and print media. Born in 1976, he began his journalism career in 1998 and became the arts editor of the Yorkshire Post in 2004. He has contributed to publications such as The Guardian and The Independent, focusing on arts and cultural commentary.

Ahad is also a playwright, with works including Nor Any Drop and Glory, which explore themes of identity and multiculturalism in contemporary Britain. His play Glory delves into the experiences of minorities in Britain, reflecting his own mixed English-Bangladeshi heritage.
In broadcasting, Ahad presents weekend shows on BBC Radio Leeds and is a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's Front Row, where he has interviewed notable figures such as Dave Grohl and Amy Adams. He has also created radio documentaries like A Walk Through My Father's Village, chronicling his return to Bangladesh with his father.

In television, Ahad has written for the ITV soap Emmerdale and contributed to the BBC drama Better. He was the runner-up in the 2020 Red Planet Prize and has several projects currently in development.
Through his diverse body of work, Ahad continues to engage with themes of race, identity, and cultural heritage, offering insightful perspectives across various media platforms.

CLAIRE BURNILL-MAIER

Dr Claire Burnill-Maier is a Postdoctoral Researcher whose current research explores the role of culture in place and place-making. Following her research excellence awarded PhD at the University of Leeds, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, examining the relationships between cultural organisations located in cities and their counterparts in the satellite towns on their peripheries, she has held research positions with 'Here for Culture and Place 'on behalf of the eleven Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) for the Northern Culture and Place Partnership.

Research has included collating evidence and mapping assets in support of investment strategies in culture, heritage and nature as part of wider place-based economic strategies. Previous research roles have included research associate for Creative Manchester / AHRC Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (the PEC) at the University of Manchester (UK) where she remains an Honorary Research Fellow. Prior to this Claire was a postdoctoral fellow with the University of Leeds and Research Associate with the Centre for Cultural Value.

DAVID HOLDEN-LOCKE

David Holden-Locke is a seasoned British public affairs consultant and fundraiser with over 25 years of experience in political strategy, lobbying, and stakeholder engagement across the UK and EU. He is the founder and Managing Director of Holden-Locke Ltd, a consultancy specializing in parliamentary monitoring, policy influence, and public affairs for businesses, charities, and public sector organisations.

Born in March 1975, Holden-Locke began his career within government and has since developed a reputation for delivering strategic political insights and advocacy campaigns. His work has included arranging access to MPs and ministers at both Westminster and Holyrood, and lobbying on issues such as VAT reductions for safety products . In addition to his consultancy work, he serves as a trustee for Bolton Community and Voluntary Services, reflecting his commitment to civic engagement and regional development.

A member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, Holden-Locke adheres to its national code of conduct, underscoring his commitment to ethical standards in public affairs . His extensive experience and strategic acumen continue to make him a respected figure in UK political consultancy.

ABDUL MALIK-AHAD

Abdul Malik-Ahad is a British arts leader, community advocate, and public sector strategist with over two decades of experience in cultural development and civic engagement. He serves as Chair and Trustee of Peshkar Productions and was an original participant of the company during its inception in 1991.

In 2009, Malik-Ahad was appointed as a non-executive director of NHS Oldham, bringing his extensive background in community development, education, housing, regeneration, and the arts to the health sector. At the time, he was also an executive director of Capital Consult Group, an Oldham-based consultancy and training company working with both the public and voluntary sectors.

Malik-Ahad's leadership has been recognised at the national level; in 2024, he was invited by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to attend the King's Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, celebrating contributions to the UK's cultural life. Through his longstanding commitment to Peshkar and his broader civic roles, Malik-Ahad continues to champion inclusive cultural participation and social equity across Greater Manchester and beyond.

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GLOBAL CANVAS

Peshkar

Peshkar's International Journey (2010-2025)

FOREWORD

Peshkar and its diaspora have always had their roots in an international context. When the organisation was first established as a Community Arts and Theatre Organisation in 1991, its heart lay within Oldham's burgeoning South Asian community. It was art that defined us then, just as it does now.

As an original participant in Peshkar's first workshop at the Werneth Park Music Rooms, it was clear to me then—as it remains—that while the universality of experience may be the initial motivation for engaging with the arts, it is the individuality of experience shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic background that ultimately defines our artistic voice.
And we are proud to protect these characteristics when engaging with participants, artists and their communities.

Similarly, I have always recognised that my own worldview is shaped by the experiences of those I interact with. My perspective is not the same as that of my wife, my children, or my friends and colleagues within the British Bangladeshi community, just as their experiences differ from those of individuals in the Indian, Pakistani, and wider communities. It has been a privilege to oversee Peshkar's evolution within a digital and international context while remaining true to the ethos upon which the company was founded. Peshkar's evolution, development and growth mirrors Oldham's own transformation across our near thirty five years of existence.

I recall with great affection some of Peshkar's early international collaborations, which have helped shape our work locally and regionally. In 2002, we developed the 'Crazy Masala Club 'in partnership with Chol Theatre in Yorkshire, an international youth arts exchange involving young people from India, Bangladesh, Oldham, and Kirklees. The outcomes became part of Contact Theatre's 'Contacting the World 'programme and were showcased at the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony alongside eleven other international organisations.

In 2010, we launched 'FutureDesh, 'a digital arts and climate change project. I led a team, including British-born writer Nick Ahad, to Bangladesh, where we collaborated with arts organisations using creative expression to address the country's climate challenges and its connection to young people in the UK. Our trip included visits to flood-affected regions and key institutions such as BITA (Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts), the University of Dhaka, and Shondani, as well as input from nationally focused organisations like Red Room, Unicorn Theatre, and the Bangladeshi High Commission. This collaboration resulted in a multidisciplinary, cross-arts project that placed digital arts at the heart of Peshkar's aesthetic. It is also worth remembering that much of our work leading up to 2009 was funded through locally based European Regional Development initiatives and our relationship with Oldham Council and Arts Council England as a National Portfolio Organisation has shaped all of our international work including the memorable local arts initiative for developing cycle routes in the Oldham locale. 'Bike Adventures Oldham' was part of a GMCA region wide initiative that formed part of a larger EU project funded by MOBISEC

Our successes in this regard were presented in Varna, Bulgaria during the final project review meeting in 2014 and in many ways helped shape our Global Reach aspirations to follow. That said, it took further trips and potential project partner applications with organisations in Italy between that 2012-2015 period to further solidify our international ambitions including research and development trips to Rome and meeting MEP's in Brussels to fully understand the need for our international approach to projects and partner working and why it remains so important to this day. Not every partner application that we made proved successful and similarly there were two projects with partners in Cyprus and Poland that we had to step down from due to the travel restrictions imposed as a result of the Global Pandemic between 2020 and 2022.

In spite of these issues, the international journey has been immensely rewarding to witness and Peshkar's continued evolution, expanding our reach locally, regionally,
nationally, and internationally is something we should rightfully celebrate which I hope this publication will go some way in illustrating.

With support from Creative Europe and Erasmus Plus, we have showcased our work in Norway and Denmark and partnered with organisations across Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Serbia, and North Macedonia. We have spoken at the European Parliament and shared our work at IETM conferences— further examples of our commitment to international engagement, many of which are explored in this publication.

Brexit has undoubtedly created challenges for future international collaboration, given the UK's withdrawal from key funding programmes. Our Creative Europe funded Under 25 Routes Project launched in Valencia not long after the referendum and it was almost surreal seeing our team and participants fielding questions from the Spanish media on this highly charged issue. In spite of this, our work continued until the final whistle and it is also worth noting that even the global pandemic did not deter Peshkar's appetite for cross-border work. This period marked a generational high for financial turnover and allowed us to re-center our work with artists at the core of our mission.

Our Global Canvas continues to evolve, and we remain committed to creating meaningful international opportunities for young artists. No matter the obstacles, we will continue to forge pathways that make global artistic exchange a reality.

Abdul Malik Ahad, Peshkar Chair

Acknowledgements

The work captured in this publication could not have taken place without the continued support of Arts Council England and Oldham Council who have remained committed stakeholders in Peshkar's work for nearly three decades.

Project funding from the various projects in this document have come from Erasmus Plus and Creative Europe with support from the relevant international agencies and the British Council.
Our thanks in turn must also go to all of the relevant partner organisations, employees, artists and young people who made this work a success. We will meet again.



FUTUREDESH & NOR ANY DROP

(2010-2012)



Nick Ahad is a British Bangladeshi writer, presenter, and broadcaster known for his work across radio, television, and theatre. With a career spanning journalism and the arts, he has made a significant impact as a cultural commentator and storyteller. He began as a journalist with The Yorkshire Post, where he served as arts editor and developed a reputation for championing diverse voices in the arts. As a broadcaster, he has been a regular voice on BBC Radio Leeds and BBC Radio 4, presenting programmes that explore social issues, culture, and the arts. In theatre, he is also a respected playwright, with works such as Partition and The Chef Show, which often delve into themes of identity, community, and heritage, particularly within British Asian experiences. His versatile and insightful approach to storytelling has earned him recognition for enriching public dialogue through multiple media platforms.

Q: Looking back on Nor Any Drop, what stands out the most about the experience of creating that work?

Nick Ahad: Nor Any Drop was a huge turning point for me, both personally and professionally. It was my first professional commission, and that alone was transformative. But more than that, the subject—climate change—and the way I approached it made the whole experience incredibly meaningful. The piece let me bring my identity as a British Bangladeshi into the work, examining climate change from a deeply personal and cultural perspective. Fifteen years on, the memories of that journey to Bangladesh, where I saw first hand the impact of rising sea levels on the communities there, still resonate.

Q: The project involved traveling to Bangladesh with Peshkar in 2010. How did that trip influence the work?

Nick Ahad: Traveling to Bangladesh was crucial. Climate change can feel abstract when you only experience it through news headlines, but in Bangladesh, it's a daily reality. I met people whose lives were directly affected, and that connection deeply impacted my writing. The trip allowed me to ground Nor Any Drop in real, lived experiences. It transformed the play into more than a story; it became a piece that highlighted the human side of climate change. That journey changed my perspective on what storytelling can achieve.

Q: Could you tell us more about the trip itself? What moments or places had the biggest impact on you?

Nick Ahad: It was a deeply moving experience. We visited rural villages where I met families living on the edge of rivers that were rising year by year. These were people who'd been forced to move multiple times because the land kept shrinking, eaten away by the water. I vividly remember talking with a fisherman who showed me the marks on his house, year by year, showing how high the river had risen. It made climate change terrifyingly real and immediate. I couldn't help but think about the privilege I have, living somewhere that's largely insulated from these effects.

That contrast between my life in the UK and the struggle of those communities was humbling.

Q: How did witnessing these environmental issues in Bangladesh differ from hearing about them in the UK?

Nick Ahad: The difference was night and day. In the UK, climate change often feels like something that might happen in the future or something we read about affecting distant places. But in Bangladesh, you don't have that luxury—it's happening in front of you. People are losing land, homes, even lives. What struck me was the resilience of the people we met. They adapted, finding ways to live with the ever-present danger of the water. But they shouldn't have to. That feeling of immediacy and urgency became a central theme in Nor Any Drop.

Q: Did your own heritage affect your experience of being there and how you connected with the communities you visited?

Nick Ahad: Absolutely. I felt a profound connection that I think I might not have felt otherwise. As a British Bangladeshi, I share a cultural heritage with these communities, even though my life in the UK is so different. I felt a sense of kinship and responsibility, especially when people would share their stories with me. It was a reminder of how climate change disproportionately impacts people who've contributed the least to it. That realization made me even more committed to bringing these stories back to the UK, where they aren't as visible.

Q: How did you approach blending the realities of Bangladesh's climate crisis with the needs of a UK audience?

Nick Ahad: That was one of the most challenging parts. I wanted Nor Any Drop to be relatable and impactful for young audiences in Manchester and Yorkshire, but I also wanted it to honour the reality of what people in Bangladesh face every day. So I focused on universal themes—loss, resilience, the fear of losing one's home— that anyone could understand. At the same time, I made sure to ground it in my personal experience and the specific stories I encountered in Bangladesh. My hope was that this blend would make the piece both accessible and eye-opening.

Q: How did the young audiences in Greater Manchester and Yorkshire respond to the story? Did you see any surprises in their reactions?

Nick Ahad: Yes, and that was one of the most rewarding aspects. Many students hadn't ever considered how climate change could impact communities outside of the UK. I saw young people connecting with the material in ways I hadn't anticipated. They started asking questions about their own impact on the environment, or how they could help people in places like Bangladesh. It was really powerful to see them shift from thinking of climate change as a "faraway problem" to something they cared about on a personal level.

Q: Has working on Nor Any Drop shaped your approach to storytelling over the years?

Nick Ahad: Absolutely. It taught me that storytelling can be a powerful vehicle for social change. Nor Any Drop wasn't just a play; it was an invitation to audiences to reflect on their impact on the world. Since then, I've tried to tackle issues that matter, whether through stage or screen work. The experience also strengthened my resolve to create stories that are accessible and impactful, especially for audiences who might not traditionally engage with certain topics.

Q: Climate change and digital art were central to the FutureDesh project. Do you see a connection between those elements today?

Nick Ahad: Yes, and even more so now. Digital art has an incredible power to communicate complex issues like climate change in innovative ways. Through virtual reality, social media, and immersive experiences, artists can bring the urgency of climate issues to audiences who might not otherwise engage with them. Looking back, FutureDesh was really ahead of its time in pairing digital art with climate storytelling. Today, I see that fusion as even more relevant, pushing the boundaries of how we address global challenges.

Q: Was there a specific moment during your research or travels that made a lasting impression?

Nick Ahad: There were so many, but one that stands out was meeting families whose homes were threatened by flooding. These were people who had lived in the same village for generations, and they were faced with the reality of losing it all. It was a stark reminder of how precarious life can be when nature shifts. It's those personal stories that stayed with me and shaped Nor Any Drop. The stories I heard on that trip remind me, even now, of the stakes involved in the climate crisis.

Q: If you could rewrite Nor Any Drop today, would you make any changes to it?

Nick Ahad: Yes, absolutely. I think I would bring in more voices—maybe include perspectives from young climate activists or people on the frontlines of climate adaptation. In 2010, there was less awareness around the urgency of climate change, and now there's a lot more we could address. I'd also use digital elements more extensively to create an immersive experience for the audience, something that brings them right into the story.

Q: What advice would you give to emerging artists working on themes of identity and climate today?

Nick Ahad: I'd encourage them to find personal connections to the themes they're working on. When you're dealing with something as big as climate change, grounding it in your own experience or the experiences of people close to you can make it feel real. And take risks. The fusion of digital art and storytelling is a powerful tool, and young artists today have so much at their disposal to make their voices heard.

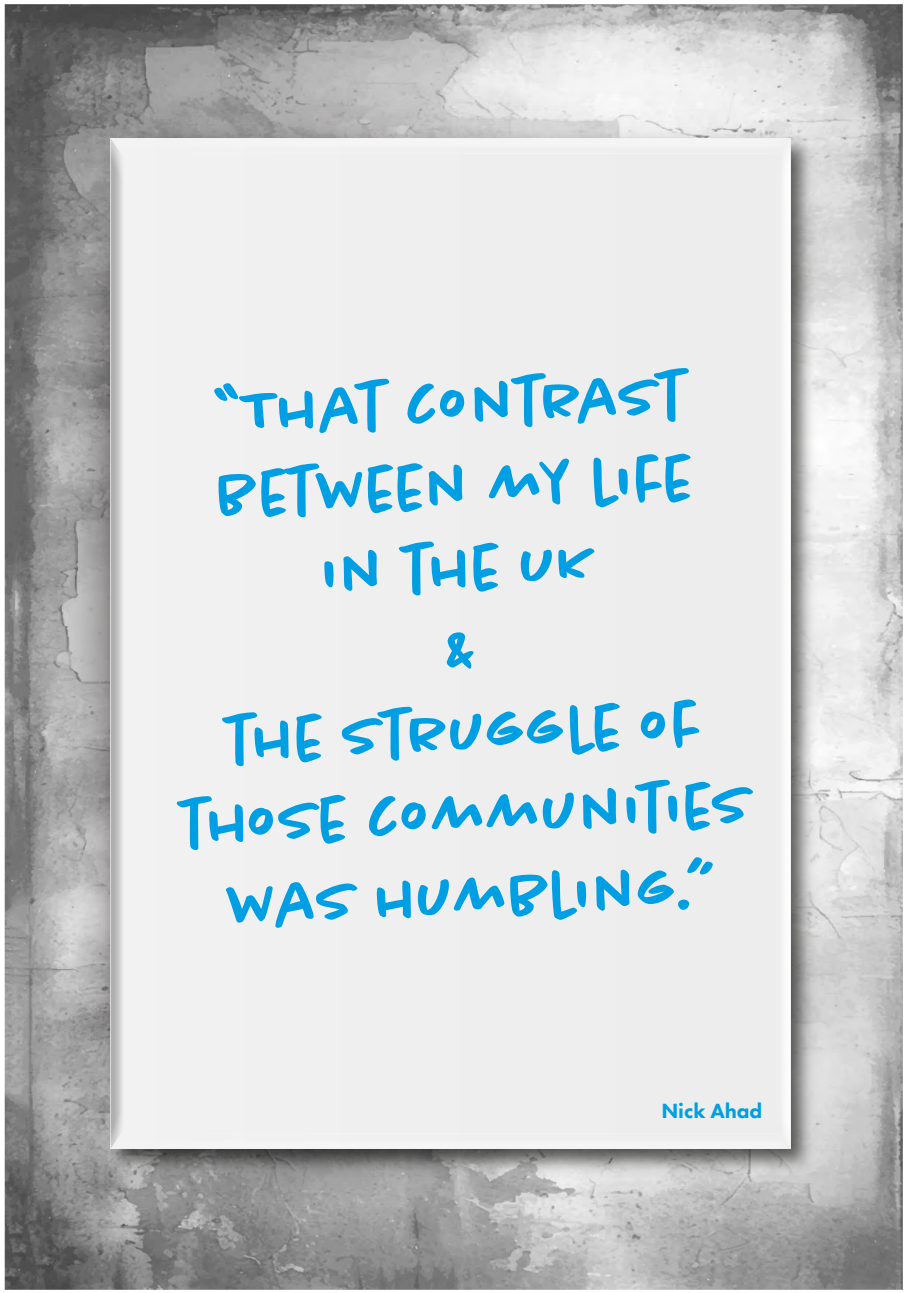
Q: What's next for you in terms of projects or topics you're passionate about?

Nick Ahad: I'm still deeply interested in projects that tackle social justice and environmental issues, especially those that touch on identity and community. My work continues to draw from my background, exploring how identity shapes our experiences of the world's biggest challenges. I think there's so much more we can do to connect stories with audiences in meaningful ways, and I'm excited to keep exploring those avenues, whether in theatre, film, or broadcasting.

Q: Looking back, what role do you feel Nor Any Drop has played in your career?

Nick Ahad: Nor Any Drop was a foundation stone. It taught me that the stories I had to tell mattered and that I could use my voice to raise awareness about critical issues. The trust Peshkar placed in me gave me confidence to pursue my own voice and vision, and that's something I've carried with me through every project since.







Reflections on
THE <UNDER 25> PROJECT:
A Cross-Cultural Artistic Journey (2016-2018)

The <UNDER 25> Project was an ambitious and inspiring collaboration that brought together young, emerging artists from across Europe to share creative practices, develop new work, and explore artistic innovation beyond the boundaries of culture, language, and artform. This international partnership included three European nations and four dynamic arts organisations: Peshkar Productions (Oldham, UK), Companhia João Garcia Miguel (Lisbon, Portugal), La Rambleta (Valencia, Spain), and Escuela del Actor (also based in Valencia).

After going through various iterations including an initial rejected application in 2013, the project officially launched in the final week of June 2016 with an intensive creative laboratory, immediately followed by a four-week residency in Valencia. This model of laboratory and residency was repeated in January 2017 in Lisbon and once more in June 2017 in Manchester, UK. The culmination of the project was the creation of a collaborative piece of artistic work, which toured each of the participating cities during autumn 2017, showcasing the rich tapestry of ideas, influences, and creativity developed throughout the year.

Artists representing Manchester were selected from a pool of talented young creatives recently recruited through an open call. In each residency, four artists from each country participated, forming a vibrant and diverse group that brought fresh energy and unique perspectives to the collaborative process.
Before each residency, participants engaged in a creative laboratory—a space for cultural, artistic, and linguistic exchange led by local arts professionals. These sessions provided the foundation for the residencies, encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and preparing the artists to immerse themselves in the creative process with their international peers.

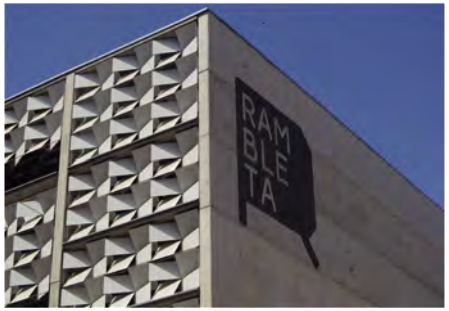
Each residency spanned four weeks, offering artists the invaluable opportunity to hone their skills, expand their artistic horizons, and experience life in a different European city. Through these residencies, they not only developed their own practice but also embraced the cultural and linguistic richness of their fellow artists, culminating in collaborative works that resonated with international audiences.
Leading up to the residencies, Peshkar Productions facilitated workshops with the North West-based artists who formed the UK cohort. These sessions, held in Oldham, marked the beginning of their journey, equipping them with the tools and connections to embark on a truly European artistic adventure.

The <UNDER 25> Project was a testament to the power of collaboration and the potential of young artists to shape the future of cross-cultural artistic expression.

Bill Duffy: "Having the chance to be immersed in a creative environment with language and culture completely different to your own is an invaluable experience. The chance to learn new things – new words, new artists and musicians I would otherwise have never heard of because of the prioritization of English speaking media and art. It was important what it would be like to live in another country with a different language, culture and political landscape. This alone provoked a desire to learn and make with a view to creating something we couldn't have come up with otherwise without the specific experience of people, time, and place. It was also an emboldening experience in that it showed that a much larger world outside of the UK was within reach if only temporarily. It was important because of the immense privilege to get to travel and stay abroad (funded) but notably exposed to me my own privilege of speaking English as a first language. This seems obvious with hindsight. However, at the time it had never been revealed to me so glaringly as when I saw our colleagues and residency tutors from Spain and Portugal conducting the residency in a second language while I spoke English and felt guilty for barely knowing or learning any Spanish or Portuguese."

Fay Beesley: "I think the importance of Under25 being international not only did we get to work with young people from across Europe and learn about their art forms and influences, it also allowed us the opportunity to live and breathe the different cultures for 5 weeks. If this project was purely in the UK it definitely wouldn't have had the same impact on me as an artist/young person. Still to this day I talk about the fact I got to live in Lisbon and Valencia for 5 weeks and are both some of my favourite cities. I do not know of any/many organisations that can offer these sorts of opportunities for young people especially in this current political climate and the fact Peshkar are able to is what makes them so unique, and I can only thank them for the opportunities they have provided for me over the years."

Bhavesh Jadva (Under 25) "Yes naturally it was the first time I'd done this kind of project abroad. It was the first and only time I've been to Spain and the first time I've spent such a long time abroad as well. Outside the work itself it was a way to spend real time getting tuned into another culture. I also wouldn't have been able to collaborate with other artists from multiple other countries, speaking other languages. Finally, being abroad and the length of the stay was a baptism of fire in terms of needing to work and live independently. It's one thing moving out of home to go study, another entirely to go abroad to work long hours with strangers you were also to live and socialise with!"









ALTERNARRATION

Exploring Youth Radicalisation Through Art and Digital Storytelling (2018-2020)

In March 2018, Peshkar launched a powerful European partnership project titled Alternarration, in collaboration with Out of the Box International (Belgium) and the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue (North Macedonia). Funded through the Erasmus+ programme, this project took on a timely and sensitive issue—youth radicalisation and violent extremism—with a fresh and creative approach.

TACKLING RADICALISATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Alternarration focused on equipping youth workers across Europe with tools to identify and address radicalisation, particularly within the digital landscape. As the online world becomes increasingly influential in shaping young minds, the project explored how digital platforms and media are used to attract youth to radical and extremist causes.

Peshkar's unique contribution to the project was to create Digital Stories—original pieces of digital artwork that would explore, illuminate, and challenge the narratives surrounding youth radicalisation. To achieve this, Peshkar commissioned three talented artists to produce engaging and thought-provoking works.

The Artists Behind Alternarration

Michael-Jon Mizra

A composer and digital artist, Michael-Jon Mizra explores the boundary between virtual and physical existence, presenting it as a cohesive "digital ecology." His work, influenced by formal art, DIY cultures, and pop formats, revolves around media appropriation and recontextualisation, forming new, complex relationships between seemingly disparate materials. Beyond his art, Mizra works as a youth arts facilitator, encouraging empowerment and growth.

Rabhia Saeeda

Rabhia Saeeda is an artist passionate about drawing, short films, and travel photography. For her, art is a survival mechanism, a counterbalance to the monotony and challenges of everyday life—especially those surrounding race, disability, and religion. A graduate of the University of Bolton and Camberwell College of Arts, Rabhia is also a qualified teacher working in Greater Manchester as a studio-based artist and filmmaker.

Melanie Frances

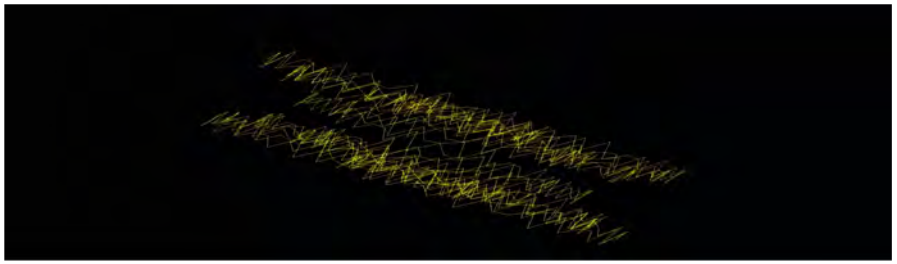
A multidisciplinary creator, Melanie Frances is a theatre-maker, games designer, and artist with a background in mathematics. Her solo practice explores economic, social, and political systems through interactive artworks. One notable piece, An Algorithm of Deviance, investigates digital surveillance and was featured at Arebyte Gallery in London. Melanie is also Co-Artistic Director of Produced Moon, an interactive arts company.

Key Project Outcomes - Research Document

Out of the Box International compiled an insightful research document examining the landscape of radicalisation across Europe, with a special focus on online activities.

The Digital Stories: Art Meets Advocacy

The artists collaborated throughout 2018, running workshops with young people, conducting research, and sharing insights via an *Are.na page*



Here's what they created:

The Ministry of Disinformation – by Rabhia Saeeda

Rabhia developed an interactive website titled The Ministry of Disinformation, using graphic art and GIFs to critically examine propaganda and visual manipulation in radicalisation.

Imprint – by Melanie Frances

Imprint is an interactive game created using open-source tools, addressing "the dangerous question" and the emotional complexities surrounding the UK's Prevent agenda. Melanie's game invites players to consider the ethical dilemmas of surveillance and reporting.

Displacement Native – by Michael-Jon Mizra

Mizra's sonic art piece, Displacement Native, employs data sonification to manipulate the Syrian National Anthem using UNHCR API data. This haunting audio work tells a story of displacement and migration from the Middle East to Europe.

Youth Work Resource: Practical Tools for Change

The Centre for Intercultural Dialogue compiled a Youth Work resource packed with key definitions and practical exercises for tackling radicalisation in youth settings. In March 2019, this resource was tested with delegates from North Macedonia, Belgium, and the UK, marking the premiere of the Digital Stories.

Sharing the Impact

The UK premiere of the Digital Stories took place at the Young Digitals Festival in March 2019. Additionally, project manager Steph presented Alternarration's findings at the Culture Geek conference at the Barbican in London, sharing insights with an international audience.

Conclusion

Alternarration exemplifies how art, technology, and international collaboration can confront complex social issues like radicalisation. By creating compelling digital narratives and practical resources, this project empowers youth workers and young people to engage critically with the world around them—and perhaps, change it for the better.

Melanie Frances: "On Alternarration, the international context gave me a much broader perspective of the issue of youth radicalisation, and it was really interesting to consider how my project (which was so focussed on Prevent and UK legislation) might be relevant or resonant in that context. The project also sparked a real interest in international collaboration which I have taken forward into my practice."



Toby Holden-Locke: "A significant factor about the project being set in Ireland and having a range of participants from multiple European countries, is the learning and understanding of cultural differences as well as the exchange of experiences that everyone had to share. As someone who is born and lives in England, the project being based in another country allowed me to gain both skills and experiences during the travelling phase of the project as this was the first time travelling without my parents. This has given me the confidence to go travelling with friends to multiple countries and allowed me to experience even more cultures as a result."

GOING FOR GOLD

A Youth Exchange Adventure in Ireland (2018)

In the late summer of 2018, we had the incredible opportunity to participate in an Erasmus-funded partnership that brought young people from the UK, Ireland, and Croatia together for a unique and enriching experience. The Going for Gold Residential 2018 took place from 26th October to 1st November on the stunning West Coast of Ireland — and what a journey it was!

Six young people from Peshkar joined Engagement Manager Steph and Alternarration artist MJ for six unforgettable days packed with creativity, collaboration, and adventure. This wasn't just a trip — it was a springboard for our young participants to dive headfirst into their Gold Arts Award projects, explore new forms of digital art, and connect with peers from different cultures.

From the very start, the energy was high. The week was filled with hands-on creative workshops, where our young artists experimented with innovative digital art techniques, pushing the boundaries of their practice and developing their ideas for their Gold portfolios. Beyond the creative work, the exchange was a celebration of cultural learning. Participants from all three countries shared stories, traditions, and perspectives, forging connections that we know will last far beyond the week itself.

Of course, it wouldn't be an Irish adventure without some outdoor excitement! Our group took part in a range of outward-bound activities that challenged them physically and mentally — think windswept hikes, team-building challenges, and moments of reflection in breathtaking landscapes.

Throughout the week, we kept our followers updated via social media and chronicled our journey on Tumblr. These updates captured just a glimpse of the fun, learning, and growth that took place.
Looking back, the Going for Gold Residential was more than just a trip; it was a powerful experience that empowered our young people to take ownership of their creative journeys, broaden their horizons, and step out of their comfort zones. We're immensely proud of what they achieved.



INTERMEDS

Migration, Art and Collaboration Across Europe (2020-2022)

Between 2020 and 2022, and taking into consideration the impact of COVID on project delivery, Peshkar was part of an exciting Erasmus+ funded project that brought together a dynamic team of organisations from Portugal, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and North Macedonia. The initiative, called InterMEDS, set out with a bold mission: to explore the narratives surrounding migration in Europe, interrogate the impact these stories have on communities, and develop innovative ways for youth and community workers to foster more positive, cohesive societies.

From the very beginning, InterMEDS sparked rich conversations and deep research into how young people and adults engage with stories of migration—whether their own, their families', or those of people in their wider communities. The project questioned how these stories influence relationships between different groups and how they could be reframed to encourage empathy, understanding, and solidarity.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT ACROSS BORDERS.

InterMEDS was more than just a research project—it was a true collaboration. Partners across the EU rolled up their sleeves and worked together to develop a wide range of learning materials, including a comprehensive youth work toolkit and policy documents aimed at shaping future approaches to community cohesion. All of these outputs were set to be showcased at a final conference hosted in the UK—or online, depending on circumstances.

One of the standout elements of InterMEDS was the incorporation of art and creativity into the heart of the project. Peshkar commissioned three incredible artists to respond to themes emerging from the research. Each artist brought their own unique perspective, shaped by the lived experiences of migrant communities in their local areas, and created brand new works of art that gave life and colour to the data and insights collected.

The artists who helped bring InterMEDS to life were:

Ciara Leeming

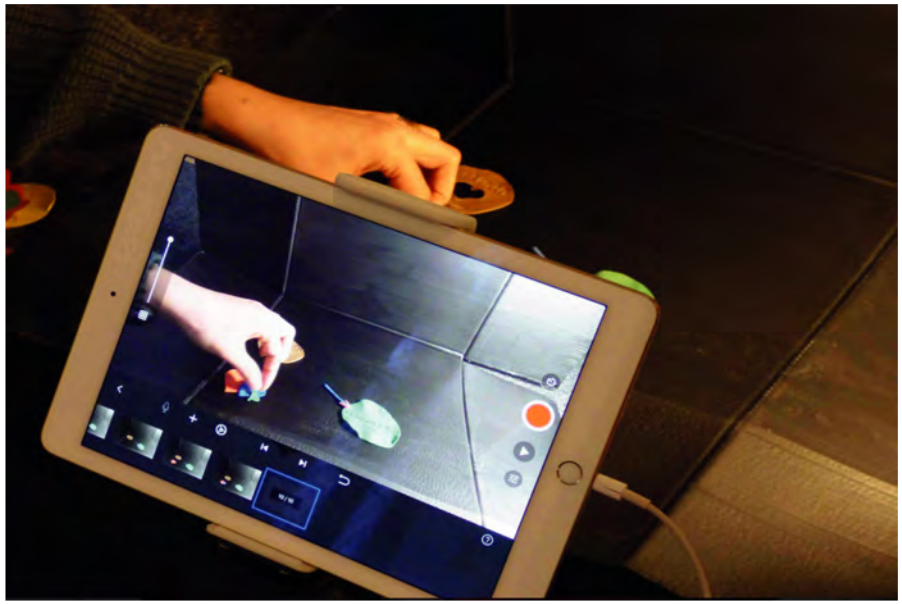
Freelance journalist and photographer Ciara Leeming brought her rich background in documentary work to InterMEDS. With a history of working alongside marginalised groups—including Roma migrants, indigenous Gypsies, Travellers, and asylum seekers—Ciara used photography, video, and storytelling to highlight powerful migration narratives.

Her previous work has been featured in The Guardian, Big Issue North, Save the Children, BBC, and many more, and she brought that same journalistic rigour and compassion to this project, building upon earlier collaborations with Roma communities.Sam Rushton

Sam Rushton

Sam Rushton, a multi-talented artist and project manager, has long explored the intersection of art and technology. For InterMEDS, Sam tapped into the potential of everyday digital tools—particularly mobile phones—to create stunning imagery using photogrammetry.

With recent exhibitions at Brierfield Library and upcoming work at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, Sam's approach emphasized the accessibility of technology and how it can empower communities to tell their own stories. This project marked a reunion for Sam and Peshkar, who previously worked together on the 2015 'Matchbox 'project.





Toubie Jack

Originally from South Africa and now based in Manchester, Toubie Jack brought a vibrant and community-driven approach to InterMEDS. Known for her large-scale mural work and passion for teaching art, Toubie designed an animation project that evolved over the course of multiple workshops, engaging diverse client groups.

Her work was hands-on and deeply collaborative, reflecting her belief in the power of creativity to bring people together. Since founding her own children's art club in 2013, Toubie has continued to inspire through community art projects and education.

INTERMEDS WAS A TRUE TEAM EFFORT,
UNITING PARTNERS ACROSS EUROPE TO INTERROGATE,
UNDERSTAND, AND CELEBRATE THE STORIES OF MIGRATION.

FROM RESEARCH AND POLICY TO CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND DIGITAL LEARNING,
THE PROJECT BUILT A LEGACY OF RESOURCES THAT ARE NOW AVAILABLE TO ANYONE
INTERESTED IN RUNNING SIMILAR INITIATIVES.



YOUTH ON AIR

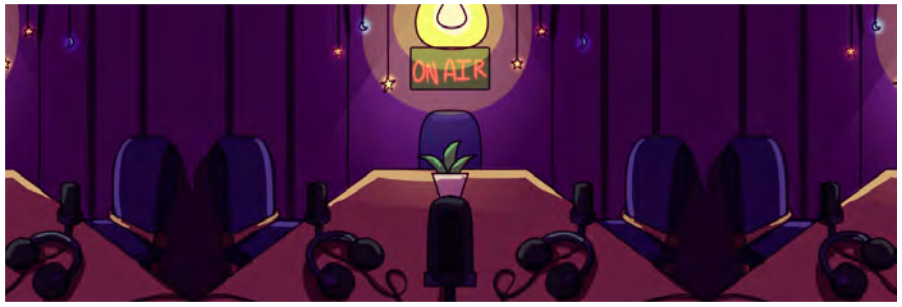
A Retrospective on Youth Voice and Radio (2020-2021)

Commencing in early 2020, YOUth On Air was an Erasmus+ funded project that explored how radio and podcasting could be utilised as effective tools within youth work. The project saw Peshkar collaborate with partner organisations in Belgium, Serbia, and North Macedonia to develop a comprehensive training programme, a practical toolkit, and a series of participatory projects with young people in local communities.

In the UK, Peshkar recruited a team of four artists — Lorien Edwards, Huma Arshad, Rabhia Saeeda, and Georgia Lomax Thorpe — each of whom designed and delivered a unique project with young people local to them, following participation in the international training course. Due to the ongoing global pandemic, the work took place during late 2020 and early 2021, meaning all activity had to be conducted online. This presented a significant challenge for both the artists and the young participants, yet they adapted with resilience and creativity.

Despite the constraints, the projects resulted in a range of insightful, thought- provoking, and often deeply personal pieces of audio work. These not only reflected the experiences and perspectives of the young people involved but also demonstrated the potential of digital audio as a medium for youth expression and engagement.

The radio shows and podcasts created through YOUth On Air, both in the UK and across the partner countries, remain available to listen to via Peshkar's Mixcloud account. Several of the UK-based projects also included visual components, which were shared through Peshkar's YouTube channel and continue to be accessible to audiences interested in exploring the multimedia outcomes of the programme.





NEW INNOVATIONS

Exploring Entrepreneurship: A UK–Balkan Creative Exchange (2022)

In June and July of 2022, the Erasmus+ funded New Innovations project brought together 28 young people from across the UK and the Balkan region for a transformative cultural exchange. Through week-long residencies in both the UK and Serbia, participants delved into themes of entrepreneurship and employability, while forging lasting connections across borders.

The first residency took place in Salford, where participants were hosted and engaged in a variety of creative and cultural activities in nearby Oldham. The week included inspiring visits to local landmarks and institutions such as Oldham Coliseum, Manchester Art Gallery, Band on the Wall, The Met, Bury Art Museum, and Media City UK. These experiences provided a vibrant backdrop for exploring the intersection of art, culture, and employment opportunities in the creative industries.

The return leg of the exchange took place in Belgrade, Serbia, where the group immersed themselves in the rich history of Serbia and the wider Balkan region. Discussions around the region's complex political landscape were complemented by interactive training exercises that encouraged reflection, collaboration, and personal growth.

Upon returning to the UK, many participants shared how deeply the experience had resonated with them.

One participant noted, "Throughout the whole experience, we really got to see the similarities and differences between the participants from the different Balkan countries." Another reflected on the power of art to connect people, saying, "Seeing how people from different countries respond to art helped to break down barriers and for us to learn about one another."

Perhaps most striking was the recognition of shared human experiences across cultures. As one participant put it, "Finding out about how we have more in common across cultures is very powerful."
When asked about the value of cultural exchange, the group spoke passionately.

One summed it up perfectly: "Cultural exchanges are an experience, something that you live through. What's the difference between seeing a concert through a video and actually being there? Because you're living it—and that's what a cultural exchange is, it's real."

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all who took part in the programme, especially Phelan, Zoe, Daniel, Chloe, Taylor, and Ibrahim. Their enthusiasm and openness helped make this exchange a meaningful and unforgettable journey for all involved.



Reflections on

FUTURE OF THOUGHT

A Web Summit Side Event at Second Home Lisbon (2023)

In November 2023, amidst the vibrant buzz of Lisbon's International Web Summit, Peshkar brought a unique and thought-provoking side event to the intimate yet dynamic setting of Second Home Lisbon, perched above the lively Time Out Market. Future of Thought was more than a showcase; it was a convergence of digital innovation, artistic exploration, and global collaboration—posing vital questions about the intersection of technology, culture, and the future of human creativity.

Hosted in collaboration with João Garcia Miguel, Tajo Magazine, and Second Home, this international expo served as a milestone in Peshkar's evolving digital journey over the past decade, pushing the boundaries of participatory arts, particularly through digital technology and cultural engagement. This event, echoing with conversations on social mobility, active citizenship, and the fluidity of cultural identities, served as both a retrospective and a forward-looking dialogue.

TRACING THE DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Central to the event was a celebration of Peshkar's digital evolution. Merseyside-based participatory artist Tristan Brady-Jacobs set the tone with reflections on his early involvement with Peshkar from 2009 to 2012, particularly his role in shaping the aesthetic foundations of projects like FutureDesh, which tackled the pressing issue of climate change through a digital arts lens. His work signalled a transformative period for Peshkar, laying the groundwork for the organization's deep engagement with technology as a tool for social commentary and artistic expression.

Sam Rushton, a digital artist from Todmorden, offered insight into how Peshkar's Creative Employment Programme, Matchbox, helped ignite his career. His involvement in the Intermeds Erasmus Project (2020-22)—a cross-European collaboration with partners from Portugal, Spain, North Macedonia, Greece, and Cyprus—highlighted the power of international networks in fostering digital creativity and cultural exchange. Rushton's experience emphasized the value of nurturing young talent within structured but innovative frameworks that transcend borders.

Meanwhile, Manchester-based LGBTQ+ artist **Kate Partington** brought fresh perspectives with her current digital collage project, Carving Queer Perspectives. Commissioned by Peshkar in partnership with the Oldham Proud Trust Charity, Kate's work, unveiled at Peshkar's 2024 YDF Festival of Digital Culture—explored representation, identity, and inclusivity in digital spaces. Her emerging role as curator underscored a broader theme of the event: empowering underrepresented voices through digital arts.



Conversations at the Crossroads: AI, Arts, and Culture

The panel discussion that followed drew together diverse voices from the arts and digital sectors. Suzana Durão, Executive Director of Companhia João Garcia Miguel and CEO of Mockingbird, brought a wealth of experience from both artistic and technological spheres. Her insights into digital transformation in arts funding and management, particularly her work with DGARTES, illuminated the complexities of modernizing cultural platforms in an increasingly AI-driven world.

Steph Meskell-Brocken, Programmes Director at Peshkar, offered a meta- perspective on the organization's international reach. Having represented Peshkar at conferences in Denmark and the UK, her reflections grounded the discussion in the tangible outcomes of cross-border collaborations. The publications she co- edited—Our Teenage Years, Peshkar 25, and Under 25 Routes—stand as testament to Peshkar's commitment to documenting and disseminating its evolving methodologies.

Thematic Tensions and Takeaways

Throughout the event, one question loomed large: What is the Future of Thought? The discussion touched on the tension between rapid technological advancement— especially in AI—and the need for ethical, inclusive, and participatory artistic practices.

How can digital tools be leveraged without losing the human touch?

How does one ensure equitable access to these tools, especially for marginalized communities?

Attendees debated the implications of AI in creative industries, with some viewing it as a tool for democratization and innovation, while others warned of homogenization and the erosion of human nuance. The consensus was clear: any future-oriented approach must be deeply rooted in values of collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility.



A Global Community, Rooted in Place

What made Future of Thought particularly resonant was its grounding in local context while engaging a global audience. Second Home Lisbon, with its ethos of nurturing creativity and community, served as the perfect venue for this convergence of minds. Against the backdrop of the Web Summit's tech-forward energy, the event reminded participants that the most important advances in digital culture are those that reflect, question, and ultimately serve humanity.



BERLIN INTERNATIONAL ARTIST EXCURSION

(2025)

In February 2025 Peshkar sent three individuals from our Artist Development Programme to Berlin on an excursion designed to inspire, learn new things and take that learning back to the UK to create new and exciting ideas for their work. They were encouraged to step outside their comfort zones, meet new people from the Berlin Arts Community and being to piece together new collaborations and potential partner working. The experience was invaluable in enhancing their creative processes and expanding their perspectives as artists.

BERLINISCHE GALERIE

Their visit to the Berlinische Galerie provided an excellent starting point for exploring how art challenges societal norms. The IBB Video space, in particular, showcased works that questioned political issues, marginalized voices, and the impact of power structures. The gallery's collection highlighted the historical context of art in Berlin, particularly the early 1900s, when artists responded to rapid industrialization and social inequality.

Key pieces such as The Dancer by Eugen Spiro, Composition – Ibis Bird by Jacoba van Heemskarck, and Constructive Torso by Naum Gabo made a lasting impact. Madison found inspiration in Spiro's fluid dancer, seeing potential for choreography that mirrors the dynamic pose and the color palette used in the painting. She envisioned a dance piece with flowing transitions, influenced by the emotional tones of the artwork.

For James, Composition – Ibis Bird sparked ideas about incorporating transparency and light into dance and digital media. He proposed creating a live digital dance performance that would play with light and shadows. Joshua, on the other hand, was inspired by Constructive Torso, exploring the interplay of form and structure, envisioning choreography that emphasizes angular movements and geometric patterns. Mariechen Danz's Edge Out further expanded our creative boundaries by playing with perspective, shadow, and light. James noted how the installation juxtaposed the organic and the digital, sparking ideas for integrating sound and digital media into dance. The piece's innovative approach left a strong impression, and we even considered reaching out to Mariechen for future collaborations.

DNA Arts Club

The DNA Arts Club, a vibrant creative space for over 300 artists in Berlin, provided them with a welcoming environment to network and explore the community-driven ethos of the local art scene. They attended a weekly artist meet-up, where they were introduced to diverse creators, from poets to musicians and visual artists. This open, inclusive atmosphere led them to consider the possibility of hosting their own artist meet-ups in Manchester, potentially creating an online space for artists to share opportunities and events.

Joshua found the experience particularly enriching, meeting an artist from Ukraine working on his first short film. He also gained insight into how audio and performance poetry could merge, especially after being shown the audio room, which showcased how voice and sound can elevate the poetic experience. The idea of creating multidisciplinary collaborations with poets and musicians, where sound and digital media enhance the performance, resonated deeply with us.

Classic Remise Berlin

At the Classic Remise Berlin, a former tram depot now housing vintage cars and classic vehicles, they were struck by the unique ambiance of the space. It was a perfect example of how old industrial sites could be repurposed for artistic use. The building's vastness and historical significance made them consider how similar spaces in Manchester could host visual art exhibitions or digital art viewings. Madison even captured sound recordings here, contemplating how the space could inspire a soundwalk project.

Berlin Wall Memorial and Haus Schwarzenberg

The Berlin Wall Memorial was a sobering visit, reminding them of the brutal separation that once defined the city. The memorial's preservation of the wall in its
full depth allowed them to reflect on the historical significance and the power of memory. Joshua, whose family history is connected to the Nazi era, found the experience deeply moving, sparking new ideas for incorporating historical narratives into future projects, including writing poetry from historical perspectives. Haus Schwarzenberg, a creative nonprofit hub in a gentrified area, also caught their attention with its dense street art and layers of stickers, murals, and graffiti. The walls felt like an ever-evolving canvas for social and political expression. James was inspired by the atmosphere, envisioning a project where street art and performance could intersect, allowing individuals to contribute to the creative process.

Workshop for the Blind

Their visit to the Workshop for the Blind museum, which tells the story of Otto Weidt's factory during World War II, inspired Joshua to explore the power of poetry in his work. The poem "A View Ahead" by O. Weidt, which reflects on the struggles of blind Jewish workers, sparked the idea of incorporating rhythm and metaphor from poetry into dance. He began imagining how written work could guide the pace and emotional arc of a performance, blending spoken word with movement.

Deja Vu Museum and KW Institute of Contemporary Art

The Deja Vu Museum, with its interactive exhibits and optical illusions, was another highlight. The museum's use of motion sensors to create visual and auditory experiences inspired them to think about how technology could enhance dance performances. James began to experiment with motion-sensored art, exploring how the movement of dancers could interact with projected visuals. Meanwhile, Madison was captivated by the interplay between scientific principles and fun, prompting her to consider how light and motion could create immersive environments for digital art.

At the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, they saw a light-based installation that used lasers to tell a story, which sparked ideas for integrating light into theatrical
productions. James considered how precise lighting could enhance narrative storytelling, particularly in theater, where light could be used to represent the passage of time or a character's inner thoughts.

IKONO and Futurium

Their visit to IKONO, an immersive digital space, sparked ideas for creating interactive and immersive experiences. Madison imagined creating a "silent disco" soundwalk, where movement could trigger sounds and visuals, allowing participants to experience art in a wholly engaging way. The Futurium, with its focus on sustainability and ecological themes, inspired James to think about how new technologies could be used to create sound and visual experiences that reflect pressing global issues.

Reflection

"Our time in Berlin during Global Canvas 2025 was a transformative experience. Each location, exhibition, and artist collective we encountered contributed to expanding our creative horizons. From exploring the fluidity of dance through visual art to discovering new ways to integrate sound and digital media into our work, Berlin's rich art scene has provided us with invaluable insights that will shape our future projects. As we return to Manchester, we're eager to bring these experiences back to Peshkar, with new ideas, collaborations, and a deeper understanding of how art can evolve in exciting and unexpected ways."

Peshkar Global Canvas Artists:
Madison Hawley
James Dobbs
Joshua Tarinson



Making the Case for

ERASMUS AND CREATIVE EUROPE

The Positive Impact of EU Funding for Young People in Oldham

David Holden-Locke

Since the beginning of the Erasmus+ programme in the UK in 2014, more than 1 billion euros have been awarded for the decentralised actions managed by the UK National Agency, with more than 6900 projects funded over the years. During this time, more than 112,000 university students have benefitted from an international mobility, with Spain, France and Germany being the top receiving countries for UK students. In the UK, Peshkar has been at the forefront of supporting Oldham's young people and emerging talent for over a decade.

Erasmus+ has not just supported Higher Education, as 40,500 Vocational Education and Training placements have taken place via UK projects, with 93% of participants gaining better work skills and over 29,000 teachers took part in the eTwinning programme across over 14,000 schools.
There is pride in Oldham and the Northwest in our history and in our achievements and also in our potential. Through our work in the EU Peshkar were able to identify inequalities within the town and region and work to overcome them as a direct consequence of our national and international work and experiences.

Young people in Oldham reaped the benefits of European Union (EU) funding, with a series of innovative programs helping to shape their futures and provide exciting new opportunities. From education and skills development to community engagement and job readiness, EU-funded initiatives have proven to be a powerful force for change, empowering the youth of Oldham and opening doors to a brighter future.

In Oldham Peshkar flourished under Erasmus, and Creative Europe programme funding. We worked with organisations form across the EU and opened new markets and opportunities to Oldham's young people in Spain, Greece, Serbia, North Macedonia, Belgium, Ireland, Portugal and beyond. Peshkar's reach and work across the Uk and EU during the years 2009-2023 was over 1million UK and EU citizens. Our work was exhibited in all these countries and featured in many national theatres, galleries and through the mainstream and online media and we were able to invest £100,000s in our local people and economy.

One of the key areas where EU funding has made a difference is in educational programs and vocational training. Local schools and colleges have received support to introduce a range of specialized courses, enabling young people to gain essential skills in industries such as digital technology, engineering, healthcare, and the arts. Peshkar worked with Oldham schools and supported through funding and staffing some students on international youth exchanges. With these programs, students are better prepared for the job market, gaining practical experience and certifications that enhance their employability. In this area Peshkar was able to add value through our project work and EU Erasmus funding for employability training and entrepreneurial mentoring.

Additionally, through EU funding, Peshkar has supported several youth development programs aimed at increasing confidence and personal growth. Projects such as youth exchanges, youth mentorship schemes, leadership training, and volunteering opportunities have given young people the chance to explore new passions, build meaningful relationships, and take on new challenges. Through these initiatives, many have found their voices and discovered a sense of purpose, often going on to inspire others within their communities.

In Oldham, EU funding has also played a significant role in tackling youth unemployment by supporting innovative job-readiness programs. Initiatives like paid apprenticeships, work placements, and career development workshops have equipped young people with the skills, experience, and professional connections needed to secure long-term employment. The success of these programs is reflected in the increasing number of young people entering the workforce with confidence and a clear sense of direction.

Perhaps one of the most notable impacts of EU funding has been the creation of cross-cultural exchange programs. Young people from Oldham have had the opportunity to participate in exchange visits across Europe, learning about different cultures, languages, and global perspectives. These exchanges have broadened their horizons, helping them develop a greater understanding of the world and encouraging them to think beyond their local environment. Such experiences foster tolerance, cooperation, and global citizenship, which are invaluable in today's interconnected world.

For Peshkar such youth exchanges and projects in North Macedonia, Spain, Serbia, Belgium, Portugal, Ireland, Greece and other countries provided new and life changing experiences for many Oldham young people. Through these fully funded programmes of work many emerging artists were nurtured and trained and are now working in the sector fulltime and mentoring the fledging artists of tomorrow across the UK.

Peshkar led and partnered with many Erasmus and Creative Europe funded programmes over the years and participated in some key meetings in the European Parliament regarding the UKs role in future programmes alongside the British Council. Many of the projects we started and helped design and build are continuing across the EU with our old partnerships. Alas we are not able to continue our work which is at the detriment of Oldham's young people.

Local youth organizations such as Peshkar in Oldham and England's North West have been able to offer additional support and services as a result of EU funding, creating safe spaces for young people to engage in creative and recreational activities. Whether it's sports, music, or drama, these activities provide not only a sense of belonging but also an outlet for self-expression, helping to reduce social isolation and improve mental well-being.

For those interested in starting their own businesses or pursuing entrepreneurial ventures, EU funding has helped provide essential resources such as business mentoring, access to micro-loans, and training in financial management. Peshkar added value through our project work and EU Erasmus funding for employability training and entrepreneurial mentoring. We supported young people to be trained in person and online mentoring with international partners and institutions across the EU over a number of years with many of our resources still being discovered and utilised online today on online platforms. This has given many young people in Oldham and beyond the tools they need to turn their ideas into reality, contributing to the local economy and helping to create new job opportunities.

As the UK moves forward post-Brexit, the future of EU funding for young people is uncertain. However, the legacy of past EU investments continues to be felt in Oldham, where young people are benefitting from the opportunities provided by these programs. Many local organizations are working hard with us to ensure that the positive impact of EU funding remains a part of the fabric of Oldham's youth development efforts, whether through securing alternative sources of funding or continuing to build on the lessons learned. We are hoping that the UK youth and Oldham's emerging talent have the opportunities of previous generations to embrace Erasmus and other programmes that only brought opportunities to those that need that helping hand to thrive and realise their potential.

We believe that maintaining and strengthening the local, regional, national and even international politics, funding and relationships is vital for better decision making and accountability. It is from our international experience that we have been able to help transform things locally. Our work should not be seen as merely historic or criticised by some as jollies and folly, but as vital mechanisms that positively assisted our young people to achieve their potential.

In conclusion, EU funding has had a transformative effect on young people in Oldham, and on our organisation Peshkar, offering them the tools, experiences, and opportunities needed to succeed in an ever-changing world. From education to employment and beyond, these initiatives have laid the foundation for a brighter future for the next generation. Once access to these programmes is reopened for the UK youth, we have no doubt that the youth of Oldham will undoubtedly benefit, helping to shape the leaders, creators, and innovators of tomorrow.

David Holden-Locke



THE ROLE OF UK ARTS IN THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE POST-BREXIT

Arts Funding and Small Arts Organisations

Dr Claire Burnill-Maier

International engagement is essential for arts organisations in the UK, as it fosters cultural exchange, broadens audiences, and enhances artistic innovation. Collaborating with international artists and institutions enables UK-based organisations to diversify their programming, access global markets, and remain competitive in an increasingly interconnected cultural sector. Such partnerships also provide opportunities for knowledge sharing, capacity building, and sustainable development, ultimately strengthening the UK's creative economy. Research indicates that international collaborations contribute to economic growth and resilience in the arts sector, as they encourage investment and create new revenue streams[1].

Moreover, fostering cross-border artistic dialogue enhances cultural diplomacy and strengthens the UK's global influence in the creative industries. The UK's departure from the EU has triggered a series of challenges and transformations to its arts and cultural sector's ability to work internationally, ranging from restricted movement for artists and performers to shifts in funding structures and market access. This paper explores some of the ways in which Brexit has altered the UK cultural sector's prospects and calls for continued efforts to reinstate closer ties with Europe.

While much Brexit discourse has focused on trade, migration, and legal frameworks[2], The departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union marked a pivotal shift in its cultural, economic, and political relationships. its impact on the arts sector has been profound. One of the most immediate, tangible consequences of Brexit has been the loss of access to EU funding sources. Prior to Brexit, UK arts organisations benefited significantly from European cultural programs such as Creative Europe, which provided over £60 million to UK projects between 2014 and 2020[3].

Between 2014 and 2019 609 cultural projects involving UK beneficiaries received funding from Creative Europe[4]. These funds supported collaborations, cultural mobility, and the development of innovative artistic practices across Europe. With the UK no longer eligible for such funding, organisations must seek alternative sources to sustain their projects. Whilst the EU has seen an estimated 66% increase to its Creative Europe fund, the UK Trade and Business Commission estimates that UK arts and film sectors have missed out on approximately 200 million pounds as a result of Britain's new relationship with Europe[5].

A substantial portion of the sector's income has historically been derived from work within EU[6] but the loss of income due to restricted access for touring theatre companies, independent galleries, and community arts groups is only one part of the equation.

Brexit has significantly affected young artists and organisations across the UK, limiting their opportunities for mobility, collaboration, as well as funding. Evidence[7] shows that over a fifth of all UK arts and cultural organisations prior to Brexit had employed at least one EU national, leaving regulatory and workforce challenges in the face of Brexit. Similarly, before leaving the EU, British artists benefited from frictionless travel, allowing them to tour, study, and work across Europe with ease.

One significant challenge for small arts organisations is the increased bureaucracy for EU nationals working in the UK and vice-versa. The loss of freedom of movement has created barriers, particularly for emerging artists who lack the resources to navigate costly visa applications, work permits, and customs regulations[8]. New visa requirements, customs regulations, and administrative hurdles have made cross-border collaboration more costly and complex[9]. Crucially, research makes clear that these increased administrative and financial burdens fall most heavily on small organisations, like Peshkar.

The burdens of Brexit impact smaller organisations disproportionately, as they tend to be those organisations which lack the infrastructure to navigate these complexities effectively. These organisations often lack the financial reserves or institutional support necessary to withstand funding shortfalls. Small arts organisations rely on the stability of long-term funding relationships, which Brexit has disrupted. In an increasingly competitive domestic funding environment, smaller organisations face heightened financial insecurity, making it difficult to plan for the future. Many small arts entities have historically depended on cross-border partnerships to secure funding, share resources, and enhance their visibility on the European stage. The loss of free movement and EU funding streams has placed additional pressure on these organisations, limiting their ability to engage in collaborative projects and access international audiences.

Previously, Erasmus+ had enabled thousands of young people to study and train across Europe, fostering artistic development and international networks. The Turing Scheme which had hoped to bridge the funding gap does not offer the same level of funding or partnerships, making it less accessible. While the Turing Scheme facilitates international placements for students in the arts and culture sectors, it does not directly fund partnerships between UK and European arts and culture organisations. Coupled with an estimated 22-million-pound reduction in funding compared to the Erasmus + scheme[10]. Institutions seeking to establish international collaborations may need to explore alternative funding sources or programs specifically designed to support international cultural partnerships. Without proactive measures to restore lost opportunities, young UK artists risk isolation from the wider European cultural scene, limiting their global reach and professional development.

Whilst smaller arts organisations play a crucial role in local communities and grassroots cultural initiatives, they are the ones left particularly vulnerable in the post-Brexit era. Small organisations provide crucial first opportunities for young creatives. They are incubators for the wider creative sector. Consequently, the financial threats of Brexit in combination with the added logistical barriers pose an existential threat for the whole UK creative sector. Of course, the UK creative sector has begun to find creative solutions to the challenges Brexit has posed.

Looking forward, the sustainability of UK arts within the European cultural sphere will depend on policy responses, institutional support, and the ability of artists and organisations to forge new networks and funding models. While Brexit has undeniably reshaped the cultural connections between the UK and Europe, it has also highlighted the enduring significance of cross-border artistic collaboration. The challenge now is to ensure that these connections not only survive but continue to flourish in a changed and uncertain landscape.

Whilst some UK arts organisations have registered as legal entities within EU countries to retain eligibility for European funding and streamline logistical processes. Others have formed strategic alliances with EU-based organisations, allowing them to access joint funding and maintain artistic collaborations. For some organisations, the challenges of Brexit have led to a renewed focus on local and national collaboration. Small arts organisations are forging stronger ties with regional arts councils, universities, and private sector partners to create sustainable funding models and collaborative opportunities. At the same time, advocacy and policy engagement advocacy groups and cultural organisations have intensified efforts to lobby for better governmental support and policy adjustments. Calls for the reinstatement of mobility schemes for artists, reductions in administrative barriers, and increased public arts investment have gained traction in policy discussions. These calls are strengthened by calls from European cultural institutions who have expressed their disappointment over reduced collaboration. Many in Europe also seek renewed agreements to support cross-border artistic projects.

Many UK arts organisations, including Peshkar will continue to engage with European cultural networks, albeit under new constraints. For example, a large number of arts organisations are turning to digital platforms to maintain their presence in the European cultural landscape. The use of digital platforms for artistic engagement has become more prevalent, enabling UK artists to participate in European cultural life remotely. While digital art forms present their own challenges, they offer an alternative avenue for sustaining international artistic exchange. Virtual exhibitions, online performances, and hybrid events have allowed UK artists to showcase their work without the logistical challenges of physical mobility. While digital engagement cannot fully replace the experience of in-person collaboration, it provides a crucial lifeline for artists and organisations seeking to sustain their European connections. The UK remains a key player in international arts festivals, biennales, and residency programs and although participation often requires additional funding and administrative workarounds. Whilst some organisations have established satellite bases within EU member states to retain access to funding and mobility benefits. For example, certain UK- based theatre companies have partnered with European counterparts to co-produce works, ensuring continued engagement with EU audiences.

In addition to digitalisation, arts organisations have sought alternative funding streams, including increased applications to national grants, corporate sponsorships, and philanthropic support. Some have also turned to crowdfunding and community-backed initiatives to sustain their work.

While the loss of EU funding and mobility presents substantial challenges, small arts organisations are demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability. The necessity of securing alternative funding sources, navigating new bureaucratic hurdles, and maintaining European collaborations has driven innovation and strategic shifts within the sector. Meanwhile, the UK's creative sector continues to demonstrate its determination, creativity, strong leadership and resilience as it endeavours to fight for survival in a new European climate. Nevertheless, the benefits of closer ties with Europe are undeniable and in the interests of both the UK and European arts and cultural sectors it is essential that our cultural sectors continue to advocate for closer ties with our closest neighbours.

Dr Claire Burnill-Maier

[1] https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctsce2024d2_ch01_en.pdf

[2] Adam, Rudolf G. Brexit : Causes and Consequences. 1st ed. 2020. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020.

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