

# if these walls could talk...

#ifthesewalls



**With thanks to:** Aleasha Brennard, Andrea Ribchester, Becky Fraser, Cathleen Proctor, Charlotte Carr, Christina Jenables, Claire Chambers, Diane Coldray, Dorothy Cairns, Emma Holmes, Erika Fitton, Fiona Braganca, Jenniffer Chambers, Joan Arrowsmith, Joanne Gallop, Kate Hourihan, Kellyann Kay, Kim Wilkins, Kirsty Green, Kirsty Lindsley, Lisa Pendlebury, Lola Beaufort, Pat Moon, Penny Cartright, Rebecca Arlott, Sally Caddy, Selina Crosbie, Sheila Saunders, Stephanie Fallowes, Susan Gibbs, Tara Hawkins, Tracy Fallowes, Ute McDonough, Vicky James, Vicky Milton





**if these walls could talk...**

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Photograph: Bolton at Home

# what is it?

**A talking microwave, scattered secrets and a house emblazoned with truth: “If These Walls Could Talk...” is an installation filling a converted house in Brightmet with the writing of local women. Layers of content including confessions, reminiscences, reflections, humour, poetry, observations and powerful life stories combine to create a stimulating environment in which the voices of the women are made physical and immediately accessible.**

In 2012, the Neighbourhood Management Team established three weekly women’s groups across Brightmet to address a lack of supportive spaces for women. Poet, Louise Wallwein, was commissioned to run taster sessions as part of a varied offer for the groups to try new things. Something about creative writing just clicked. The concept of physically filling a house with their writing emerged from one group and quickly gained the support of all three. Louise continued to work regularly with the groups and brought in artists Paul Gent, Mark Haig and Mel Harris, Jen

Gilmour and local group the Naughty Knitters to collaborate with the women. Staff from the local Children’s Centres and local library (where the groups were held) also became part of the collaboration.

The result is a gallery-standard installation that uses visual arts, creative writing, crafts and interactive audio recordings to compelling effect. The installation has been seen by more than 500 people and, as well as becoming a useful and stimulating space for community activities, it has developed a reputation as a unique training and meeting space across many sectors. It gives meetings and training sessions a totally different slant, brings the ‘customer’ to the fore, and is beginning to reshape the delivery of services through stimulating new dialogues.

The key to the power of ‘If These Walls...’ is the honesty and authenticity of the content. These stories are seldom heard and rarely platformed. They challenge the ‘strivers vs scroungers’ rhetoric and have highlighted the uniquely precious value of ‘home’ at a

time when government policies such as the Bedroom Tax undermine and disregard this.

As a result, the project also sparked the delivery of a one day workshop in Brightmet ‘How many women does it take to...’ (March 2013) which explored political issues raised in the work. During the day over 30 local women wrote ‘rants’ about issues important to them, made new links with their Local Councillor, Kate Lewis, participated in ‘The Controversial Book Club’ with a debate around the key concepts of Owen Jones’s ‘Chavs’ book and galvanised themselves to attend a Bedroom Tax protest in the town centre that coming weekend.

This is a community development project with social justice and collective action at its core.

# reflections from louise wallwein, poet

**“You’re a right genius you, Tracy Emin got 44 million quid for having ideas like that” Is what I said to Vicky in response to an idea she’d just had.**

We were in session two of a creative engagement workshop that I’d been commissioned to lead for Bolton at Home with three women’s groups in the Brightmet area. I’d just asked the Leverhulme group what should we do with this writing? What kind of projects would you like to do? Vicky came back straightaway with “we should embroider the writing into a blanket.” The installation grew from there, assisted by the community development workers and children’s centre staff we then challenged the women to think big. Then it was like, “What if we found a council house in the area and turned it

into a big piece of art?” I took this idea to the other groups and the idea developed from there. We wrote every week for the next five months, we shared a lifetime’s worth of stories, laughed loads, argued a bit and cried enough.

When I suggested we could make the walls talk and that this could be an installation of sound and text, the women thought I was slightly bonkers and we wouldn’t get away with it. Every good idea needs a champion and this was Vanessa who sorted the funding and treated our ideas with respect.

My process as an artist always begins with the fundamental principle that participants of any project are also my collaborators. We’re all artists in the room. My next passion is to help people find their voice

through creating art whether it’s to transform a council house into an installation or to write a play, make a film, write a poem, the main outcome for me is that people find their voice and discover a new way of putting it to good use. Sometimes I ask difficult questions, I make people do quite hard work, I expect a lot from my collaborators and the writing they create is always high standard because people just tell the truth.

‘If these walls could talk...’ literally speaks for itself, when you walk into the house you are walking through the inner worlds of these Brightmet women, who have shown a huge generosity in sharing some of their inner most secrets. It’s a beautiful inner world too, an installation on the corner of a road, in an estate on the edge of Bolton in the heart of Northern England. It’s meant to challenge you and what you might think of these women and their area. I’m still slightly in shock myself that we did in fact get away with it.

*Louise Wallwein, Lead Artist on the project*





Today You  
Will Change  
the  
World with  
Every bright  
idea!

WHAT WOULD YOUR  
MIRROR SAY IN THE  
MORNING?



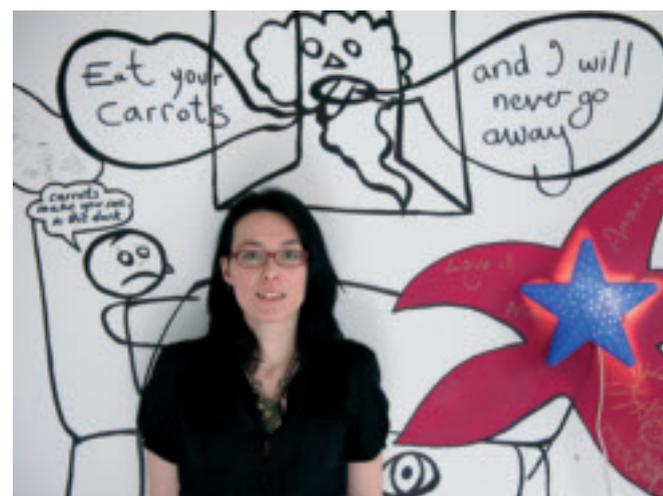
“You can really hear people’s true voices. The messages are so powerful. It’s a full range of women’s lives.”

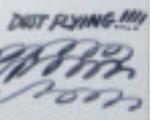


“This has made some of the group realise that what they have to say has value. It makes you proud, which is why I’ve signed it.”



“There is warmth here.”

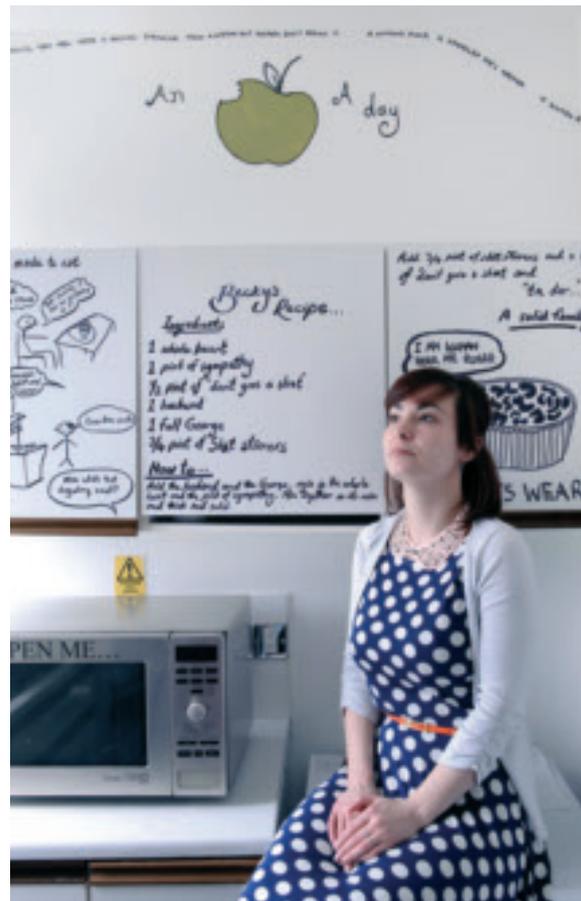




“Too often women’s voices themselves are ignored and we hear from ‘experts’ - this house turns this on its head. You can’t get away from their real stories.”

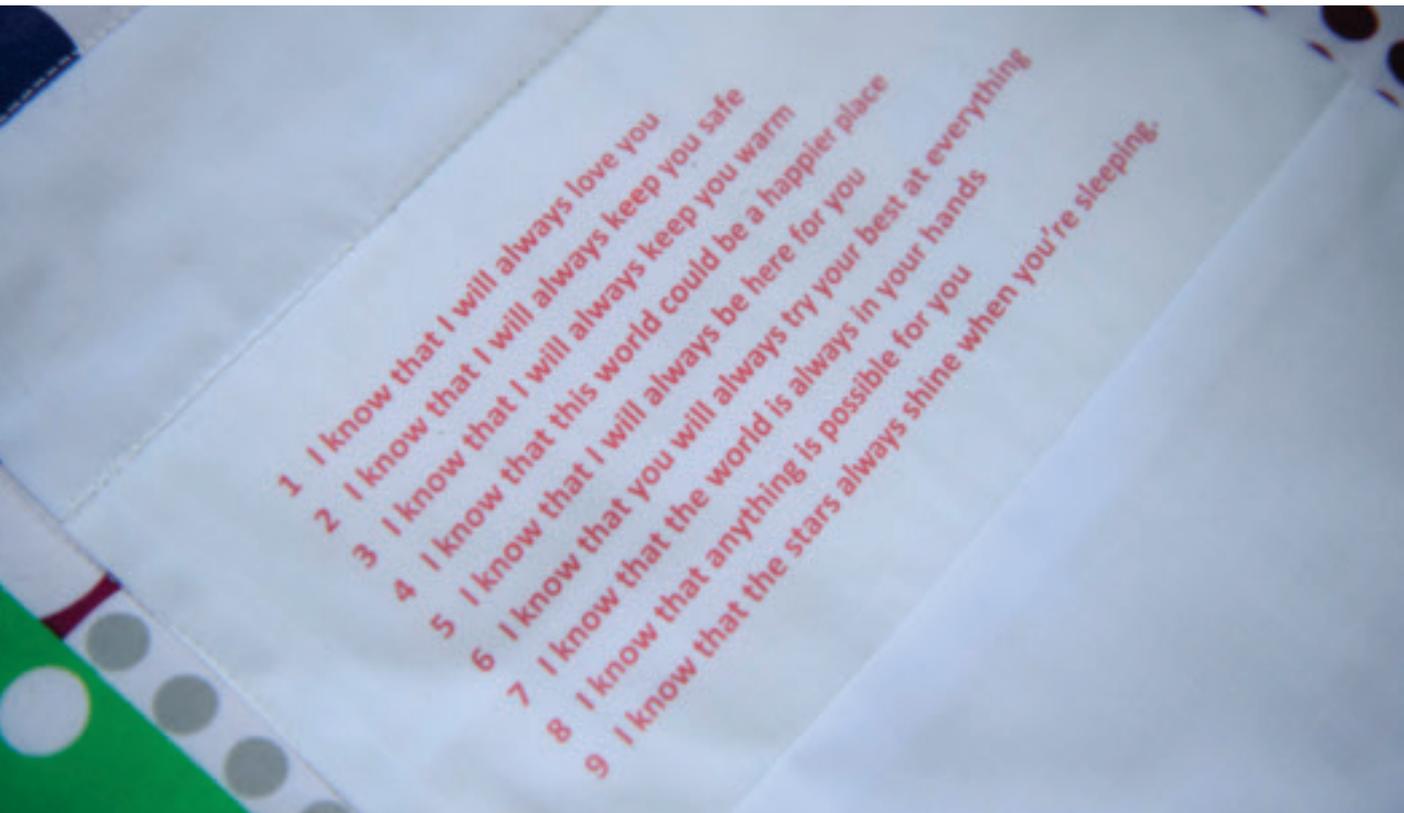


“A real assault on the senses. Powerful, moving and interesting.”



“This is as real as any other art.”





## observations from matthew watson

**Often in the name of doing things *for* people, organisations end up doing things *to* people.**

This may be due to time or resource constraints (the need to 'get things done') but also deeply rooted assumptions about how things are done, namely that knowledge and learning flows from experts (sociologists, teachers, artists) to people who are dependent or in need.

Grant Kester, in his essay 'Aesthetic Evangelists' (1995), suggests a way of re-framing this relationship. Kester's method is based on the principle of doing *with* rather than *to*. The artist/organisation is no longer the source of greater understanding or knowledge but one who participates in an act of creative collaboration. Knowledge is something that belongs to a process of co-production.

The Brightmet project shows what can be achieved when a project is allowed to develop and change. As well as allowing a strong bond to grow up between the women and the poet, the long term nature of the project also enabled different voices to emerge and grow stronger over time.

Brightmet is so often described in negative terms. Not only must residents deal with a host of sociological

*'You get pre-judged. If you tell someone you live on an estate in Brightmet, and look after children, they might think, "Oh, they are not educated, they have not bothered to go out and get a job, they have decided to stay at home. They live on an estate so they probably sit at home all day watching TV". They have all these preconceptions and I suppose this house is showing, "Well, okay, maybe there are some people like that, but there are other people who have got a brain, and want to use it," and they have used it very well.'*

*Interview with participants, 2013*



classifications (deprived, marginalized etc) they must also contend with the worst kind of tabloid labels. The challenge for a community like Brightmet is to break away from these preconceptions and to establish a new representation for itself. The installation, and the women's stories and memories, provide a different, more nuanced portrayal of the area.

*Matthew Watson is an MA student on Manchester University's Art Gallery and Museum Studies course.*



# what can we learn from this work?

**When the women's groups were initially established, their future was genuinely their call. The installation was their idea and it was ambitious, but we instinctively knew this was going to be something special and well worth the subsequent work in facilitating it to happen. This is a riskier, more responsive way of working than traditional more predetermined methods but remarkable results flourish when you openly take a steer from people, rather than being driven by budgeting schedules, business planning days and pre-set outcomes.**

I was fortunate at Bolton at Home to have the space to work in this way, but challenges still exist and there remains a need across the sector to influence old inflexible structures to make it possible for more staff to work this intuitively and flexibly more of the time.

Drawing on Community Development values and Social Engaged practice, true collaboration was at the centre of the process. It

was a collective energy and determination that drove this project, an energy rooted in the sincere relationships that emerged between us all. It led us to consider how all too often, notions of being 'professional' can lead staff to build relationships that are 'officer vs customer' in nature - it almost becomes a comfort zone.

This project was built on 'real' relationships, evolving through openness. Our work can't be about professional distance or perceived hierarchy, it has to be about meaningful connections and creating the spaces for these to flourish. I really believe you can't genuinely do this work if you don't genuinely care. Pouring some of yourself into it builds trust, breaks barriers

and enriches projects. It is evident in the authenticity and immediacy of the installation, which provokes an emotional response in viewers. It has prompted discussions with professionals about reflecting and reconnecting with their motivations for pursuing their line of work, rethinking and reframing how they connect with the people they engage with day to day.

In terms of the women and what has changed for them, I honestly don't think I can do their achievements justice in a paragraph, but a flavour of what has changed includes:

The women are taking control of other things that affect them. All three groups now have greater autonomy and





ownership, continuing to meet on a weekly basis. The group who meet at one Children's Centre have become the Parent Steering Group there and now help shape that service. Several of the women have continued to write; one group member submitted a poem to the Octagon Theatre's open competition and had her work performed at the venue. It has become her passion. The experience of the project has helped many group members overcome individual challenges. One member has been able to come off antidepressants, attributing this to being part of the group. Another was struggling with every job interview she attended, but after co-facilitating workshops with Louise she has found new confidence and successfully secured a job after delivering a strong interview.

There have been small but valuable steps too, discussions that have broken down barriers, connections made just by two people sharing something in the same room, referrals made to previously unaccessed services, mutual support networks formed, trust has been built which has led to new disclosures and the identification of support needs in other areas of the women's lives. Then there are the benefits of the 'How Many Women..' event and dialogues leading people to become increasingly politically engaged, to know and have contact with a local elected member, to begin to question the social and political structures that shape lives.

Given the above, this project has also highlighted for us the need to begin to develop new evaluation models that better articulate the value of process,

the significance of 'small wins' along the way and the web of interconnected impacts that spark and spiral from the work as it progresses. Too many evaluation models tell 50% of the story and the depth and complexity of the difference the work makes can become lost because it doesn't necessarily fit in a box. To this end, the women have become involved in a participatory research study with The University of Durham where they are actively shaping an independent evaluation of the women's work delivered by Bolton at Home.

For me though, the process of knowingly stepping out of your comfort zone and pushing for something ambitious was one of the key valuable experiences for us all. At times the scale and challenge of the project felt huge and conversations were held within the groups about sticking with something you wouldn't ordinarily do, the ups and downs of working to a long term goal and having faith in yourself and those around you. I feel this has had a lasting impact on the women involved, and it also has on me.

*Vanessa McDermott,  
Community Development  
Officer, Bolton at Home*

# closing thoughts

**When we set off establishing women's groups in Brighton nobody could have predicted that we would end up with an installation of women's writing that appears on the walls of the house, the cushions, the bedding; it speaks to you from the kitchen drawer, the microwave and the mirror.**

Normally when you end up with something as profound as this it is somebody's vision, it belongs to one person who already has in their mind what they think it will look like and they inspire others to make it happen. The great thing about 'If these

Walls...' is the truly collaborative nature of the project.

It was created by introducing the poet, and her genius in teasing out the women's writing; it was Vanessa's vision in turning the existing office into a gallery space; it was Paul Gent, the graphic artist, faithfully translating the work onto the walls of the house; Mark Haig making sure all the audio worked beautifully; Jen Gilmour and the Naughty Knitters creating quilts and textiles... it was all this and, of course the fantastic women of Brighton, that went into making the installation.

What makes it more remarkable is that all the content is from this estate. It is raw and undiluted and the closest representation to what working on an estate like Brighton is really like.

It's inspirational.

*Tony Cottam, Neighbourhood Manager*

*For more info or to arrange a visit contact the East Neighbourhood Management Team, Bolton at Home, via [linda.jones@boltonathome.org.uk](mailto:linda.jones@boltonathome.org.uk)*





Photograph: Len Grant

## east nm team's top ten rules to work by...

1. Follow your intuition; allow your staff to do the same
2. Target your efforts thoughtfully, know specifically who you're aiming to reach, and do what it takes to reach them
3. Invest in bringing in new voices, new skills, new perspectives
4. Brutal honesty policy - don't pretend it's working when it's not
5. Don't settle for engaging the 'usual suspects' - just keep trying again
6. Flex, adapt, be responsive to the people you're working with - they are the drivers, they are your lead
7. Sometimes it is as much about challenging your own organisation and structures as it is about challenging others
8. Don't expect quick results... but trust they will come
9. The true value is in the process, not necessarily the product
10. Stay on the bus!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *This Column Will Change Your Life: Helsinki Bus Station Theory*, Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2013

Bolton at Home is a registered charity providing social housing, owning and managing more than 18,000 homes across the borough. We believe that strong and thriving neighbourhoods are key to the growth of all communities - they are at the core of tackling all forms of exclusion.

Within our Neighbourhood Management Teams we employ Community Development Officers, who work peer-to-peer with local people to facilitate meaningful change for individuals, groups and communities with Social Justice at the heart of what they do. This work is supported by Arts Officers, who commission artists and arts organisations to deliver creative community engagement and development initiatives involving our customers.

'If these walls could talk...' arose from ongoing Community Development work in Brightmet. The focus was on profoundly platforming the voices of local people, supporting new risk taking and working collaboratively to create a lasting and impactful project full of political, social and personal significance.

All photographs by Joel C Fildes except where indicated.



# Bolton at Home

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