



**LEEDS
ARTS RESEARCH
CENTRE**

**BUT WHAT IF WE
TRIED?**

HARRY MEADLEY

OUTPUT INFORMATION

Title:
But what if we tried?

Output Type:
M – Exhibition

Venue:
Touchstones, Rochdale

Year of first exhibition:
2019

Research Groups:
Participatory Practice



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION STATEMENT

'But what if we tried?' was an exhibition conceived in response to the common complaint made by visitors to Touchstones, Rochdale (and to many other municipal art galleries) that 'not enough of the collection was on display'. As an artwork in itself—artist Harry Meadley challenged the public gallery to attempt present every artwork in their 1600+ collection within a single exhibition. An additional six-part docuseries filmed by Meadley followed the staff in the year leading up to and during the exhibition itself. Deemed an impossible task due to multiple factors, the focus was on the process of the attempt, rather than just the realisation, in an effort to expose and explore the many realities faced by the regional gallery—as well as the larger threats to public ownership.

Prior to this exhibition Rochdale Borough Council was considering beginning to sell-off works from its publicly owned collection. As one of the most highly attended exhibitions in the gallery's long history (17,966 visitors) 'But what if we tried?' challenged many of the gallery's, as well as the sector's, assumptions about the role their often underutilised public collections can play. Rochdale Borough Council rescinded these considerations during the exhibition.

The exhibition was realised with £15,000 combined funding from Arts Council England and The Foyle Foundation. Harry Meadley received the civic 'Artist of the Year' 2019 Rochdale Borough Sports & Culture Award.

Coverage included BBC1 North West Tonight (18 Feb 2019), The Guardian (2 March 2019), Art Monthly (April 2019) and Corridor8 (April 2019). Part 1 of the docuseries was exhibited at the Great Exhibition of The North, BALTIC39, Newcastle (June – October 2018). Harry Meadley and Bryan Beresford (Curatorial & Community Engagement Coordinator, Touchstones) gave a presentation at the UK Registrars Group conference 'Magical Mystery Store' at Tate Liverpool (10 May 2019).



Though an inherently contrary concept, it is compelling watching the staff try to negotiate it—attempting to waive curatorial control whilst still, ultimately, asking us to trust in their judgement. The challenge to display everything the gallery cares for physically, has been transformed along the way into uncovering narratives in the life of the gallery; from unpicking a sometimes cryptic collecting history, to bringing the hidden work of art handlers and conservators out into public view. Importantly it also lays bare the frustrations of its current workers and asks us to consider what is at stake when investment in our cultural heritage is chipped away at.

Denise Courcoux, Corridor8



What initially seems like a fairly simple — if logistically demanding— idea is given room to grow into something much greater, an exhibition that disassembles the gallery to show you how it works, and why. [...] The two first sections are notable for how they make visible the work of running an art gallery. Galleries often seem as though they are trying to make this process invisible, producing immaculately installed exhibitions that appear effortless.

While this can be a seductive display mechanism, it also encourages the public to question how much work does go on behind the scenes, and what public money is spent on. Meadley's fly-on-the-wall documentary reinforces this, clearly showing that this is a small team working with limited resources, making a project of this scale all the more impressive.

Tom Emery, Art Monthly



Gallery Two

Through to Galleries Three and Four ↑

Refuge point



← Harry Meadley:
But what if we tried?
2 March – 1 June 2019
Gallery Two, Three & Four

Intrigued by the fact visitors often ask us why we don't show more of the over 1500 works in the Borough's fine art collection, artist Harry Meadley set us the challenge of attempting to display as much of the collection as possible in a single exhibition. Spanning three galleries, *But what if we tried?* presents the result of this attempt. As much about the process as the final display, the exhibition also includes a multi-part documentary filmed by Meadley featuring the Touchstones staff as they endeavour to realise this impossible task.

This is unique and unmissable opportunity to see a large proportion of the collection on public display and discover more about all the conservation and research work that goes on behind the scenes.

→ **A Postcard from Rochdale**
19 January – 18 May 2019
Gallery One

Having proved a hit in its inaugural year we return with the second edition of our annual open art exhibition *A Postcard from Rochdale*. This time established artists, amateurs and schools were invited to seek inspiration from our rich and diverse permanent art collection of over 500 paintings and submit their artworks to the size of a postcard.

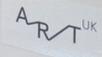
The exhibition includes a digital slideshow of all of the works from our collection that inspired the imagination of the entrants and a selection of the originals.

People's Postcard

In addition to a number of prizes awarded by an esteemed panel of judges we are also asking you the visitor to vote for your favourite postcard. The winning entry will have their postcard reproduced and for sale in our shop. Don't forget to post your vote in the red post box.

Sales

For further details about sales please ask at the front desk.

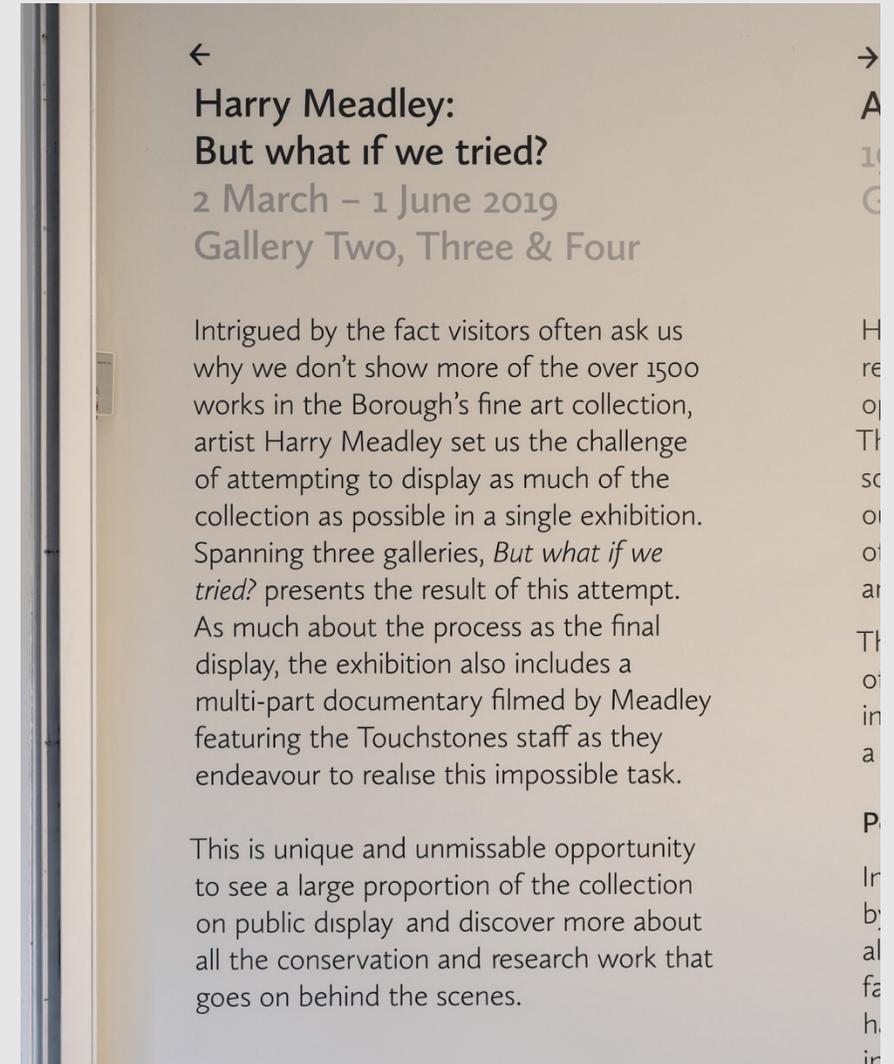


But what if we tried? (2019)
Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 1—Officers Meeting (2018)

Image courtesy of the artist



But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Gallery Two: The secret life of a collection

Rochdale Borough's art collection was founded in 1884 and comprises of approximately 1600 artworks including paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints. The way in which most people experience it is through a programme of public exhibitions that are normally staged in this space.

However, this is only one aspect of the work we do at Touchstones as custodians of the collection, with our responsibilities ranging from cataloguing, research and digitisation, storage and conservation, through to managing an external loans programme and dealing with copyright and image requests. All of this work is ongoing and remains hidden from public view, but it is vital for the preservation and development of the Borough's cultural heritage for present and future generations.

In the spirit of Meadley's challenge our intention in this space, and throughout this unique project, is not to present a static display or 'museumification' of what goes on behind the scenes but instead to turn the galleries into a working space in which staff and others continue to go about the day-to-day business of managing and using a regional art collection.

Talk to us!

Please feel free to ask us questions or share your knowledge about the collection in person or by using one of the forms on our feedback board.

But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 2—Stores (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 3—Personnel (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist

But what if we tried? (2019)
Image courtesy of the artist



Gallery Three: What's new?

Art (as with every other aspect of life) doesn't stand still. Throughout history artists have challenged our ideas about the forms that art can take and the materials it can be made from with their relentless exploration – in turn, constantly presenting galleries with new challenges for its public display. Collections, too, can't be frozen in time. It is important that they represent, celebrate and inform audiences about the past, but equally that they reflect the present and even offer insight into future trends.

Thanks to the generous support of funders, organisations and bequests from private individuals in recent years, there has been an unprecedented growth in the art collection. Following a clear strategy, we've committed ourselves to collecting in three broad areas all of which build upon and amplify the existing strengths of the collection.

All of the works in this space have been acquired in the last three years and are seen here in the packing and crates in which they arrived. With one or two exceptions, they have never been shown as part of the collection before. In keeping with the spirit of this project, we will install some of the works over the course of the exhibition, allowing you a rare insight into the process of an art installation and the fixtures, tools, equipment and paperwork we use.

Our strategy

Every public collection of art has particular areas of strength, for example, significant holdings of work by one artist or an artistic movement. These areas will often form the foundation of a collecting (or 'acquisitions') policy, specifying what an institution will consider (through gift, donation, bequest and purchase) for entry into its collection.

We have a very clear policy that builds on the existing strengths within our collection. Not only does it guide the growth of our collection, but it also informs our exhibition programme. It focuses on the following areas:

- **Women Artists** – building on our historic strength in collecting and showing the work of women artists by showcasing the formal and conceptual concerns of a new generation of female artists, while responding strategically to the gender inequality that still exists in galleries and public art collections.
- **Northern Talent** – supporting emerging and established artistic talent in the North of England by providing these artists with the opportunity to create new career-defining work, placing their work in the critical context of nationally and internationally recognised artists, and seeking to bring them to the attention of others who can further their professional development.
- **Contemporary Craft** – continuing to explore innovative contemporary craft, with a specific focus on artists who are appropriating and re-purposing materials, processes and techniques traditionally associated with craft practices such as ceramics and textiles.

But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 4—Hanging Committee (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist

Gallery Four: Warts and all

So here it is. Well, not all of it because clearly we were never going to be able to show every work in the collection: it would be a practical and logistical impossibility. However, we've managed to amass over 200 works (roughly 13% of our entire collection), floor to ceiling, in our largest exhibition space. It is the most comprehensive public presentation of the Borough's permanent art collection ever staged.

The conventional approach to an exhibition drawn from the collection would be to decide a theme, subject or artist and carefully select and arrange the work accordingly; underlying this, of course, is a series of judgements on the part of the staff, and the wider art world, about what is valued and deemed worthy of exhibition. For example, is the artist important or does the work exemplify a significant artistic or cultural movement?

However, this isn't the point here: it is all about the collection and attempting to showcase as much of it as we can. Therefore, we've ignored all the normal curatorial considerations and simply followed as closely as possible, using a system of accession numbers, the order in which works have entered the collection. Consequently, we hope to offer a sense of how the collection has evolved, but also of how it bears witness to the different tastes and interests of the benefactors and curators who have shaped it over the years.

Please take one of the wall plans.

Middleton Arena

In addition to Touchstones, we've also displayed even more works from the collection in our outreach case at Middleton Arena. Don't miss it!

Over to you!

We've quite enjoyed opening up the collection in this way. So much so, that we've decided we would like you to select the works you would like to see in our next collection exhibition opening in June. Please pick up one of the forms in Gallery Two to make your choice.

But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



But what if we tried? (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 5—Install (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



Touchstones Part 6—Wash Up (2019)

Image courtesy of the artist



When Harry Meadley hatched the idea of exhibiting a large part of our collection he was articulating a vision that I'd had for sometime. I was excited by the prospect, Harry's exhibition did not disappoint. The collection belongs to the people, and, as such should be enjoyed by the people. This was considered to be an ambitious project for anyone, but Harry did us proud! He engaged with stakeholders in a personable and supportive way, their confidence and trust in him was evident in the finished product. Following the exhibition I have requested that we do something similar on a regular basis, thank you Harry!

Janet Emsley, Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods, Community & Culture, Rochdale Borough Council



Addressing a common criticism of regional galleries, But what if we tried? with Harry Meadley was both a sophisticated conceptual artwork and a highly popular collection-based show attracting national coverage and provoking considerable professional debate within the arts and heritage sector. Two years in the development it also sensitively caught on camera the inner workings and heart of a small yet dedicated team trying to do their best on very limited resources. It has had a profound and lasting impact on our organisation directly informing a new creative vision (2020-25) and an ongoing commitment to democratising all the collections we care for.

Mark Doyle, Joint Head of Culture, Touchstones, Rochdale



The Harry Meadley exhibition attracted more first-time visitors (32%) compared to the other exhibitions, where first-time visitors averaged 22%.

During the Harry Meadley exhibition, 75% of the audience stayed for longer than 30 minutes. During all other exhibitions, 46% stayed less than 15 minutes, and 72% stayed less than 30 minutes.

The principle difference in Net Promoter Score was around the type of exhibition. Visitors seeing the Harry Meadley exhibition gave the show a NPS of 67, which is a good score. The Net Promoter Score for all other exhibitions taken together over the period was 23.

APPENDIX

REVIEWS & ARTICLES

Tom Emery, 'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?', Art Monthly, April 2019, Issue 425, page 27.

Denise Courcoux, 'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?', Corridor8, April 2019.

Helen Pidd, 'In the frame: two radically different plans for civic art collections', The Guardian, March 2019.

Helen Pidd, 'The big question: how many paintings can you fit on a wall?', The Guardian, March 2019, pages 14–15.

Stuart Flinders, North West Today / North West Tonight, BBC 1, 18 Feb.

'The impossible exhibition', Lancashire Life, February 2019, pages 94–95.

'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?', Press Release, Touchstones, Rochdale.

'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?' Tom Emery, Art Monthly, April 2019 Issue 425, page 27

<https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/harry-meadley-but-what-if-we-tried-by-tom-emery-april-2019>

Why don't civic galleries display all the artwork in their collections, and what would happen if they tried? This is the premise for Harry Meadley's 'But what if we tried?' at Touchstones Rochdale, the final project in the gallery's Contemporary Forward series of commissions. What initially seems like a fairly simple—if logistically demanding—idea is given room to grow into something much greater, an exhibition that disassembles the gallery to show you how it works, and why.

The idea seems to have been prompted by the sort of questions from visitors that will be familiar to anyone who has worked in a front-of-house role at a public gallery. Visitors often want to know why so much work is held in storage rather than being out on display. Likewise, if a particularly famous work isn't on display, they want to know why not, and if something in storage is worth millions of pounds, they want to know why it can't be sold. The answers seem obvious once you gain some experience of the industry, perhaps so much so that we forget the legitimacy of these enquiries and the importance of galleries answering them, demonstrating public accountability.

At Touchstones, these sorts of questions have been addressed with refreshing transparency through the delivery of the exhibition, which is divided into three sections that focus on different areas of the gallery's work. Accompanying this is a five-part documentary shot by Meadley, showing the process of undertaking the project and making it clear that the small team of staff, led by curator Mark Doyle, were vital collaborators in both practical and creative terms. A sixth part is on its way, documenting the show while it is open, and, as with the others, it will be made available on both Meadley's and Contemporary Forward's websites.

In the first section, the gallery's stores are recreated, as well as displays of works under conservation and works going out on loan. As well as highlighting conservation methods, it also becomes clear that there is only so much money available for conservation, as demonstrated by two Susan Hiller wallpaper works. Doyle

explains that these works are deteriorating, even while in storage, and any conservation would be an expensive temporary fix—the work wasn't made to last. This raises a difficult issue: the gallery has a duty of care for its collection, but to let artworks waste away in storage, even if this would maintain them for longer, seems futile—thus they have taken the bold step to display the Hillers while they still can.

Beside the exit, a number of paintings are shown in their crates with the fronts removed. These are works that are due to go out on loan, accompanied by a list of current and forthcoming loans. As well as this, copies of the loan requests are made available to read, giving visitors a view into the fairly opaque world of artwork loans. When well-known artworks aren't on display, the reason is often that they have gone on loan elsewhere, but visitors often feel affronted that this is done without any prior notice, especially when they may have travelled to see a specific work that is no longer on display. Thus, letting people see how the process works, as well as informing them of loans that are coming up, is quietly radical. It's a simple gesture, but also a generous one.

The situation is not exactly the same, but the (overblown) fuss about the temporary removal of John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896, from display at Manchester Art Gallery (see Sonia Boyce's interview AM415 and Francis Frascina's 'Troublemaking' AM416) is an apt example of how aggrieved visitors can feel when galleries don't adequately communicate the reasoning behind curatorial or, in this case, artistic decisions.

Following from this, the second section shows a selection of recently acquired works, displayed in a half-installed state. A ceramic work from Rachel Kneebone sits in its crate (which itself is an ingenious, impressive piece of design), with lengthy install instructions from White Cube made available to read. Elsewhere, paintings lean on the floor, ready to be hung, something that will be done as a live event later in the exhibition's run.

'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?' Tom Emery, Art Monthly, April 2019 Issue 425, page 27

<https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/harry-meadley-but-what-if-we-tried-by-tom-emery-april-2019>

Continued.

Most intriguingly, Doyle uses this space to state publicly, and explain, his acquisition strategy, which is split into three overlapping strands: women artists, northern artists and contemporary craft. This sort of information is not exactly secret, but it isn't explicitly public either.

The two first sections are notable for how they make visible the work of running an art gallery. Galleries often seem as though they are trying to make this process invisible, producing immaculately installed exhibitions that appear effortless. While this can be a seductive display mechanism, it also encourages the public to question how much work does go on behind the scenes, and what public money is spent on. Meadley's fly-on-the-wall documentary reinforces this, clearly showing that this is a small team working with limited resources, making a project of this scale all the more impressive.

Finally, there is the salon hang, displaying over 200 works in one room. Gallery space is typically reserved for thematic collection displays: this is almost anti-curating, displaying as many artworks as will fit according to the order they were acquired. This section demonstrates the impossibility of the initial proposition; with approximately 13% of the total collection on display, you begin to get an idea of how much space the full 1,600 artworks would require. By volume alone this display manages to cater for a wide variety of tastes, ranging from contemporary stars like Lubaina Himid to local favourites like the frequently asked after Charles Burton Barber, whose *A Special Pleader*, 1893, was at one point the most reproduced image in the UK.

With local authorities facing drastic cuts in government funding, culture can become an easy target. It is tough to justify arts spending when you can't pay for social care, and the sale of artwork is a tempting—though temporary, short-term and retrograde — fix to help fill budget gaps. In this environment, galleries need to do what they can to demonstrate their value.

Across the industry, organisations seem to assume that their value is self-evident, perhaps a symptom of the absence of diversity across the staff of most arts organisations. Transparency is one way to demonstrate value, and 'But what if we tried?' is radically transparent, showing the mechanics of the organisation and inviting public response. If this can happen in Rochdale, there is no reason it can't happen elsewhere, and it would be extremely welcome if curators from across the UK (many of whom will be far better resourced) would pay attention and learn from Touchstone's approach.

'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?' Denise Courcoux Corridor8, April 2019

<https://corridor8.co.uk/article/harry-meadley-but-what-if-we-tried/>

Harry Meadley: But what if we tried? at Touchstones Rochdale is billed as an 'impossible task', and one of the first things I encountered upon entering the exhibition was a video of a member of staff cautiously saying, "It might be that we can't have everything at once." This admission refers to the challenge posed to the gallery by artist Harry Meadley: to display the entirety of its art collection, around 1,600 works, in one go. Rochdale's arts and heritage services have faced a funding crisis over the past decade, as the local authority grapples with its own impossible task of balancing the budget in the face of severe cuts from central government. With a reduced and overstretched staff, why would Touchstones embark on such a resource-heavy mission?

What might sound like a frivolous idea is a response to frequent visitor queries about why the gallery doesn't display more of its collection. Through the resulting exhibition it reveals the inner workings of a civic art gallery feeling the strain of austerity. Documentary videos recording various parts of the process of realising the exhibition punctuate the gallery spaces. The concept might come from an artist, but the gallery staff are the protagonists in these films, debating at length in front of Meadley who acts as curious observer. There is a canny resourcefulness about their decision-making that will be familiar to anyone who has worked in a cash-strapped arts organisation. Practicalities take precedent over artistic intentions, as they search for ways to add value to the project; emptying out the stores is a great opportunity for a deep clean.

The outcome of Meadley's proposition spans three galleries. The first room illustrates extreme ends of the spectrum of an artwork's fate. Selected stars of Rochdale's collection are displayed packed in their travel frames; a Vanessa Bell, fresh home from a UK touring show, stacked in front of a Stanley Spencer, in demand from international art museums. The gallery walls, however, showcase a range of conservation nightmares. Many of these works are discoloured by layers of dirt, their colours and sharpness merging

into a murky jaundice. An 18th-century portrait by John Collier Jnr bears a sizeable hole in its canvas— repairable, but low down on a long list of priorities. 'Gulf I' and 'Gulf II' (1991) by Susan Hiller are large, yellowed paintings on children's wallpaper. Their surfaces are gradually flaking away, and the accompanying label describes the dilemma of how, and whether, to halt the deterioration of works that the artist intended to become progressively cracked. There was something affecting about seeing these works up close, their frailty bringing me closer to the sense that once someone sat down to create them, not knowing what their fate would be.

The second space is dominated by recent acquisitions, so new they've not yet been displayed by the gallery. Shown in various states of crating and wrapping, a secondary art of packing is revealed. Susan Collis's gemstone screws and plugs looking, in this context, like the fixings for a work rather than the art itself, are meticulously laid out in tiny cellophane packets on a neatly-inked paper diagram to indicate how they should be displayed. The thin, white porcelain wafers of Rachel Kneebone's sculpture are supported with precision by plywood and foam, demonstrating the rigour and care of the art handler whose work is usually unseen. The works on display here are all by women, a curatorial statement of intent by a gallery keen to show it is trying to improve on the 8% of its collection that is currently by female artists.

The concept behind the exhibition indicates an abandonment of curatorial control and value judgements by choosing to show everything rather than a selection. This is supposed to come to fruition in the final and largest gallery space. The text panel proclaims it is 'Warts and all', but it is, in its way, just as carefully curated as the other spaces. Just over 200 artworks are presented here—an impressive display if still only a fraction of the collection—hung salon-style across every inch of available wall.

**'Harry Meadley: But what if we tried?' Denise Courcoux
Corridor8, April 2019**

<https://corridor8.co.uk/article/harry-meadley-but-what-if-we-tried/>

Continued.

The works are ordered by the date that they were accessioned, which leads to some curious juxtapositions. Somewhere around the 1970s we leap from the clean lines of Keith Grant's monumental polyptich 'Snow Drift, Clear Sky' (1974), to an intricate 16th-century Flemish religious painting, to a 19th-century watercolour of Rochdale Bridge. Because not everything could be displayed, curatorial decisions have been made—about what will physically fit, but also considering which works tell stories, or best represent their genre. The first work to be acquired by a woman artist (accession number 14: a landscape by Alice Mary Havers) was a significant marker to include given the gallery's current collecting remit, and there would surely be an outcry if the sentimental public favourite, Charles Burton Barber's 'A Special Pleader' (c.1893), was omitted.

So, what is the value of trying to undertake Meadley's impossible task? Though an inherently contrary concept, it is compelling watching the staff try to negotiate it—attempting to waive curatorial control whilst still, ultimately, asking us to trust in their judgement. The challenge to display everything the gallery cares for physically, has been transformed along the way into uncovering narratives in the life of the gallery; from unpicking a sometimes-cryptic collecting history, to bringing the hidden work of art handlers and conservators out into public view. Importantly it also lays bare the frustrations of its current workers and asks us to consider what is at stake when investment in our cultural heritage is chipped away at.

**'In the frame: two radically different plans for civic art collections' Helen Pidd
The Guardian, March 2019**

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/in-the-frame-two-radically-different-plans-for-civic-art-collections?CMP=share_btn_link

It is a tale of two civic art collections, one in the north, one in the south, both containing well over a thousand paintings and sculptures. But while Hertfordshire county council has decided to auction or give away most of its hoard later this month, Rochdale in Greater Manchester is attempting to put every single work it owns on display.

On 21 March, an auction house in Cambridge will sell some of the gems from the Hertfordshire collection, which includes a pastel work by the Scottish artist Joan Eardley that has an estimated value of £12,000–£18,000.

The council insists it is less about saving money than space. "It is the sensible thing to do," said Terry Douris, a Conservative cabinet member for education, libraries and localism. "With 60% of the art collection languishing in storage and not available to the public, the county council believes that the approach it is taking to the art collection balances its fiduciary duty to its council taxpayers to use the full resources available to it to best advantage, while aiming to achieve much improved access and display of the retained collection for the public."

Meanwhile in Rochdale, a show opens on Saturday that attempts to cram the council's 1,600-strong fine art collection into the Touchstones gallery. The brainchild of the artist Harry Meadley—But What If We Tried?—was prompted by questions from members of the public disappointed that most of Rochdale's art collection—as with civic collections around the UK—was never on show.

It has proved a logistical conundrum for the gallery as it attempts to use every inch of wall space. The result is a riot of styles and genres, displayed side-by-side in order of acquisition date. It is a discombobulating experience for the art lover used to exhibitions organised by theme or genre. Within a few metres viewers are expected to process A Special Pleader, a sentimental Victorian oil painting of a sulky girl and a dog by Charles Barber, which was

reproduced for many Rochdale living rooms in the 1980s, and then a black and white homoerotic portrait of two wrestlers, a bit of pop art or a surrealist landscape.

One minute viewers are enjoying a caricature of a Winston Churchill lookalike by the "Lancashire Hogarth" John Collier (who went by the pseudonym Tim Bobbin), before being presented with a steel chastity belt hanging from the ceiling by Anthea Hamilton, who was shortlisted for the 2016 Turner prize. The most valuable piece in the collection is Woman's Head with Yellow Background (circa 1963) by Lucian Freud, acquired with the help of various local bequests in 1983.

Mark Doyle, Touchstones's creator, happily admits many of the works on display are not his cup of tea. "But it isn't about what I like, or what Harry likes. It's just about what fits on the walls," he said. Hanging the show required a change in mentality: "It was hard to get our heads around. Usually the artist decides where each work needs to go. We are fighting our normal instincts."

Doyle hopes the show will spark a debate about the worth of civic art at a time when council budgets are under increasing pressure. It takes a certain amount of courage for a council to resist the temptation to flog its collections as austerity bites, he thinks: "When you are getting lots of complaints from residents about bins not being collected it might feel like having a collection and spending money on it isn't necessarily a priority. Times are tough. Rochdale has a lot of economic deprivation."

Over the past nine years, Rochdale's Labour-controlled council has cut £178.1m from its planned budget. But it has resisted the temptation to sell its art and continues to build its collection with the help of external funding, such as the Art Fund New Collecting Award, which helped buy Hamilton's 4th Guimard Chastity Belt earlier this year.

**'In the frame: two radically different plans for civic art collections' Helen Pidd
The Guardian, March 2019**

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/in-the-frame-two-radically-different-plans-for-civic-art-collections?CMP=share_btn_link

Continued.

Neighbouring Bury council received a barrage of criticism in 2006 when it sold a Lowry for £1.4m to plug a £10m budget shortfall. It was accused of cultural vandalism by the Museum Association. Eight years later, it came up for sale again at Sotheby's and had risen in value to almost £2m.

Under the Museums Association's ethics code, public institutions are warned not to consider their art collections as "financially negotiable assets". They are not allowed to dispose of works for financial reasons, "except where it will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection".

Tory-run Hertfordshire has got away with its great sell-off by saying its collection, which began as a postwar initiative to obtain artworks for schools to borrow from the council, had fallen out of favour. It had no gallery to display the work and so most of the 1,496 works gathered dust in storage. It will sell 150 at the auction, followed by a further 279 later in the year. The rest are being offered for free to schools, museums and interested organisations, with 27 pieces being kept by the council.

The Art Fund, a national charity, said it broadly supported Hertfordshire but wanted clarity on how the council was going to spend the £200,000-£300,000 it hoped to raise at auction: "In this case we are concerned with the council's suggestion that only a proportion of the monies raised will be invested into the remaining collection," said a spokeswoman.

She applauded the Rochdale initiative: "We welcome any news of a project or exhibition with the ambition to open up a public collection and to provide access to as wide of an audience as possible."

The new show will certainly do that, even if a lack of wall space thwarted Rochdale's ambitions. Of the 1,600 works in the collection, there was room for about 360. But at least it tried.

The big question: how many paintings can you fit on a wall?

Helen Pidd
North of England editor

It is a tale of two civic art collections, one in the north, one in the south, both containing well over 1,000 paintings and sculptures.

But while Hertfordshire county council has decided to auction off or give away most of its hoard later this month, Rochdale in Greater Manchester has attempted to put every single work it owns on display.

A show opening today tries to cram the council's 1,600-strong fine art collection into the Touchstones gallery. The brainchild of an artist, Harry Meadley, *But What If We Tried?* was prompted by questions from members of the public disappointed that most of Rochdale's art stash - as with civic collections around the UK - was never on show.

It has proved a logistical conundrum for the gallery as it attempts to use every inch of wall space. The result is a riot of styles and genres, displayed cheek-by-jowl in order of acquisition

date. For the art lover used to exhibitions organised by theme or genre, it is a discombobulating experience.

Within a few metres you must process *A Special Pleader*, a sentimental Victorian oil painting of a sulky girl and a dog by Charles Burton Barber, which was reproduced in many Rochdale living rooms in the 1980s, and a black and white homoerotic portrait of two wrestlers, a bit of pop art or a surrealist landscape.

One minute you are enjoying a caricature of a Winston Churchill lookalike by the "Lancashire Hogarth", John Collier (who went by the pseudonym Tim Bobbin), and then you see a steel chastity belt hanging from the ceiling by Anthea Hamilton, who was shortlisted for the 2016 Turner prize. The most valuable piece in the collection is *Woman's Head with Yellow Background* (c1963) by Lucian Freud, acquired with the help of various local bequests in 1983.

Mark Doyle, Touchstones' curator, happily admits many of the works on display are not his cup of tea. "But it isn't about what I like, or what Harry

likes. It's just about what fits on the walls," he said.

Hanging the show required a change in mentality: "It was hard to get our heads around. Usually the artist decides where each work needs to go. We are fighting our normal instincts."

Doyle hopes the show will spark a debate about the worth of civic art at a time when council budgets are under pressure. It takes a certain amount of courage for a council to resist the temptation to flog their collections as austerity bites, he thinks. "When you are getting lots of complaints from residents about bins not being collected it might feel like having a collection and



▲ *A Special Pleader* by Charles Burton Barber, very popular in the 1980s

spending money on it isn't necessarily a priority. Times are tough. Rochdale has a lot of economic deprivation."

On 21 March an auction house in Cambridge will sell some of the gems from the Hertfordshire county council collection, which includes a pastel work by the Scottish artist Joan Eardley with an estimate of £12,000-£18,000. Hertfordshire insists it is less about saving money than space. "It is the sensible thing to do," said Terry Douris, Conservative cabinet member for education, libraries and localism.

Over the past nine years Rochdale's Labour-controlled council has had to cut £178m from its planned budget. But it has resisted the temptation to sell its art and continues to build its collection with the help of external funding.

Under the Museums Association ethics code, public institutions are not allowed to dispose of works for financial reasons, "except where it will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection".

Tory-run Hertfordshire argued that its collection had fallen out of favour with schools. With no gallery to stage an exhibition, most of the 1,496 works gathered dust in storage.

Meanwhile, in Rochdale, a lack of wall space has forced a tempering of ambitions. Of the 1,600 works in the collection, there was room for only about 360. But at least they tried.



◀ The artist Harry Meadley, centre, oversees the hanging of *But What If We Tried?*, an attempt to display Rochdale council's entire collection

PHOTOGRAPH:
CHRISTOPHER
THOMOND/
THE GUARDIAN

It isn't about what I like but what fits on the walls... we are fighting our normal instinct'

Mark Doyle
Curator



Stuart Flinders, North West Today / North West Tonight, BBC 1, 18 Feb.

'The impossible exhibition', Lancashire Life, February 2019, pgs 94-95



A Special Pleader, a sentimental Victorian work by Charles Burton Barber

The impossible exhibition

A Lancashire gallery is about to attempt what some consider impossible – show every work of art in its possession

Across the country, there are thousands of art works stored in local galleries that rarely see the light of day. Rochdale is about to challenge that.

In one of the most ambitious projects staged by any public gallery, Touchstones Rochdale plans to hang and install all of the borough's 1,600 artworks



Crawling Woman, Benares, India, by Jeremy Critchlow

from a collection spanning two centuries.

It is the idea of international video artist, Harry Meadley, whose response to the huge logistical challenge posed by the project forms the title for the exhibition – 'But what if we tried?' It opens at the gallery on March 2 and runs until June 1.

The works on show include pieces by internationally-

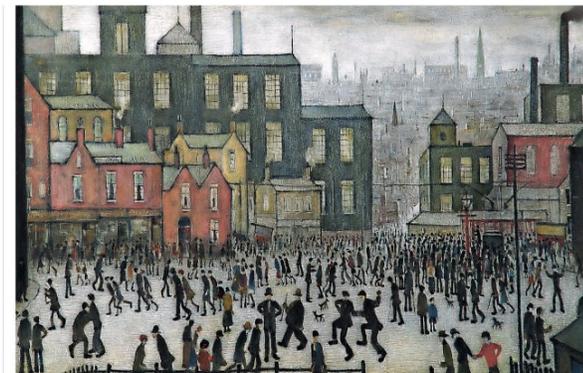
renowned artists acquired by Rochdale, others more recently purchased and a number that have been long forgotten.

A large number will be part of a 'salon hang' involving as many works as possible occupying the walls.

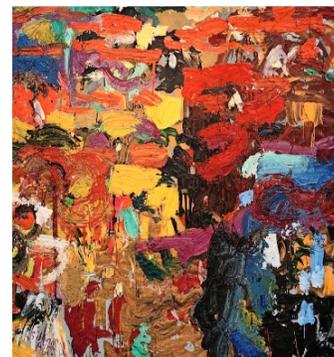
Others will be seen in their crates because of their condition, while some might have to be digitized.

Staff at the gallery have probed deeper into their collection than ever before revealing a series of anomalies and a mystery or two.

One of them involves a portrait of Oliver Cromwell, destroyed by the order of the gallery committee in January 1934. There are another three forgotten pieces thought to be out



L.S. Lowry's Our Town painted in 1941



Mons Graupius by British abstract artist Gillian Ayres

on 'permanent' loan since June 1959. It has also revealed the degradation of some works, due to the instability of materials of the age.

Harry's provocative and playful proposal to gallery staff has created layers of logistical issues and raised poignant questions. Mark Doyle, gallery curator, said: 'The nature of collecting art in the public's name and the decades, if not centuries-worth of artworks already in the possession of local authorities, galleries and museums throughout the UK, is a subject of perpetual debate.'

'By asking us to remove everything from storage, Harry has kick-started a process that perhaps all public collections

should be asked to go through. Rochdale owns many works considered priceless, whether they are by big-name artists or exemplify a particular artistic or cultural movement, with others now considered less valuable by a variety of measures. But, could that change as time brings new periods of evaluation? Whether we succeed in displaying every single artwork in Rochdale's collection remains to be seen, yet the process and the resultant discussions here and, hopefully, elsewhere means we're grateful to Harry for the challenge.'

Harry added: 'I am very conscious that what I have asked of the team at Touchstones is a very big ask, and one I am extremely humbled they have been willing to accept. The fact that they have allowed me to film the process I hope signifies the real care and determination they have shown to both displaying and discussing the collection. It is the experience, expertise, and incredible effort of the small team at Touchstones that has made this impossible exhibition as ambitious as it can possibly be. It has been eye-opening and heart-warming to witness.' ♦ **Harry Meadley: But what if we tried? is part of Touchstones Rochdale's Contemporary Forward programme. The gallery, in The Esplanade, is open Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-5pm. Admission is free.**

Artists on the run

Artists who fled wartime Europe for the relative safety of Britain form a new exhibition at Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal.

Refuge: The Art of Belonging (February 15 to June 29) tells the story of artists who entered Britain as a result of Nazi occupation. It features works from Kurt Schwitters, Hilde Goldschmidt, Hans Coper, Lucie Rie, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach.

Helen Watson, of Lakeland Arts, said: 'This exhibition will explore experiences of migration, internment and subsequent refuge. All works within the exhibition were created either during the artists' migrant journey, or after coming to Britain.'

Press Release

HARRY MEADLEY: BUT WHAT IF WE TRIED?

Sat 2nd March – Sat 1st June 2019

Contemporary Forward, Touchstones Rochdale, Greater Manchester

Media Opportunities: Photography, filming and interview opportunities as the Rochdale public art collection store is opened, revealing selected items including rarely seen and famous works leave for the Touchstones galleries, from Wed 30 January 2019 and up to the exhibition opening date.

Preview: Sat 2nd March 2 – 5pm

The first known attempt by a public art gallery to display every item in its collection is underway. Touchstones Rochdale's effort to hang and install all of the Greater Manchester borough's 1,600 artworks, from a collection spanning two centuries, has been instigated and documented by artist, Harry Meadley for a new exhibition, *But what if we tried?* opening at the gallery between Sat 2nd March – Sat 1st June 2019.

Creating a logistical challenge for a small gallery team, the effects of the year-long project will be largely unknown until its legacy is fully assessed. The full range of artworks, by internationally-renowned artists acquired by Rochdale, as well as recently purchased works and forgotten works by obscure artists of the past have remained in the sights of the artist and the team supporting the exhibition, as the reality of the daunting experiment has become clearer.

The interpretation of the brief laid down by Meadley, the success in meeting the challenge and how the resultant issues are represented in the exhibition are to be revealed in the final installation.

Meadley's (Great Exhibition of The North, Baltic 39, 2018; International Studio & Curatorial Programme, New York, 2017-2018; UP Projects' The Floating Cinema Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire, 2017; Liverpool Biennial Associate Artist, 2016) provocative and playful proposal to gallery staff, that they should try to display every painting, drawing, and piece of sculpture across the limited wall and floor space of the town-centre gallery, has created layers of logistical issues and raised poignant questions. Stimulating the debate around the acquisition and storage of artworks in public collections, Meadley has documented the attempt in a series of video episodes, acting dually as both participant and observer.

Exploring into the farthest reaches of the archives, the weight of history and the increasingly unrealistic responsibilities placed on local authority shoulders to maintain and display public artwork collections has been laid painfully bare. *But what if we tried?*

simultaneously highlights the cultural riches held on behalf of many communities, without widespread public knowledge of the depth and significance of those collections.

Mark Doyle, Art Gallery Curator & Collections Manager at Touchstones Rochdale said:

"The nature of collecting art in the public's name and the decades, if not centuries-worth of artworks that are already in the possession of local authorities, galleries and museums throughout the UK is a subject of perpetual debate. By asking us to remove everything from storage, Harry has kick-started a process that perhaps all public collections should be asked to go through; facing the successes and failures of historic collecting policies, of conservation and the sheer volume of work versus the challenges of finite gallery space and financial resources. Rochdale owns many works which could be considered priceless, whether they are by big-name artists or exemplify a particular artistic or cultural movement, with others now considered less valuable by a variety of measures. But, could that change as time brings new periods of evaluation? Whether we succeed in displaying every, single artwork in Rochdale's collection remains to be seen, yet the process and the resultant discussions here and, hopefully, elsewhere means we're grateful to Harry for the challenge."

An artist who works across multi-media formats, Meadley is known for the eight episode video work 'On the Bench' commissioned by Up Projects for The Floating Cinema, which toured the waterways of South and East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire, in partnership with Hull City of Culture, as well as the regular podcast, titled 'Ey Up', which features interviews with a wide range of artists and creative individuals.

For *But what if we tried?* Meadley has followed the process by recording hours of video footage, including candid team meetings and interviews with a range of stakeholders in Rochdale's art collection. An integral part of the viewers' experience of the project and exhibition, this multi-part documentary will also be released online in the run up to, and during, the exhibition itself.

Harry Meadley says: *"I am very conscious that what I have asked of the team at Touchstones is a very big ask, and one I am extremely humbled they have been willing to accept. Not only that, but the fact that they have allowed me to film and document the process I hope signifies the real care and determination they have shown to both displaying and discussing the collection. Though I have made this request, it is really the experience, expertise, and incredible effort of the small team at Touchstones that has made this impossible exhibition as ambitious as it can possibly be. It has been eye-opening and heart-warming to witness the process so far, and I am very much looking forward to being able to share the results."*

Harry Meadley: But what if we tried? is part of Touchstone Rochdale's Contemporary Forward programme, generously supported with funding from Arts Council England, The Henry Moore Foundation and the Friends of Rochdale Art Gallery.

Touchstones Rochdale is an award winning Arts & Heritage Centre with an art gallery, museum and Local History Centre. It has a regular programme of contemporary visual arts exhibitions.

Visit: <http://www.contemporaryforwardrochdaleartgallery.org/>

Address: The Esplanade, Rochdale OL16 1AQ
Admission FREE. Tuesday – Saturday 10am-5pm
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[facebook.com/Touchstones Rochdale](https://www.facebook.com/Touchstones Rochdale)
twitter.com/Touchstones

Ends

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But what if we tried? (2019)
Image courtesy of the artist



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2 March – 1 June 2019
Touchstones Part 6–Wash Up Screening event: 1 June 2019

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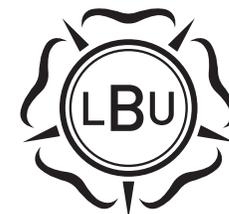
<https://harrymeadley.studio/but-what-if-we-tried>

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