

AGE ON THE STAGE

Staging Age through Creative
Encounter in Telescope by Quarantine

Amy
Barron





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Amy Barron

We began our project *Telescope* with the idea of creating a situation that brought a young person – someone on the cusp of adulthood – into an encounter with an older person, a complete stranger, someone who’s lived a life. In the 27 years since we set up Quarantine, we’ve always found it useful to have someone look in from the outside and tell us what they see – not a reductive analysis of numbers and postcodes (we can do that ourselves) but an objective insight into some of the ineffable qualities that art can carry. Amy Barron’s research into ageing and the life course – particularly her challenges to the representations of what it means to ‘be’ a certain age and her focus on the lived experience of difference – are entirely apposite for the work. This book looks at the experience of those involved in the work – as ‘lenders’ of objects and artists – with the expert eye of a social and cultural geographer and with a human voice. It’s a vignette not just of an art project and its process but also how it sits in the world – a rich and moving read.

‘Age is just a number’ says the self-kidding cliché. It takes off its reading glasses and closes its eyes to its worn-out knees from all those years of late-night dancing, ignores the accreted cocktail of sweet experience and acrid memory, and the absence on the tip of your tongue of the things you know you once knew. My sense is that the numerical version of ageing is an ongoing churning jumble of digits loosely pinned to things we’ve done, places we’ve seen, and all those different versions of the person we’ve been....

I had a conversation with my sister, this weekend just gone. For years she’s been a kind of self-appointed family archivist, with unsorted boxes full of photos, letters, old bills and wills in her loft. She’s thinking about moving, now that she’s over

70 herself (can you believe it? How can my big sister be 70? What does that make me, always the baby of the family?). Not quite the usual downsizing, more of a sideways shift to somewhere easier, warmer and loftless. And if and when she moves, she said, she’s going to pass all those boxes on to me. They’re documents of a family history beyond our own experience – our parents had 17 siblings between them. All those aunts, uncles, first, second, third-and-beyond cousins. People I’ve never met and never will. We don’t know each other even exist, despite the common blood. I’m not keeping the boxes. Instead, maybe, my sister and I will gather for a joint rooting through, have some brief nostalgic moments of recognition, and then a bonfire. They don’t feel like my belongings.

Yet of course, most of us are surrounded by objects – the things that belong to us – that are soaked and stuffed with the stories of how they came into our possession. If you’re like me, you’ll do a regular clear out, trying to convince yourself of your lack of

sentimentality. But there will always, always be the things that I can’t let go of: my dad’s whisky glass, a jar of blackcurrant jam that my mum made in 1993 (potentially still edible?) ...

One of those two things might well have been the object that I would have brought to *Telescope*, had I taken part in it, rather than watched from the edges. Something worthy of its place in a museum of personal experience. Maybe the jam, not just because of the absurdity of its longevity but because my mum picked the blackcurrants on the parks behind her house in Belper; because the jar sat unopened for 15 years even before she died, hoarded on a shelf at the back of the dresser. I’d have remembered her letting me make jam tarts as a 4-year-old, swearing that the rock-hard pastry, grey from my grubby little hands, was delicious. Already the cache of time leaps back and forth in what that jarful provokes.

Telescope invited people into Manchester Museum whose lives were at different stages, to bring with them an object that they'd hate to lose, one of their belongings that they were willing to trust us with in a temporary exhibition. They met across long tables, bringing their precious things into a space which is usually a lecture theatre, a room where you learn about stuff. Twenty-somethings met seventy-somethings, amongst others. It was open, tender and thoughtful. I'm always amazed by the generosity of people when you find the space and time for them to be seen and heard. And it confirmed something that we probably all already knew and still know – that ageing brings with it not necessarily more wisdom, or cleverness, or even knowledge; it doesn't necessarily mean you've had richer experiences – that all depends on the situation you've lived in. Ageing means you've had more time. Back to that cliché that we started with. Age is indeed a number – but not just that....

Richard Gregory
Co-Artistic Director, Quarantine

This booklet will be of interest to artists, researchers, students, and cultural practitioners interested in participatory performance, ageing, difference, and staged encounters — alongside funders, organisations, and audiences seeking reflective accounts of socially engaged practice.



Amy Barron is a Lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Manchester. She is interested in age, ageing and the life-course and draws on a suite of creative, participatory methods to research these themes.

Cerys Wrigley is a Manchester-based theatremaker and artist. She has worked on stage as a performer, and in a number of production roles off stage. She is interested in creating work collaboratively and where theatre can interact with other creative mediums.

Christiane Kühl is a theatre maker, author, and editor. She is a co-founder of the Berlin based performance company doublelucky productions, part of Weiter Schreiben, a platform supporting writers exiled to Germany, and currently serves as Professor of Interdisciplinary Artistic Practice and Theory at the University of the Arts Berlin.

Hannah Keating is an arts marketing professional based in Leeds and Quarantine's Communications Manager. With a focus on visual art and contemporary performance, Hannah has worked at a range of arts organisations including Transform international performance festival, Yorkshire Contemporary and South London Gallery.

Kevin Jamieson is Executive Director of Quarantine. Prior to joining the company he worked as Head of Programme at HOME, Manchester; Deputy Chief Executive at Harrogate Theatres and held roles at Wakefield Theatres and West Yorkshire Playhouse. He is an Arts Emergency Mentor and is a Board Member of Unfolding Theatre.

Leentje Van de Cruys is a Belgian artist, theatre maker and end of life ceremony speaker. She works regularly with UK companies Quarantine and Reckless Sleepers, alongside her solo practice which explores ideas around living and dying, listening, writing letters and making lists.

Lisa Mattocks is a digital artist. She makes films, books, events, websites, installations, performances, and interactive artwork. She is interested in what it is to be human in a hyper connected digital age. Her approach to making art is political and collaborative and deeply rooted in Riot Grrrl and DIY culture.

Lucy Suggate is a dance artist and choreographer, recognised for her articulate and engaging dance installations and movement research. Her current focus is around developing choreographic scores in response to prolonged uncertainty and implementing ever changing models of dance production.

Paul McGarry has been the Head of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's (GMCA) Ageing Hub since 2016 and is now Assistant Director of GMCA's Public Service Reform Directorate. Paul has worked in local government since 1993, worked on ageing projects since 1997, and set up the Age Friendly Manchester Programme at Manchester City Council in 2009.

Renny O'Shea co-founded Quarantine in 1998 and is Co-Artistic Director. Whatever she's working on, she's always interested in the relationship between politics and poetics. She co-edited the book Summer. Autumn. Winter. Spring.: Staging life and death (Manchester University Press 2020).

Richard Gregory is a Co-Artistic Director of Quarantine, since 1998. His work around the world has involved collaboration with a huge range of people including philosophers, families, politicians, plumbers, chefs, sociologists, children, doctors, dancers, florists - and many others.

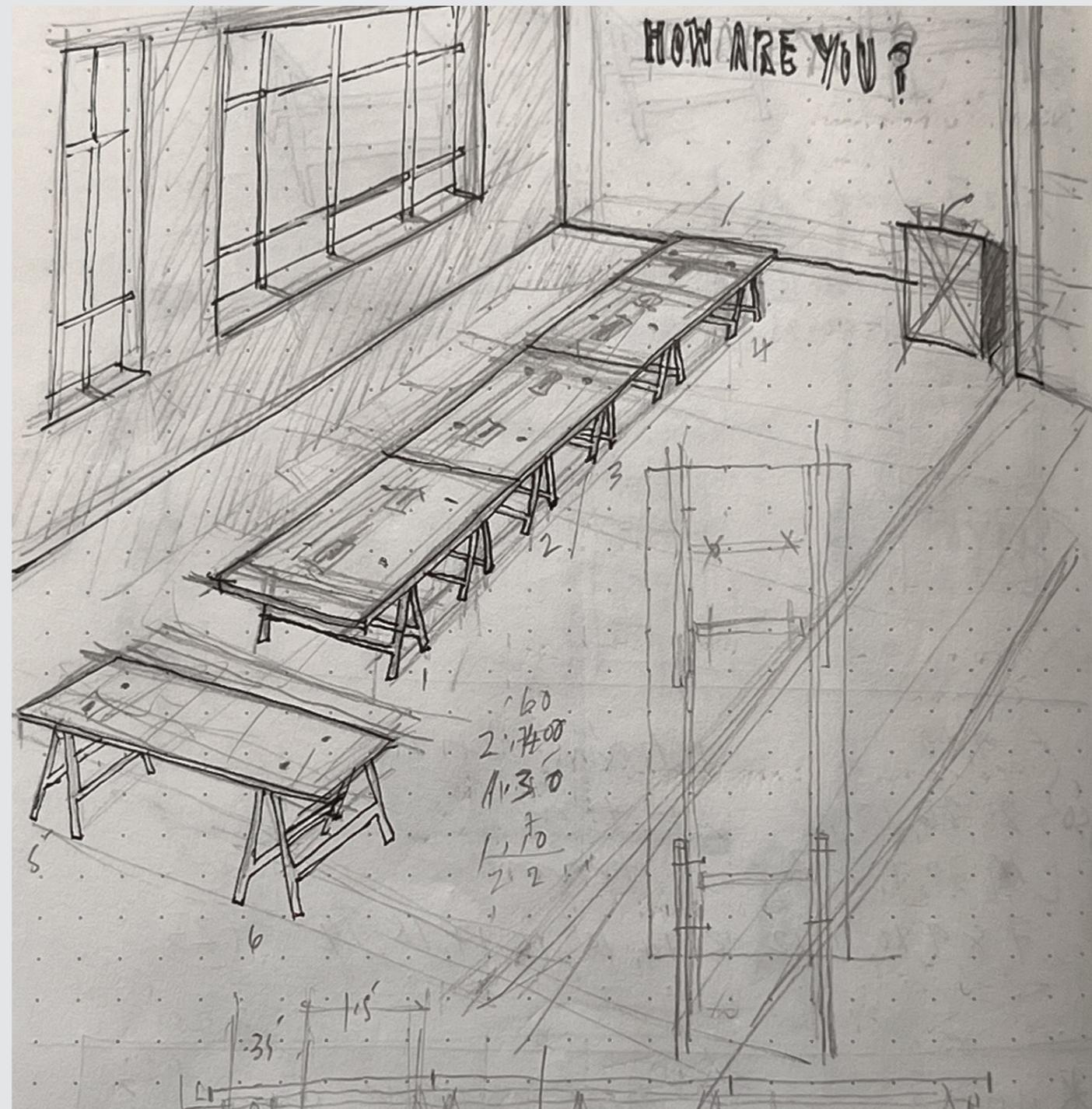
Sam Bonser is a Manchester based illustrator and animator. They participated in Quarantine's WLTM 2025 residency. Their work centres on observation and capturing personal, everyday stories.

Sarah Hunter is an artist and producer with Quarantine. Across different projects her work with Quarantine includes making, producing, facilitating, writing, researching and dramaturgy. She's interested in the fragility of memory, broken storytelling, and working with fragments.

Simon Banham is one of Quarantine's 3 founding members and the scenographer in all of their work. He is Professor Emeritus in Scenography at Aberystwyth University.

Solomon Hughes is a Manchester-based freelance photographer with a breadth of experience in the various fields of photography. Solomon has worked with organisations such as the Southbank Centre, Factory International, and the Manchester Museum, to name a few.

The lenders who took part in the performance have all, in their own ways, also contributed toward the development of this booklet.



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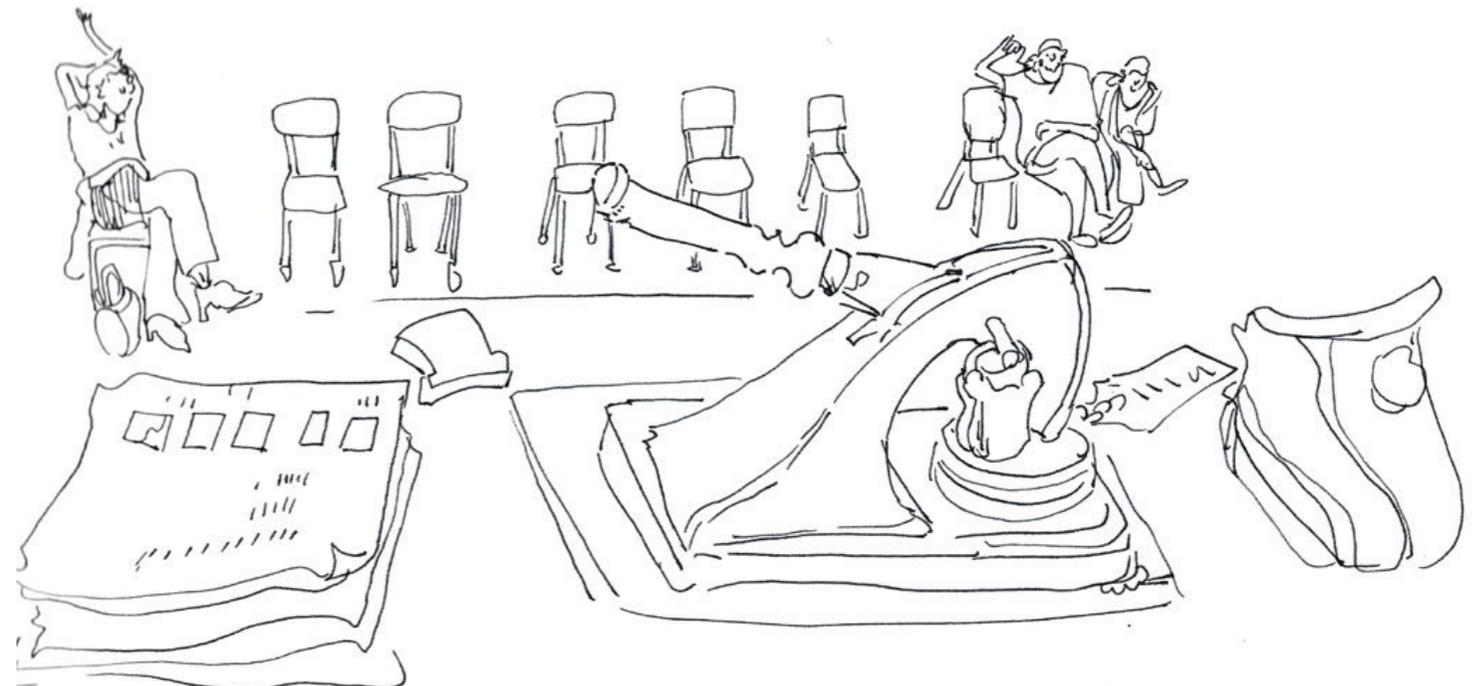
‘We are interested in making situations where people can be part of a public conversation; in bringing people together who might not normally meet each other. It’s like a live exhibition’.

Richard, Co-Artistic Director of Quarantine.

‘I always thought of theatre being an upper- or middle-class genre, ... [Quarantine] isn’t like that because they work with everyday people ...’

Ian, age 67, lender.

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AGE ON THE STAGE

This booklet showcases the value of using creative, participatory approaches to better understand ageing and difference. By observing and sharing a series of staged encounters by the theatre company **Quarantine** in one strand of their performance *The Questions* – called *Telescope* – it aims to encourage theatre makers, practitioners, academics, and researchers to consider how artistic methods can open new ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking about these themes.

The material shared is drawn from research conducted by Dr Amy Barron, Lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at the **University of Manchester**. Over six months (July–December 2025), Amy set out to explore (i) how the role and position of age, as a central lens in the design of *Telescope*, evolved; (ii) how encounters were staged within the performance space; and (iii) the

types of interactions that were facilitated.¹ Amy conducted ethnographic observation through attending development meetings with **Quarantine**, observing the research and development phase of *Telescope* at **Contact** theatre, and later observing the performance when *Telescope* was presented at **Manchester Museum**. Interviews were conducted with participants, or ‘lenders’, of different ages, inviting them to reflect on their experiences, as well as with members of the **Quarantine** creative team who devised the performance.²

In a moment marked by deepening divisions, creating spaces for people to meet feels more important than ever. Creative staging practices like those used in *Telescope* show how encounters can foster new ways of listening across generations and perspectives, inviting people to dwell in the indeterminacy of the in-between.



¹ This project has been reviewed by The University of Manchester's Proportionate Research Ethics Committee. Ethics Reference Number: Ref: 2025-23782-43156.

² 'Lender' refers to members of the public who participated in *Telescope* and lent an object to be displayed at Manchester Museum for the duration of the performance. Pseudonyms for lenders are used throughout.

Quarantine: theatre that belongs to everyone

Quarantine are a Manchester-based theatre collective committed to reshaping how performance works. Rather than rehearsing and presenting a fixed piece, **Quarantine** build their work around live encounters, unpredictable co-presence, and shared experience. Their process is inherently collaborative, slow, and open: they begin with questions, invite people in, and shape a space where genuine exchange can unfold.

This approach is derived from **Quarantine's** assertion that theatre can be rooted in everyday life. **Quarantine** do not just work with trained performers but with members of the public who have likely never done anything like this before.

The Questions: staging a public conversation across difference

The Questions is a project connecting the cities of Manchester, UK, and Chemnitz, Germany, and the generations living within them. While Manchester is rapidly expanding and attracting a younger population, Chemnitz has an older demographic shaped by a very different social and political history. *The Questions* brings these contrasting contexts into conversation, creating spaces in each city where people of different ages and backgrounds can meet, listen, and reflect together. Although *The Questions* comprises multiple strands, the material shared here focuses solely on the *Telescope* performance in Manchester.³

'The initial idea with The Questions was to create some sort of performance bringing young and old into the same room at the same time. The aim was to create situations where people who might never cross paths in everyday life could meet. Right now, that feels like a really important thing to do in the world: creating space for people to understand each other across generations, especially when it comes to getting older.'

Richard Gregory, Co-Artistic Director of Quarantine.

At its core, *The Questions* is driven by the belief that everyone has the capacity to speak, share, and be heard. It is less about presenting a finished performance and more about staging encounters that reveal how people relate to one another, across time and across difference.

³ To find out more about *The Questions*, visit: qtine.com/work/the-questions/

Telescope: creating a portrait of the city through the people who live there

Telescope is a co-created performance in which local people work alongside experienced artists, appearing on stage as themselves. Lenders were recruited from two age groups: young adults aged roughly 18-25, navigating their first steps into adulthood, and older adults aged around 60-70, entering new chapters of later life. Each lender was invited to bring an object they would be ‘devastated to lose’; ‘something they would like to get rid of’; or ‘something they found and kept’.

‘The object is both something that connects with the person that brought it in, but also a way of bringing the person into the room so we can talk to them about who they are and how they see themselves in the world. We are interested in questions of belonging: who belongs here and how they belong.’

- Richard, Co-Artistic Director
of Quarantine.

Phase one involved meeting lenders, usually in pairs, sometimes in groups of three or four, at **Contact** theatre to get a sense of their character and to understand why they chose their object. These conversations informed the staging of the encounters in phase two: the performance at **Manchester Museum**.

At the Museum, each iteration brought together a curated group of lenders whose differences – of age, gender, politics, or perspective – created the conditions for dialogue, disagreement, and moments of shared understanding.

The questions used in the encounters are pre-written. During each exchange, an artist reads the questions aloud while they are projected on the wall. A different artist creates live notations which are projected onto another wall, creating a shared visual text. When the conversation ends, the objects remain on display alongside the notations, forming a live installation: a collective portrait of the city told through the everyday things its residents choose to bring.



‘There is something liberating about having a prewritten sequence of questions. Without it, conversation risks becoming amorphous; with it, participants are held by a form that gives a sense of stability and security to the dialogue.’

Leentje Van de Cruys, Artist and regular Quarantine collaborator.

*What have you brought with
you?*



DIFFERENCE, AGE AND, INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATION

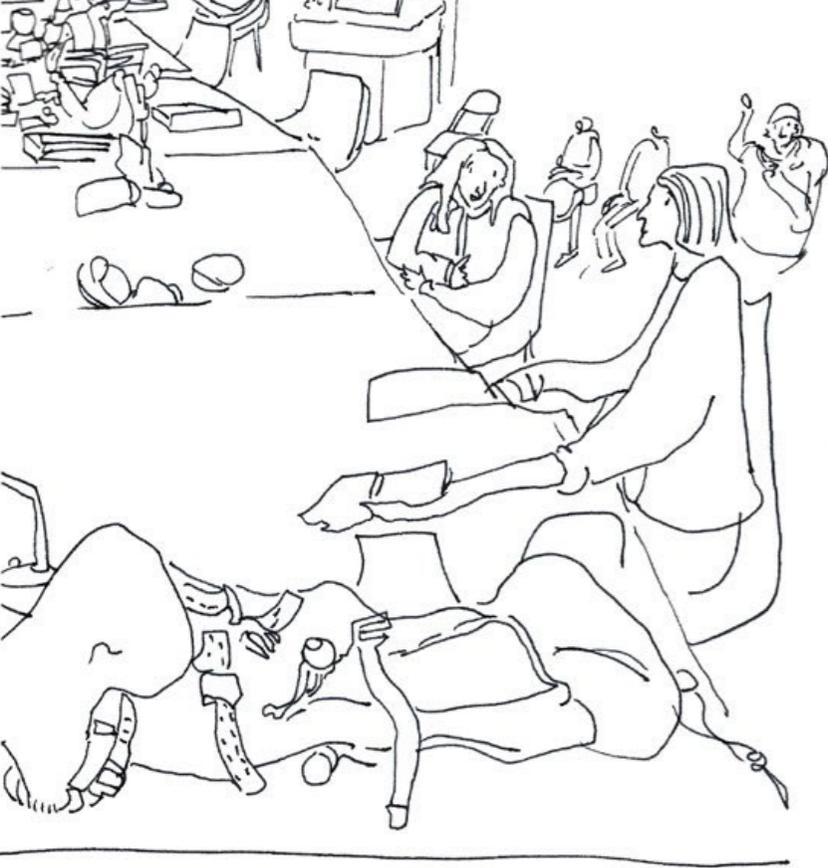
Unlike other social categories of difference such as gender and race, age is something everyone moves through. Although meanings attached to age vary, the experience of becoming older is universal, even as it is lived differently across contexts and identities. Whether ‘young’, ‘middle-aged’, or ‘old’, age is nevertheless often portrayed in reductive, homogenising terms. What it means to be a particular age shifts across generations and in relation to the people around us – colleagues, friends, parents, children, and strangers. It is shaped by personal histories, by the expectations individuals hold for themselves, by the roles others assign to them, and by the ways places and institutions either reinforce or challenge assumptions about age.

Age is also an intersectional experience: how it is lived and recognised depends on and interacts with other identity factors such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability. It is something performed and embodied, sometimes embraced and sometimes resisted – expressed in the ways people carry themselves, are perceived, and make sense of their place in the world.⁴

Despite this complexity, everyday life does not always create opportunities for people of different ages to meet, collaborate, or speak meaningfully with one another. Social worlds are often organised along age lines – through work, education, housing, culture, and even digital spaces – limiting the chance to hear first-hand how people at different life stages understand and navigate the world. Intergenerational conversations therefore offer something rare: moments in which experiences, expectations, and perspectives can move across age boundaries, creating space for reflection, recognition, and sometimes productive disagreement.



⁴ See Barron, A. (2021). The taking place of older age. *cultural geographies*, 28(4), pp.661-674 and Barron, A. (2021). More-than-representational approaches to the life-course. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22(5), pp.603-626.



STAGING AGE: VIGNETTES

The vignettes that follow are written in a style inspired by Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*.⁵ Affect here can be understood as the capacity to affect and to be affected. It draws attention to those subtle, often pre-verbal processes that shape an individual's capacity to think, feel and do, and which influence how encounters unfold.⁶ Stewart's approach therefore attends to the often overlooked ways feelings, atmospheres, and small gestures circulate through everyday life. Rather than offering a conventional narrative summary, this style foregrounds sensory details, rhythms of interaction, and the movement of attention and emotion across people, objects, and space.

This approach was chosen as a way of making sense of the ethnographic notes because it allows the everyday, embodied textures of the *Telescope* performance to come into view: the smells of objects, the pauses and laughter, the weight of silence, the fleeting glances exchanged. It also illuminates how age and generational difference were actively staged during the performance – how younger and older participants were prompted into dialogue, how questions passed between them, and how ordinary affects of curiosity, hesitation, and delight moved through the room.

At other times, age was not an obvious force shaping the exchange at all. Yet it was always part of the performance's architecture: present in the recruitment, in the design of the encounters, and in the tacit expectations that framed the dialogue. Age rarely surfaced explicitly, but often lingered as a background force, subtly shaping how questions were answered and how people positioned themselves in relation to one another.

The vignettes are therefore deliberately open. They do not seek to impose readings of age where it did not feel present; rather, they aim to witness the lived realities of the staged encounters as they unfolded. To focus solely on age would be to overlook the many other elements that contribute to the making and sustaining of age relations in practice, such as the spatial, relational and affective.

The vignettes move through the different phases of the project, from research and development at **Contact** theatre through to the public performances at **Manchester Museum**. They are interspersed with photographs and sketches of the performance and excerpts from lender interviews, offering a sense of how lenders experienced the performance and how, in some instances, these moments stayed with them afterwards. The excerpts from lender interviews that follow each vignette were selected because they speak to the moments described.

⁵ See Stewart, K. (2020). *Ordinary affects*. Duke university press.

⁶ See Baron, A. (2021). The taking place of older age. *Cultural geographies*, 28(4), pp.661-674.

Room Zero, research and development

Light presses through the long windows, brightness diluted by cloud. The room feels both open and unfinished – five small tables, chairs gathered in cautious clusters. Someone has placed a jug of water in the centre, a few glasses catching the light. There's a sense of waiting.

The air is cool. Coats stay on shoulders. A printer starts up in the corner, the sound thin and insistent, spitting paper into the morning. Laughter folds over it, an easy deflection – this noise, this momentary interruption, part of the texture of things starting.

People move loosely. Names introduced. Warm clothes, soft fabrics, the kind of smiles that hover at the edge of newness. The room hums with polite curiosity, small talk, fragments of weather and travel. It's a blank canvas, someone says, but it's already thick with the weight of what will be shared here – a stage made not of light or sound, but of chairs, a jug, and waiting bodies.

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‘The brief was to bring something you would be devastated to lose, and I struggled to think of something for a while. At first, I thought of a childhood teddy, and then literally on the morning of research and development at Contact, I saw the gnome my dad bought me in my kitchen. I thought I would be more sad to lose that than the thing I thought I should be sad about losing – which was the teddy. So, the whole question of bringing an object that meant something to me made me go inward. I was surprised by how it all went for me. I had expectations of talking about a teddy that I was born with, and I actually brought both objects with me, but on the day the thing I felt the strongest about was the gnome.

The teddy was one of those things where I felt that was the thing that I *should* bring. I expect people to have the most emotional connection to that kind of object – I thought that's what I would feel. I kind of also thought about how I was wrong in my assumption, like how I should maybe care more about the teddy, but I don't really, and that was an interesting idea’.

Euan, age 22, lender, post-performance interview.

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Meeting Emma, Contact Theatre

By the time Emma speaks, the room has already laughed with her – quick remarks, little sparks that loosen the air. She’s young, sharp-eyed, restless in her chair. The afternoon light tilts in through the windows, making slow patterns across the floor.

When she places the object on the table – a menstrual cup – the room pauses, just for a breath. Then something like approval hums through it. A few smiles. A kind of relief.

She says it changed things. Less worry each month, less cost. ‘I was about eighteen’, she says. ‘Someone gave it to me. It just... made things easier’. Practical. Meaningful.

She talks about hard times – a difficult upbringing, the anxiety that still sits close. How her personality doesn’t always get to come out. ‘Contact theatre looks after me’, she says. ‘Music therapy. The allotment. That’s where I feel good’. The cup sits between everyone – small, clear, like a quiet revolution.

No one says it out loud, but there’s a shared sense that this – this ordinary, private object – has opened a space. Something bodily, vulnerable, political, made simple again. The room feels different now. A little braver.

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‘People respected [my object, the menstrual cup] and they listened. There was a side of me fearful of rejection [in the performance], but people stayed, they listened, they respected me, and I appreciate that, and perhaps some people were grateful. I got compliments in the break too – people said I didn’t know about that, and this is coming from older people as well – ‘they said that would have been helpful to know about. I am happy that I got pleasant responses.’

‘When menopause was specifically spoken about by the other older lender [in the performance at the Museum], I felt it was my opportunity to listen first of all, but to then share that I didn’t know there was an end to [the menstrual cycle]. I didn’t know there was a menopause. I don’t believe I learned that the menopause happens when I was at school, or it is not a detail I remember, because I would have remembered something like that because, for me, menstruation is painful and distressing and I want it to end. If I’d have known it would end, I would have been happy’.

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Emma, age 27, lender, post-performance interview.

Approaching the performance, Manchester Museum

The museum hums with weekday movement – school groups, retirees with tote bags, a low swell of chatter that blurs into the whirl of the café. Posters for *Telescope* mark the way like clues: one fixed to the railings outside, another in a stand in the lobby, another still – inside the lift. Each one a small signal: something is happening here.

Manchester Museum has just won an award – European Museum of the Year – and it shows. Everything feels newly polished. A museum attendant gestures toward the lecture theatre. I follow the signs.

The corridor narrows, the sound softens. The lighting dims. Through an open doorway, a desk with a single person behind it, smiling. She tells me the performance is ‘just through there’, gesturing toward a darker room beyond. The air changes as I step inside – cooler, quieter. Two long tables stretch down the room, cardboard boxes lined along them like placeholders for stories shared. Each box labelled, some already slightly scuffed from travel. Only a few sit there today, but you can feel the week ahead in room, a kind of accumulation waiting to happen.

The smell is faintly of dust, paper, and tape. A threshold space – not quite exhibition, not quite backstage. It feels like an inhale before something begins.

“

‘Subconsciously you read the room [...]. [To say something distasteful] was not the vibe or the values that the room was generating. People’s behaviour changes to fit the environment in which they exist. [...] You don’t want to be in that room and suddenly let yourself down. Putting [the performance] in the top floor of a museum that was full of lovely families and the energy and hubbub of that, and been greeted by the poem by Lemn Sissay ‘Belonging’ on the way in, you would have been kind of prepared for what you were about to engage in. [...] The whole set up kind of enabled people’s goodness to come through; there was a sense of possibly wanting to be the best, kindest, most wholesome person in the room’

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Peter, age 62, lender, post-performance interview.



The performance space, Manchester Museum

The lecture theatre opens out rectangular and clean – beige flooring, white walls. Functional, academic. The kind of room where learning happens, or is meant to. But today, it's been reassembled.

Black fold-up chairs line the long walls, audience members scattered – about twenty of them. The lights are bright, not theatrically bright but steady, fluorescent, like an office. They flatten the space a little, make everything visible – unhidden. There's an expectancy in the air, quieter than excitement, steadier. The artists move around the room with calm precision. Someone sprays a scent marked 'road' into the room. 'This is what road smells like', they say. The mist drifts, faintly chemical, slightly earthy. People lift their hands, waft the air, lean in to catch it. A sensory cue – something to ground us here.

A lender is invited to sit at the long table in the centre of the room. Ten chairs on each side, the table like a bridge. The rest of us watch, half audience, half witnesses.

On one wall, questions appear in crisp white text against a black background. New ones appear whenever one of the artists chooses to move on, or when the voice asking says softly, 'we'll go to the next question'. The shift is almost imperceptible – a flicker, a new prompt. On the opposite wall, notes materialise as the conversation unfolds. You say... then a pause. The blinking cursor waits, pulsing. I find myself watching it – wondering what will be written next, how the artist will interpret what's just been said. The artist begins seated, then rises, walking a slow circuit around the table. Her tone gentle, curious. The rhythm alternates – question, pause, elaboration, laughter.

“The questions asked were interesting – unexpected. I thought they would be more about the object and less about me. It was simple stuff – what is outside your house and such like, and then using what you say to ask another question – that was really interesting. I liked how they were so simple and short, you could talk for ages about one question, or you could have a one-word answer. It was very open’.

‘The process made me really appreciate my dad a lot [...], through talking about this one little thing that he does for me, [buying the gnomes that I brought today], the fact I could talk about it for so long showed it really did mean a lot to me. He does it because he knows it makes me smile. Talking about it and realising how I do appreciate it and that [my dad] notices what makes me happy – he goes out of his way to do that. I gave him a little call afterwards to tell him – I was like, so I chose the gnome that you gave me. We don't really do emotional chats, but he is like me where he avoids it by being funny – it allowed us to have an actual proper nice deep conversation’.

Euan, age 22, lender, post-performance interview.

Things left over, things forgotten

A second lender joins. She talks about playing cards, cat pictures, tracing paper, dried paint, fabric offcuts. Things left over. Things forgotten: 'a junk scrapbook'. She says she likes to keep what others would discard – make something of it. The room seems to agree. Forgotten objects, small acts of care.

Another artist reads questions aloud while text unfurls across the wall. 'Is it better to live alone or together?' someone asks. The question hangs, open-ended.

The projection glows white against black. The audience breathes together. The space feels balanced – not staged exactly, but held'.

It's not quite theatre, not quite conversation. Something in between – a place where ordinary stories expand until they fill the room.

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'Ironically, I feel like I interact less with younger people than older people. I seem to end up in elderly dominated spaces. I learned more from hearing from younger people – that was a more unique thing for me. For instance, I remember the gnomes and I remember the shrine from when we were at Contact theatre – they were both from younger people. They were both very interesting. They spoke about very different experiences to my life despite them being in the same age bracket. So, it was the differences between younger people that I found the most interesting'.

”

Jessica, age 25, lender, post-performance interview.





Age relations

Two lenders sit at the long table: Jenna, younger, lively in her seat; and Joana, older, poised, the painting she brought resting upright beside her.

The artist stands nearby, a small notebook in hand. Her tone is gentle but deliberate, steering. ‘Jenna’, she says, ‘do you like Joana’s painting? Is it similar to your style?’ Jenna nods, half-shy, half-curious. The question lands, then bounces – a rhythm begins.

‘Do you have a Saturday job?’ the artist asks. Jenna laughs softly. ‘No, but my dad works for the council, mending roads’. She says she wants to be an art teacher. ‘I don’t want to do what my dad does’. The words hang, simple and sure.

The artist pivots – same voice, new direction. ‘Joana, what did your dad do?’ The older woman smiles, thinking. The line of conversation crosses the table, age flowing back and forth. Questions become a bridge, one answer feeding the next.

They talk about careers, then siblings. For a moment, the two women slip into easy exchange, a shared rhythm of laughter and small recognitions. Then the artist reclaims the thread, steering them toward friendship.

Joana says, ‘friends are people you find stimulating. I value that more as I’ve gotten older – quality over number’. Jenna nods, quick to respond. ‘I look if a friend has my back or not. You need to feel mutually valued’.

On the right-hand wall, text continues to appear – you say... followed by fragments of their speech, the blinking cursor waiting.

‘Joana’, the artist asks, ‘what’s your longest friendship?’

‘Bernadette’, she says without hesitation. ‘Lives in Chorlton. Known since 1979’.

Then – Question 50. The number appears in bold white text on the black projection. ‘Is this a good time to be alive?’

Jenna thinks, glancing toward the audience. ‘Yes’, she says finally. ‘But my grandma said it was peaceful back then. My dad said things were easier – side jobs, more bumping into people’.

The atmosphere shifts. A soft laughter ripples through the room – not at anyone, but at the tenderness of the comparison, the stretch of time between them.

Two artists lift Joana’s painting and Jenna’s drawing, carrying them around the space. The works catch the fluorescent light, colours flashing briefly across faces as they pass. The audience leans in to look – art objects now moving through the air like small emissaries of what has been said.

For a moment, the room feels suspended – held between ages, between stories. The questions keep circling, each one touching the next, a quiet choreography of listening.

“

‘[In the performance], I was talking with another younger woman who was a student and she was lovely and interesting. I like hanging out with young people. It’s a really nice thing to do. [...] I spend a lot of time with younger people – I am involved in child protection work, so the focus of my work has been children. I have a daughter, and I’ve always had good relationships with her friends and boyfriends. I also have a couple of young relatives who I enjoy spending time with’.

**Joana, age 67, lender,
post-performance interview.**

”

Topics and atmosphere

‘Are you English?’ the artist asks one of the younger lenders. The audience laughs – a shared recognition of the weight of the question, the unspoken threads of politics and identity it carries’.

The lender hesitates. Then laughs, pointing behind her. Her father sits in the audience. ‘He works for something to do with Europe’, she says. ‘He’s just there’. Her dad smiles, shaking his head, ‘Not saying anything’. The room leans, collectively shifting attention to catch a glimpse of him.

The story moves forward – memories are re-made through the questions being posed. The younger lender recalls crying with friends after school, recounting a sleepover in the library the night before. She wonders now whether Brexit is precisely why the sleepover was arranged. She remembers that she and her friends were sad, and that their parents were sad when collecting them, though she didn’t understand why at the time. Brexit lingers like a shadow they couldn’t name.

Questions continue, layered and relational. ‘Do you feel British?’

‘Yes’, replies a younger lender.

A different, older lender interjects: ‘English, or British?’ The discussion unfolds – culture, belonging, the weight of nuance. The room breathes with these small recalibrations, laughter and reflection folding together.



‘I think it is really good for people to have [the experience of the performance]. You don’t really get to be important on a day-to-day basis, do you really? It makes you think, I am worthy, you know. It is a good idea, and people might not think they have interesting stories, but they do’.

‘I brought my sketch book from art college. It was passed around the room and every time I looked up, someone was going through the pages and it was nice to have someone interested in your work and your being’.

Evelyn, age 62, lender, post-performance interview.

Humour, race, difference

The conversation had been circling big themes – belonging, what it means to be ‘British’ or ‘English’. Topics that could easily tilt into unease, though here they seemed to pass gently, questions moving quickly enough to avoid getting stuck. Answers were careful, kind.

Then the lender asks, ‘Ellie, what makes you laugh?’

Ellie – older, black, poised – smiles before she speaks. ‘People’, she says. ‘Funny things. Other people’s sense of humour’. A small chuckle, then a pause. She begins a story.

‘When I was younger’, she says, ‘I offered to help an older white lady with her shopping. Carry her bags down the escalator. She looked at me, suspicious, and said no’. Ellie mimics the look, the tone, the refusal. The room already

senses the direction of the story. ‘And then’ she continues, ‘the lady tumbled down the escalator’.

Laughter ripples – uncertain at first, then freer. Ellie joins in, shaking her head. ‘The black part of me’, she says, still laughing, ‘couldn’t help but find it funny’. Her voice folds humour and hurt together, laughter carrying the weight of what she’s saying. The story sits in that complicated space – where racism meets irony and where pain meets recognition.

She adds, softer now: ‘of course, I went to help her up’.

The room exhales. A moment of shared laughter becomes something else – an exchange of memory, race, age, and care. Humour opens a door to reflection, and everyone steps through together.

“

‘It’s a completely non-judgemental space. When I entered the environment, I always knew the people at the table were carefully curated to be the people who would always be open minded. I understood the kind of environment I was in. No matter whether there was difference in age there was a common ground of mutual respect’.

”

Aiden, age 21, lender, post-performance interview.



Break and liveliness

After the lively discussions around Brexit, race, national identity, and politics, the artist glances at her watch. A pause. The word break is spoken, and the room shifts. Chairs scrape softly on the floor as audience members stand to stretch, bodies unfolding after sitting. Conversation erupts – fragments of stories, laughter bouncing between clusters of people. Objects are examined, rearranged, admired, handled by the set designer as if holding small universes.

The set designer Simon threads through the mingling audience toward Richard, the director. He smiles, takes both of Richard's shoulders, and pulls him into a hug. 'This is the best bit!' he says. Around them, objects – paintings, bullets, fabric, cups – circulate through hands and eyes, gathering stories as they go. People lean in to ask, to tell, to notice. Even the simple act of returning an object to a box feels shared, attentive, deliberate.

The air carries a new weight – freer, looser, charged with curiosity. Ideas spill into corners, conversations branching unexpectedly. Laughter and attentiveness mingle with the faint scents of paper, paint, and anticipation. The performance has shifted – it is now social, tactile, alive, a hum of ordinary encounters made extraordinary by attention and care.

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'You are often asked to measure in advance the impact of things that you are doing, yet the fundamental qualities and purposes of art and of learning have sort of being pushed aside by the notion that everything we do should have a measurable impact. But sometimes it just doesn't. Sometimes it is not measurable, and more importantly, that is not the point'.

Richard, Co-Artistic Director of Quarantine.

”

Generational perspective

The room has settled again after the break, the hum of earlier discussions still lingering. Jamie and his wife Inka step into the rhythm of the conversation, already aware of the kinds of questions that have been posed.

The artist resumes: ‘Question 66: Is there room for everyone?’ Jamie hesitates. His eyes flick to Inka, then to the artist. His hands lift slightly, open beside him, a gesture both vulnerable and tentative. ‘I am starting to feel concerned whether there is or not’, he admits, his voice catching slightly, stammering just enough to make the pause matter.

‘Maybe it’s just because I’m an old man’, he repeats, the phrase returning like a refrain – an acknowledgment of generational framing, but also a soft disclaimer, as if to contain what he might really want to say. His tone carries cautiousness, perhaps a slight shielding of deeper unease.

He talks then of polarisation, the sense that people wish to argue, to disagree, to assert positions. The room shifts subtly in response – attentive, quiet, sensing the careful navigation of age, authority, and perspective.

The artist turns to Skye, a younger lender at the table. ‘Is this an old man’s perspective? What do you think?’ Skye laughs, looks down, nods. ‘I agree with what he said’. The laughter softens the tension, folding recognition across generations, bridging caution and affirmation, the past and present sharing a conversational space.

“

‘When Jamie was saying that things are not so good [in the world right now], and [the younger lender] was asked whether she agreed, and she did. That was a bit surprising – that an 18-year-old would agree with a 77-year-old’.

Inka, lender, post-performance interview.

‘I learned that it is not just an old man’s perspective that the world is going to hell [...]. I don’t know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, I don’t know. I have maintained a secret hope that if you’re 18, the world is open to hope and possibilities, and not as bad as it looks to an older person. I thought [the younger lender] might have said ‘no I don’t think it is really like that’, you know. Or, ‘you sound like my dad’, but that didn’t happen’.

Jamie, age 77, lender, post-performance interview.

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Boxing gloves: staging sensory orchestration

Skye sits at the table with the artist. She brings her boxing gloves – scuffed, lived-in, familiar. ‘I love to box’, she says, her voice light, proud. She teaches younger kids. The gloves are passed around the audience, moving slowly from hand to hand, eliciting curiosity and small gestures of care.

The artist leans in slightly, and asks, ‘what does boxing smell like?’ Skye laughs awkwardly – it’s an odd question, but she answers anyway, pointing at the gloves. ‘It smells like them’. She means the gloves, the residue of practice, of effort, of hours spent moving, punching, breathing.

The audience leans forward, hesitating, then bending to smell the gloves as they circulate. Most wrinkle their noses – the sweatiness is unfamiliar, a little off-putting – yet they do it, embracing the opportunity to immerse themselves in another’s world. Their faces shift between embarrassment and delight. It is playful, awkward and shared. The staging here is subtle but precise: the object, the question, the movement of bodies, and the collective attention all converge to make the sensory ordinary extraordinary.



‘It was nice to be listened to. As a community, communication is going down quite fast. I think it is nice that we can take the time to stop. No one was on their phone. We can just have this conversation – they don’t know me, they don’t know anything about me, but they sat and listened to this girl and other people talk about their object. Everyone was very in the moment. Everyone was there to listen. That is very rare now. Nowadays because you can communicate with people in so many different ways, it was nice to have a face-to-face conversation with people. The way it was set up was like talking around a dinner table, not like a theatre performance’.

Skye, age 18, lender, post-performance interview.

Choreographies of the ordinary

The table holds a small constellation of objects brought by the lenders: gloves, mints, a guitar. The artists orchestrate attention deliberately, each question a pivot, each answer a gesture in the choreography of the encounter. Younger and older lenders exchange glances, laughter, hesitation, curiosity – not spontaneously, but guided, staged and attended to.

Objects circulate slowly, hands reach, noses wrinkle, fingers linger on surfaces. Memory, habit, and play are made tangible in shared gestures. Age moves across the table in subtle pulses: the careful caution of older voices, the curiosity and lightness of younger ones, folded together by the rhythm of the questions.

In this space, the ordinary becomes something more. Passing gloves, shaking a container of mints, strumming a guitar – these gestures hold attention, spark recognition, and carry affect across bodies, time, and experience. The room hums quietly with shared noticing: curiosity, delight, hesitation, amusement. The everyday, carefully staged, becomes palpable, alive, ordinary.

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‘I was worried about general right-wing opinions coming up. When I think of an older person, I think it might mean someone who is very conservative, old fashioned, traditional views. My first thought of talking to someone over the age of 60 is – will they disagree with me being a gay man? Will they say things? I am very aware that this is not an accurate depiction [of an older person] but it is in the back of my brain’.

‘The performance challenged these thoughts. It reminded me that, no matter what people think or believe, everyone can be connected over something that they cherish. Everyone brought something that they cherish, and we all did that together. We all bonded over being vulnerable in front of other people’.

Euan, age 22, post-performance interview.

”

Temporal reflection and generational anxiety

The room holds its bright, steady light. Fluorescent glow flattens the walls, casting everyone at the long table – Jamie and Inka, older, composed and alert; Peter, steady; Aiden and Skye, younger, leaning forward slightly, curious. The air carries the residue of earlier discussions: Brexit, nationality, identity, politics.

The artist asks, ‘Question 81: What time in history would you like to return to?’ Peter speaks first. ‘2015’. Quick, almost reflexive – a small anchor of certainty. Aiden, younger, hesitates. ‘Five or ten years before this point’, he says. His hands gesture subtly, framing an edge he perceives – a cusp of political tension, environmental anxiety, cultural unrest. ‘We live in a very difficult time at the moment. Reaching the tipping point of a lot of different issues’.

He continues, ‘going back ten years would take the edge off. There was a sense of comfort in the 2010s that I don’t have now’.

The artist turns to Jamie and Inka: ‘does ten years sound long ago for you?’ Their quiet laughter softens the weight of the question. Jamie reflects. ‘The perception of time changes the more time you have under your belt. The 1990s almost seem quite recent’. He smiles briefly at Inka, then down at the table. A trace of irony, a hint of disbelief at the speed of living.

The artist leans in, gently asking, ‘do you feel you have enough time left?’ Jamie’s smile flickers, uneasy. Eyes drop to the floor, then to his hands. ‘I don’t know what to make of that question’. A pause hangs; the room listens. Finally, he adds, ‘things are changing extremely rapidly now... politically, socially. Feels out of control’. Calm words, carrying the weight of caution, a generational perspective sensing acceleration.



“

‘Passersby came in, and you could sort of see people go through this period of ‘what is this?’, ‘is this in the museum?’, ‘where am I and what is happening?’. I quite like that. Some had an interesting time, others thought it was ridiculous!’.

Richard,
Co-Artistic Director
of Quarantine.

”

Uncertainties and ambitions

Aiden nods, leaning in. ‘The past year and a half has felt faster. Twice the speed, maybe’. Skye agrees softly: ‘I feel like that too’. Younger and older voices pulse against one another – different temporalities, anxieties, experiences – encounters provoked by *The Questions*.

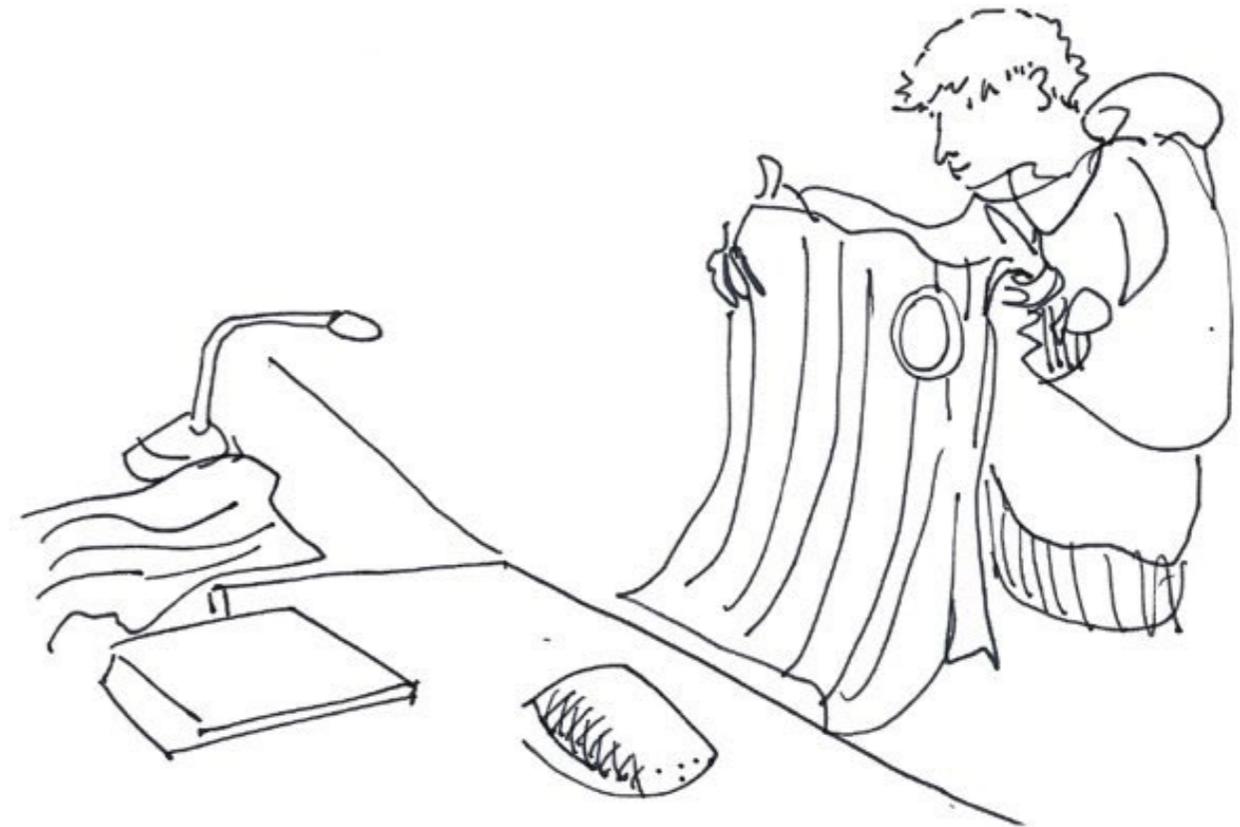
The artist asks Aiden, ‘do your parents say you’re better off now or worse?’ His reply is careful. ‘Emotionally subjective. Politically, environmentally... it’s a crazy time. But my parents grew up in the Cold War. They had a similar sense of anxiety about what the world was going to become’. The past folds into the present; generational echoes move across the table.

Finally, the artist turns to Skye. ‘What do you think the next ten to fifteen years will look like?’ She pauses, then smiles. ‘I’m doing a personal training course. I want to go to Brooklyn again. I want to travel more’. Optimism filters in, grounded in concrete, everyday desires. Political tension and uncertainty momentarily give way to personal ambition, curiosity, and the ordinary pleasures of planning a life.

The room absorbs these shifts. Hesitant, assured, reflective voices are held by the artists. Pauses, glances, smiles, laughter – choreographed subtly by the rhythm of questions. Age and experience circulate in the space, a measure against time and against change. The lights, the projections, the blinking cursor of notes on the wall – all witness. The space becomes a vessel for reflection, intergenerational understanding, and the quiet navigation of a world that feels to be both speeding up and slowing down at once.

“ ‘We hear a lot about celebrities and politicians and their lives, but we don’t really get to know about the people we see every day. There are people who I walk past on dog walks and I know them, but I don’t *actually* know them. It felt really caring. I will get to know you for no other particular reason than we are in this society together’ ”

Skye, age 18, lender, post-performance interview.



Quick questioning

Peter and Aiden take their places at the table – older and younger, side by side – joining Skye, Inka, and Jamie. The rhythm of the room shifts again as new bodies settle, voices reorient.

The artist turns to Skye. ‘When was the last time you cried?’ The question lands suddenly, sharp and intimate. It feels close – too close, perhaps. A question that could open something raw. Skye answers lightly, but the air tightens for a moment. We don’t really know what’s underneath such questions.

Without pause, the artist turns to Peter. ‘Do you cry sometimes, Peter?’

‘Sometimes’, he says, short, contained.
‘Have you ever broken a bone?’
‘Yes’
‘Which?’
‘My arm’.
‘When?’
He explains, quickly, matter-of-fact.

Each answer comes clean, clipped – almost too fast. The pace accelerates. The artist matches it, keeping up. The questions follow the tempo of the replies, bouncing rapidly between them. There’s a strange choreography here: control shifts quietly, from the artist to the participant. Peter’s briskness holds the space, shaping the rhythm of the exchange.

Around the table, others wait, watching. The flow of questions leaves little room for anyone else to enter. It becomes its own small performance – of pace, of resistance, of how conversation can close as easily as it opens.



‘It was a sophisticated Belgian woman with a quiet voice [asking the questions], using English better than most people could as her second language. She had this calm relaxing voice. That doesn’t give rise to hatred’.

Peter, age 62, lender, post-performance interview.



After the encounter

This booklet has showcased the value of using creative, participatory approaches to better understand ageing and difference.

It has highlighted how artistic methods can open new ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking about these twin themes, that are often totalised within common-sense discourse. It has lingered with their lived specificities, the way they shift, contract, and expand in ordinary life. It has tried to hold onto the textures that usually slip past when experience is reduced to the headline of 'age'.

Instead, this booklet, and the performance of *Telescope* by **Quarantine** has dwelled on encounters. Deliberately and attentively. The purpose was not to extract an essence about ageing today, or to map where the lines of difference are drawn or ought to be.

Instead, *Telescope* is a would-be political intervention'. A way of staging encounters between those who would not otherwise meet, between different ages and positions,

to meet the world in the middle. To look at themes of difference, age and belonging from the in-between of these lives that were suddenly rubbing up against each other that likely would not otherwise.

Telescope, then, is less a performance than a process of research-creation: a space where thought and feeling are generated in the very act of doing. A minor gesture that opens the conditions for something to occur without deciding in advance what that something must be. The encounter is not a method for producing findings; it is the creative event through which new modes of relation come into view.

It is through these encounters that possibilities are generated. Possibility lies at the intersection of these encounters and the thoughts, conversations, interactions, discoveries, reassessments, new determinations, and the like, that arise from them.

We saw it in Euan ringing his dad afterwards to say how much he appreciated him.

In Evelyn's quiet delight as people lingered over her sketchbook.

In Jessica hearing the variety of ways people her own age inhabit the world.

In Joana's pleasure at listening to the lively words of Jenna.

In Inka and Jamie finding themselves doing something different from the routines of their days, surprised and refreshed by the perspectives of younger people on things they shared and things they did not.

It cannot be denied that *Telescope* has been generative of something.

But one cannot foresee what these encounters may unfurl or may yet do. What is more, to do so would miss the point. Instead, the value is in cultivating the creative spaces of encounter and being open to where else they may take us.



It is a thrill to be able add my thoughts at the end of this fantastic new publication. I performed a similar role in Amy's 2022 *Beyond Older Age* booklet that sets the standard for words, pictures, and storytelling of older people's lives.¹

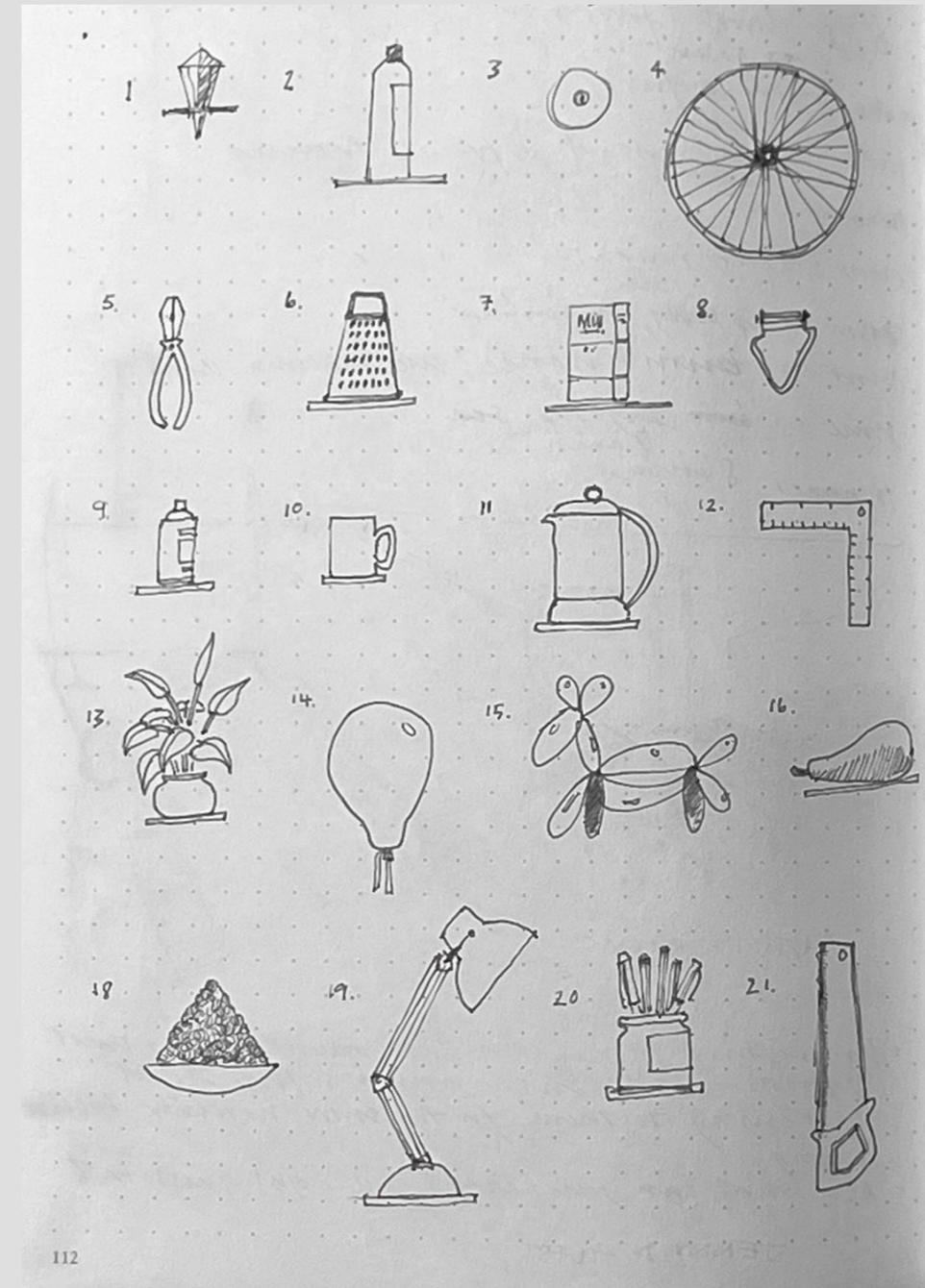
Creativity in later life and access to cultural experiences have been a constant feature of Manchester's and then Greater Manchester's ageing programmes, for over twenty years. I have seen fantastic art and lives changed for the better through the wide range of community, cultural institution-led and radical initiatives that have taken root in our city and region.

The people from the cultural and creative sector have been some of the best people to work with, seeing the opportunities, taking risks, and spotting the angles that a long-time bureaucrat cannot. Add in the special role of committed researchers, such as the author of this book, and you cannot fail to make an impact beyond the resources you have been able to assemble.

Culture and creativity take us to new and exciting places; through it we can encounter nostalgia and challenge. And, as I watched an 83-year-old band leader in my local concert hall and slightly younger Dutch musician in a small venue in 2025, I was reminded that age should not be a barrier to bringing joy and to receiving it.

Our programmes can change lives and ideas, let's get on!

Paul McGarry, Head of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's (GMCA) Ageing Hub and Assistant Director of GMCA's Public Service Reform Directorate.



¹ See Barron, A. (2022). *Beyond Older Age. Approaches to Understand the Diverse Lives of Older People*. The University of Manchester Library. Available: <https://amycbarron.com/beyondolderage/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Staging Age* booklet has been produced in partnership with **Quarantine**. The idea for this booklet arose through conversations with the various directors, artists and designers involved in the staging of the *Telescope* strand of *The Questions*, and while listening to and spending time with the lenders sharing their stories and objects.

The author would therefore like to thank those involved in **Quarantine** and the lenders who gave their time to be a part of both the performance and the preceding interviews.

Developed over the course of six months, the booklet has benefited from the critical input of those involved in **Quarantine** as well as with policy makers and practitioners interested in and working around ageing.

The author would like to thank the support of the project partner organisation, in particular Richard Gregory (Co-Artistic Director of **Quarantine**).

The production of this booklet has been generously funded by **Quarantine**.

There is a large print version of this booklet available to download at: amycbarron.com/ageonthestage



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AGE ON THE STAGE: STAGING AGE THROUGH CREATIVE ENCOUNTER IN TELESCOPE BY QUARANTINE

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ENDORSEMENT

This series of carefully curated participatory reflections shows that creative evaluation can be more than a process to measure impact, but an opportunity to illuminate rich data with poetic flair. This accessible booklet offers a glimpse into the theatrical process of presenting *Telescope*, with an added dimension for continued discussion. Although I didn't attend these staged encounters in person, I am left moved and intrigued in equal measure. Transported to the epicentre of their make-shift stage, I am invited to explore the complex conversations instigated as part of Quarantine's progressive theatre-making approach.

As Dr Amy Barron suggests:
'Possibility lies at the intersection of these encounters and the thoughts, conversations, interactions, discoveries, reassessments, new determinations, and the like that arise from them.'

Nationally, we are at a juncture in how we approach co-design and representation. From a sector

perspective, there is a growing recognition that the process is as productive as the final outcome. It is imperative that researchers, academics and funders are part of this collective shift, challenging assumptions of what it means to platform the voices of communities with agency and authenticity.

Perhaps the key takeaway for *Telescope* and subsequently the *Age on the Stage* booklet is a master class in co-creating comfortable spaces to explore universally (un)comfortable questions - and this collective experience, held by artists, participants, audiences and researchers alike, is where the magic happens: in 'the space between the lines'.

This project offers a timely reminder that creativity can hold complexity without forcing a conclusion and that learning is lifelong, not linear.

Farrell Renowden,
Cultural Development Consultant and
Founder of Age Friendly Culture CIC.





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