



Abdullah Elias

Selected Work 2020

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Abdullah Elias

Artist and Designer

Abdullah Elias (b. 1985, Philadelphia) is an artist, designer and curator, primarily working in socially engaged art initiatives. For the last fifteen years, he has delivered projects in collaboration with public and private institutions, galleries and grassroots organizations in Philadelphia, Bangkok and London. His work investigates the socio-political entanglements of objects and spaces as well as themes of faith, decolonization and gastronomy, through public interventions and programming, installations, performances, deconstructive storytelling and trolling, which collectively aim to address social inequities.

Elias also facilitates the strategic and conceptual development of community-led projects. Through various modes of community engagement and co-design, Elias has supported the development of holistic platforms and projects which promote long-term sustainable economic and cultural growth, working in partnership with wide range of socio-economic groups.

Notable collaborations: Victoria And Albert Museum(UK), Greater London Authority(UK), Battersea Art Centre(UK), Tate Britain(UK), Tate Modern(UK), Design Museum(UK), London Design Festival(UK), V64 Bangkok(TH), HOF ARTS Gallery Bangkok(TH) amongst others.





A Common Ground

Tate Britain, London (2018)

with Something & Son

A Common Ground, a temporary garden installation designed and fabricated collaboratively with Something & Son, was designed to unpack, de-construct and propose modes for reconstituting British cultural identity through seemingly innocuous activities. With activities involving food, a safe space was created for socialising, sharing and finding common ground, for participants to begin having comfortable discussions about potentially uncomfortable topics. Elias and team operated on the fundamental belief that a great meal can change the way a person sees the world and, in turn, how they perceive institutions like the Tate and the roles they play in the construction of British art history, culture and everyday life.

By introducing diverse culinary traditions that are deeply embedded in Britain's social fabric, the project hoped to decolonize British culture in a heartfelt and meaningful way. Locals were engaged in community dinners, cooking workshops and storytelling through food. Most notably, ethnobotanical way-finding tools were distributed throughout the garden, detailing how vegetables and spices ended up in parts of the world due to the establishment of trade routes and colonization. Weekly events that explored different cuisines were also organized, comprising activities like Korean kimchi making, herbal medicine preparation and Caribbean Ital cooking demos. Working in conjunction with the Ramadan Tent Project, the first ever Iftar dinner was held at the Tate. Over five hundred guests participated in this shared meal and a series of talks in the gallery's courtyard.

With outreach as its priority, thousands of Londoners who had never been to the Tate before were invited to participate in this holistic programme. At its heart a project for the people and by the people, *A Common Ground* was developed from close collaborations with local residents, the Tate's service staff, including those in catering, cleaning and security, and two local Mosques throughout the summer of 2018.







Boulevard 3.0 Live Archive

Tate Britain, London (2018)

Collaborator: Abbas Zahedi

"The Boulevard is a series of interactive installations consisting of a green-screen, upon which locally sourced food is served within the context of a public exhibition space."

-Abbas Zahedi

During a five-month-long public programme curation project at the Tate Britain, Elias worked closely with staff across every sector of the museum and discovered stark imbalances within the institution's social structure.

As a response towards this social imbalance, Elias and Zahedi conceived of an interactive installation, wherein members of the public were invited to partake in a shared meal. Encouraging visitors to engage in meaningful exchange with the service staff. Served in the 1840's gallery in the main exhibition hall, the anachronistic disjunct between the contemporary form of installation and the antiquated space hinted at the archaic nature of the Tate's customs and hierarchies.

The soup was also imbued with its own critical poeticism, made with nettles foraged from the Tate Britain employee garden—the only thriving plant in the garden. Nettles have invaluable healing and immunity-boosting properties, thrive in the harshest environments and are often overlooked or avoided, and were thus identified as an apt metaphor for the disparity in treatment between the security and service staff members of the Tate Galleries.

"We're transforming the 1840's gallery into a living space to meet, eat and connect. Hosted by artists Abbas Zahedi and Abdullah Elias, this space invites you to pull up a cushion, enjoy soup made with ingredients from the garden and engage in conversation and exchange with your neighbour."

-Tate Britain Event Copy







A Seat at the Table

Tate Britain, London (2018)

Collaborators:

Abbas Zahedi

Al Hayyat Halal Meats

A Seat at the Table was a performance in the form of a meal which attempted to engage neighbouring residents of the Tate Britain and strip down socioeconomic barriers between long-term residents of the Church Hill Garden Housing Estate and the River Walk Apartments, newly built residences in Pimlico, London.

An equal number of invitations were sent out randomly to both residences requesting their participation in a group meal. To encourage non-hierarchical interactions, guests were situated at tables next to people whom they had never met before, and urged to talk to one another.

Given a seat at the table, guests immersed themselves in a good meal and good company and, in this universal act of enjoyment. At the same time, they were made aware of social discrepancies, which were clearly visible and keenly felt in new and unfamiliar interactions.

All the ingredients were sourced from local shops and vegetables grown in the garden installation *A Common Ground*, as a gesture of support for local businesses, communities and practices that were embedded in Pimlico. Crucially, each dish told a story: some were of the collaborators' personal journeys through the service industry; others were of their social struggles and experiences with migration; and all of them spoke of cultural heritage and familial ties.







Equal Parts: Eid Al-Adha Celebration

Tate Britain, London (2018)

Collaborators:

Hassan Vawda

Abdul Maalik Tailor

The project's title *Equal Parts* refers to the ritual sacrifices made during Eid Al-Adha, or "The Festival of Sacrifice", where animals are split into three portions to be shared amongst those most in need; as well as the notion that Muslims should be entitled to the same forms of participation within the Tate Britain. The Muslim community can be involved as key stakeholders of the gallery space, not simply as security or cleaning staff, but as patrons and artists; and not simply as onlookers of a prescribed history, but as active contributors who can ascribe meaning to the space and the works within it.

Equal Parts ambitiously reinvented the institution's spaces and public programmes. People from across London came together to break bread in a communal potluck with Ethiopian food and coffee from the Al Negashi Centre, dishes from the Tate staff and sweets from the Ramadan Tent Project. Tate's greenhouse was transformed into an Islamic children's bookstore, and the Djanogly lawn became a prayer space, featuring talks with Imams and activities for children where they could design a "*London Prayer Mat*". There were also Islamic tours of the Tate led by blue badge tour guide Abdul Maalik Tailor.

A pioneering social project, *Equal Parts* was Tate Britain's first ever Eid event since its opening in 1897 and marked several of the institution's other "firsts", from the first Eid celebration at the Tate, which called for its first collaboration with local mosques Al Negashi Centre and Victoria Islamic Cultural Centre; to the first Islamic tour of the gallery, which critically examined the Tate's acquisitions and interpretations of their collection. This was also the first time a call to prayer was made at the Tate, which was preceded by the first ever Iftar dinner organised in its halls, held a week prior to the official launch of *Equal Parts*. This event not only opened up a discursive space, it also opened doors of possibilities to help us envision what public institutions could look like.







Amaranth

Origin: Central America

A staple Aztec grain, Amaranth was used as a staple food and for religious ceremonies before being destroyed and outlawed by Spanish colonists. Brought back into cultivation in America in the 1970s, now commonly found in cereals and cereal bars.







Peckham Palms

Southwark Council, London (2018-2020)

with Something & Son

The Palms is a new Afrocentric retail space, in the heart of Peckham, which provides exceptional hairstyling and beauty services, with high-quality food and drink, and a multi-use event venue. This covered marketplace will be home to over thirty professional hair and beauty stylists and lifestyle businesses. This will be enhanced with a new bar and food kiosks that are expertly curated to meet the needs of customers from all backgrounds, particularly those looking for more diverse and eclectic retail offers. The Palms exists to support and grow London's lucrative Afro hair and beauty industry, with a mission to put the power back into the hands of the communities that The Palms works with, and to create new opportunities for women to work collaboratively and to thrive.

Southwark Council invited Something & Son to tender and manage a new Afro hair and beauty hub in Bournemouth Close in order to relocate businesses during Peckham Rye Station Square's development. Beyond a simple relocation project, Something & Son designed the identity of Peckham Palms; they developed the brand, concept and ethos of this centralised space for new businesses, working collaboratively with hair and beauty service providers working on Blenheim Grove. Something & Son initially worked with Tree Shepherd and Llandolt Brown to develop the project and carry out R&D and community consultation.

-Adapted from Peckham Palms Website Description

Peckham Palms was launched in February 2019 after 3.5 years of R&D, consultation and workshopping with black hairdressers, other local residents and businesses. Elias provided creative and structural support during the extensive R&D programme, which was undertaken so that the resulting retail space could be meaningfully co-designed to better meet the users' business and cultural needs. Today, *Peckham Palms* is an Afrocentric hair and beauty retail hub and co-working space, led by black women, whose capacity builds sole traders and micro-businesses.







Peckham Food Hall

Southwark Council, London (2020)

Collaborators:

Izatu's Kitchen

Steamer London

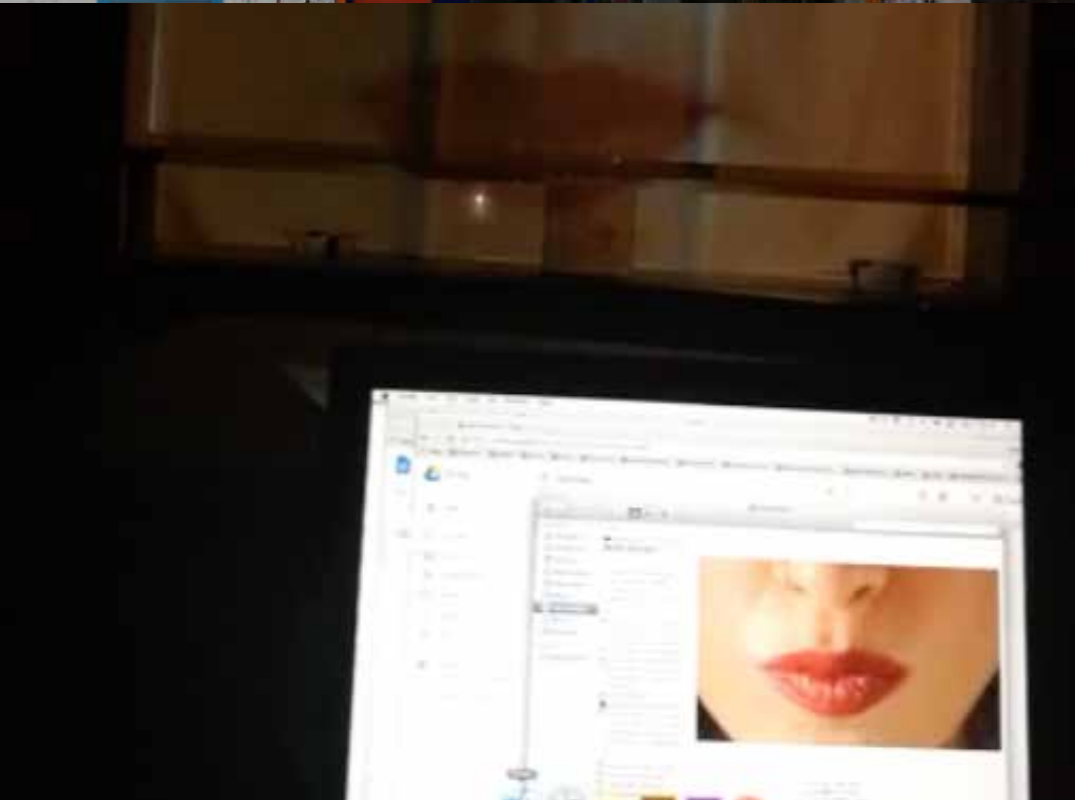
Copeland Jerk Centre Ltd.

Farok Agoro

Peckham Food Hall is a two-year Meanwhile project designed to support and house three food businesses based in Peckham Rye station while it underwent two years of regeneration works. The operators of Copeland Jerk Centre Ltd, Izatu's Kitchen and Steamer Chinese have lived and worked in Peckham collectively for over thirty years, serving food in the station. Each business had its own unique set of challenges when shifting from the spaces they had invested their lives into. This was also compounded with the declining patronage of their usual customers, who have no cause to visit this rapidly gentrified area of Peckham.

This work was undertaken on behalf of Southwark Council. Elias adopted the role of a change management consultant, providing support to the owners in adapting and sustaining their businesses along with shifting trends and new audiences. The space was designed in collaboration with Farok Agoro and the local establishments. The day-to-day support ranged from branding, health and safety, licensing, online sales and delivery services, to marketing, visual merchandising and supply chains. *Peckham Food Hall* opened in the Summer of 2019, and the businesses have since seen significant growth and garnered new interest while retaining their core customer base.

The space was also used for community workshops and acted as a base for *Something & Son* and the *Tomorrow's Market Programme*. The windows were also used in the evenings as a public gallery space for digital and new media artworks produced by Elias and Abbas Zahedi.







Tomorrow's Market

The Greater London Authority, London (2019-2020)

Collaborator:

Hazel Durrant

Tomorrow's Market was a two-year pilot programme designed while working in partnership with the London Growth Hub and the Mayor of London. It was a small business development programme that aimed to future-proof street markets across London. The programme focused on removing the glass ceiling that prevents marginalized communities from reaching their full business potential.

Tomorrow's Market's work in future-proofing over the past eighteen months has supported over thirty new traders to develop and grow their businesses. The team behind the programme also worked closely with market management teams providing consultancy on workflow management, design, marketing and market curation.

This programme was delivered with the support of:

Thalia Gray (Sheer Chemistry), Maria Knowles (Makatcha), Vanessa Provin (Beho), Lilli Conreen (Depop/Student High Street), Sally Williams (Retail Revival), Ian Dodds (Kerb), Fabio Diu (Real Food Festival), Stuart Horwood (Brixton Market Traders Federation), Abiodun Adesoji (Lower Marsh), Debbie Carpenter (Camden Council), Tina Jadav (Greater London Authority), Stephan Sidebottom, Andia Dollia (Attitude Ltd.).



**FRESH FRUIT
FRESH MEAT
FRESH IDEAS
FRESH START
APPLY NOW**



**PUT
SOMETHING
AWAY
FOR A
RAINY
DAY**



**GET THE
SUPPORT
YOU NEED
TO SUCCEED**



**TURN
YOUR
PASSION
IN TO YOUR
LIVELIHOOD**



**TOMORROW
IS THE
FUTURE**



**BE YOUR
OWN
BOSS
BECOME
A MARKET
TRADER
TODAY**



tm



LEARN
TRADE
GROW
EXCHANGE



LAST
CHANCE
DEADLINE
MIDNIGHT



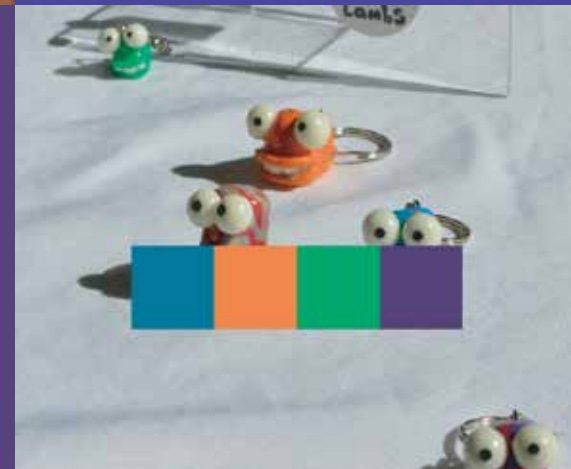
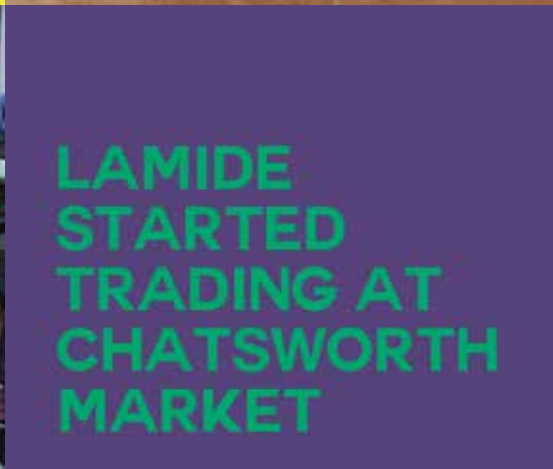
LONDON
ARTISTS
FOR
LONDON
MARKETS

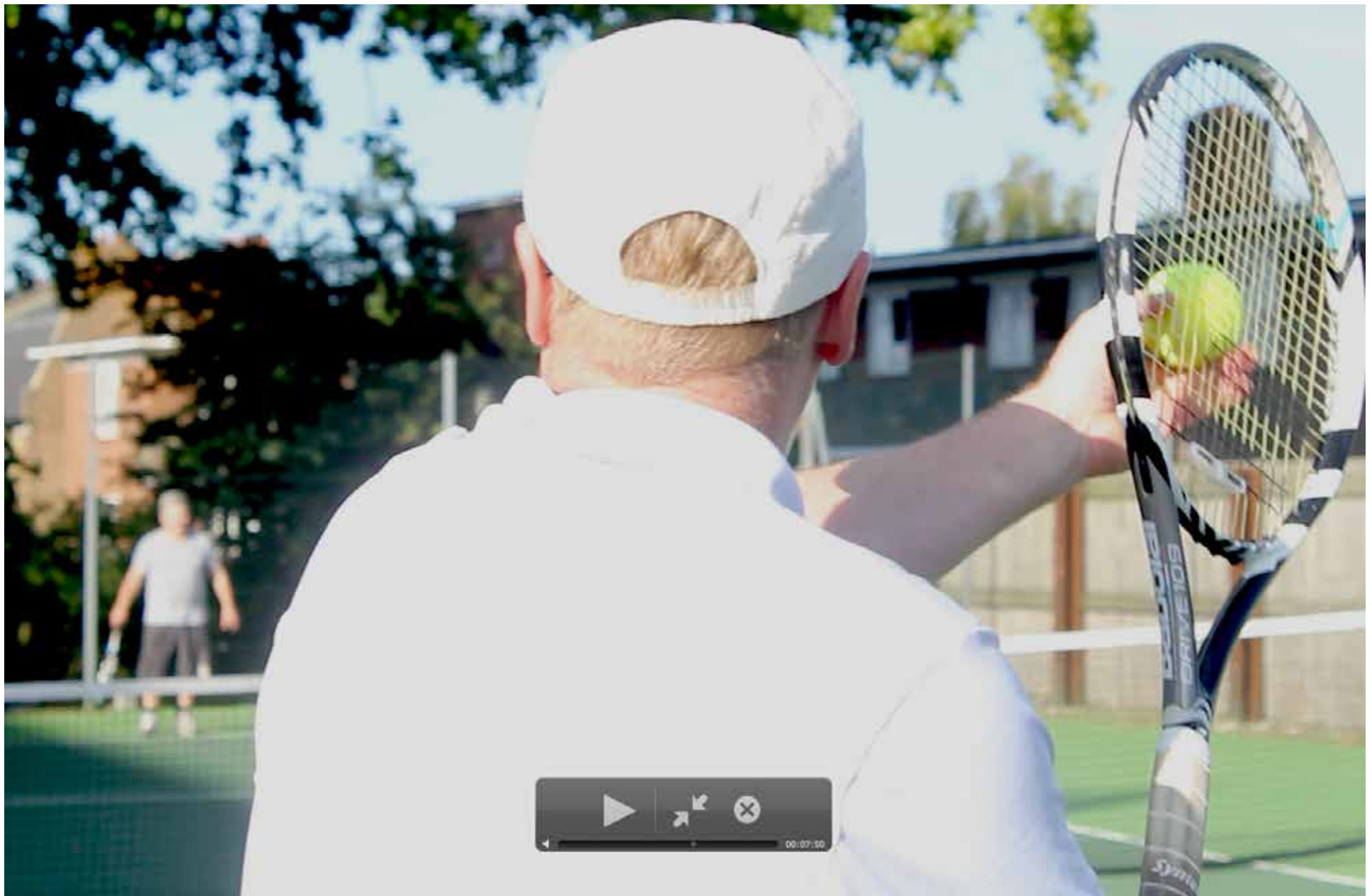


COMMUNITY
IS BUILT
IN THE
MARKET



LAMIDE
STARTED
TRADING AT
CHATSWORTH
MARKET







Parasitic University of London: Guerilla Lecture Initiative

Goldsmiths University, London (2016-2017)

The *Guerilla Lecture Initiative*, part of the *Parasitic University* alternative learning framework conceived during Elias' Design Critical Practice MA at Goldsmiths University, was a lecture series that brought six academics into public communal venues across London. The intention of these films was to illustrate the pre-existing forms of learning, which take place in “non-academic” spaces and widen the access to institutional resources.

Lectures

Terry Rosenberg and Martin Conreen — The Materiality of Sport

Location: Goldsmiths Tennis Courts, New Cross, London

Description: While playing tennis, Martin Conreen, material expert and founder of the Institute of Making, and Terry Rosenberg, senior lecturer of design at Goldsmiths, discussed the material networks and evolution of sport as well as the philosophy of sports

Dr Gabriel Dattatreyan and Dr Martyn Wemyss — Postcolonial Train Debate

Location: London Overground New Cross, Highbury Islington, London

Description: Over the course of their journey on the Overground, Dr Gabriel Dattatreyan and Dr Martyn Wemyss, professors of anthropology at Goldsmiths, discussed a number of postcolonial theories and subject matter, interjected with personal reflections; utilised the train and their surroundings as pedagogical tools.

Vinny Montag — The Museum of the Refused Design Thinking Workshop

Location: Fat Walrus Pub, New Cross, London

Description: Vinny Montag, designer, studio manager and adjunct lecturer at Goldsmiths, ran a speculative workshop focused on the design of museums titled The Museum of the Refused in the Fat Walrus Pub. Alaa Alsaraji's ideal museum, which housed all the things she felt were lacking or misrepresented in museum spaces.

Dr. Rose Sinclair — Education and the Diaspora

Location: Deptford Market, Deptford, London

Description: Dr Rose Sinclair's lesson focused on urban development, gentrification and education. Involving a walk around the Deptford Market, examining the different shops and stalls, her lesson was one of visual association. Sinclair selected different tropes present in the market, identified their relationships to the redevelopment of Deptford, and recontextualised them with postcolonial analyses.

Dr Ricardo Leizaola — Decolonising Cuisine Ethnobotany in the UK

Location: Junction Market Off License, Walthamstow, London

Description: Dr Ricardo Leizaola academic, writer and filmmaker specialising in ethnobotany and traditional medicine acts as the shop keeper for the day at Junction Market in Walthamstow. Ricardo used fruits and vegetables as learning devices to explore the ethnobotanical journeys and networks of produce.







Parasitic University Mobile Education Unit

London Design Festival. London (2017)

Collaborator: Richard Caraffi

The *Parasitic University of London (PUL)* critically examines the contemporary problems of institutional education, pedagogy and higher learning, primarily focusing on access to academic resources and educational programmes through the freedegree.org.uk website, a platform for mapping and sharing free lectures across London, and the *Guerilla Lecture series*, which brought academics to traditionally non-academic spaces.

The *PUL Mobile Unit* took the concept of unusual learning spaces one step further through the conversion of a moving van into a mobile lecture hall, complete with chairs, reading materials, a projector and a desk. The Mobile Unit then trolled the London Design Festival 2017 by hosting alternative and counter-lectures across London in front of scheduled Design Festival activities and workshops.

The *Mobile Unit's* series of forums examined urban regeneration, sustainable design and collaborative design processes, and were facilitated not only by designers and academics, but social workers as well. Each forum was designed to be decentralised, without prescribed authorities or experts. Within the intimate confines of the moving van, an informal, open and democratic peer-to-peer learning environment was created, which promoted comfortable and honest sharing sessions.

The project was well received and gathered on average twenty to thirty attendees per lecture, many of whom were redirected on their way in or out of the London Design Festival's programmes or in the area for purposes apart from the Festival. This latter group in particular forms the crucial target audience of *PUL Mobile Unit*, whose primary aim is to engage people who are often overlooked by or uninvolved in institutions in design discourse, via experimental modes of design education in non-academic contexts.









FYPM

@fypmbrixton

★★★★★ 16 Reviews

12K Followers

0 Following

Follow

Selling Likes



£20.00



£199.00



£30.00



£55.00



£49.00



£69.00



£45.00



£20.00



£125.00



£75.00



£20.05



£31.00



£20.00



£25.00



£70.00



£55.00



£65.00



£75.00



FYPM Fine Yarn Preserve Maintain

Depop Shop, creative community online marketplace (2017)

Collaborator: Richard Caraffi

FYPM was a vintage and second-hand clothing brand designed to mimic a high-end fashion label. The concept of the store was to preserve and share the narratives and heritage of the garments, creating new looks, upcycling and celebrating the cultural capital of streetwear.

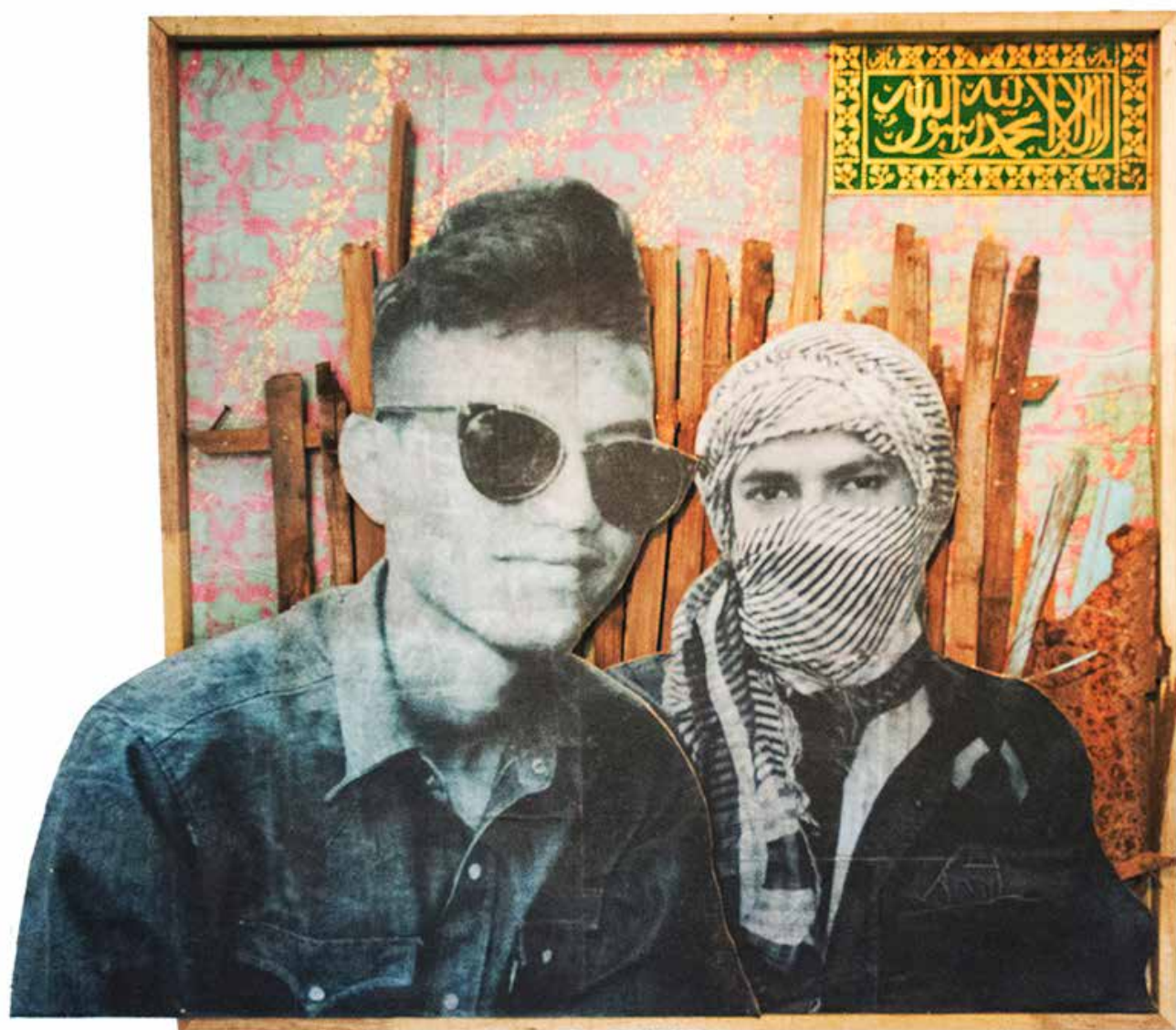
Originally named Tique Booty, *FYPM* was started by Richard Caraffi, a home removal self-proclaimed “man in a van”. Rich had a love for clothing and amassed an exceptional collection of rare clothing from the 1970s to early 1990s. He opened his brick and mortar shop in Brixton Market in 2012, but it closed after three years due to rising rents and the shifting demographics of Brixton. This led to the creation of the *FYPM* Depop shop.

FYPM is at its heart a social project; Elias acted as the creative director of the Depop shop over a six-month period to help rebuild Rich’s business in a new context. He developed the brand, created all the content, styled the looks, shot all of the photographs, promoted, organized and curated the Depop page, and created a number of garments and accessories, which were sold by *FYPM*. The products also addressed contemporary themes such as gender fluidity and investigated the value of commercial objects in general.

Under Elias’ creative directorship, *FYPM* found commercial success. Within the first two months of the shop’s online launch, his photographs were featured on the discover page of Depop Shop, where clients are provided with an overview of leading products. By the third month, the page had three thousand followers, and by month five, almost every item was featured on the discover page. By that time, *FYPM.Brixton* had twelve thousand followers.









V64 Residency

V64 Arts, Bangkok (2013-2014)

Exhibitions:

V64 Annual Summer Exhibition

Solo Exhibition El Chiringo

HOF Art Now

Collaborators:

Jamal Rodin

Arif Rodin

Elias participated in a six-month residency between 2013–2014 in which he did a series of works that explored his faith and experiences with migration and refugee camps, specifically those along the Burmese border where he lived and worked as a teenager.

The work was produced with photographs taken over the years and found objects from a demolition site close to the V64 studios. The materials were designed to reflect the weathered corrugated steel homes of Sangkhlaburi where he worked and lived. Broken walls and natural materials were woven together with steel to form baskets and drying racks.

The work was exhibited in three venues across Bangkok in 2014: the V64 Annual Summer Exhibition and open studio, HOF Art Now group exhibition and at El Chiringo in a Solo Exhibition titled Bismillah (In the name of God).





Emulsification

Until Something Brings Us Back to Reason

V64 Arts, Bangkok (2014)

At the time I had been working in restaurants for two years back in Philly, prior to returning back to Bangkok. I had just broken up with my partner of three years. I had a lot of people in the countryside of Thailand looking to me for support. Approaching thirty years old, I went back to school for the first time since leaving at fifteen. The different elements of the performance were all these things coming together. I cut onions, referencing art in this context and labour in another. I merged the clothes I used to pray with, the school uniform and floral patterns. I covered myself up in layers of veils, remembering the Hadith “there are seventy thousand veils between heaven and earth.” And I cut my hair to break away from all of it. Returning to Thailand and art and being back in Bangkok was, in a way, starting fresh and finding release. The eggs were about birth. Those frying in the projection were about the transformation of and combination of elements that formed something new. But really it was simple. It was a performance in a gallery about change.

-Abdullah Elias

Emulsification was a performance that interpreted the experience of personal identification and clashes of culture, expectations and faith. Elias handmade his costume from an upcycled university uniform, a floral patterned textile designed to mimic a kurta, and his aunt's head scarf.

Seated on a pedestal and surrounded by an arrangement of onions, Elias began a performance ritual involving the repetitious cutting of onions, backdropped by a projection of eggs being beaten and fried on loop. At the end of the performance, he removed his veils and masks to reveal himself then cut his hair before walking off stage.

This performance was part of the event *Until Something Brings Us Back to Reason*, curated by Pierre Bechon of TARS Gallery Bangkok.





Ban Thor Phan

Sangklaburi, Thailand (2004-2012)

Ban Thor Phan creates adaptable modern designs for the ever-evolving global market. With three bases of operations in Thailand, Japan and here in Philadelphia, they have a unique global perspective of fashion and cultural trends in the mainstream and in regional style; using the finest natural materials, hand woven textiles, organic hemp and bamboo cotton, with their signature dyeing techniques, using the time honoured tradition of frigid leave and bark dyeing.

BTP is more than just a clothing company. BTP is a self-sufficient sustainable non-profit orphanage solely funded by their clothing line. All proceeds go to support their 55 orphaned abandoned and abused children. Not only do they support the children, they have also developed an amazing formula for enriching the lives of the surrounding refugee communities in Thailand through their efforts in saving people from the burdens of working in sweatshops—taking people out of the sweatshops and creating workspaces in their own homes and giving them a healthy living wage and the availability to spend time with their families and the time and space to create their own hours. Ban Thor Phan's goal is to spread their model and inspire the world, on and off the runway, to better themselves and the world around them.

-CBS News 2010

Elias worked for *Ban Thor Phan* for eight years, supporting the development of a number of social design projects, which transformed migrant trades into sustainable businesses, including a coffee company that gathered foraged wild coffee from the Tong Yai National Park, a brick company, two organic farms, a retreat centre and a natural clothing company which used traditional bark and indigo dyeing techniques. All the subsidiary businesses' proceeds supported the *Ban Thor Phan Children's Home*. Elias supported day-to-day operations and designed clothing for the clothing line that was featured in Philadelphia Fashion Week in 2010.





Common Knowledge x Reclaim Print Studio

Art Collective and Print shop, Philadelphia (2010–2013)

The *Common Knowledge* Collective was a socio-political arts collective, based in West Philadelphia. The collective is formed of four members: Quan Blanche, Russell Shoatz, Doc Harris and Elias. They generated works between 2009 and 2015 that explored concerns with race, class and gender, and also celebrated the under-represented diaspora's American experience.

Common Knowledge also supported the everyday operation of the *Reclaim Print Studio*. *Reclaim* was established by Quan Blanche through a grant scheme sponsored by the Leeway Foundation. The print studio provided classes and low-cost print services to grassroots organizations and start-up fashion brands, and offered training programmes for people of all ages to build skills.

Elias worked with *Common Knowledge* for three years, producing artwork and supporting the development of Reclaim Print Studio, working with a number of start-up brands and community organizations including Philadelphia Print Works, Wierdo, Matthew Law, BLM, Philadelphia City Council, M.O.V.E and ACAF Centre.

Common Knowledge also produced a series of music and poetry events. Most notably, *the PSA series* brought together the Last Poets, Reef the Lost Cause, Oluwafemi, and Dead Prez to raise awareness about the inhumane practices of the criminal justice system and raise money to free political prisoner Russell Maroon Shoatz.





2020