

Art, Culture and Policy

A Socially Engaged Project by Dima Karout

October 2021- April 2023

Celebrating We Are Lewisham

The Mayor's London Borough of Culture 2022

In conversation with

Lewisham Council and Counterpoints Arts

Supported by

Arts Council England, GLA and Horniman Museum

OUTCOMES

1- NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Crofton Park, Corbett, Manor House and Sydenham Community Libraries, Lewisham Local, Bow Arts Studios, Halcyon Books, Pentland House, Horniman Museum and Gardens, Migration Museum, Lewisham Council and Counterpoints Arts.

2- COMMUNITY BUILDING PROGRAMME

Curated conversations (readings, sketching, printmaking and creative writing).

Creative walks to local parks, libraries and museums.

Learning English conversation around coffee.

3- RESEARCH IN ART, CULTURE AND POLICY

Conversations, practice based research and knowledge exchange with Council employees, local humanitarian and art organisations' teams, and local residents, Goldsmiths university students and local volunteers.

4- COLLECTIVE ART EXHIBITION

Presented from 12 November 2022 to 5 March 2023 at the Horniman Museum:

<https://www.horniman.ac.uk/event/internal-landscapes/> And a Digital Exhibition on

Bloomberg Connects App. Upon closure, the art pieces were distributed to participating libraries and will be permanently exhibited in the borough.

5- ART BOOK

Internal Landscapes by Dima Karout (Hard cover, 128 pages. ISBN: 9781399935807).

250 copies were distributed to all participants, collaborators and public libraries. A digital copy is available here for free: <https://www.dimakarout.com/internal-landscapes-art-book/>

The book is available at all Lewisham libraries, The British Library, The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, the Cambridge University Library, National Library of Scotland, The National Library of Wales, and Trinity College Dublin Library.

6- ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Launch Event (22 November)

Learning Lab (1 December)

A series of 15 Workshops and Curated Visits (November to February)

7- DIGITAL SHARED RESOURCES

About the Art - Horniman Museum:

<https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/about-the-art-dima-karout/>

Art and Policy - Lewisham Council:

<https://lewisham.gov.uk/articles/blogs/internal-landscapes-by-dima-karout>

Project Launch Video - We Are Lewisham:

[Internal Landscapes by Dima Karout](#)

Learning Lab - Counterpoints Arts:

<https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/event/learning-lab-catalysts-for-change-arts-culture-and-engagement-in-local-governance/>

Project Online Presence - Dima Karout:

<https://www.dimakarout.com/internal-landscapes>

REPORTING BACK

Fergus Downie

Housing and Resettlement Programme Manager, Lewisham Council

(Contribution to the Learning Lab)

I am by nature a bureaucrat and the prospect of working with an artist filled me with a certain trepidation, and if I'm honest with scepticism. Front line housing managers tend not to do the 'vision thing' partly because they're always on the brink of crisis and getting through the day seems triumph enough. Bringing art into the equation seemed an incredibly abstract proposition but with a slightly cynical pragmatism I resolved to be polite and regale our artist in residence with the portable Pavlovian cliches I had to hand. I soon ran out of them and I foiled my cunning plan by becoming vaguely interested.

The exhibition was the moment everything fell into place and the thing that grabbed me was how I felt to tap into someone's most important experiences and transport myself somewhere else without moving. The place I soared to was 'home' which I imagine was the whole point. For me it was the water - when I saw the Quaggy exhibit it triggered a reminiscence I always return to in times of stress. I was shy of my fifth birthday and remember being transfixed at a local river watching salmon spawn, an odd memory to keep perhaps but one which bonded me to a particular place. Someone told me they had completed their life's journey which seemed a very profound and impressive thing for a fish to do and the experience stayed with me. It even gave a slant to my reading experience as Joseph Conrad describes the Thames poignantly and George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* contains a touching reminiscence on the main character's boyhood fishing haunts. I always head for rivers where I can - and I felt a little less lonely reading the reflections on Deptford Creek and the Quaggy. What did it all mean and what had it to do with art? I can only give my own reflection.

Before enlarging I should say at the outset that every council in one form or another uses art to engage or (in the form of its brutalist architecture and monuments to inadvertently alienate) so it is never that abstract- but it has always appeared to me a slightly top down process - more well intentioned social engineering than active engagement. The exhibits

at the book launch by contrast were personal, visceral and rooted in place, and that place was Lewisham . I don't normally seek out artsy settings but I was humbled to feel a strong connection with people I hadn't even met and if integration is something other than a KPI it has to involve something like this. Without it what is the point of parroting the virtue of respecting a 'lived experience' which is sterile unless it also includes the imagination

All of this would not have been possible without the numerous little platoons making this possible. Councils can without malice overlook them because of their quiet unsung altruism and that's a pity. Grass roots voluntary groups aren't part of the community - they in large measure make it and without the shared sense of place they foster what is someone to be integrated WITH? It's an elemental point which we neglect to our cost.

The main value of this project for me was the value it placed on rooting diverse individuals in a shared place. The art was public and meant to be shared - it wasn't solipsistic. In understanding the private reflections of others I felt at some level connected to something larger than myself. Community isn't proximity - it's a feeling of existential connection and rootedness in something larger. Anything that can draw out that experience has to be a good thing and I'm sure there's a public health anorak that could say it delivers tangible benefits. What's not to like? I like it in any case and I thank everyone who contributed.

Paul Aladenika

Head of Policy and Strategy, Lewisham Council

(Interview for the Horniman Museum)

You've been in conversation with Dima over the past year. How do you reflect on Dima's work?

Engaging with Dima Karout's work in Lewisham has been extremely helpful in enabling me, as a public servant, to rethink the Council's work on resident engagement. Dima's creative vision and community building programme reminds those of us who serve communities, particularly those with a diverse demography, that public engagement is not a head count. Neither is it simply an exercise in seeking the views of others. The purpose of public engagement is to empower and enable residents and stakeholders to give

expression to their views and opinions. It is only when people feel empowered to express themselves and share their experiences, that they will feel included. And by visiting the Internal Landscapes exhibition and reading the extended project in the book, we can see Dima's focus on presenting a collective narrative of Lewisham that brought local people's stories and experiences to life and allowed us to connect with them in a more meaningful way.

Can you share insights on the conversation between art and policy that Dima's project initiated?

There are clear points of intersection between art and policy. Done correctly, policy-making is the science of collating, segmenting and analysing data and the art of achieving transformational outcomes. In policy, data does not have to be empirical. Anecdotal data can be an equally powerful way of communicating sentiment and experience.

To that extent, Dima's curated conversations and focused approach on what we share, the local places we inhabit, and the wider meaning of geography created space for local people and council team members to participate in the creative mapping of the borough and the policy-making process in a new way.

If art is the frequency through which residents choose to communicate, then policy-makers need to make sure that they are tuning in.

How can we understand the legacy of this project, for Lewisham Council and communities?

Dima's socially engaged methodology and inclusive vision brought Council members and many individuals and local organisations together to share creative spaces that she designed carefully to reunite. Her work offers the Council an additional lens through which to view itself. In a borough such as Lewisham, with a rich cultural heritage and residents from more than 70 nationalities and five continents, inclusion will always be a moving target.

The challenge presented by Dima's work and what will stay with us is the need to remain alert to new opportunities and be willing to embrace fresh creative ideas in order to meaningfully engage with residents and earn public trust.

Terry Bracher

Alan Ball Award Judge, Hon. Chair CILIP LSG

Internal Landscapes is an excellent publication and everyone was struck by the creative writing and the illustrations and how they responded beautifully to the Lewisham landscape. The project, its concept, delivery and outcomes was considered to be tremendously inspiring and we are very keen to ensure that the work is known widely as it is exactly the kind of project many heritage organisations are keen to create and deliver. It will act as a great model for future projects. Everyone involved, especially of course Dima, should be congratulated for the tremendous work that went into creating it.

Charles Parry

Accountant, Lewisham Council
(December workshop feedback)

It was a beautiful, bright, icy morning in Manor House Gardens and the upstairs room in the library made a lovely setting for the session with sunlight pouring in. Dima was a wonderful facilitator and did a great job of including everyone and drawing everyone out. It was really interesting hearing the other group members' responses to the words and ideas presented, and how that related to their histories and experiences. It's rare to have these sorts of conversations with friends let alone strangers, and by the end of the session it really felt like being amongst friends, everyone was so supportive and encouraging toward each other. The drawings we produced were a fitting culmination to the discussions and showed a part of everyone's personality I think.

It was also great to see the prints and drawings from earlier workshops and hear the stories associated with them. I got a copy of the Internal Landscapes book from the library and have enjoyed dipping in and out of it, learning not just about the people involved but also places in my borough I wasn't aware of.

Working at the Council, I haven't done much in the way of art/creativity for many years so it was really special for me to have a space to make something and talk with people

about art and ideas, so I fully intend to make more time and space for this sort of thing in the future. It was a great session, I'm really glad I came.

Sanchia Leddy

Lewisham Resident, project participant and supporter
(Final Reporting)

As an ever-curious artistic individual, I'm always on the lookout for short workshops to participate in to keep me busy. I came across one of Dima Karout's Creative Conversation workshops, I was instantly intrigued and signed up as I love Lino printing.

I attended an initial workshop in early April 2022 at Manor House Library. There, I met a lovely group of people who I probably wouldn't have met had it not been for that particular workshop. We read snippets of text and poetry and we shared stories and memories connected to those words, which opened up some emotive discussions. It was a very free flowing yet gentle process and everybody felt comfortable to share as little or as much as they wanted to. It was a well considered and caring approach, encouraging enrichment and enjoyment.

Although on the surface we were complete strangers, trust played an important role in the shared space. It was fascinating and touching to hear everyone's stories. Everybody felt validated in the calming environment provided and I felt privileged to listen. Likewise, we were all treated with respect and any contributions were equally valid.

We shared our favourite places and locations within the Borough of Lewisham, as an inspiration to base our prints on. With Dima's advice, we all produced some scaled down shapes and simplified forms based on our inspirations. Once our lino cut was carved, we commenced lino printing together. We all created prints with single colours onto paper and then experimented by superimposing various colours with our motif prints. Everybody got very involved and we had lots of fun

getting lost in the process of producing different coloured prints. We left Manor House Library with a bunch of interesting prints to take home and a sense of having produced some great art as a group collective.

A few weeks later, I attended an additional event in Catford to continue our Creative Conversations. Our prints and small carvings were on display from all of Dima's workshops. It was a great social event where I spent my time taking photos of the collective prints, met more new people and shared stories within a safe space group setting. We could all go ahead and do more printing too which was fantastic. Of course people wanted to make more art pieces to take home! A really lovely evening with great like-minded people from Lewisham.

Part of that evening was oriented towards creative writing. It involved a little bit of our own writing, describing the inspiration for our prints. We then had the opportunity to work with some spoken word artists. I had the pleasure of working with Bex Gordon, an amazingly talented poet and author. She gathered ideas as we spoke and made notes about the piece I'd written, exploring why Horniman Museum is my favourite place in Lewisham. She added some personal aspects about me such as how I'm always taking photos of flowers and the architecture there. The Horniman Gardens are always changing with seasonal flowers and I love spending time there, zooming in on fine details with my camera.

Some two months later, that conversation with Bex turned into a beautifully written poem about me and my connection to the Horniman Museum and Gardens. Of course that was the premise of working with us residents, but I had no idea how much that poem would touch my heart when Dima shared the preview of how it would look in book format. This project was becoming multi-layered and a lot was going on behind the scenes. We were well informed of any updates by email and Dima spent time making sure our full consent was covered as she continued editing things accordingly to be used in the book.

How amazing that six months after turning up to two short workshops, all the prints, stories and poems about our inspirational Lewisham places were living in a

beautifully published book as part of Lewisham's celebration of being the Borough of Culture 2022. Not only that, some of our prints were being launched at an exhibition at the Horniman Museum and I was indeed fortunate for my print to have been chosen to be displayed there in large format.

In November 2022, I attended the Horniman launch and it was a wonderful event, with great food and an excellent turnout of people interested in seeing the project. We listened to various talks and readings from the book and participants in the project were given copies of the book as a keepsake. There was some filming taking place and lots of photo interest. I even shared my little written piece from the book on stage. It seemed fitting for me to read this out loud at that venue, after all, my inspiration for my print and words was the Horniman Museum itself!

We were all chuffed and proud to have some of our work displayed in a public space, where people could read from a physical book and feel more connected to the existing prints on the wall. A group of ordinary residents attending some art workshops turned into a triumph of a community project. It is really important for everyday folk to have a voice and be invited to free accessible art projects that they might not necessarily participate in. It's very special that the prints and stories about us and our favourite places within Lewisham have ended up in a book. For me, that's a permanent thing that can't be erased and solidifies this particular project in time. It was exciting to see the exhibition as a participant and having my print and words on show was wonderful, the definite highlight of my year in terms of this project. I feel eternally grateful for this opportunity to have arisen.

There were two other Creative Conversation workshops held at Manor House Library and Corbett Community Library in December 2022 and I went along to them both. These involved sketching and drawing rather than printing, and some lovely dialogue was again opened up about our different philosophies and ideas that shape us as individuals. A couple of attendees I'd met in the project previously, the others I'd never met before. By the end of the session, we had all bonded by sharing emotional experiences and tales.

As I'd attended all of the previous sessions and knew the process well, I was able to assist in helping Dima a little bit with those two final workshops, which was great. We all ventured to those sessions with much determination, in the freezing December weather. For me, the snow seemed the perfect way to end the year's creative process off at Corbett Community Library. Like Manor House Library, it's another beautiful place in Lewisham I'd have probably never visited had it not been for Dima's workshops. I look forward to revisiting these two libraries in the future.

This entire project has been a pleasure to take part in, from start to finish. I so enjoyed making art with other people and will treasure these Creative Conversations for ever. Taking the time to slow down, be present and simply listen to other people's journeys can actually enhance our own journeys. That's why this process was important for those who participated. Everyday people coming together for a couple of hours to make art and write about our feelings in a safe space, simply sharing and learning from each other. Even though we might never meet again in person, we carry those emotional connections with us, no matter how big or small. We can be reminded of each other's stories now in the book. There are some really good people and places to explore in our immediate surroundings if we just take a small amount of time to find them every now and then. It really was a lovely collaboration.

For me, my own personal project about the Horniman Museum and Gardens has truly come full circle. A tiny lino carving inspired by my photos turned out to be an integral part of my emotional journey over the past year and I'm so glad I stumbled upon Dima's art project purely by chance. I am very thankful to Dima Karout for her love, care, hard work and dedication in curating this marvellous community project for the Lewisham Borough. I'm glad that the large prints from the exhibition will be housed in some libraries and other public buildings, keeping this legacy alive. My print, called 'Horniman Evolving', will be staying there at the Horniman Museum to live permanently, thus cementing it as my favourite place in Lewisham even more than before!

FEEDBACKS

From Iva

December workshop participant

"I wanted to bring locals together to talk about the place we all share rather than the diversity of our differences" Dima Karout

Few years ago while living in France I used to say "English talk about things they have in common like the weather - if it rains it rains for everybody - whilst French talk about their differences". Indeed, conversations through which we establish how different we are - you an accountant, married and with two children; I, a single, touring musician - usually go nowhere. But in France we love to do that : establish who is precisely who so that we know how to talk or not to them. Having lived in France herself, Dima Karout brings a simple unifying idea to Lewisham, Borough of Sanctuary, 'Talk about the place we share rather than the diversity of our differences'.

For this year Lewisham has been both 'Borough of Sanctuary' and 'Borough of Culture'. And this is how they got art curator Dima Karout working on this project.

Last Saturday, I was lucky to assist to 'Internal Landscapes . Creative Conversation and Sketching' described as "A conversational workshop designed for local people to build connections, exchange knowledge and positive stories about their neighbourhoods" which is the same workshop like the one that has produced 'Internal Landscapes' the exhibition and the book. In the bright winter light ducks and swans were slipping upon the frozen waters of the lake in Manor House Gardens; while we, five women and two men from all over the world were exploring and drawing memories of our favourite places in the warm comfort of Manor House Library, with teas, raw nuts and halva at hand.

"What is sanctuary?" asks Dima and I answer "This, where we are now, is a sanctuary. A place where you can discuss philosophical questions with strangers on a Saturday morning". And the questions ARE philosophical indeed: as we smoothly pass from the description of specific places, like somebody's barbecue in Australia, to discussions of abstract concepts such as Freedom, Peace, Emptiness and Grounding and back to the manifestations of these abstracts in particular places varying in size from geographical phe-

nomenon like lakes and forests through particular buildings to distinct elements such as single pavement stones or yacht mooring rings.

After thinking, talking and writing it's time for drawing, the final stage of the workshop. As I haven't drawn for years I have forgotten how drawing is a form of playing. Once I get going it, I am carried away in the play and I am happy. I laugh. I always laugh when I am happy. And I think "Art, just like sport, is an aspect of humans' ability to play".

This thought and my laughter take me to my native Sofia and the inscription on the side of Vasil Levski Stadium facing the canal, the meagrely trickling runnel nearby that Sofianites pompously call Pearlsh River. An inscription that I always tend to forget and then rediscover each time I go back. But now the memory brings it to me. Facing the stadium's grey concrete, I lift up my head and read "Man is Only Human When at Play", Friedrich Schiller. I turn to Dima and say "Sanctuary is a place where you feel at home".

I am so inspired by this think-talk-right-and-draw experience that I forget to buy 'Internal Landscapes' the book, which I consider will be a lovely Christmas present for my friends who live in Lewisham.

From Arek

Workshops photographer and project supporter

What I think of the book... for me it's hard to separate it from the project. I see it as a fraction of what it's really made of. Being involved somehow from the beginning to the end allow me to see the bigger picture.

I still see there all our walks and talks, I see all the workshops with people of Lewisham, their ordinary, but at the same time, magic places and the stories behind those, I see your deep research but also some of your struggles, I see building bridges and relations, building a community (no matter how it's defined).

I also see the Family walking through the Library door... and their smiles. And the other walks and time we all spent together. It's all there in a book. I think the book reflects and represents what Lewisham is and what Borough of Culture and Sanctuary is/shall be.

But as a physical object the book is nicely made, is of good quality of course. The book is beautiful...in and out. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of it.

From Pat

March workshop participant

Thank you for the beautiful book. I was at Crofton Park Library yesterday and Silvana gave it to me. It's lovely to have all those memories and representations of Lewisham together in one book.

Yesterday I visited Ruth, the teacher I talked about in my piece who so encouraged me in my teaching career. Ruth is now 93 years old and in the final stages of terminal cancer, but I spoke to her of the book and how much her example had meant to me when I was young. I'm not sure if she was aware of what I was saying, but it meant a lot to me that I was able to share those early memories with my dear friend.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to honour her memory.

From Heidi

March Workshop Participant

Thanks for leaving me your autographed book. Having read it all, things now make sense! I am no longer floating in a sea of bewilderment... rather like reaching the end of a syllabus when all the bits suddenly slot in to make the whole picture and the inter-relationships are clearly visible.

At first, I thought a Lino cutting class might be fun as I remember doing it in my early teens to illustrate my poems in the school magazine, but I did arrive on the day at the class a little late. I found all the words on pieces of paper on the tables totally confusing as they appeared random & unconnected and failed to give rise to any imagery. I note your collaborators follow a similar way of writing – is it something that was not taught to my generation?

I have written poetry, prose, countless essays and stories, have good grades for English Language, English Literature, Oral English & Use of English but I'm afraid I find this disjointed splattering of words totally incomprehensible when seen in isolation. Placed in the context of the book this has now ascribed new meaning as the random words can be associated to the project. At least I now know what I was supposed to be doing and glad that I did make a contribution.

Thank you once again for your kindness in giving me a signed copy of your impressive looking book to keep and treasure. And many thanks for all your hard work on behalf of Lewisham Council.

From Tom

Exhibition visitor

I saw your quite brilliant exhibition at the Horniman today, as a resident of Catford, it was so lovely to read some of the poems and descriptions of my area alongside the prints.

Is the accompanying book available to purchase? I asked at the Horniman book shop and they don't stock it. Your exhibition (and book) is the best thing I've seen to come out of the We Are Lewisham festival.

From Jean

Manor House Library Volunteer

Dear Dima, I'm a volunteer at Manor House Library. I read your book with great interest, and I wondered if you were aware of the Allan Ball Awards made annually for publications by local authorities and by community groups. The Awards are administered by the Library Services Trust and CILIP Local Studies Group. Entries for books published in 2022 are being submitted now, and the winners will be announced in March.

The library manager gave me your email address, and a copy of your book so I can post it without delay, in time for the judging of this year's Awards. I hope this will be OK with you.

Internal Landscapes is a lovely book, and reading it made me feel proud of the Lewisham I have lived and worked in for much of my life.

From Chia

Workshop Participant March and December

Sincere thanks to you for all your hard work and for being such an asset! I hope you're really proud of what you've achieved seeing this project through. The exhibition and the book are a triumph.

Saturday morning and yesterday evening were such lovely December workshops with great like-minded folk. A fantastic end to your project with so many shared memories and people's stories that I will treasure forever.

For me, somehow it seems fitting finishing the project surrounded by wonderful snow! Thank you so much for all your hard work on this project and for your caring approach. It was a real pleasure to work with you!

Dima Karout has 20 years' experience in managing art projects, curating and producing exhibitions, and designing publications and learning programmes. She specialises in socially engaged art and its contribution to museums, education, research, wellbeing and inclusive societies.

She is a trusted advisor on strategies and public programmes supporting complex innovative projects. Throughout her career, she promoted equality, inclusion and learning having authored and delivered diverse programmes at internationally renowned universities and humanitarian charities. She gained strong cultural awareness, multilingual and interpersonal communication skills and a global mind-set through international experience including Damascus, Paris, Montréal, and London.