

BODY (RE)FORMING

Creating textiles, sculptures and maps to spark conversations about how beauty standards impact our bodies and communities

We are a group of art students (aged 12 – 18) who wanted to explore the impact of beauty norms on our bodies and our communities. We had the opportunity to develop our ideas through our **schools research centre** about the pressure to conform to certain standards of what does or does not look good. This is the story of how our project has grown and inspired others to act.

"I don't think us girls should have to change who we are to please a stereotype or to please anybody else"
(Rotimi, Year 13)



Beauty norms

Constructed standards around what it "looks like" to be beautiful and attractive; people are judged on how well they meet that standard.

HAIR BY HOOD

"Tamed, shaved, dyed or straightened, hair is a material that has been used by humans to construct a portrait. Human hair is shaped to be a social indicator between individuals to communicate their status and cultural affiliations. Although hair's original state is characterized by richly diverse texture and colors, our idea of hair has been steadily standardized over the years by the cosmetics industry, media, and social conventions, making it akin to a uniform. (Alex Bizet, 2015)"

Working with the school's artist in residence **Alix Bizet**, we began exploring hair as a material that opens up debate around societal beauty standards.



We were invited to collect hair from local hairdressers, which unlocked conversations about the role of hair salons in our communities and in constructing our own sense of identity.



Once we had the hair we began **making felt** from it. Using a material that we had in our hands allowed us to focus less on our words and more on the activity, which enabled more creative thinking.



We created several felt squares that went towards creating a larger piece of felt. This was then shaped into a Hoodie. The hair in the hood therefore reflected the neighbourhood where the hair was collected.



Hair By Hood has been displayed at school and art venues where lots of students have been brought together to touch it and read it. The project sparked many conversations and ideas that have inspired other student-led projects exploring similar themes and concerns.

BODY SCULPTURES

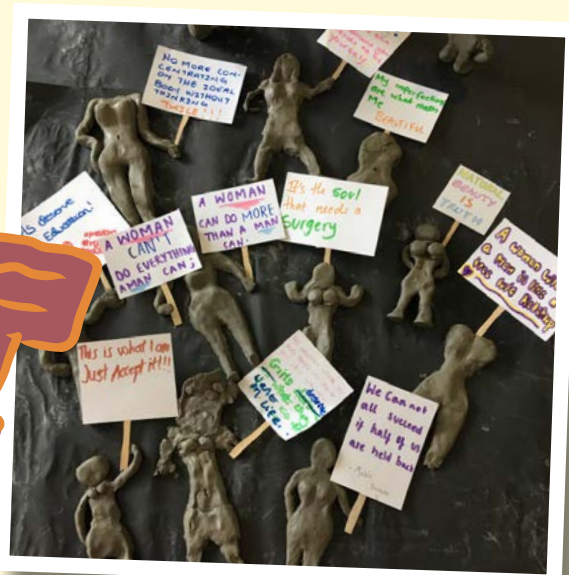
After the Hair by Hood project, we wanted to continue thinking through making as well as support other students to think about body image. Rotimi and CJ, two Year 10 textiles students, helped run a student-led workshop on beauty norms with Year 8 students.

They broke the ice with a monstrously wonderful game of consequences, which used drawing to help challenge ideas of perfection.



These discussions were continued through working with clay. Students shaped their clay into different body shapes. Clay is an interesting material to think with as it can be pounded, pressed and pulled into various forms, but it is also difficult to make it conform to the images we had in our heads. Working with the clay created space for mistakes and laughter, as well as connected with our own bodily struggles to achieve societal standards of perfection.

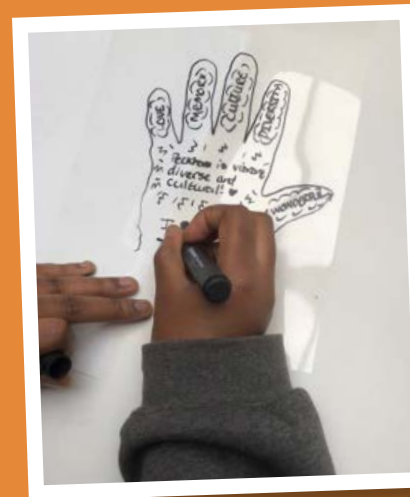
Once the figures were completed, we created feminist protest placards demanding equality and respect and activated the figures into defiant bodily poses.



THE CHANGING FACE OF OUR COMMUNITY

We have continued to think about beauty standards, and how they shape attitudes towards our local community. We live in an area that is experiencing a lot of change and gentrification. Working again with artist Alix Bizet, Ria and Ahamad had the opportunity to work on a project called Hairytage and contribute to a local exhibition. This included running a workshop on how gentrification matters to us, and exploring its impact on people in the area through hand tracing and mapping.

In the first part of the workshop, people were invited to draw around their hands and annotate them with their memories of the place. Working with hands helped open up conversations about community. The extended hand can be a symbol of friendship and support, it can also represent power and defiance.



"Gentrification is pushing one specific race out of the area, because it doesn't look 'appealing' and they are sticking the hairdressers all in one building because they want the area to look 'prettier'"
(Ria, Year 13)

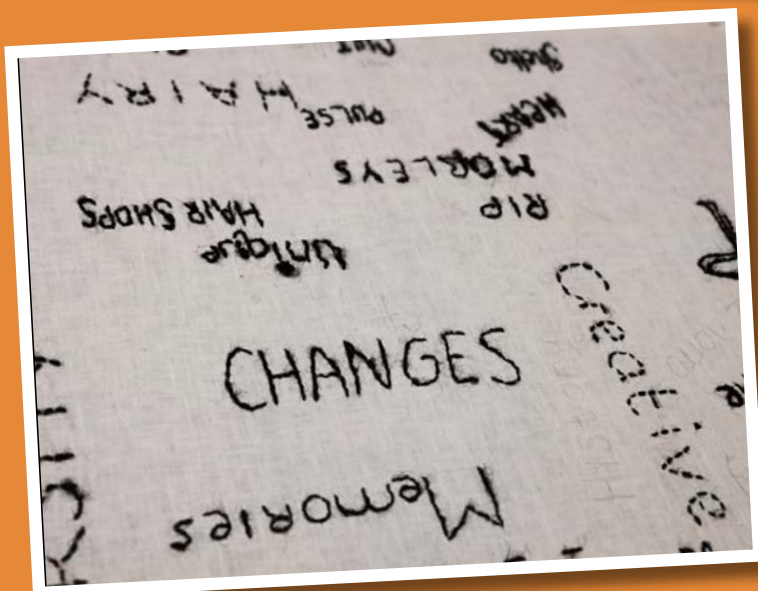
"We all know gentrifications going on, it comes up in the news but then it's discarded after a week. I wanted to really bring that up again, and see what we could do to change it."
(Ahamed, Year 13)

Gentrification

The process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in an area (such as an urban neighbourhood) accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people that often results in the displacement of earlier residents.
(Merriam Webster 2019)



Following on from this we used heart-shaped sticky notes and people wrote down all the things they love about living in the area. The sticky notes were then added to a map of the area. This got everyone talking about what it means to love an area, and how it feels when it changes around us. The stories that were shared in these workshops brought out the hidden histories of the place.



"It was really interesting to find out what the deeper meaning and significance that hairdressers had in our local community" (Ria, Year 13)



Building on these conversations we invited people to pick a word that stood out to them, and weave it into a tapestry using thread made of human hair. The tapestry weaves together different strands from our ongoing exploration of beauty norms. We hope our tapestry continues to grow and gets people thinking about the changing face of our community.



Find out more about Alix Bizet's **work and exhibitions**

Watch the film, **Hair by Hood**

Centre for Creative Exploration

Read more Louise Rondel's work **using beauty products to craft responses to neighbourhood change** (pp. 25 – 28).

4 ways our socially accepted beauty ideals are racist

Can the beauty industry make-over the gender norms it created?

The truth can get a little hairy: reflections on body hair, feminism and trans-identity

Hairdressers train staff to spot signs of domestic abuse

Using clay to explore gender and bodies

I want to show you a body: thinking through gender, bodies and building different worlds, by Linda Stupart

What the rise of men's make-up means for masculinity

Body Activism Activity Guide

Women we see – a report into girls and women's views of gender, diversity and advertising in public places



DIY

BEAUTY MASH-UP

Re-framing our feelings about the beauty industry



Preparation: Select a range of beauty products (eyeliner, lipstick, nail varnish, hair extensions, fake tan, lashes etc) that you might find in your online or local store.

Get a big piece of thick card and use the beauty products to write, draw and make marks that express your feelings about the beauty industry.

1 Mash, Stir and Frame: cut up the images and text in the magazines that annoy or upset you. Empty the pieces into the bucket or carton. Stir with the sticks. Add the dye. Collect up small handfuls of mache and create a frame around your card. Sprinkle with glitter*

2 Un/titled?: Does your final piece have a name? A hashtag?

3 Body mash-up gallery: once you've finished your beauty map why not photograph the piece. Hold an exhibition or create an online gallery on Instagram, Flickr or another image hosting website, so others can view and read them.

Why not create a soundtrack of uplifting body positive songs to accompany your body-mashing worksho?



What you'll need

- Thick card (e.g. one side of a cardboard box)
- Beauty products
- Beauty magazines / online adverts
- Bucket or Carton
- Sticks
- Mache glue (**make your own** with flour, sugar, water and vinegar)
- Natural Dye
- Biodegradable glitter

* Anyone who has ever used glitter knows it gets everywhere. So why **glitter**? Glitter's capacity to linger long after an activity has happened, can be its power! Every time you spot some glitter, it will connect you back to how you were getting creative with mashing-up normative body ideals.

Extension activity

Find out more about how the beauty industry is trying to make-over the gender and sexual norms it has created over the years. How far does the beauty industry both work for and against normative ideals? Can the beauty industry advance social justice? Or is their promotion of inclusivity and justice just cosmetic? What new beauty norms are you seeing around you? Is the subversion of beauty ideals being commodified?

Before you begin adapting these activities for the children and young people in your setting, read the section on **Safety and Support**.

DIY

CLAY BODY SCULPTURES

What you'll need
Clay or play-doh

What more can a body do?

- 1 Using clay or play-doh begin squeezing, shaping and sculpting it into a body
- 2 Discuss the bodies that you are making with the people you are with:
 - Is it human, animal, cyborg?
 - Are they smooth and / or bumpy?
 - Hard and / or squishy?
 - What can your body do?
- 3 See if you can bring your body to life (e.g. through animation or film)
- 4 Who would you most want to share the story of your body-sculpture with? (friends, beauty agency, everyone, no-one)



"Clay is an interesting material to think with as it can be pounded, pressed and pulled into various forms, but it is also difficult to make it conform to the images in our heads"

"Working with the clay created space for mistakes and laughter, as well as connected with our own bodily struggles to achieve societal standards of perfection"

