

barbican

differently various

Large text exhibition guide



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Introduction

“We’re all human beings, but we’re differently various. What’s ‘normal’ is much bigger than people think. And it includes people with a brain injury.”

Chris Miller

Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, Headway East London is a charity based in Hackney that supports over 700 people affected by brain injury annually across 13 boroughs, and has grown into an empowering, creative community for brain injury survivors. In 2019, the charity became the Barbican’s first Community Collaborator, piloting a partnership based on two-way exchange and learning. *differently various* – a takeover of The Curve and the first exhibition co-produced by people living with brain injury – is the culmination of this four-year partnership. The title emerged as an expression that Headway East London member Quentin Goss used to describe their community. As fellow member Billy Mann explains, ‘At its root, the phrase *differently various* reflects openness and acceptance, a generosity of spirit and a celebration of otherness. It is a torch worth carrying down even the rockiest of roads.’

The vision of this exhibition is to recreate the places, spaces and creativity of the community at Headway East London. *differently various* honours their voices and perspectives through four journeys: Experience, Learning, Creativity and Community. Sharing the artwork and stories of individuals who have experienced brain injury alongside a series of member-led events, this exhibition welcomes you into the vitality of its Hackney centre and art studio, **Submit to Love**.

Starting with the question ‘who gets to be an artist?’, *differently various* has been co-produced with a Steering Group of 11 Headway members and volunteers who have been meeting for over a year. They set the vision

and direction and have taken major creative decisions collectively, from choosing the title to recruiting the designers. Actively contributing as artists and decision-makers, their passion shines through in what you are about to experience.

Experience

“My stroke happened overnight. I went to bed on Friday 13th February and woke up on Valentine’s Day to find I’d had a stroke in my sleep. My 31-year career as a graphic designer ended overnight. I spent the best part of a year in hospital. In 2016, I started coming to Headway one day a week, and discovered the joy of painting.”

Mike Poole

At Headway East London, every member has an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). ABI has many different causes including strokes, meningitis, encephalitis, and brain tumours, but also injuries to the head caused by things like car accidents (known as Traumatic Brain Injury or TBI).

Brain injuries can happen to anyone, and every brain injury is different. Experiencing a brain injury is traumatic. The effects can be wide-ranging and severe, with lifelong consequences – such as losing your job, relationships, memories, and even your identity. Some effects of brain injury are visible, affecting your body and mobility. However, many of the effects can be invisible – affecting your cognition, behaviour, and emotions too – making brain injury often a hidden disability.

Learning

"I couldn't walk or talk so I was transferred to rehab. I had a whole team helping me 24/7. I'll never forget the Occupational Therapist who told me "You are going to walk" and I said "You're joking!" and she said, "You will." It sounds silly, but we used children's books to relearn words. I had to go back to childhood and begin again."

Jackie Pingue

Living with brain injury is a journey, and not always an easy one. Learning to answer the question "Who are you now?" is a big part of this journey. Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) survivors are confronted with obstacles to their recovery like prejudice, access to healthcare and equality in society.

Headway East London's vision is for people living with brain injury to experience a world which is accessible to them, and where their contributions are valued and celebrated. They believe that every member has something to contribute to both Headway and the wider community. Members participate in occupational projects that inspire new, and perhaps unexpected, identities like artist, chef and musician.

Creativity

“Making art at Headway East London has helped me become who I am. I wouldn’t be the artist I am without the studio. It has given me a lot of confidence and done a lot for my self-esteem.”

Sam Jevon

Creativity can be a powerful tool for recovery, communication and self-expression. A brain injury can change how you perceive the world, and how you perceive yourself, leading to new outlets of artistic expression that help people accept and develop from their brain injury, as well as take on new identities: as artists.

At Headway East London, some members discover newfound creativity following their brain injury – undiscovered talents that they develop week after week in the **Submit to Love** art studio, as named by member Tony Allen. It is a buzzing and open environment, and is home to all the artists living with brain injury that you see in this exhibition.

For **Submit to Love**, the act of making is an empowering and hopeful one. In making something, you’re discovering new gifts, new cultures, and new connections. That’s why their mission is “discovery through art”. Art that is by everyone, for everyone.

Community

“I’m always in awe of my fellow brain injury survivors, their sheer strength and achievements, the journeys they have been on and their honesty and openness. Not to mention our laughs when we sit around the table at lunch. We listen, learn and share.”

Firoza Choudhury

A strong community is important for social connection, a sense of belonging, and is essential to living life to the fullest. This is the community at Headway East London, which is bonded by the experience of brain injury and the value of encouraging everyone to be themselves. It is a place where members can access the support they need whilst being recognised as individuals. At Headway, brain injury is not a barrier. It is a place of belonging.

The heart of Headway East London is its centre – a space of fun, food, music, dance and games. From cooking a delicious daily lunch together, to joining in a music jam or singing happy birthday, members are at the core of the community. Everyone – members, staff, volunteers and visitors – are a valued and celebrated part of this powerful community.

