



*Place Setting*  
*Nina Thomas*

PRICE TWO PENCE

# PLACE SETTING

12 mins, 2023

A film by Nina Thomas

Sound design: Chu-Li Shewring

Captions by Care-fuffle Working Group and Nina Thomas

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Rhiannon Ewing-James

For LUX:

Benjamin Cook  
Sun Park

Interviewees:

Malcolm Johnson and Anne Cartlidge

BSL interpreter:

Steve Bostock

Interviews filmed and edited by  
Connor Wells

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dDeaflinks Staffordshire, The Willows School, Spode Museum Trust, and using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Place Setting is a new film by artist Nina Thomas, commissioned by Animate Projects and British Ceramics Biennial.

Place Setting refers to a set of tableware for dining, and also resonates with how lives are shaped by a particular culture, industry and workers. The film explores themes of loss, memory and community, and what it is to live in and work in a hearing world.

In developing the work, Nina researched local archives and met with deaf former ceramic industry workers in Stoke-on-Trent, and shown alongside the film is a video of interviews with Malcolm Johnson and Anne Cartlidge, deaf former ceramic industry workers in The Potteries.

British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke on Trent  
23 September - 5 November 2023

QUAD, Derby  
25 January – 25 February 2024

LUX London  
6 April – 19 May 2024



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**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

# Nina Thomas

Nina Thomas grew up in Staffordshire, and now lives in London. She studied illustration at the University of Derby and has MA in Art and Media Practice from the University of Westminster. She works mainly with film and installation, exploring overlooked or under-explored stories and histories. Her recent work has focused on her experience of becoming deaf and subsequently seeking to understand other deaf experiences and histories. Exhibitions include The Crypt Gallery, London and OVADA, Oxford.

Nina is profoundly deaf, and as a founding member of The Film Bunch, a deaf and hard of hearing film organisation, she has curated the online screening Deaf Experience and was commissioned by Pan Macmillan to create an animation for poet Raymond Antrobus. Her film Silence was commissioned and exhibited by LUX, London in 2020. She has worked on access and advisory projects at the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Wallace Collection, National Disability Art Collection and Archive, The British Museum, Shape Arts and the D4D research programme. Nina is a trustee at Stagertext.

“ There is a history of cinema as a space in which deaf people and hearing were equally included – early cinema and silent films were accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences. Perhaps we are in a time now where technological developments, the nature of global communication and social media might see this space open up again. How we view films is changing all the time – hearing audiences are often viewing without sound, because they are viewing on phones or handheld devices.

A deaf artist's cinema might decide that rather than privileging English language it would explore alternative structures, narratives and signifiers – which don't follow English language grammatical and narrative structure. How also might our relationship to the body and other senses be considered? “

Interview with Nina Thomas, March 2021  
[lux.org.uk/nina-thomas-interview](http://lux.org.uk/nina-thomas-interview)



[sound of deaf silence]



[sound of the body]

# On Place Setting

## Nina Thomas

In June 2022, at the start of my research for *Place Setting*, I visited dDeaflinks in Stoke-on-Trent. I wanted to see if anyone there might have gone to The Mount School for the Deaf, and then worked in The Potteries. At the time, dDeaflinks were losing their building, and we talked a lot about this loss. I was interested in what it means to lose these physical spaces, and how we make space for the complexity of this loss, in the face of the outward signs of progress that are also happening within the deaf community and mainstream culture.

In post-industrial towns we are still grappling with a sense of deep loss: the loss of industry, of community and social spaces, and the loss of meaningful labour. These experiences of loss have sometimes been exploited for political gain or to further a particular agenda. I believe that we need places where we can hold space for loss, particularly in secular society, where sites for mourning and community are diminishing. Such spaces begin the process of healing through community, care and connection with each other. We begin to see ourselves not as individuals competing for scarce resources, or simply products or consumers, but as human beings, interconnected and with a shared responsibility for each other, the world we inhabit, and our future.

I'm grateful that many of those working in contemporary ceramics are thinking about exactly these issues, projects like The Portland Inn Project, Clayground Collective and the BCB. I want to draw attention to this work, and consider how we might also create a space for loss – a process that also

begins to think about what we want to preserve and rebuild, in order to build the future we want together.

For an older generation of deaf people who lived through the extremes of an oralist education, the church was where they often found their language, identity and created a community. These community centres became hubs that allowed deaf people to meet, support each other, share their experiences living in a hearing world, and thrive. Eventually, this led to the rights movement and deaf people felt empowered to challenge some paternalistic structures such as oralism and the role of the missionaries in their lives. But now these clubs, which hold so much important history and culture, are being lost. More deaf people are finding themselves mainstreamed or are part of an online community. Online communities - while valuable – inevitably offer something different to local community buildings.

Deaf history is rooted in deep trauma arising from oralism, eugenics, language deprivation, oppression, and marginalisation. We need to remember this history too. To understand this trauma, and this deep and complex history, must surely result in a resolve not to perpetuate the structures and systems that further marginalise, silence, and exclude deaf people. In making *Place Setting*, I was consciously aiming not to speak on behalf of those I met, but instead to explore these issues from my perspective. Too often, hearing or non-disabled people are still the ones making the decisions for us. I worry that access is often performative, a gesture - a one off BSL tour

or a captioned screening. We are allowed into spaces temporarily, but we are not given access in any meaningful way. Our position still remains one of the outsider. It's sometimes assumed that we do not know what is best for us, or that we can't possibly speak for ourselves or understand what is happening. Worse still, I have seen organisations financially benefit from our unpaid labour and from undertaking work that we might have been more qualified to do, whilst we remain marginalised and often simply trying to survive. We are often denied any possibility of acquiring the skills and knowledge to become empowered to speak for ourselves.

We must all recognise our own privilege or lack of privilege, and centre ourselves appropriately. I want to have uncomfortable conversations that might help realise my dreams about what access work might be more broadly; I'd like to permanently embed the change that's needed in our communities. But let's not smooth out or erase complexity or difficulty. This work shouldn't be tokenistic. It might not be perfect, and we need to hold on to the fact that the world we want to build will take time, love, care and attention. We shouldn't give up on the project because of its difficulty or complexity.

I love living in a profoundly deaf body. This way of experiencing the world is beautiful, rich and so particular, that I struggle to express it in words. It brings new insights and is a different way of being. I don't experience deafness as a deficit. However, when we talk about being deaf in a positive way we often only talk about the cultural

and linguistic experiences of deafness. I believe we should also recognise the bodily experience of being deaf, as a rich space for exploration – of what it means to live in a deaf body and what it feels like to inhabit this deaf space. In this space I think about what sound is, how it's received, and how language is experienced and received differently depending on our bodily and lived experiences. There are so many ways to listen and hear, and I want to explore all this in my work.

Working with Chu-Li Shewring, who created the sound, was a fascinating process. In my work as a captioning consultant, I'm often listening to sounds that I can't fully hear, and trying to understand what sound is there, and why it might be there. It's interesting to do this process in reverse, from a deaf perspective – to imagine sounds, and then ask somebody to create those sounds for you. It was a collaborative process and Chu-Li was open to this way of working. I made the film without my processor on; I didn't hear any external sound as I worked, and so it's from this perspective that I imagined what sound was and what it might mean in this film. I created sound captions and asked Chu-Li to create the sound in response. I wrote captions like [sound of hope emerges] or [the beats and tones of the city] and asked her to interpret these captions into sound. I also wanted to explore the idea of poetic captioning and worked with CareFuffle Working Group on the final captions. CareFuffle were able to bring their own experience to this project and also offered a collaborative and creative approach. The process of making the film demonstrates a way for deaf and hearing

artists to work together to create accessible work. Sound is subjective; infused with other meanings, connection, memories, time, place and feeling, and I wanted to consider all of this when working. I was also interested in the idea of having my voice in the film, as I exist in my deaf body; because English is my first language, I chose this voice of a silent narrator. I hope the film allows the viewer to think about what sound, memory and language is to them.

One of the biggest employers in Stoke is bet365, epitomising a change from the traditional skilled manual labour of the area to a service industry. I am really interested in the alienation from our labour and the loss of work done by hand. BSL is a language of the body. There are things that can only be expressed in BSL that we miss in translation to English. We often forget what it means to communicate through the body, and how we all might benefit from learning BSL to express ourselves. Before *Place Setting*, I'd been exploring ideas of clay from a deaf perspective as a bodily material and language, from a deaf perspective. I am interested in clay as a material and its potential to offer ways of seeing or being, that relate also to my experience of living in a deaf body, and the way of being in the world that this offers me. I like the idea of this space as a certain kind of *attending* to the world or as an alternative way of listening. I am interested in what a 'deaf silence' is.

An important part of the *Place Setting* project is the opportunity to draw attention to what is happening in communities outside London and how recent cuts to services, the cost of living and redevelopment are having a direct and particular impact on the lives of deaf and disabled people. I would like to see organisations like dDeafLinks properly supported and be given the resources they need to support deaf people and to preserve the regional language, deaf history, community and local culture. On a national level, I believe learning BSL should be free for all deaf people; it should be taught at all

levels and parents should be encouraged to make sure their deaf children have access to both BSL and English. Cochlear implants do not make us hearing people; they are a tool and it helps, but I am still profoundly deaf. All deaf people should have access to sign language and should have the opportunity to learn about their cultural, linguistic and social heritage. Bear in mind that deaf people are twice as likely to experience mental illness, which I believe can be linked to experiences of isolation and marginalisation. I am pleased to see the recent BDA "BSL in Our Hands" initiative. I imagine a future where everyone has access to sign language.

### **Oralism and Audism**

Oralism was an approach to teaching deaf students that privileged spoken language over sign and forced deaf students to speak rather than sign. The Milan Conference in 1880 was a significant event in Deaf history. At this conference a group of influential, predominantly hearing people, decided that an oralist education (spoken language) was superior to manual education (sign language). This led to the loss of many deaf teachers and to the suppression of BSL. Deaf students often had their hands tied behind them to prevent them communicating. Deaf education became focused on speech therapy, lip-reading and learning English, rather than BSL, forcing deaf children who couldn't hear to speak. The medicalisation of deafness and oralism still persists today, many deaf schools have closed and many deaf students still have little or no access to BSL. Deaf students are encouraged to have cochlear implants and speak, to assimilate in a hearing world. They are discouraged from thinking of themselves as deaf. The aim of oralism was to remove the need for deaf communities to exist at all. A combined method would acknowledge deafness and would allow access to both English and BSL for deaf children.

### **Alexander Graham Bell**

While many recognise Alexander Graham Bell as the inventor of the telephone, he is also known within the Deaf community for his impact on deaf education and involvement in oralism. Bell believed that an oralist approach to education was preferable and developed a method of teaching deaf children called 'visible speech'. He supported the removal of deaf teachers from Deaf schools and encouraged 'The Oral Method' to be taught in all deaf schools. Bell was also concerned about the creation of a 'deaf race', hereditary deafness, the promotion of sign language and deaf intermarriage. The promotion of his views had the effect of suppressing sign language and of encouraging the medicalisation of deafness. The impact of this approach is still felt today.

Audism is the belief that to hear makes one superior.

*I found myself and others coining a new label of 'Deafhood.' Deafhood is not, however, a 'static' medical condition like 'deafness.' Instead, it represents a process - the struggle by each Deaf child, Deaf family and Deaf adult to explain to themselves and each other their own existence in the world. In sharing their lives with each other as a community, and enacting those explanations rather than writing books about them, deaf people are engaged in a daily praxis, a continuing internal and external dialogue. This dialogue not only acknowledges that becoming and maintaining 'Deaf', but also reflects different interpretations of Deafhood, of what being a Deaf person in a Deaf community might mean.*

### **Paddy Ladd, Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood (2003)**

*The deaf child of hearing parents discovers with joy the solidarity of the deaf world, which replaces the incomprehension and alienation of his hearing home and, frequently, hearing school. The discovery of a deaf community is fraught with emotional and symbolic significance; it is a rite of passage that is told over and over in deaf autobiography. The most common metaphor is a coming home, a new family.*

### **Harlan Lane, The Mask of Benevolence: disabling the Deaf community (1999)**

*Like the paternalism of the colonizers, hearing paternalism begins with defective perception, because it superimposes its image of the familiar world of hearing people on the unfamiliar world of deaf people. Hearing paternalism likewise sees its task as "civilizing" its charges: restoring deaf people to society. And hearing paternalism fails to understand the structures and values of deaf society.*

### **Harlan Lane, The Mask of Benevolence: disabling the Deaf community (1999)**

British Sign Language (BSL) has its own grammatical structure and syntax, as a language it is not dependent nor is it strongly related to spoken English. The British Deaf Association estimates that there are over 150,000 BSL users in the UK, of whom 87,000 are deaf.

In April 2022, the British Sign Language Act legally recognised BSL as a language of England, Scotland and Wales, requiring the government to publish reports on how the language is used in its public communications and issue guidance on promoting its usage.

There are 45,000 deaf children in England.

One in four councils in England have no specialist teaching units for deaf children. 9% have closed in the last five years.

340 deaf children live in Stoke-on-Trent, where there is one specialist unit.

775 children live in Staffordshire, with no specialist unit.

The national average is one unit for 197 children.

National Deaf Children's Society, February 2022

## dDeaflinks

dDeaflinks, Staffordshire began as North Staffordshire Adult Deaf and Dumb Society in 1868, in a small rented classroom in Hanley. In the 1930s, with its own building, it became the Church and Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, providing weekly meetings and religious services for Deaf people, and support in all aspects of members lives, including finding employment and housing.

It was renamed The Ellis Memorial Centre for the Deaf in 1976, in honour of Joe Ellis, who had been Principle and Secretary for 45 years.

A name change in 2001 to dDeaflinks Staffordshire aimed to indicate two groups represented - the lower-case d representing the hard of hearing and the capital D representing those who are profoundly deaf and use BSL as their means of communication. Services and support to the dDeaf community are equally in demand today as they were in 1868. Today, dDeaflinks' activities include social groups, from toddlers to 50+ Bingo and signed singing, support services, courses in British Sign Language and Deaf awareness, and providing interpretation services. dDeaflinks is proud to continue its strong history offering support and empower dDeaf people.

[deaflinksstaffordshire.com](http://deaflinksstaffordshire.com)

# Anne and Malcolm



Above image: Anne, Malcolm, Nina  
Images right: Connor Wells

The North Staffordshire School for the Blind and Deaf, established in 1897, was the first residential school for deaf children founded under the Elementary Education Act of 1883. Based in the former mansion of potter Josiah Spode II, it became The Mount School for the Deaf in the 1980s and closed in 2000.

As part of her research, Nina interviewed Malcolm Johnson and Anne Cartledge, who had been pupils at The Mount School for the Deaf in Stoke-on-Trent in the 1960s/1970s and went on to spend their working lives in the Potteries. The interviews were filmed at the former school.

Malcolm's mother taught him to write, and his father taught him about the Potteries. He worked at Spode and many other potteries, making coffee pots, teapots, vases and plates. No one used sign language where Malcolm worked, but there were other deaf people in the industry, and whilst they worked in different places, they socialised at the Ellis Centre – now dDeaflinks. Malcolm has been a member since 1964 and is now a trustee; he was taught sign language at the Ellis Centre church.

*I was four and a half years old when I came here, so 1953. I used to board, so I didn't go home. I only went home at the holiday time, so Easter, Christmas, summer holiday. So it is quite emotional being back here.*

*I was only small, obviously, so I can't remember much about it. I can remember the teachers, but there was no sign language allowed. I can remember that.*

*They would say, "if you sign, you're lazy – you have to learn how to lip read." For Deaf people, it's really hard. We would sign when the teachers weren't looking.*

*We used to wear a box around the neck and we had the headphones, and then people used to speak to the hearing aid.*

*I used to go to the Deaf club and there was lots of deaf people there and it was really,*

*really enjoyable. And we could all communicate. We talked about sports, and there was darts, dominos, crib, bingo. We used to travel to Wolverhampton, to Manchester, Birmingham. And any problems we had, there used to be someone that came on an evening and then we could sort any issues out.*

*At that time, there was no technology, there was no mobile phone, and people had to go to the Deaf club to find out about things. So it was really important that we could meet.*

Anne went to The Mount when she was about five.

*I can remember saying I didn't want to come. And then I started mixing with the other children and it was enjoyable.*

*It's about 50 years since I left here. Feels a bit emotional, obviously. But it is nice to be back. I think I just about remember walking down the corridors and the different classrooms.*

*Some teachers could sign, but they didn't actually teach us sign language. I just picked it up from the other children, and we all just signed together.*

*I left school on the Friday and got the job on the Monday. I did different jobs in the pottery industry, and eventually started lithographing, and worked at quite a few different factories at that time.*

Anne worked in a predominantly hearing environment, often experienced discrimination, and had to advocate for herself. When Anne's work was undervalued in comparison to her hearing co-workers she complained to personnel, and the union, and action was taken.

*It was hard being discriminated against. Sometimes others wouldn't speak with you and they'd just walk off. Every time I moved to a new job I had to start everything again.*

*You have to stand up for yourself and have confidence in doing that.*

*My parents didn't know about dDeaflinks. They didn't really know much about deafness. The school never informed me or anyone about there being a deaf club.*

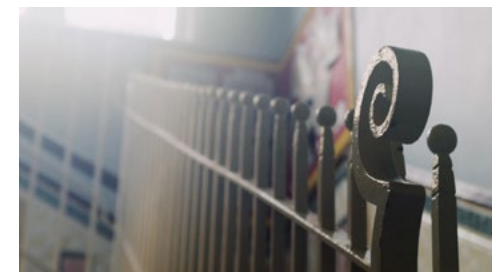
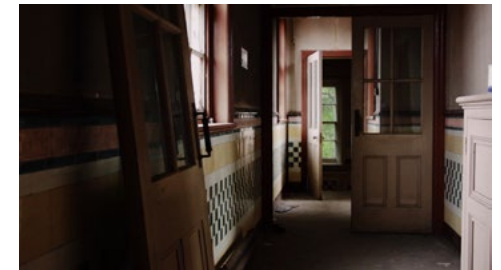
*I went straight into work. And then I found out about dDeaflinks. I was quite shocked*

*that there were so many deaf people there. I would have gone if I had known earlier.*

*And then I met my husband there, at dDeaflinks.*

*I think it's important to learn sign language. My parents didn't know much about deafness, didn't learn any sign language. And that made me a little bit angry, frustrated.*

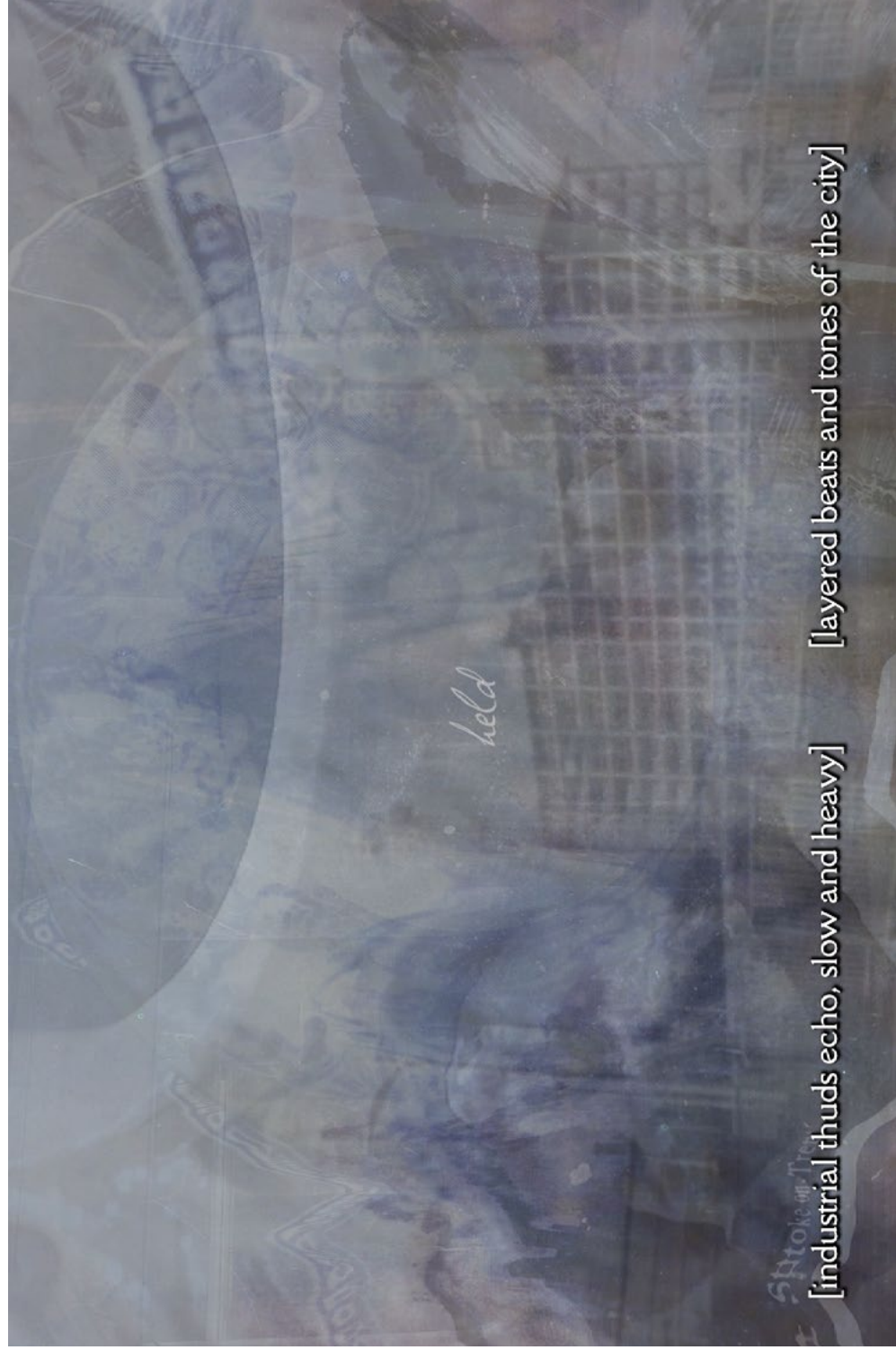
*I'm really proud of using sign language. It's part of my culture. It is a language in its own. And it's quite a powerful language.*







*the deaf body is never silent*



*held*

[industrial thuds echo, slow and heavy]

[layered beats and tones of the city]

# Links

Action Deafness  
[actiondeafness.org.uk](http://actiondeafness.org.uk)

British Deaf Association  
[bda.org.uk](http://bda.org.uk)

British Deaf History Society  
[bdhs.org.uk](http://bdhs.org.uk)

BSL Timeline  
[ucl.ac.uk/british-sign-language-history/bsl-timeline](http://ucl.ac.uk/british-sign-language-history/bsl-timeline)

British Deaf News  
[britishdeafnews.co.uk](http://britishdeafnews.co.uk)

dDeaflinks Staffordshire  
[deaflinkstaffordshire.com](http://deaflinkstaffordshire.com)

DEAFvibe  
[deafvibe.co.uk](http://deafvibe.co.uk)

The Limping Chicken: the world's most popular deaf blog!  
[limpingchicken.com](http://limpingchicken.com)

National Deaf Children's Society  
[ndcs.org.uk](http://ndcs.org.uk)

Royal Association for Deaf People  
[royaldeaf.org.uk](http://royaldeaf.org.uk)

Stagetext  
[stagetext.org](http://stagetext.org)

Care-fuffle  
[care-fuffle.com](http://care-fuffle.com)

Clayground Collective  
[claygroundcollective.org](http://claygroundcollective.org)

The Portland Inn Project  
[theportlandinnproject.com](http://theportlandinnproject.com)

# Partners

Animate Projects produces and curates art projects across animation, film and art. Established in 2007, it works with a wide range of partners, supporting artists to create thought provoking, collaborative projects, engaging the public in the process, and through exhibition across broadcast, cinema, museum, festival, gallery, online and digital platforms.


[animateprojects.org](http://animateprojects.org)

The British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) launched in 2009 with a festival celebrating and showcasing contemporary ceramics from across the world. Set in Stoke-on-Trent – the heart of the UK ceramics industry, the festival takes place in established venues and non-traditional spaces across the city. The BCB programme includes artists' residencies, fellowships, commissions, education and enterprise projects, in partnership with organisations and individuals in the museums, cultural, industry, business, education, community and voluntary sectors across the city.

[britishceramicsbiennial.com](http://britishceramicsbiennial.com)

Based in London and Glasgow LUX is an arts organisation and museum that supports and promotes artists working with the moving image. Originally founded in 1966 as the London Filmmakers Co-operative, it represents an over 50 year history of artists' engagement with the moving image in the UK. As well as organising exhibitions, education programmes, commissioning, artists professional development and research LUX represents Europe's largest collection of films and videos made by visual artists and the only such significant collection in the UK.

[lux.org.uk](http://lux.org.uk)

The logo for Animate Projects features a large, stylized black letter 'P' with a diagonal slash through it. To the right of this symbol, the words 'Animate Projects' are written in a clean, sans-serif font, with 'Animate' on the top line and 'Projects' on the bottom line.The logo for the British Ceramics Biennial consists of a stylized, magenta-colored graphic on the left that resembles a continuous, looping ribbon or a ceramic form. To the right of this graphic, the words 'British Ceramics Biennial' are written in a magenta, sans-serif font, stacked in three lines: 'British', 'Ceramics', and 'Biennial'.The logo for LUX features a circular graphic on the left that resembles a camera lens aperture or a stylized flower. To the right of this graphic, the word 'LUX' is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font.

Designed by Daniel Hawley-Lingham

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SUPPOSING YOU SUDDENLY BECAME DEAF! WHAT THEN?