

# **AYAH – SIGN: COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL ART WITH THE GRENFELL COMMUNITIES**

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**Oliver Gingrich** is an artist and researcher, currently based at the National Centre for Computer Animation at Bournemouth University. Oliver Gingrich focuses on the potential of media arts as a vehicle for social change. His research centres around conceptions of presence, immersive media and the potential of media arts for local communities as a means for social connectedness and social cohesion. With the Art collective Analema Group, Oliver Gingrich explores visual sound as transformative, immersive experiences focusing on participatory arts practices (Tate Exchange, National Gallery). Oliver is Lecturer at the University of Greenwich. As co-founder of ART IN FLUX, Oliver curates media arts talks, workshops and exhibitions - including AYAH - Sign in collaboration with Dr. Sara Choudhrey.

**Sara Choudhrey** is a London-based artist and researcher, using an investigative process to explore themes of space and place. Sara's practice involves the analysis, construction and application of patterns using a variety of media, where geometry and biomorphic forms become reference points to spaces, objects, concepts and locations around the world. Sara is interested in human engagement with the material world and spaces, both natural and man-made, and considers their impact on each other beyond a specific time and place. Pursuing the concept of continuity, Sara has conducted practice-led research on visual culture from medieval Spain and Portugal, Mughal era sites in Pakistan and Islamic art in the British Arts & Crafts Movement. Through both her research and artworks, Sara raises the question of whether hybrid art presents an affinity to an ever-globalising and hybrid society, seeking inspiration through spaces where cultures intersect. The results are hybrid in both practice and media and include examples of light art, interactive installations, painting, sculpture and etching.

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#### **Acknowledgements**

This research has been supported by the Arts Council England and RBKC Arts and Culture.

## Abstract

Coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the Grenfell tragedy, local artistic practitioners Oliver M. Gingrich, of media art platform ART IN FLUX, and artist researcher Sara Choudhrey, curated a series of workshops and events as part of the project AYAH – Sign. Significantly, the project places collaboration at all stages of its conception, implementation, and its outcome. Members of the local community and the wider general public were invited to explore new forms of artistic practice with a focus on Islamic pattern-making. These practice-based community-focused activities contributed towards a collaborative digital artwork, publicly displayed as a site-specific installation opposite the Grenfell Tower site. The participatory activity and artwork were designed to bring the community together in a time of need, to provide mutual support through joint creative engagement. Social connectedness, i.e. the experience of belonging, and relatedness between people (Van Bel et al 2009), is becoming an increasingly important concept in the discussion of social benefits of media including participatory art practices (Bennington et al. 2016). This paper reflects on the potential for art to bring communities together, to contribute to wellbeing and social-connectedness and providing a more inclusive experience for a range of community members. The project was conceived within the context of deeper research into participatory art and its potential to contribute to mental wellbeing, providing social cohesion for communities and acting as a creative support strategy in times of need. Collaborative art practices, such as AYAH - Sign, not only inspires further creativity among local residents through collaborative engagement, but also encourages community members to reconnect both physically and emotionally with one another.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Community Practice, Digital Art, Islamic Digital Art, New Media Art, Social Connectedness, Arts and wellbeing,

## AYAH - Sign: Genesis of the project and collaboration

During the summer of 2018, a year after the Grenfell fire in North Kensington, London, the project AYAH – Sign was conceived by the artists Sara Choudhrey and Olive Gingrich as a response to the tragedy in support of local residents. Ayah is an Arabic term meaning ‘sign’ or ‘verse’ and was chosen as both a literal and symbolic title for the project. AYAH - Sign was intended to cultivate a sense of community through a focus on Islamic art and pattern-making, whilst demonstrating cross-cultural connectivity and providing insights into digital art practice as an additional area of interest for those unfamiliar with contemporary developments in Islamic art.

The opportunity to produce AYAH – Sign was propelled as a response to local council support for arts activities that incorporated community participation, particularly in the locality of the Grenfell Tower in West London where both Sara Choudhrey and Oliver Gingrich were based. The proposal to work together in developing and instigating the AYAH – Sign project was through mutual resonance to contribute towards a meaningful cause, whilst bringing together a number of varying digital skillsets to best implement a collaborative creative intervention. Creative engagement has been frequently identified as a means to deal with loss and grief (Neimeyer 2015, Morris et al., 2020).

In 2017, a fire had ravaged the 24-storey, public-housing Grenfell Tower block in North Kensington, West London. The tragedy resulted in 72 deaths, numerous injured, and all survivors being displaced. The incident brought to light a number of underlying social inequalities where the neglect in ensuring the safety of the residents of the tower was deemed as discriminatory (Macleod, 2018). It was highly important that the significance of the incident, the impact on the local community and the importance placed on responding to concerns relating to the neighbourhood would be handled with sensitivity. However, the diaspora and heritage make-up of the community was

also to be taken into consideration in incorporating a relevant visual language.

The large proportion of Muslim residents within the Grenfell and North Kensington communities, as well as a history of celebration of Islamic art in North Kensington (Nour Festival of Arts), framed and contextualised the project AYAH - Sign and its focus on Islamic digital art, providing cultural meaning and relevance for local residents. Sara Choudhrey specialises in contemporary Islamic art and this was deemed an appropriate area for focus. Knowledge of Islamic art and design methods related to the field, particularly in relation to digital artistic practice, is little-documented yet is considered of interest to a general public (Choudhrey 2018).

Previous exhibitions of digital Islamic art have demonstrated a demand and interest in having more access to contemporary art based on Islamic visual culture. In July 2016, Sara Choudhrey curated an exhibition, *Seeing the Unseen*, at Four Corners gallery in East London. The premise of the exhibition, which included Choudhrey's installations exhibited alongside contemporary London-based artists Aphra Shemza, Sama Mara, Ruh al-Alam and Zarah Hussain, was aimed at determining interest in digital Islamic art. General public audiences were invited to view works prior to reading artist statements in order to understand how they would perceive the work. An exit questionnaire provided unanimously positive responses,



Fig. 1 AYAH - Sign workshop by Sara Chodhrey and Art in Flux.

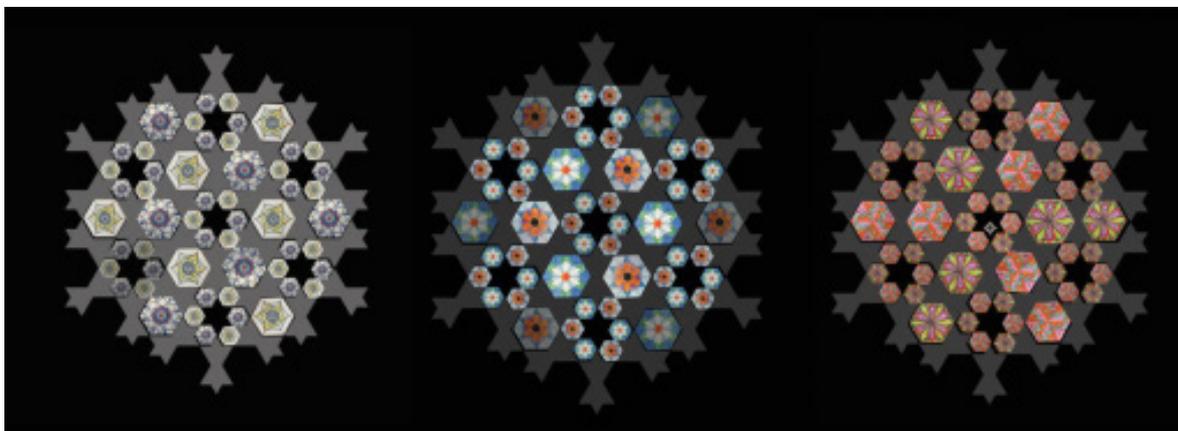


Fig. 2 AYAH - Sign – Still from collaborative animated artwork.

with visitors expressing interest in viewing further exhibitions of of similar work in the future (Choudhrey 2018).

The AYAH – Sign project took this into consideration in development of the project aims and outcomes. Therefore, the workshops and exhibition were designed to bring awareness to hybridised approaches to Islamic art and design whilst increasing understanding and engagement with arts relating to diaspora communities from the Islamic world, for both those familiar and unfamiliar with this area of art practice.

A further collaborative aspect to the project was partnership with Art in Flux, an arts organization based in London, with a focus on art and technology, which strives to break down barriers between technology, art and communities. Art in Flux provided the opportunity for media art to actively connect members of a dispersed community with one another. The context and setting were aimed at providing a creative and supportive environment and encourage social engagement among residents. The ambition to provide a forum for artistic creation, for reflection through creative practice and community support, aligns with Art in Flux’s ethos, the organization’s principles and objectives (Gingrich, et al. 2020).

Art in Flux was created in August 2016 by the artists Maria Almena, Aphra Shemza and Oliver Gingrich at Light in Soho Gallery, London. Responding to the need for media artists to discuss their respective practices, and to provide mutual support, Art in Flux aspires to fill a gap in the institutional UK media arts landscape. Art in Flux is also dedicated to providing visibility for underrepresented groups in the media arts and to break barriers to media arts engagement. Islamic digital art is one such example of arts that is considered outside of mainstream arts and the larger media arts field.

Maxilla Space where the AYAH – Sign workshops and exhibition were held, was generously provided for use by the Association for Cultural Advancement in the Visual Arts (ACAVA). Programme managers Isabella Niven, and Lisa Nash had been heavily involved in arts for the local community, working closely with those in the Grenfell neighbourhood and had thus established themselves as a trusted team and environment for community-led activities previously. ACAVA had also produced and programmed a number of projects that placed arts and well-being at the forefront of their work, making it an ideal partner and location for the AYAH – Sign project to be conducted with the local Grenfell community (ACAVA 2018).

The AYAH – Sign project would also benefit from making such art spaces more welcoming, portraying this as an accessible creative space for all by bringing together a number of local and creative communities. Social connectedness, i.e. the experience of belonging and relatedness between people (Van Bel et al 2009), is becoming an increasingly important concept in the discussion of social benefits of media including participatory art practices (Crisp, Beth 2010). The community would thus be involved in a connected creative activity contributing towards a new media creative project.

## Arts and Wellbeing for Community

In developing the AYAH – Sign project, the aims of working for the benefit of the local community set a foundation for the goals and aims for output and impact. Recent research suggests that participatory media arts experiences have a direct effect on wellbeing and social connectedness. (Tymoszuk, Fancourt, et al. 2020, Tejada et al 2020, All-Party Parliamentary Report 2017).

As Mike White put it 'A key benefit of the arts is that they may reveal and pronounce our spiritual values and our biological needs and limitations. Unlike clinical medicine, they cannot cure disease, but they can remove unease'; (White 2009, p.19).

The UK's long-standing tradition of investing in community arts in the context of health, including participatory arts, to provide socio-cultural cohesion, bringing local communities actively together through creative engagement activities, has evolved tremendously since the 1980s. The UK Government's Evidence Summary Report for the Role of Arts in Improving Health and Wellbeing (April 2020) points to strong evidence for community-engaged art programs to reduce loneliness and social isolation, specifically for adults aged 55+. In addition, 'intergenerational community arts projects have been reported to support relationships, personal development, social inclusion, social networks, confidence, and self-esteem

and develop a sense of social justice, empathy, and support for others' (DCMS report 2020).

In 2017, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) published the results of an inquiry into practice and research in the arts in health and social care (Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, 2017). The APPGAHW found that 82% of people in deprived communities across the UK enjoyed greater wellbeing after engaging with the arts, where participatory arts activities can help to alleviate anxiety, depression, and stress. In the context of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, residents in North Kensington had experienced trauma, stress and a severe strain on social cohesion. The calls for local arts activities were invited to play a particular role in bringing people together.



Fig. 3/ 4 Flyers for Art in FLUX' AYAH – Sign.

## AYAH - Sign Project output

In implementing the AYAH – Sign project a three-stage output was followed (from 23 June to 1 July 2018), the first being a series of pattern-based community workshops in geometric and floral motif design led by Sara Choudhrey. The second stage was the production of an animation produced with the community drawings, and the third was an exhibition showcasing the animation alongside artworks by local emerging

artists whose works can be described as examples of digital Islamic art (Choudhrey 2016). The artists included Sara Choudhrey, Zarah Hussain and Ben Johnson.

### *The Workshops*

Sara Choudhrey's artistic practice centres around the use of geometry and biomorphic floral motifs, combining digital and analogue techniques to create complex pattern compositions inspired by Islamic visual and material culture and surface design. For the AYAH – Sign workshops, Choudhrey developed a format which allowed local audiences of all ages to gain an understanding of some of the fundamental methods and techniques of Islamic pattern-making, teaching principles such as the use of rotation, symmetry and tiling. In four sessions, audiences learned how to create drawings that could be further expanded to create larger designs by continually tiling modular units such as hexagonal tiles.

It was important that a range of skills and experience were accounted for to accommodate the various ages of unknown participants that might attend the workshops. A number of tables were set up with a wide-range of art tools and materials, including hand-outs and various colouring mediums. This enabled participants to choose to be led through an activity step by step or work through activity sheets at their own pace, with little instruction required from assistants who were discreetly available should they be needed.

The activities were produced such that those under 9 years of age would not be shown how to use a compass but would be provided sheets for colouring and drawing freehand, as use of a compass can be difficult and requires some practice. Adults were shown and encouraged to try their hand at drafting patterns, with the compass used to establish proportional geometric divisions in a circle.

### *A collaborative artwork*

Through the course of two days and four workshops, 60 drawings were created by participants on paper. These were digitally photographed and subsequently digitised to Jpeg images to fit a modular hexagonal template by Sara Choudhrey using Adobe Photoshop, a graphic design software. These digitisations were then imported by Oliver Gingrich into Adobe After Effects, a motion graphics software, and animated one at a time into a larger isometric pattern composition. The 60 individual patterns were combined to create one seamless animation, constantly changing between community designs across the timeline. The full duration of the artwork spanned three minutes, a collaborative art piece becoming one cohesive network of modular pattern components, in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

### *Exhibition*

The collaborative animation then became part of the AYAH - Sign exhibition which ran from 28 June to 1 July 2018, at Maxilla Space. A physical display of artworks included work by established artists Zarah Hussain, Ben Johnson and Sara Choudhrey, contextualising and framing the display of the collaborative community artwork amongst contemporary digital Islamic art. The animation was projected within the same space that the workshops were held, providing continuity to their familiarity with the space. Following Joseph Beuys' credo, that everyone is an artist (Beuys 1973), the project was encouraging participants to return to see how their workshop drawings had contributed towards a digital artwork that they could also call their own,

### *Outdoor Display*

For the duration of the exhibition period, the display extended into a public outdoor display of the AYAH-Sign animation being projected onto the facade of the Kensington Leisure Centre, opposite the Grenfell Tower. A 10,000 lumen projection



Fig. 5 AYAH - Sign by Sara Choudhrey, Oliver Gingrich and the Grenfell Community – 2018.

was used to illuminate a brick and mortar wall for four hours each evening. Passers-by could see the collaborative artwork created by local community members, contributing to an example of digital Islamic art. Some members of the public were able to recognise the design elements as such.

The animation was later invited for screening at the local 'Portobello Film Festival' where it was viewed by thousands of visitors. By enabling both forms of outdoor display of the AYAH – Sign animation, it became a symbol of collaboration for a larger audience and enabled larger-scale awareness of the project. The 'sign' or message of the project was thus expanded too.

### Impact and further developments

The impact and learnings from AYAH – Sign were multi-fold, much like its foundation and output. In order to measure and evaluate the impact of the project, an anonymous questionnaire was used to collect data from workshop participants to gauge their response and experience in learning new creative skills and contributing to the artwork. The data revealed that the age of participants ranged from under 5 to over 65 years and all provided positive responses to their involvement in the project.

Comment-based feedback from participants was also welcomed, with most responses focussed on the environment that was created through the group activity. It was described

as a space for 'relaxation', 'mindfulness' and 'ease'. One particular participant returned for the second day of workshops too, as the sense of community within the space had cultivated an unpressured pace for creative output. Although the participant was living in the neighbourhood, the workshop had become a welcoming and alternative space for them to spend their time.

In regard to the specific creative activities of drafting geometric shapes and composing floral motifs to produce patterns, a number of participants showed willingness to expand their skills to produce larger compositions. They felt they had acquired new skills based on existing but untapped past knowledge.

Many older adult participants commented on not having used a compass and ruler for many years, since attending primary or secondary school (pre-16 schooling in the UK). Those who had used compasses, were familiar with basic circle division. This was the basis of the isometric pattern being referred to in the workshop, as this requires the least adjustment with the compass to develop a range of patterns.

The supporting material in the workshops, such as examples of historical surface design, allowed participants to make connections with the built environment, recognise how they could respond to natural flora and fauna in their local neighbourhood and incorporate these into creative output for their own personal fulfilment.

With the support of Art in Flux and ACAVA, the activities were widely published including in national and international newsletters (Yasmine, Computer Arts Society London, JISC and RBKC Mailing lists), and through local mosques' and library networks (North Kensington Library, White City Library). Accordingly, the offer of free workshops received substantial interest from the local community, resulting in workshops being booked prior to the activity. Making such activities free allowed for a more inclusive project, crucially enabled by support from a number of funding bodies (The local borough of

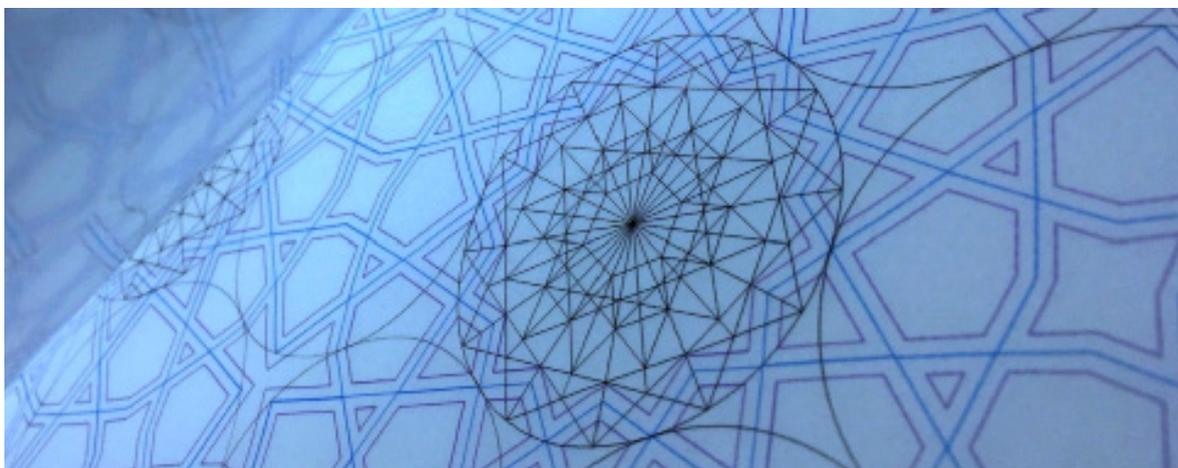


Fig.6 Sara Choudhrey.

Kensington and Chelsea and this leading to further support from the Arts Council England).

Further demonstration of the successful design and format of the AYAH – Sign project was evident in it forming the foundation for the commission and outcome of the 2020 Digital Light Codemakers at Bletchley Park event involving creative production from Sara Choudhrey. Choudhrey was invited by Milton Keynes Islamic Arts Heritage and Culture (MKIAC) to develop workshops with the local community in Milton Keynes and visitors at Bletchley Park, having them contribute towards an outdoor animated projection *Between the Stars*, which was developed in collaboration with creative technologist Pete Cleary (MKIAC 2020). The animation again used a modular hexagonal unit-based pattern, combining over 80 drawings of artworks produced by participants attending Islamic pattern-making workshops. Once digitised, these contributed towards an animation that resulted in over 240 tiled iterations of classic isometric patterns.

The further notable characteristic of this project format is its suitability for site-specific application. In the case of Bletchley

Park it could incorporate connections between computer science, algorithms and mathematics, whilst, enabling a wider understanding of the cross-disciplinary application of Islamic patterns.

It should be noted that Digital Light Code Makers was also a project funded by Arts Council England, its significance being the focus on developing understanding of digital and new media arts and technology in the context of both historical and contemporary developments in Islamic sciences and visual culture.

## Conclusion

The premise for AYAH - Sign was built on the foundations of collaboration for social benefit, connectedness and mental well-being (Mental Health Foundation’s Evidence Review on Participatory Art 2011), whilst adapting to a context sensitive to the immediate locality and community. In this case, the project considered participatory arts as having a societal role to play to bring communities together, to heal and to provide mutual support through creative engagement sensitive to the needs of the local Grenfell community.



Fig. 7 ACAVA's Maxilla Space, Westway.

The timing of the projection was significant, one year after the tragedy. The visibility of the piece, on a pedestrianised, public square opposite the tower, meant that passers-by were invited into the discourse of commemoration. AYAH - Sign consisted of a sign for local community members, a sign of literal and conceptual collaboration and social connectedness. AYAH - Sign was shown across four days of the exhibition, three days at the site of the tragedy, and subsequently screened at the Portobello Film Festival in Notting Hill, where it was seen by a further audience of thousands. The impact and significance of the project was highlighted at Sara Choudhrey's solo exhibition *Here and Beyond* (2019) by hosts and co-founders Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Greater social connectedness has been linked to a lower risk for cancer recurrence, higher survival rates following a heart attack, lower blood pressure, better immune responses, and better psychological well-being (Cohen 2004, Stansfeld 2006, Uchino et al 1996).

Research has provided ample evidence of the social impact of participatory art, for instance in providing social connectedness, empowerment and mental health (Hacking 2008). Recent studies have shown the effect of participatory art on loneliness and social isolation (Curtis et al 2018, Dadswell et al. 2020). The AHRC-funded HEartS Study on the health, economic and social impact of art suggests the overwhelming effect of art engagement on social connectedness, with 82%



Fig. 8 Workshops designed and conducted by Sara Choudhrey.

of participants (N=5892) reporting a perceived link between arts and social connectedness (Perkins, Williamson et al 2021, Gingrich et al 2020).

As Tom Richard, of the Kensington and Chelsea Social Council put it: *'Participatory art offers huge potential for highlighting the greatest issues of our time, engaging audiences who wouldn't otherwise consider or care about topics (..), and the accumulative effect that it has on our wellbeing.'*

The process of making, of sharing each other's company and engaging in joint creative practices was anchored in the spirit of commemoration. Claire Bishop points to the momentary, contextual, and non-visual nature of participatory art, and its dual nature as being a social activity as much as a symbolic one (Bishop 2012). This political and symbolic dimension, the idea of a sign by and for residents impacted by the Grenfell tragedy, was not just an incentive for the artists, but also the participating public. AYAH – Sign was supported by a number of organisations including the local Council who supported the initiative and exhibited it at the Kensington and Chelsea Townhall almost a year later, by the Arts Council England, who provided funding for the project, by the Portobello Film Festival, that screened the artwork to thousands of viewers, and by Ars Electronica Festival, where it had been nominated for a Prix Ars Electronica.

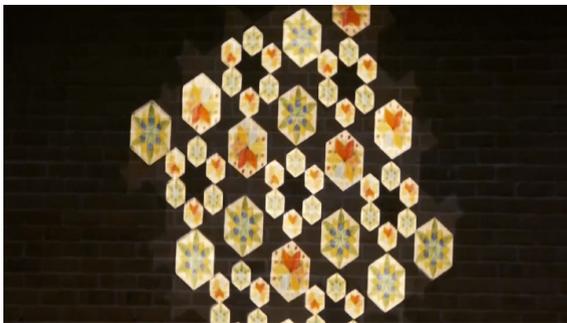


Fig. 9 AYAH projected onto Kensington Leisure Centre, June 2018.  
Project link & video: AYAH - FLUX ([artinfluxlondon.com](http://artinfluxlondon.com))

The resulting project of AYAH – Sign as a whole and specifically the digital animation were collaborative endeavours in a multitude of ways, by combining the artistic practices of both artists Sara Choudhrey and Oliver Gingrich alongside the artistic contributions of local residents and artists in displaying their work, whilst being enabled with the support of local arts and recreational. The collaborative process therefore became a vehicle and an artistic output in its own right, whilst enabling a higher level of engagement in both conventional and unconventional modes of art production and display.

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