

CHIEN-WEI CHANG



The image shows a close-up of a broken glass bottle that has been used as a canvas for an abstract artwork. The surface of the glass is covered in a complex, multi-layered pattern of colors and textures. The colors range from deep, dark browns and purples on the left to bright, vibrant blues and oranges on the right. The textures are varied, with some areas appearing smooth and others showing signs of cracking, scratching, and peeling. The overall effect is one of a rich, tactile surface that has been created through a process of destruction and reconstruction.

DON'T LOOK BACK!
I TOLD YOU SO

Front cover: *Found & Broken* (detail), 2011; broken glass bottle, found objects

TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE

BY FRANCES LORD



I last wrote about Chien-Wei's work in 2008¹ when the artist was living in London. Since then Chien-Wei's reputation has been consolidated by winning one of the coveted 2010 Jerwood Contemporary Makers Prizes, representation at *Collect* at the Saatchi Gallery in 2010–11, and participation in many group shows. He has also moved from the metropolis to the seaside town of Bournemouth and a very different lifestyle and environment in which to work.

At the time of my visit to Bournemouth four years later, in preparation for writing this essay, Chien-Wei was settling in with many personal possessions and work still stored in boxes. The garden workshop, however, was fully set up and as productive and organised as his former London workshops; the space made personal with a small selection of functional found objects and kitchen utensils – such as battered wooden spoons, a metal and plastic ladle, a carving fork, an elaborate lock and set of keys and various metal containers – all bearing evidence of unknown and chequered histories. These objects have been, and continue to be, used as a resource for new works: now, however, these collected objects will form part of the actual work itself. Other insights can be drawn from the images of dance, music and performance cut from magazines displayed on the workshop walls: the performing arts have always been important to Chien-Wei and this interest is reflected in large scale sculptural works such as *One after the other* 2008, and *Authorised Zone* 2011–12, where an installation of objects relating to daily life are displayed on an 18th century Chinese table 'as if on a stage': a more overtly political work which explores the relationship between the West and China and Taiwan.

The timing of *the shape of things* project is of great personal significance to Chien-Wei as it coincides with the final stage of his long journey to become a UK citizen. In November 2011, after eleven years of uncertainty, temporary visas and proving his financial worth as a 'commercially successful' silversmith to the UK immigration authorities, he was finally granted UK Nationality at the Citizenship Ceremony, attendance at which is a British government requirement when granting British Citizenship to foreign nationals. This profound experience and the stories behind and leading up to this momentous event are woven into the works made specifically for this exhibition.

Chien-Wei has written movingly of his experience coming to live in a foreign country and how he tries to use his cultural background 'as a resource and as an inspiration' for his work: *"each piece I produce has a title and depicts different stages of the narrative of my life as a foreign artist living in England: my goal is combining artistry with storytelling in order to communicate the meanings and messages of my work to as wide an audience as possible."*

By anyone's standards Chien-Wei is a consummate adapter, quick to learn, absorb new languages and experiences and integrate into, and assimilate,

different cultures. Born in Taiwan of Chinese descent, Chien-Wei moved to the UK in 2000 at the age of 29. His mother ran a jewellery, design and accessories shop in Taichung, Taiwan's third city. This early exposure to the commercial craft and design world proved invaluable when he came to run his own business. Following his first degree in German Language and Literature at the Soochow University in Taipei, Taiwan – chosen 'as something different' to the more usual English studies of his Taiwanese contemporaries – Chien-Wei lived in Germany for a short time in the early 1990s. Returning to Taiwan from Germany, Chien-Wei enrolled on a gemmology course, followed by an 'office job' at Tiffany's International in Taiwan. Wanting to follow a different career and creative path Chien-Wei began to apply for jewellery design courses in Europe. Despite a lack of formal training, he was accepted onto the MA in Silversmith & Jewellery Allied Crafts at London Guildhall University in 2000. After finishing his MA in 2002, during which time he focused on the development of ideas, he decided that he needed more time to develop his technical skills, and enrolled on a two year City & Guilds course in Silversmithing in 2003. This technical training and subsequent time spent working as a workshop assistant for former tutor and highly regarded

silversmith Simone ten Hompel, further honed his skills and assisted in his decision to focus on silver and metal.

Chien-Wei is renowned for his striking re-interpretations and re-presentations of everyday objects such as the *Ladles Series* of 2004 (silver combined with rosewood handles) and 2006 (silver combined with bamboo); and *Containers for Spirits*, 2005–06, and the *Bamboo Series*, begun in 2005. Writing eloquently about the background to the *Ladle Series* and his decision to choose materials traditionally associated with both the East and West, he says “...I made a crucial decision in my life to leave my country and start a new life in this foreign city. Despite the big impact of the differences in terms of culture, politics, geography etc., learning how to abandon the old knowledge about this world and refill the new understanding inside me has already become a daily ritual. Driven by this motivation, I created [a] series of ladles.”

Another characteristic of Chien-Wei's work is meticulous making and attention to detail. The silver and metal elements are made either by hand-raising or by hammering soldered pieces of metal: a laborious and repetitive process requiring both patience and skill. The process of transforming and manipulating raw materials is described in highly

symbolic terms: “I love metal because of the characteristics of the material. The process of making a metal work: treating it with fire to anneal it, using hammers to translate the invisible ideas into visual forms, and bathing it in water to clean it. When I put metal, especially silver, into the acid to purify it and turn it white, it feels as though I have finished a personal ritual – almost like a baptism.”

This exhibition, significantly, will mark an end to works relating to bamboo. For the artist this decision marks an important change of direction, an opportunity for closure, for moving on and making space for new creative exploration. In 2010 in *Bamboo and Me* Chien-Wei wrote about the wide range of objects, mainly vessels or containers, he has made based on, or inspired by, bamboo: “The association of bamboo as a cultural symbol of the East is now widely accepted in Western societies. As a foreign artist who has had to be commercially successful to survive... I subconsciously or sometimes even intentionally use the Eastern aesthetic as the major selling point in my work. Therefore, the way I myself treat bamboo as a maker reveals a new kind of relationship between my cultural heritage and me. The representation of my work can therefore reflect differences in values, perceptions and treatment between cultures.” This exhibition showcases

some of the bamboo inspired work for which he is well known, but firmly places an emphasis on exploration of the vessel form and a growing interest in experimenting with new materials, specifically the transparent qualities of glass. In the new work glass is combined with everyday objects: the potency of these mundane, ordinary objects signifying the routines and rituals associated with daily life.

A key component of this exhibition is an installation based on the idea of the cellar: the cellar as an intimate space inhabited by a multitude of containers to store and preserve food and drink. Some may regard the cellar as representing the darker side of life – a dark, damp, cold place with ominous or threatening overtones; but for Chien-Wei the cellar is a space where things can happen – a laboratory, a place of experiment with positive connotations. Our ancestors dug cellars into the ground, or erected a shed or house over ground, to store things – whether food, wine or other provisions; in more recent times we might think of a cellar as a private space, an adjunct to domestic life; or as a place to store personal possessions which may be valuable or precious, or conversely discarded or superfluous.

The artist asks us to take an imaginary journey, to walk into a cellar and in this dimly lit gloomy space to see different types of jugs, pots and containers

placed on shelves and against the walls, and to use our imagination to wonder about the magic power that is encapsulated within these objects. In the exhibition the viewer walks into a constructed space, in the relative neutrality of the gallery, to experience the mysterious atmosphere and build an intimate relationship with a collection of hand-made and found, broken and altered containers. These real and imaginary journeys bring great rewards to the viewer as this collection of 200 transparent glass bottles and their contents bridge the past and signal the future; providing a myriad of clues to the artist's personal and creative life. Some glass bottles have been squashed and flattened: this supremely physical and aggressive act – carried out not by the artist but by another hand – demonstrates the ambivalence Chien-Wei feels towards the vessel form which has provided his livelihood and means of support for over 10 years, yet in some sense he now feels constrained by. Contradictions and the play of opposing forces seem to figure in Chien-Wei's life and work – he talks of how, when developing the concept for the cellar installation it was as if, subconsciously, he wished to stamp on the vessel form, flattening it and rendering it impotent.

With this installation the artist is focusing not only on the shape of the vessel form but the interior, the

space inside. With much of Chien-Wei's work there is a metaphorical meaning and significance; and with this new body of work the visual language and symbolic value is more important than the skills and techniques used. The bottles may only have been gathered since 2010, however the objects they contain have a much longer history. The cellar installation forms an archive or diary room of the artist's life: not only the past and the present, but the future too. The coconut shell gathered from a Singapore beach, the rusty nail given by a Mexican sculptor, the empty coloured foil chocolate wrapper – all contain memories of the artist's journey through life.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung used the metaphor of the cellar to describe the layers of human consciousness: the personal unconscious, whose contents are forgotten or repressed; the lower level of the collective unconscious, the storage repository for the collective past experience of the human species; and the space beneath these two layers – a repository of prehistoric pottery, bones, and skulls. This simplified reading of Jung's theories hints at the complexity of the cellar image and its role in the imagination and as a store of both physical objects and memories. For Chien-Wei the cellar is a place where a process of transformation can take place:

"I certainly believe life is not just about finding the answer. It is actually a journey of hope towards the unknown. Maybe it leads us into the territory of discouragement, loss, despair, or pain, but we also learn to forgive, share and love through our common bonds of humanity. We cannot live on hope alone, but without hope we find life not worth living."

Chien-Wei is poised ready to embrace whatever creative challenges and rewards his future in the UK may bring. What can be sure is that he will continue to develop his personal language and perspective to make, and present, exquisitely crafted objects with strong emotional content which challenge our ideas and preconceptions of cultural value and worth. As to which strands and themes will emerge next, only time will tell; to discover the answers I will have to find an opportunity to revisit the workshop in a few years and delve into the intriguing world that lies within.

Frances Lord, January 2012

¹ *Artists' profiles 2*, June 2008, part of *a-n Collections* series published by a-n The Artists Information Company. <http://www.a-n.co.uk/publications/topic/434429>

Jars, 2011; gilding metal, hose clip, key holder, leather, door hook, suede, felt, bath plug, bolt & nut





CHIEN-WEI CHANG'S RITES OF PASSAGE

BY KATHY FAWCETT

hien-Wei Chang is an artist whose work is a meditation on crossing borders. He is a silversmith who works also with wood and other materials and who has travelled East to West from Taiwan to the UK and produced artworks that convey aspects of his journey. Chien-Wei applied to study jewellery making in Europe after becoming interested in gemmology but instead learnt silversmithing at London Guildhall University (London Metropolitan University) under silversmith and Jerwood prize winner Simone ten Hompel. Encouraged by ten Hompel to produce objects that reflect on value and functionality Chien-Wei re-made the traditional European silver spoon as a ladle, drawing on his Chinese Taiwanese background¹. In his first ladle series of 2004, Chien-Wei drew on the properties of the wooden ladle, a common utensil with its own cultural history of making and use, to reproduce it in silver, a material with a very different heritage as well as particular qualities of reflectivity and malleability whilst combining it with rosewood, a valuable material used across Chinese and European cultures.

The ladle, as Chien-Wei observes is more than a functional object, a

domestic utensil used to transfer liquids, it has the potential to carry meanings across cultural borders. For Chien-Wei, the ladle signifies the emptying of one set of memories and associations, and their replenishment through saturation in new forms of knowledge and understanding. Whilst the translation by the artist of wooden ladle into silver and rosewood, or in a later series to silver and bamboo, creates a poetic object that reflects back the identity of the user. Just as the study of material culture reflects on the shaping of the self through the processes of developing and using material objects², so artist-makers such as Chien-Wei evoke the articulation of self and community through objects they craft³, the cycle of invention through time that creates a fluid and distinctive cultural identity.

At the centre of Chien-Wei's practice is skill with materials and reflection on different kinds of making, evoking contrasting ways of being in the world, the everyday and the ceremonial or ritualistic. Chien-Wei has talked of his love of silversmithing, of his immersion in the process as ritual⁴ and his sense of participating in a different experience of time. The crafted object holds an understanding of different ways of being and inhabiting, and different

forms of connectiveness to our material environment. Amanda Ravetz and Janet Webb in their introductory essay to the 2006 conference *Migratory Practices* drew attention to recent ideas within anthropology about the vital importance of craft skills to our understanding of what it means to inhabit an environment⁵. Anthropologist Tim Ingold views the process of learning and development through craft practice as providing a model for life as 'sentient ecology'⁶, a dynamic responsiveness to material circumstances. Making is not just a set of techniques or rule following, but a fluidity of mind and body within specific physical environments.

Gabi Dewald and Louise Mazanti also reflect on skill in craft practice in *Edition 05 of THINK TANK (THINK TANK, A European Initiative for the Applied Arts)*. Dewald reflects on the importance of time and duration to the process of becoming skilled in craft, the rooting of certain skills in past ages with different patterns of time, and the immersion of the maker in different rhythms of activity outside of usual time scales⁷. Mazanti outlines the ability of craft skills to communicate alternative realities and 'to transfer human-existential sensitivity and experience'⁸ through objects. Chien-Wei's silversmithing and his construction of his ladles' handles from bamboo in his second 2006 series of ladles combine skills from cross-cultural

backgrounds and time zones, invoking both everyday and ritual contexts, the production of cutlery from metal, of utensils from bamboo as well as the production of ritual vessels from metal in ancient Chinese culture. Chien-Wei also comments on his desire to expand his practice beyond silver and to experiment with new materials. In his current work he re-makes found objects, flattening and forcing glass bottles into new forms through a kind of un-making.

The vessel has a long and complex history within both Chinese and Taiwanese material cultures. Chien-Wei talks of his fascination with utensils produced by aboriginal tribes in Taiwan 3500 years ago. Anthropologist Christopher Fung writes of the link between Neolithic Dawenkou Culture mortuary remains found in North China and the use of vessels in the practice of libation as part of modern Chinese funerary ritual in Taiwan and Guandong⁹. He examines the importance of pouring vessels and drink consumption in death rituals, citing van Gennep's conception of death rituals as a way of re-establishing social relations between living and dead, and in maintaining social lineage¹⁰. Chien-Wei's pouring vessels hark back to an archaic grammar of functional objects that through both production and consumption cement bonds of social identity across the boundaries of time.

Chien-Wei's current work for *the shape of things* programme takes the form of an installation. Chien-Wei expands the theme of the vessel to focus on the cultural space of the cellar, a space of storage, an essential ingredient of domestic dwelling with its jars and bottles preserving the fruits of times of plenty against times of scarcity. The cellar can preserve across vast stretches of time; in 2010 Chinese news reported that Chinese archaeologists had found an ancient fruit cellar containing well-preserved apricot and melon seeds from more than 3,000 years ago in the Shaanxi Province¹¹, a miraculous time capsule evidencing human resourcefulness.

Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*¹² of the potency of both cultural and personal memories of the various domestic spaces of human habitation. He describes in his chapter on the house the power of 'houses to which we return in dreams', of the link between sensory awareness and our deepest sense of self, of opening in memory: *"the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odour, the odour of raisins drying on a wicker tray... an odour that is beyond description."*

Chien-Wei aims with his cellar space to awaken a sense of our connectedness across cultures and across time with a place of nourishment, of ripening and fermentation. The expansion of

his practice from crafting of single objects to the production of a whole environment enables us to feel something of his immersion as a maker in materiality, to become part of the physicality of the work¹³. The *"being-made-ness"*¹⁴ of his crafted objects, their resonance as jars, bottles and containers that have been made or re-made reveal them as expressive subjects in their own right, not inert things but carriers of culture and of life. Chien-Wei also aims to bring back to us his own lived experience through his work, as art critic and poet Peter Schjeldahl writes of Tony Cragg's sculpture¹⁵ *"Sculpture's prerogative is to confront us with the fact of our material, physical, bodily reality, making that fact available to thought and feeling – and making it sociable, an open secret shared with others in a common space."*

Kathy Fawcett, Exhibitions Manager,
December 2011

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THE SHAPE OF THINGS PROGRAMME

The *shape of things* is a contemporary craft initiative that with the generous support of Arts Council England is taking place over six years. Providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork *the shape of things* explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events between 2006 and 2012.

The origins of *the shape of things* are in a report for Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts and recommended that exhibition should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of Arts Council England, and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, jeweller

Vannetta Seecharan and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works and in the process to consider the role of personal cultural identity within their practice.

The artists presented the new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where discussion took place with invited delegates chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this with further encouragement and invaluable financial support from Arts Council England enabled us to move forward. *The shape of things* is now working nationally and has received guidance from organisations engaged with the crafts including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council and Audiences Central.

The shape of things is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who had in the interim been awarded an MBE. The artist's response to the earlier commission was an important influence on the potential of *the shape of things*. The resulting exhibition *Woven Air* took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study

Centre enabling a test of the bursary-exhibition model. It was subsequently remade in September 2009 for the exhibition space at City Gallery, Leicester; this, one of our original venue partners, closed its doors in January 2010.

In January 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner with curators to create new work for exhibition in public spaces. The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised through their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

The shape of things exhibition programme in 2010 presented *The Gifts*, work by Alinah Azadeh and *Still Living*, work by Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; *earthlatmosphere*, new installations by Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita made for Bilston Craft Gallery; *Cut, Stitch, Adorn*, work by Tanvi Kant and *Disparate Nature*, work by Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale.

The shape of things at flow, exhibited the work of all our artists in London at flow gallery promoted as part of the 2010 London Design Festival. The works shown were mostly especially made for the smaller scale of the gallery spaces at flow with the aim of introducing the work to private collectors. The participation of a

privately run independent gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and indicative of the strategic aim of *the shape of things* to connect the work of artists with collectors and curators of public collections of contemporary art and craft.

At the end of 2010 *the shape of things at flow* transferred for exhibition to the Crafts Study Centre and in 2011 *earthlatmosphere* was remade for Touchstones Rochdale.

Finally, Chien-Wei Chang and Maggie Scott show new work made especially for installations at The New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester to conclude *the shape of things* exhibition programme in 2012.

These exhibitions provide curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. The creative context and ambitious scale of each artist's response to both the opportunity of *the shape of things* bursary and the substantial exhibition spaces of the venues, challenges ideas of the crafts as being simply decorative. Each exhibition offers audiences a dimension to the crafts as a visual art form able to convey meaning with distinct attributes that inform our understanding of the dynamic, shifting social context of identity.

Through its support of artists, exhibition partnerships with museums and galleries, and a series of discussions, workshops and events *the shape of things* aims to encourage a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts representative of the society we live in today. Best described in the words of the author and playwright Bonnie Greer who chaired a debate at the launch of *the shape of things* programme in November 2009: "This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard... This initiative, this collection of people is important now... This is a movement, this is the beginning".

David Kay

Director, *the shape of things* (2006–11)

***The shape of things*
exhibition programme:**

Rezia Wahid MBE

Crafts Study Centre, Farnham

25 September 2007 – 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita

Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton

1 May – 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin

Touchstones Rochdale

17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by all the artists

Flow Gallery, London

9 September – 6 November 2010

Chien-Wei Chang

New Walk Museum & Art Gallery,
Leicester

11 February – 25 March 2012

Maggie Scott

New Walk Museum & Art Gallery,
Leicester

7 April – 20 May 2012



CHIEN-WEI CHANG

CURRICULUM VITAE

www.chienweichang.co.uk

Solo exhibitions

- 2012 *Don't look back! I told you so*, New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester
- 2007–08 *21st Century Showcase – Chien-Wei Chang*, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester
- 2006 *Chien-Wei Chang – Creative 8*, Clerkenwell Green Association, London (Sponsored by Arts Council England, London Development Agency, Taipei Representative Office in the U.K., Tony Jarvis Ltd.)

Selected exhibitions

- 2011 *Wood Boost*, Galerie Sofie Lachaert, Tielrode, Belgium
- 2009–11 *Collect*, Saatchi Gallery, London
- 2009–11 *the shape of things at flow*, touring exhibition, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham and flow gallery, London
- 2009–11 *SOFA New York*, presented by Joanna Bird, New York, USA
- 2010 *Jerwood Contemporary Makers 2010*, Jerwood Space, London
- 2010 *The Artists' House – A Group Design Show*, New Art Centre at Roche Court, Wiltshire
- 2009–10 *Image/Craft*, Innovative Craft, Dovecot, Edinburgh
- 2009 *Silver Vessel*, Galerie ra, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2009 *Silver Maker*, Contemporary Applied Arts, London
- 2009 *Modern Masters*, International Trade Fair, Munich, Germany
- 2008 *Focus*, Contemporary Applied Arts, London
- 2008 *Fantasia*, Craft2eu, Hamburg, Germany
- 2007–10 *Goldsmiths Fair*, Goldsmiths' Hall, London

- 2007 *In the Window*, Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool
- 2007 *Rising Stars*, Goldsmiths' Hall, London
- 2007 *urban FIELD*, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham
- 2007 *Silver Art*, Montan Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 2007–08 *Collect*, V&A, London
- 2006–07 *Christmas Showcase at V&A*, Crafts Council Gallery Shop, London
- 2006–07 *Everyday*, flow gallery, London
- 2006–07 *Origin*, Somerset House, London
- 2005–06 *Frosted*, Crafts Council Gallery Shop, London
- 2005 *One-Year-On* with Crafts Council at New Designers 2005, London

Public collections

- 2008 Manchester Art Gallery
- 2008 Manchester Metropolitan University
- 2006 Norway National Museum Decorative Arts

Awards and recognition

- 2010 Jerwood Contemporary Makers 2010 (previously Jerwood Prize), Jerwood Foundation
- 2009 *the shape of things* bursary, funded by Arts Council England
- 2008 Cove Park Artist Residency: Silversmithing
- 2006 Evening Standard Homes & Property: Domestic Design Award, First Place at *Origin* 2006
- 2005 *Creative 8*, Clerkenwell Green Association (sponsored by Arts Council England)
- 2004 British Jewellers' Association Merit Award

Part of Cellar, 2012; recycled glass bottles/jars, found/ready-made objects









DON'T LOOK BACK! I TOLD YOU SO

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The shape of things

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The shape of things provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. Its programme explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connections with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2012.

The shape of things is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and registered in England, No. 6534926. Craftspace is the managing agency, Ruth Hecht is the Director, David Kay was the Director between 2006 and 2011 and there is a formal steering group comprised of stakeholders and specialists able to advise on development and implementation.

The shape of things programme receives funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England, investment by our partner museums and galleries and the Athene Trust.

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Acknowledgements: the shape of things

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