

In 2020, House of Illustration received 70 applications for its 2020 Residency. After a competitive shortlisting and interview process, the selection panel (Olivia Ahmad-HOI Artistic Director, Matt Alagiah-*It's Nice That* Editor-in-chief and YiMiao Shih-HOI Illustrator in Residence 2019) appointed Peony Gent.

Peony Gent is an illustrator, installation artist and poet based in London. She graduated with an MA in Visual Communication from the Royal College of Art in 2019 and from Edinburgh College of Art with a BA in Illustration in 2016. At the heart of Peony's practice is making experimental comics in which she explores the interplay between text and image and celebrates seemingly ordinary everyday moments that might otherwise be forgotten.

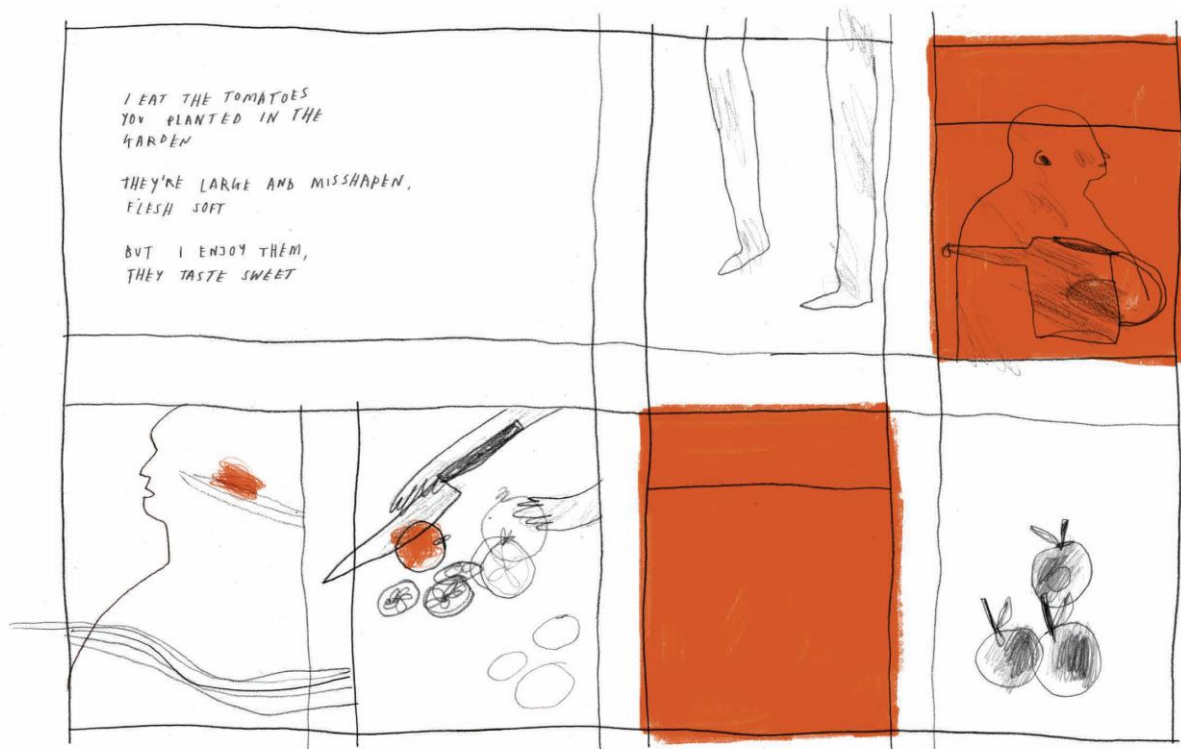


Image from experimental comic *HOOK*, Peony Gent 2017

Peony began her residency in December 2019. She proposed to use King's Cross, the area immediately surrounding House of Illustration's then-building, as her area of research. Peony planned to gather observations and collected ephemera into "an archive of the everyday" that would become the source material for new installation-based works to be exhibited at House of Illustration from June–October 2020.

Unfortunately, plans for the 2020 residency were disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. From 23 March 2020, Peony was unable to attend King's Cross to undertake research due to the nationwide lockdown, and the subsequent permanent closure of House of Illustration at Granary Square (from July 2020) and ongoing restrictions meant that the residency took place in a new context.

Despite the challenges she faced, Peony remained committed to the residency: she produced an ambitious body of work and online education resources over a six month period, and House of Illustration remains committed to sharing the outcome of her residency as soon as it is possible to do so.

### **Outcomes to date**

From December 2020–March 2021, Peony visited King's Cross, recording her observations, both seen and heard, as drawings, photographs and fragments of text. Peony explains her interest in the area:

*I always try to focus on easily ignored bits of ordinary life, but it was particularly interesting doing this in King's Cross, an area I'd almost entirely seen as a through-fare or transitory place to pass through on the way to somewhere else.*

From March-May 2020, Peony was unable to visit King's Cross in person, which presented challenges for a project so rooted in a sense of place. However, the idea of places existing both in reality and as memories provided her with further inspiration for her residency work. Peony explains:

*Having to be physically away from the area got me thinking about how places like King's Cross even exist. They exist partly in the present but also in the past and in the imagination, the connections we make with them and the memories we have of them.*

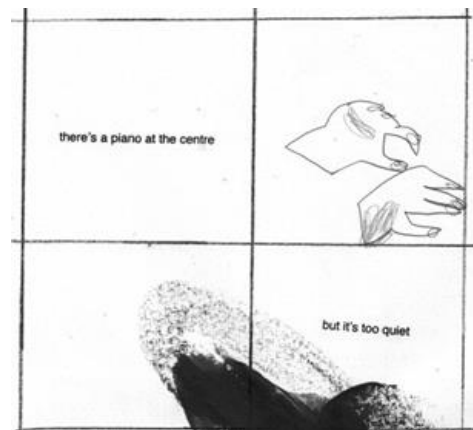
*In a way, each place exists differently for each person. For example St Pancras Old Church yard might be a through-fare, a place of respite or holy ground. For the poet Aidan Dunn, it was a site of revelation; for William Blake, it was the New Jerusalem. For most people it's probably a place to walk your dog, smoke a cigarette or escape the noise and bustle of the train station.*

*That ability for a place to be so many things for so many different people, that simultaneous invisible layering, is what I began to really focus in on. Rather than responding to the site itself, I started responding to the way we remember and reconstruct that site.*

Peony's responses to King's Cross have taken a number of forms, including observational drawings of very different parts of King's Cross; from new gentrified spaces to long-established market stalls. Peony sees these as *something of a map of transitional moments*.



Peony also recorded her extended observations as two comics: *Piano*, a retelling of a chance conversation with an elderly man who visits St Pancras station from Nottingham each week to play the public pianos there, and *Push*, a more abstract comic based on Peony's reflections on façadism, the demolition of all but a building's frontage, and the construction of a new building behind.

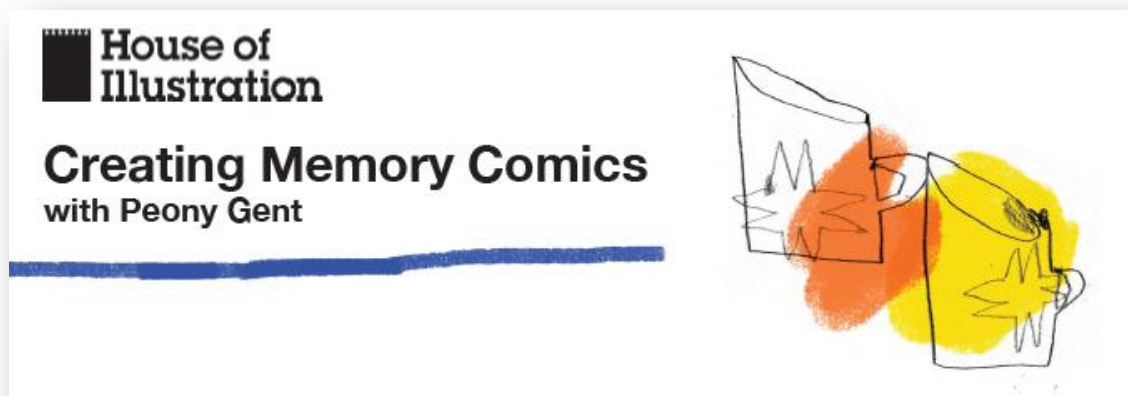


Alongside her image-based work, Peony created a collection of 'public poetry'. Peony recorded overheard conversations and fragments of text from social media, packaging and adverts and combined them with her own poetry. Many of these poems were based on Coal Drops Yard, a part of King's Cross that has seen a radical transformation from the site of infamous nightclub Bagleys, to a parade of high-end boutiques. Peony's poems were intended for installation in the parts of King's Cross that they were inspired by. Peony explains:

*I love the idea of removing something from its original context and it becoming transformed by the individual experience of the person viewing it, where it becomes fresh and unique for each new set of eyes.*



Over the lockdown period, Peony was unable to host in-person creative workshops, however, in collaboration with our education team, she created an online activity that supports people from ages 11 upwards to create comics based on their memories.



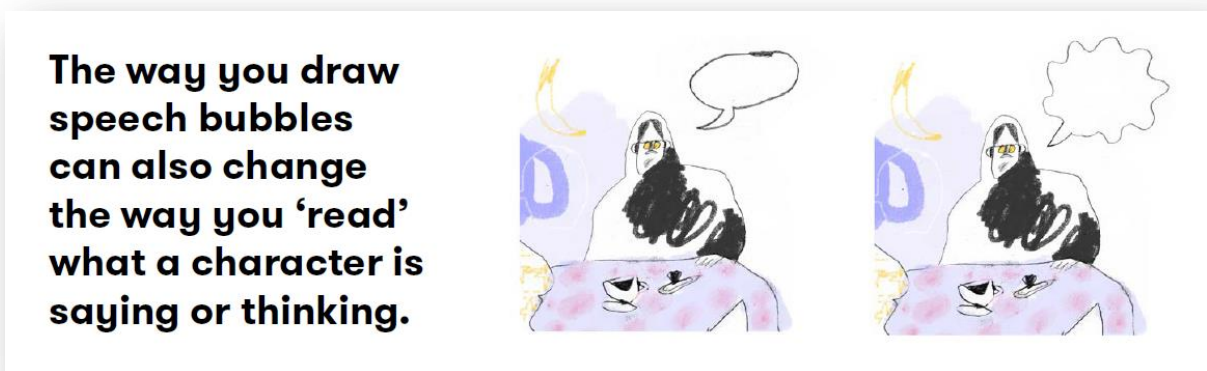
## External outcomes

As a direct result of the residency, Peony was commissioned by East London Comics & Arts Festival to create two online resources aimed at 11-14 year olds:

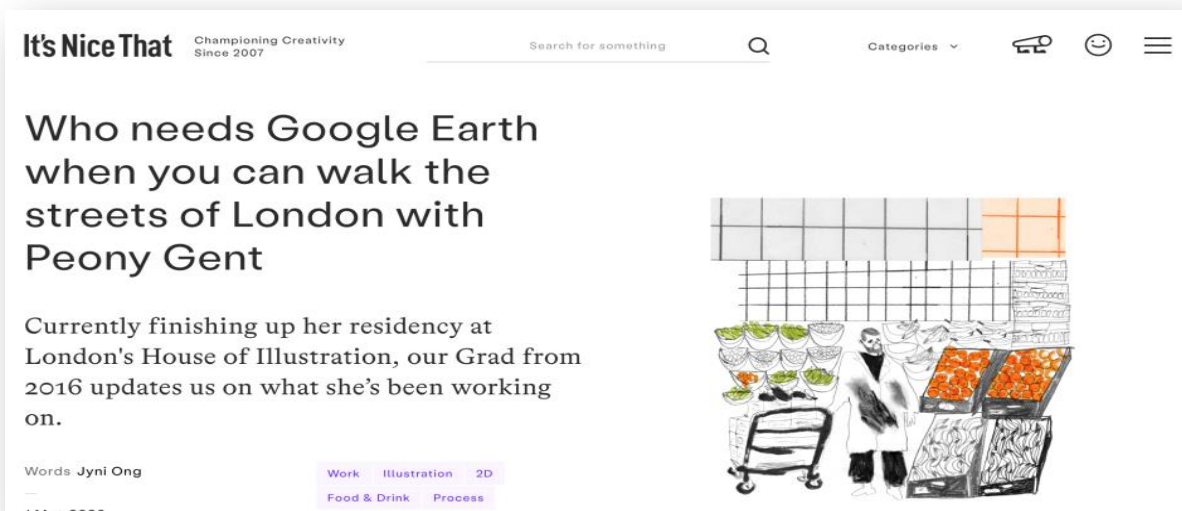
-[An Introduction to Comics](#) which explains comics as a diverse literary form that encompasses autobiography, journalism and poetry along with a guide to understanding visual storytelling devices.

-[Comics in the Curriculum](#) a resource for teachers of KS3 English, including suggestions for creative classroom activities.

Peony is now working part-time as a member of the ELCAF team on online projects.



Peony's residency was also the subject of an article on leading creative arts platform [It's Nice That](#), and her work has subsequently been featured in other articles on the site. Peony was also the subject of a full-page article in *Artists & Illustrators* magazine.



10 MINUTES WITH

# Peony GENT

The House of Illustration's resident artist on finding inspiration in the everyday. Interview: REBECCA BRADBURY



**WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST MEMORIES OF MAKING ART?**

My dad is an English teacher, but he's always made art, and I used to beg him to do these crazy drawings for me which I could then colour in.

**HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ARTISTIC STYLE?**

The first word that comes to mind is varied. I do a lot of different stuff – installations and observational drawings [see below], as well as experimental comics.

**WHY "EXPERIMENTAL"?**

I like playing with the structure and the imagery and words to push the boundaries of what counts as a comic. Some people wouldn't consider them "comics" at all because they don't have sequential images, but I do.



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**“My dream is for my art to make people reconsider things that seem ordinary”**

**WHERE DO YOU FIND YOUR INSPIRATION?**

It sounds really boring, but in the everyday. It can be the most ordinary, repetitive things, and I have my notebook with me at all times so I can jot it down.

**HOW DO YOU INCORPORATE POETRY INTO YOUR ART?**

I take words from the world around me – it could be a word I've seen in an advert, words I've overheard on the street or messages from my friends. Then by giving the words a new context [in my art], hopefully people will look at them in a different light.

**WHAT IMPACT WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR ART TO HAVE?**

It's really important that my art never tells people what to think. My dream is for it to make people reconsider things that otherwise seem ordinary.

**WHICH ILLUSTRATORS DO YOU MOST ADMIRE?**

I really love the work of Charlotte Ager, she's got an amazing eye for capturing beautiful, everyday details. And I've just read *Walking Distance* by Lizzy Stewart. I love the way she mixes essays with her own illustrations.

**WHAT WAS THE LAST GREAT EXHIBITION YOU SAW?**

Charlotte Salomon at the Jewish Museum. It was incredible. Everyone should go and look up her work online.

**WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING ON TODAY?**

I've been turning a conversation I had with a man who plays the piano at St Pancras station into a comic. He travels down from Nottingham every week just because he likes to make music for people and has nobody else to play for.

**WHAT ONE ART PRODUCT CAN'T YOU LIVE WITHOUT?**

Definitely my Koh-i-Noor 0.7mm mechanical pencil.

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE COMIC?**

*Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* by Anders Nilsen. It's a collection of postcards and comics he's drawn chronicling the relationship with his fiancé, who ends up passing away. It's incredibly moving, powerful, and my go-to recommendation. Peony is *illustrator-in-residence* at the House of Illustration, London N1. [www.houseofillustration.org.uk](http://www.houseofillustration.org.uk)



**WALKING DISTANCE**



## **Future Plans**

Due to the impact of the pandemic, House of Illustration was unfortunately unable to mount the planned exhibition of Peony's residency work in summer/autumn 2020. However, both House of Illustration and Peony remain committed to sharing Peony's residency work.

House of Illustration plans to launch a new website in summer/autumn 2021. We will host an online exhibition of Peony's residency work on our website by the end of 2021. With current lockdown restrictions in place, it is not known when we will be able to mount a physical showcase of Peony's work. However, we remain enthusiastic about doing so, and are exploring opportunities for showcasing Peony's work in King's Cross.