



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



project report

JULY, 2025

FINDING THE Flex

Testing a New Flexible
Studio Model with
Pyramid Artists



irregular
art —
schools

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Liam Hirst, 2023

01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Finding the Flex was a feasibility project delivered between April 2024–July 2025. The idea for it came from a research project called Irregular Art Schools (2021–2023).
- Both projects are a collaboration between Pyramid, a Leeds-based inclusive arts studio supporting learning disabled and/or autistic artists, and the University of Leeds.
- Irregular Art Schools identified the importance of flexible access to studio provision for the success of an artist's practice – the ability to choose when to work and for how long.
- We observed how flexible access to studio space was available at other sites in the city for artists without learning disabilities, yet not in the 'community' setting of Pyramid where access to their studio is dictated by rigid social care Support Plans reducing their choice, control, and independence.
- In response, Finding the Flex tested a new approach to studio delivery, enabling a more open and flexible use of Pyramid's studio for artists. This required Pyramid to develop a new role in their organisation, as well as rethinking studio operation beyond specific projects and group sessions with defined outcomes.
- We tested the new open studio model for 9 months. We estimated up to 20 artists would use the studio during the new open hours using their own support. We found **32** artists took up the opportunity.

02. INTRODUCTION

Irregular Art Schools was an action research project exploring different approaches to inclusive professional development with people with a learning disability, autism or both who are members of Leeds-based inclusive arts studio Pyramid.

It brought together a previously disconnected network of organisations and expertise: Pyramid, artist-led gallery and studio Assembly House, School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies at University of Leeds, Social Work Co-Investigator Katie Graham and Leeds City Council's Adult Social Care Team.

Irregular Art Schools identified the importance of flexible access to studio provision for the success of an artist's practice – the ability to choose when to work and for how long. We observed how flexible access to studio space was available at partner sites for artists without learning disabilities and/or autism, yet not in the 'community' setting of Pyramid where access to their studio is dictated by rigid social care Support Plans reducing their choice, control, and independence.

At the same time, Pyramid's Visioning Group (a group of artists with and without learning disability and/or autism who form, with the Trustees, the leadership team in the organisation) were working on the 'Pyramid Plan 2024-2028' which stated, amongst other things;

A person wearing a striped t-shirt and jeans is holding a large, bright yellow speech bubble in front of their face. The speech bubble contains the text "Being an artist should be on my passport" in blue and black font.

“Being an artist
should be on my
passport”

“Our Vision is that all people with learning disabilities, autism or both, will have access to the right space, equipment, time & support to discover and explore the arts. We will be able to make our own choices about our artwork and how we make it” and “We will explore ways of making our studio space more flexible and physically more adaptable, and accessible to artists week round, rather than just for a short session at the same time each week.”

Towards the end of Irregular Art Schools we were made aware of the Arts & Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement grant which supports unforeseen knowledge exchange or public engagement activities which arise unforeseeably during the lifespan of, or following, an AHRC-funded research. The AHRC awarded us £36,253 to trial this project.

The aim of Finding the Flex was to respond to these identified needs for development, by exploring the feasibility of providing a new flexible supported studio model for artists at Pyramid. We wanted to test out making Pyramid’s studio open for regular hours each week for artists to access on a much more flexible basis, and for longer hours than they currently can, rather than set times during the week e.g., Wednesday 10am-12pm.

To achieve this, Pyramid developed and employed a new Studio Facilitator role for three days each week. They monitored the use of the new open ‘Studio Days’ and coordinated additional activities as part of the new model.

This report presents an overview including our findings and next steps. We hope it can be used to enable not just other inclusive arts organisations and supported studios work in new, more flexible ways, but also by services and activities more broadly in the region who are supporting people with a learning disability, autism or both, to live flourishing lives.

Project Team

Pyramid

Founded in 1989, Pyramid is a Leeds-based charity that supports people with a learning disability, autism or both to discover the arts, develop as artists, and to disrupt social and institutional barriers to that development. James Hill is the Director of Pyramid, Sarah Cockburn is the Operations Manager, Alice Clayden is the Creative Programmes Coordinator, and Poppy Davis is the Studio Facilitator.



Jade French, University of Leeds

Jade is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies. Jade is an artist-facilitator and action researcher who is interested in how inclusive arts practice can be a novel lens into disability rights and social care challenges as well as an approach to generating creative and collaborative alternatives.

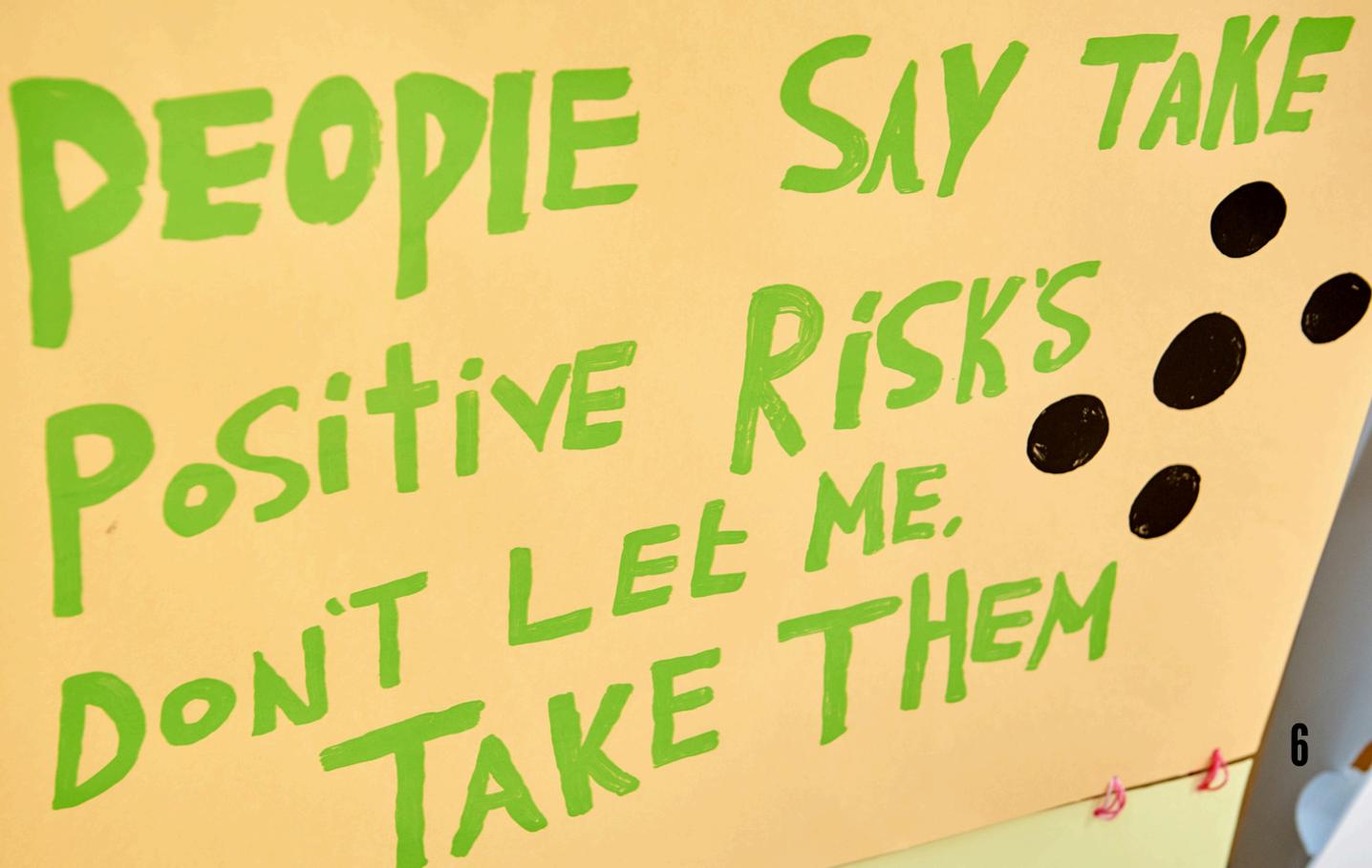
03. CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The aim of this pilot was to improve the flexibility of support and provision for artists at Pyramid leading to increased choice and independence. During Irregular Art Schools, the team identified how the majority of provision for supported arts activity in Leeds (and more broadly across the UK) is provided on a very inflexible basis, timewise. We identified how Pyramid artist's studio time is dictated by rigid Support Plans set by the Local Authority social work teams, which dictate that a particular activity is only funded to happen within a specific time slot each week (say, Wednesday 10am-12pm). Informed by these plans, staffing at organisations like Pyramid is therefore only funded by a contribution per hour to cover this precise activity.

When artistic activity is very time-limited it creates a tendency for activity or projects to be led by the non-learning disabled artist-facilitators running the sessions. In the case of Pyramid, this has traditionally led to a structure whereby groups work for two hours per week for an academic term (12 or 13 weeks) with the whole group working towards a particular collective output, like a show or a particular piece of work. Support requirements also mean that as soon as the activity is finished, artists often must leave Pyramid due to support not being available, as the staff leading the group activity finish their work. There is also a pressure for individual artists within the groups to have to work towards the deadline of the end of term, and towards an output in a single artform or medium which may not reflect the ambitions or interests of the individual's own sense of an artistic practice. Indeed, many may not get the chance to develop a sense of having their own arts practice at all.

This structure also prevents the kind of opportunities that may be available in other more flexible arts spaces; for individuals to 'hang around' afterwards, continue to work on their art, or have informal chats with other artists using the space. This prevents artists connecting to, and learning from each other, on a peer-to-peer basis and leans instead towards a siloed approach where artists only learn from the non-learning disabled artist-facilitators coordinating the sessions rather than learning from, inspiring, and potentially collaborating with each other.

The effect on Pyramid artists is a lack of choice, control, and agility with regards to their personal artistic practice. Critically, long periods of time working within such strict plans means it can be hard for some artists to then envision working in different ways that are more flexible - both in the studio and more broadly in their lives. Rigid provision can also often frame their art making time as 'skills development' (e.g., using a camera) rather than a 'practice' which encompasses ideas, networking, visiting exhibitions, and critically - experimentation without a defined outcome. We posited that without the latter an artist struggles to flourish.



PEOPLE SAY TAKE
POSITIVE RISKS
DON'T LET ME
TAKE THEM

The image shows a yellow sticky note with handwritten text in green marker. The text is arranged in four lines, reading from top to bottom: "PEOPLE SAY TAKE", "POSITIVE RISKS", "DON'T LET ME", and "TAKE THEM". To the right of the text, there are several black dots arranged in a curved line, resembling a trail or a path. The sticky note is pinned to a surface with a red pushpin at the bottom right corner.

04. PROJECT DELIVERY

01. Studio Space

- **Set up new admin systems** to ensure effective running of the studio (access management, timetabling/booking the space in a way which is both flexible and manageable, key holding, risk assessments).
- **Storage** for individual artists to leave work that they are working on between sessions.
- **New equipment** where artists have tried out new techniques as a result of the open studio and have requested equipment to develop and use these skills (for instance, purchase of a kiln for the studios, smart screen to use during sharing sessions/artists talks, and gelli printing plate)

02. Staffing & Support

- **New Studio Facilitator role:** A core part of this project was developing and employing a new Studio Facilitator role. The Studio Facilitator (SF) was based in the studio for three full days each week, enabling Pyramid to be open for regular hours each week for artists on a much more ad hoc and flexible basis, and for longer hours, than they currently can. The SF had an operational role in terms of opening the building, managing health and safety, and providing light touch creative and technical support for the artists' creative activities.
- **Support:** On Saturdays an additional paid worker was taken on to support the SF.

03. Opening Hours & Cost



- The studio was open on Mondays, Tuesdays from 10am until 3:30pm and Saturdays 10–2pm.
- We opened the studio space during academic holidays (when much supported activity for people with learning disabilities, including Pyramid groups, usually have a break). We found that Monday and Tuesday sessions were generally busier during the academic holidays.
- There was no limit to the amount of time that individuals could access the service during these days, but people were encouraged to book with the Studio Facilitator in advance to avoid over-crowding.
- The service was free during the period of this trial project.



04. Additional Activities

Spark Sessions – Once per month the SF organised for guest artists (either drawn from Pyramid’s pool of freelancers, or external artists) to demonstrate and share practical skills such as ceramics, gelli printing, monoprinting, zine making, still life drawing, 3D printing. As Studio Days developed, these sessions were set by Pyramid artists who expressed an interest in learning particular skills so, for instance, Molly Pukes was brought in to do a spark session on zining as a result of artist’s expressing an interest in this artform.

Sharing Sessions – At a set time each month, artists accessing the studio space have the opportunity to share their own work and creative practice with other studio holders.

Trips – The SF facilitated six trips to other studios and arts spaces, mostly outside of Leeds: Art House in Wakefield, Blue Room in Liverpool, Leeds Print Workshop, Sunnybank Mills in Leeds, Venture Arts in Manchester, and Feral Arts in Hull. Blue Room also came to visit Leeds to find out about our studio space. Poppy describes how, “It was important to us that the trips were to a mixture of inclusive studio spaces like Pyramid (Blue Room, Venture Arts) and to artists’ space that do not specialise in supporting learning disabled and/or autistic artists (Art House, Sunnybank Mills, Feral Arts)”.

Exhibitions / Public Events – work produced by the artists during the Open Studio sessions and on trips featured in a series of public events run by Pyramid. This includes an exhibition at Sunnybank Mills specifically focused on work produced during the Open Studios, ‘Prints of Possibility’ at Archive featuring work produced at Leeds Print Workshop, and ‘The Choice Project’ exhibition and symposium at Northern Monk Refectory in August.

05. FINDINGS

Understanding Success

- Regular use of open studio space
- Organisational culture
- Sustainability beyond funded period
- Impact on artist's practice (artist spotlight)

Regular use of studio space

As of 26 June 2025 the project has been running since 22 July 2024 and we have opened the studio for 133 days.

- 41 different individual artists have used the service
- On average there are 5 artists per day using the service
- On average those artists will use the service for 5 hours per day
- 24 people have used the service from 1-9 days
- 2 people have used the service from 10-19 days
- 10 people have used the service from 20-29 days
- 3 people have used the service from 30-39 days
- 1 person has used the service for 52 days
- 1 person has used the service for 78 days

Organisational culture

- The increased flexibility, and the associated increase in creative practice, confidence, autonomy, and independence has permeated other elements of Pyramid's offer, and organisational structure.

- Studio Days has allowed artists who had been peripherally associated with Pyramid (i.e. involved, but not regular paying members) to access more of what we do and to get involved in what Pyramid does and is.
- Although this was not an original aim of the project, Studio Days has allowed a more flexible way for partner organisations, groups, or individuals to try out being at Pyramid before getting more involved. This has worked for individuals, and for groups like the Hamara Halo Group have visited the open studio. For some people the opportunity to come to the studio and make some work in a supported but unpressured way makes more sense than a 'tour' of the studio, or a meeting at the studio which they may feel like they have less control over.

Sustainability beyond funded period

We are delighted that in June 2025 we were awarded £53,000 from Arts Council England's National Lottery Project Grants in order to extend this pilot for a further year (July 2025 – June 2026). During this year we will be setting up Studio Days as a paid membership scheme, further applying the learning from this pilot, with the hope that Pyramid artists will be able to access the service on an ongoing basis as a service commissioned via their support plans with Adult Social Care.

Artist Spotlight: Dan

Dan started attending Studio Days at the end of July 2024 and up to 07/04/25 he visited a total of 60 days which translates to 231 hours of studio time.

Dan has attended the most out of everyone in Pyramid and he has used his time to make extensive and interesting work. Before taking up the flexible studio offer, Dan attended Eden group on Thursdays and Ribblehead group on Fridays for a total of 4 hours a week. When he first started coming to Studio Days he came on Mondays and Tuesdays 10am-12pm as that was the same amount of time as he would join the groups on Thursdays and Fridays. However, after a couple of weeks Poppy could see he wanted a bit more time to focus on his work so she suggested he could stay a bit longer and bring a packed lunch. From 20/08/24 onwards he has been attending the studio 10am-2pm. He has tripled the amount of time he spends in the studio now spending 8 hours a week during Studio Days and 4 hours with groups. He comes to Pyramid 4 days a week as a result.

It is clear from this pilot that there is a demand for flexible access from individual artists and that there are beneficial outcomes to those individuals in terms of improved creative practice, impact on autonomy and independence. This section offers a case study of an artist... introducing Dan!



Trips – Dan has attended 2 trips out of the 4 which were organised as part of the studio days. He visited Blue Room in Liverpool and Sunny Bank Mills in Farsley. Dan really enjoyed visiting Blue Room and was as inspired by the work in Bluecoat’s gallery, the graffiti we drove past on the M62, and of course seeing his beloved Elland Road – the football stadium home to Leeds United. Dan also attended a printmaking session at Leeds Print Workshop and exhibited a monoprint of a fish. Poppy describes how, “Dan wouldn’t have been able to access the print studios if he hadn’t participated in the Studio Days so this has broadened his skills and interests.”



Left: Dan on the trip to Sunny Bank Mills in December 2024
Right: Dan on trip to Blue Room, The Bluecoat, Liverpool
Below: Dan at Leeds Print Workshop February 2025

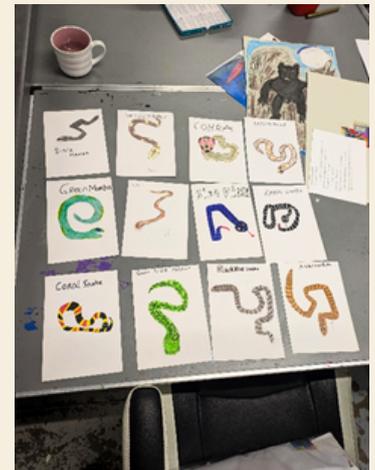


Dan has also attended a printmaking session at Leeds Print Workshop and exhibited a monoprint of a fish in the Prints of Possibilities exhibition at Archive in March 2025. Poppy describes how, “Dan wouldn’t have been able to access the print studios if he hadn’t participated in the Studio Days so this has broadened his skills and interests.”

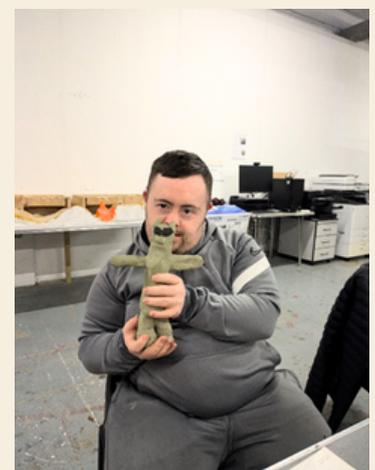
Projects – Dan really enjoys working on a project which is why Studio Days works so well for him. He has twice the amount of time to work on projects he is interested in. Poppy describes how, “Dan works in a mindful and slow way so having more time to focus on his work than the 2-hour blocks when he goes to groups has been extremely beneficial”. Dan has worked on several different projects over the course of the Studio Days including:

- **Land Rover:** Dan designed, built and decorated his own custom Land Rover, complete with windscreen and his Dad behind the wheel, Dan in the passenger seat and his dog Charlie on the back seat. Dan built the whole thing out of cardboard, tape, CD holders and plastic pipe. He used paint, glitter, collaged paper and plastic to decorate it. He spent around 5 weeks from start to finish on this piece. Poppy said, “it was great to see him so dedicated to the task and the studio days allowed him time and space to make.”

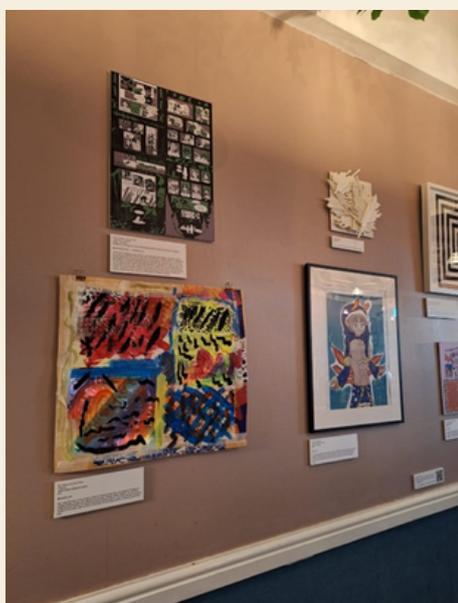
- **Snake card series:** Dan loves animals, especially snakes. He wanted to make snake fact cards inspired by a snake zine Poppy bought from the group trip to Venture Arts in October 2025. Dan researched different snakes from across the world drew them out in a mixture of pencil, felt pens and oil pastel.



- **Alien ceramics:** Poppy ran a figurative ceramics class one morning and Dan decided he wanted to make an alien. Off the back of that session, he has built three different aliens and decorated them ready for firing. Poppy reflected that, “Dan has really benefited from the sparks sessions that I have run as part of this project. Once Dan has been shown a new technique he loves experimenting with it and using it in different ways.”



- **Exhibitions** – Dan has exhibited work in two separate exhibitions as a result of attending Studio Days. He exhibited in the **1) Prints of Possibilities** at Archive (18th–24th of March 2025) and **2) ‘Stand’ing with Flamboyance** at Flamingos Coffee House March 2025 onwards. This piece was selected by fellow Pyramid artists Heather and Leigh. Heather and Dan have been sharing the studio since July when Dan started attending Studio Days. Over the course of the project they have attended sparks sessions together and shared their work during sharing sessions. The Studio Days project has enabled Dan and Heather to develop artist networks and foster friendships.



Confidence & independence: Poppy describes, “Dan’s has gained a huge amount of confidence over the course of the studio days project. When I first met Dan in July 2024 he was quite shy and insular, he would draw and make collage but not really engage with others in the studio. As time went on Dan grew more confident in the space, he tried out lots of different mediums including: ceramics, monoprinting, gelli printing, painting, sculpture, 3D printing. Myself and other Pyramid staff noticed that he now shares work he has made in the studio days with people in the Eden group and Ribbleshead group as well as showing his work to visitors coming in to the studio. It’s been so nice to see his confidence grow and him take ownership of the work he makes.”

- After 5 months of testing full sessions on Saturdays we found that people weren't accessing the studio regularly in the afternoons, so we adjusted the hours to 10-2pm on Saturdays.
- So far has been a free service, funded by the AHRC. During this time we have worked up different financial models of how this could become a paid membership scheme, but are yet to test.

06. NEXT STEPS

- In June 2025 Pyramid was awarded £53,000 from Arts Council England National Lottery Project Grants to extend this project for a further year (July 2025 – June 2026). During this year Pyramid will be setting up Studio Days as a paid membership scheme, further applying learning from this pilot, with the hope that artists will be able to access the service on an ongoing basis as a service commissioned via their support plans with Adult Social Care.
- We are sharing this report across both the arts and social care sectors, like the Adults & Health Commissioning Team at Leeds City Council, to explore how the learning from this feasibility study can inform flexible support and support plans more broadly, bringing a potential improvement in the way learning disabled adults are supported to access any kind of activity in the city, not just arts.
- Pyramid and Jade French are also continuing their research collaboration via a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship 'Inclusive Art for Wicked Problems' (September 2024 – September 2028). This features multiple enquiries led by individual Pyramid artists building on opportunities for collective and individual practice.

07. Appendices

Example flyer distributed to membership

Pyramid Studio Days

Do you enjoy coming to Pyramid?
Would you like more time to make
your own art in the studio?

From July - March, Pyramid has secured funding so that our members can have more choice about when they use the Pyramid Studio.

Mondays, Tuesdays and Saturdays
10.00am-3.30pm
Starting from Monday 22 July onwards
Free to attend!

This is time is for you to work on your own art projects, with the support of Poppy, Pyramid's new Studio Facilitator.

Poppy can help you with your creative ideas but she won't be leading an activity. This means you will be in charge of your own art projects.

If you normally attend Pyramid with support you will need to do the same when attending Pyramid Studio Days.

You don't have to come for the full day or at the same time / day every week, but it's important that you let us know when you're planning on coming.

For more information or to book a Pyramid Studio Day
please contact: studio@pyramid.org.uk / 0113 234 6040



CONTACT US

Visit Our Website



Our website is an archive of the project. It platforms all of the films, articles, reflections and research documentation as well as information about the artists.



www.irregularartschools.org
or scan the QR code.



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