

News release

**To be released:** Immediately  
**Date:** 29 May 2007

## London's original public art gallery holds first major contemporary art show since 1740

Fifteen contemporary artists have been invited to create works inspired by the art and social history collections at the Foundling Museum in Brunswick Square, London. Their responses – ranging from a wallpaper of children's names, to a lollipop opera based on Handel's Foundling Anthem - will be on show at an eight-week exhibition this Autumn from 28th September.

Originally created as a home for abandoned children by philanthropist Thomas Coram, The Foundling Hospital became London's first public gallery, thanks to the inspiration of one of the founding governors, the artist William Hogarth. Hogarth made the first endowment to the Hospital – his own portrait of Coram – and encouraged other contemporary artists to submit work for display.

There was no formal career structure for English artists in the eighteenth century and no state support. Patronage was unreliable and there were very few opportunities to display work publicly. The unique environment of the Foundling Hospital, which had been designed from the outset as a place of 'polite assembly', meant that it quickly became one of the most fashionable places to visit during the reign of George II. It was a hub of philanthropic activity, where patrons could be encouraged both to contribute to the childcare fund and to support contemporary art.

The exhibition this Autumn will be the first major contemporary art show at the Museum, yet continues the tradition begun by Hogarth of offering living artists a public platform for new work. Curator Gill Hedley, previously Director of the Contemporary Art Society, says: "I have long been fascinated by the Foundling story, not least because artists at the time the Foundling Hospital was set up – such as Hogarth and Gainsborough - supported the charity as well as cleverly creating a platform for their own works of art."

The participating artists are all from the East of England and are part of Arts Council England, East's Escalator Visual Arts programme, a pioneering talent plan that finds, supports and invests in the best artistic talent in the region, offering support at pivotal points in artists' careers.

### Commissions East

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Registered charity number 1045657. Company registration number 2802661. VAT registration number 636778589.

The project was initiated and developed by Commissions East, the visual arts development agency for the East of England. Commissions East has a track record of creating innovative relationships between contemporary artists and historic settings. "The collaboration enables artists based in the East of England to work with an internationally renowned venue," says David Wright, Director. "A previous project, Stay, in 2005 at the Great Eastern Hotel, London, involved eleven artists, such as Susan Gunn, and Richard DeDomenici, who successfully used the opportunity as a springboard for their careers."

Rhian Harris, Director of the Foundling Museum, sees the new works as "a powerful, contemporary counterpoint to the Foundling's historic interiors. They will bring a new audience to the museum, who will be both excited by the exhibition and moved by the stories of the Foundling children and the people who came to their aid."

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**Photo courtesy of Commissions East. Photographer: Richard Davies**

**[Photo caption:]**

Some of the artists commissioned to create a response to the people and spaces at the Foundling Museum, London. The exhibition of their work opens on 28<sup>th</sup> September. From left to right: Kristian de la Riva, Emily Russell, David Kefford, Matt Cook, Rob Smith, Simon Liddiment (behind), Nicola Naismith, Lorraine Douglas (behind), Tom Cox-Bisham, Sarah Sabin, Alex Pearl, Zory (Farangis Shahrohki).

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## Editors' notes:

1. Commissions East is the visual arts development agency for the East of England, providing an advisory and management service for commissioners, a programme of special projects addressing new areas of visual arts practice, and a range of services for artists.
2. The artists taking part in the exhibition are Matt Cook, Tom Cox-Bisham, Lorraine Douglas, Sandra Flower, David Kefford, Simon Liddiment, Nicola Naismith, Alex Pearl, Emily Russell and Kristian De La Riva, Sarah Sabin, Zory – Farangis Shahroki, Rob Smith, Townley and Bradby.
3. The Foundling Museum tells the stories of the Foundling Hospital, London's first home for abandoned children and of its campaigning founders: the philanthropist Thomas Coram; the artist William Hogarth, and the composer George Frideric Handel.
4. A poignant social history gallery describes the lives of the foundlings and includes artefacts such as personal mementoes left by mothers with their infants as means of identification.
5. The Gerald Coke Handel collection is the largest private collection of Handel memorabilia. The Handel gallery explores the links between the composer and the hospital.
6. The Foundling's collection of paintings, furniture and sculpture is displayed in interiors preserved from the now-demolished original hospital building. This was London's first publicly-displayed art collection, created and supported by artists, and precursor of today's Royal Academy. It was William Hogarth's idea to donate works of art to the hospital, encouraging other leading artists of the day, including Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds, to follow suit.
7. Gill Hedley is an independent curator. She was Director, from 1993 to 2006, of the Contemporary Art Society – an organisation that works with private collectors and corporate collections but primarily acquires works of art to give to member museums. Prior to that she worked for the British Council organising exhibitions of British artists abroad - from 'YBAs'-to established names such as Francis Bacon in Moscow and Richard Hamilton at the Venice Biennale. She is currently on the Board of Spike Island in Bristol and is a member of the International Association of Art Critics.