

UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS



Dr. Jonathan Gross & Professor Stephanie Pitts
Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre
(SPARC)

June 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research presented in this report was conducted through a collaboration between the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC) and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG). Responding to the striking absence of research regarding audience crossovers between contemporary work in different art forms, the project has investigated who comes to the contemporary arts, what experiences they have, why these experiences are valuable to them (or not), and what strategies contemporary arts organisations are currently employing to develop relationships with audiences.

Following conversations with thirteen arts organisations across Birmingham who present contemporary work, calls for research participants were circulated by five of these organisations: BE Festival (Birmingham European Theatre Festival), BCMG, Craftspace, DanceXchange and Grand Union. The methodology employed was specifically developed to respond to the considerable challenges of articulating arts experiences and their value. We employed four methods: semi-structured 'life history' interviews with 56 audience members; participant observation at a range of contemporary arts events across the city; 'Audience Exchange' visits through which we visited a series of events with 8 - 12 interviewees, and held a group discussion; and interviews with the directors of the five organisations whose audiences we worked with.

We identified a set of organisational conditions that play a crucial role in encouraging people to attend - and engage with - work that is new, unknown, unfamiliar or unpredictable. These conditions include:

- Access to rehearsals and the creative process
- Opportunities to volunteer: to be actively involved in helping put on the event
- The creation of 'festival' conditions: where people will see 'anything' or try new things
- Performances in public spaces: in which people can dip in and dip out of a show
- Free entry / free access: through which people will try things they would not otherwise see
- 'Gateway' organisations encouraging audiences to engage with work presented elsewhere
- Arts venues being friendly, welcoming and inclusive

Our participants strongly emphasised the value they place on having access to and involvement in the creative process, and this appears to be a particular feature of (and site of possibility for) the contemporary arts. Organisations could consider ways of developing relationships with audiences by opening up the creative process still further: this may have implications for contemporary arts organisations both in terms of encouraging people to be present in the first place, and in developing those orientations to the work that we have found facilitate enjoyment.

We identified a series of audience attitudes which facilitate their engagement with and enjoyment of contemporary arts. These include the expectation that 'you won't like everything'; an interest in 'experiment', 'asking questions' and 'pushing boundaries' (even if you do not always like the results); a curious disposition or openness to new things; not needing to understand a piece in order to enjoy it; wanting to be challenged; or wanting the arts to 'make you think differently'. Building on the

facilitating organisational conditions identified through this research, arts organisations could give further thought to how they encourage and facilitate these attitudes to their shows.

We found that some audience members particularly enjoyed the opportunity for facilitated conversation with other audience members, made possible by the 'Audience Exchange' visits, calling for these kinds of conversation to take place regularly. Contemporary arts organisations may want to consider the range of ways in which they create opportunities for audiences to talk to each other and to share their experiences.

Our research also identified the challenge of combining deep participation with broad inclusivity. There is no easy answer to this challenge, particularly when organisations are under pressure from funders to demonstrate the widest possible reach of their activities. Our findings show that when it comes to the contemporary arts, deep engagement – such as access to or involvement with the creative process – is a particularly important part of creating the conditions through which satisfaction can be taken in work that is often unfamiliar, unpredictable, challenging and strange. In this way, our findings give fresh impetus to contemporary arts organisations in their advocacy activities, in the representations they make to funders, and in any interventions they make within the ongoing debates concerning the value of the arts – by providing them with a substantial set of new resources and insights.

Our findings should encourage contemporary arts organisations to think broadly and creatively about the varieties of ways in which people 'participate'. We identified a series of striking examples of organisational conditions in which quite distinct modes of participation were taking place. These include opportunities to:

- Have a communal dinner - midway through an evening of experimental performances - with other audience members, staff, volunteers and performers at BE Festival; and to discuss the performances together the next afternoon at a 'Feedback Cafe'.
- Explore a dance company's creative process and history¹ through a series of guided but self-directed creative activities - responding to the materials and ideas that have inspired the company - in a dedicated engagement room, accompanying a performance in DanceXchange's Patrick Centre.
- Take part in an 'action research' workshop with Craftspace; a format that – by involving school and community groups in the decision making processes that shape the project – blurs the distinction between 'participants' and 'audiences'.
- Take part in a monthly reading group with other visitors to Grand Union and Eastside Projects - galleries in Digbeth - to discuss pieces of writing connected to issues of art, aesthetics and politics.
- Contribute to BCMG's commissioning of a new piece of contemporary classical music, keeping in touch with the process of composition through composer updates, and attending the rehearsals through which the piece is prepared for its world premiere.

¹ In this case, the Vincent Dance Company.

In addition to expanding the meanings and possibilities of 'participation', our findings also imply the need to move away from the language of extending 'access' and removing 'barriers', and instead to think in terms of "cultural citizenship". This would be to recognise and respond to the full range of ways in which people who engage with the contemporary arts are often involved in the cultural life of their city in multiple roles, from volunteering at a festival, to singing in a choir, to writing letters to the council to protest a funding decision, and, in many cases, simply valuing a contemporary arts organisation not only for the stimulation and enjoyment it brings them personally, but for the ways in which they see it as contributing to the vitality of their community. These findings suggest that contemporary arts organisations could look to expand the range of opportunities they create for volunteering, and to extend their connections with other sites of civic participation.

Finally, the project has demonstrated not only that there are significant crossovers between audiences for the contemporary arts, but that sustaining and deepening the collaborations between organisations presenting contemporary work in Birmingham has great potential. The research has identified common challenges faced by these organisations. It has also identified a series of strikingly successful strategies being employed to develop relationships with audiences and encourage engagement with the contemporary arts. There is much to be learnt from each other through ongoing conversation. Beyond this, however, the research has also identified the considerable benefits that could follow from greater collaboration on communication and marketing, including, for example, the creation of an e-newsletter for the contemporary arts, creating a streamlined channel of communication.

Across craft, dance, music, theatre and visual arts, there is vibrancy in the contemporary arts in the city, and a diverse range of audience members who (to varying degrees) do or would consider trying new work in more than one art form. We hope this report provides contemporary arts organisations across Birmingham with the encouragement - and a set of resources - with which to continue and deepen their collaborations, in order to realise the considerable potential for further crossovers between audiences for the contemporary arts. These collaborations hold great promise to further extend both the depth and breadth of participation, and for Birmingham's network of contemporary arts organisations to thereby contribute still further to the cultural vitality of the city.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
CONTENTS	5
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT	6
2. METHODOLOGY	9
3. LIFE STORIES	11
4. WHAT DO OUR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS MEAN BY ‘CONTEMPORARY’ ARTS?	16
5. FINDINGS	17
6. IMPLICATIONS	23
7. FUTURE RESEARCH	26

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Tim Rushby's Question

The springboard for this project was the observation made by Tim Rushby, Marketing Manager at the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG), that there is currently no research regarding crossovers between audiences for 'contemporary' work across art forms. Through conversations with colleagues within BCMG, and with counterparts at the London Sinfonietta, Tim concluded that by investigating existing and potential crossovers, arts organisations might find important new ways of expanding and diversifying audiences for contemporary work. Tim Rushby's question - *are there crossovers between audiences for contemporary work across art form?* - provides the starting point for this research project.

The Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC)

The Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre, <http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/>, directed by Professor Stephanie Pitts, makes theoretically informed empirical studies of performer and audience activities and experiences. After hearing about previous SPARC research with organisations including City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Music in the Round, Sheffield, Tim Rushby approached Stephanie Pitts to collaborate on the project. Tim's proposal was to launch a nationwide piece of research which would not only generate new understandings of audiences for the contemporary arts, but would also build a network of cultural organisations actively involved in the research and keen to share insights from their own audience development strategies and experiences. Through conversations between Tim and Stephanie, the plan was developed to first conduct this work across one city, Birmingham, and then – during what would be both a free standing piece of research and the 'pilot' phase for the nationwide project – to apply for funding to support a multi-city initiative. With the support of an Innovation, Impact and Knowledge Exchange grant awarded by the University of Sheffield, the eight month pilot phase began in October 2014. This award made possible the appointment of Dr. Jonathan Gross as the Research Associate on the project, to conduct the fieldwork and lead the day-to-day activities of the collaboration.

The Research Context

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession, conversations have been taking place regarding the future of the arts and culture under conditions of austerity and decreasing public funding. These conversations are taking place not only within and between arts organisations, (see for example, the *What Next?* movement <http://www.whatnextculture.co.uk/> and the BBC's *Get Creative* campaign <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/sections/get-creative>) but within and between academia and policymakers. One notable project through which these conversations have taken place has been the Arts and Humanities Research Council *Cultural Value* initiative, which over two years funded approximately seventy pieces of research.² Stephanie Pitts and Jonathan Gross both worked on research projects funded through this initiative, *Dropping in and dropping out: understanding cultural value from the perspectives of lapsed or partial arts participants*, and

² <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funded-Research/Funded-themes-and-programmes/Cultural-Value-Project/Pages/default.aspx>

Approaching cultural value as a complex system: experiencing the arts and articulating the city in Leeds. At stake in each of these Cultural Value projects is some version of the question, 'why are the arts important to people?'. In the same vein, the specific methodological approach - outlined below - adopted in this research with audiences for the contemporary arts in Birmingham, is guided by the ambition not only to know more about audience practices and attitudes, but, in the fullest sense, to generate new knowledge about why and how the contemporary arts are important to them.

There is currently almost no empirical work exploring the experiences audiences have of the contemporary arts and culture. This research project therefore not only responds to the need identified by Tim Rushby, but also to a glaring gap in the literature. The history and nature of those cultural practices we call 'contemporary' - and their relationships to cognate practices and nomenclatures such as 'modernist', 'avant-garde' or 'new', have long been contested in many areas of art history, aesthetics, cultural studies and music; including discussion of the implications of this work for audiences in terms of the 'difficulty' of much of the artwork, the 'alienation' often experienced by audiences, and the supposed 'disregard' of artists for their audiences. This large volume of research (and the ferocity of public controversy generated by contemporary art) notwithstanding, almost no empirical work has investigated *the experiences audiences actually have of this art*, and why 'experimental', 'cutting-edge' or 'new' work is important to people.

Research Questions

This project has therefore asked three questions:

- I. Who is coming to the contemporary arts? And what experiences are they having of this work?
- II. What value do the contemporary arts have for audiences?
- III. What strategies are contemporary arts organisations currently employing to develop relationships with audiences? (And what strategies might they employ in the future?)

The initial weeks of the project were spent in conversation with arts organisations - across Birmingham - who present contemporary work. The aims of these conversations was to spread word of the project; to see which organisations might like (and be able) to most fully involve themselves in the research by putting us in touch with their audiences as potential research participants; and to hear from these organisations what their current challenges are in developing audiences for the contemporary arts. Through these conversations a number of supplementary and complementary research questions emerged, which it became clear our fieldwork needed to address in order to fully meet our brief.

Even for experienced professionals working within the contemporary arts – and certainly for many audience members – there remains considerable uncertainty with regards to what is meant by the 'contemporary' arts. Through the early stages of the fieldwork it became clear that this fact potentially has significant implications for understanding the attitudes and experiences through which audiences engage with the work presented by 'contemporary' arts organisations, including the extent to which they actively identify recognisable characteristics of artworks and performances that connect 'contemporary' work across art form. Through these initial conversations we also found

that arts organisations in Birmingham were interested in the extent to which geographical location and organisational size affected who attends their work, and whether audiences make crossovers between organisations in different parts of the city. These important issues were therefore also incorporated into our set of research questions:

- IV. How do audiences describe and think about the kind of work presented by these organisations? (What are the characteristics they attribute to this work?)
- V. To what extent are there crossovers between audiences for contemporary work at organisations in different parts of the city, and at organisations of different size and type?

Collaborative Research and Audience Development

As these accounts of initial conversations with arts organisations indicate, this project has always been highly collaborative in nature. Not only was it initiated by an arts organisation approaching an academic research centre to collaborate on a project borne out of the needs and interests of the sector, the process of developing and refining the research questions and methods has taken place through ongoing conversation between a range of cultural organisations and the research team. Moreover, the project aims to directly benefit the sector in immediate, practical ways. Our findings provide new answers to aesthetic, sociological and cultural-historical questions concerning the ways in which people engage with, experience and value (or not) the contemporary arts. They thereby also point towards new interventions in debates around 'cultural value'. At the same time, however, these findings have concrete implications for arts organisations, by providing them with new insights and new examples through which to design and implement audience development initiatives.

In total we held conversations with thirteen arts organisations across Birmingham, of whom five (in bold) became most fully involved as the organisations with whose audiences we conducted our fieldwork:

- Capsule <http://www.capsule.org.uk/>
- Eastside Projects <http://www.eastsideprojects.org/>
- Fierce Festival <http://wearefierce.org/>
- Flatpack Film Festival <http://flatpackfestival.org.uk/>
- Ikon Gallery <http://ikon-gallery.org/>
- Sampad <http://www.sampad.org.uk/>
- Stan's Cafe <http://www.stanscafe.co.uk/>
- Town Hall, Symphony Hall <http://www.thsh.co.uk/>

- **BE Festival** <http://befestival.org/>
- **Birmingham Contemporary Music Group** <http://www.bcmg.org.uk/>
- **Craftspace** <http://www.craftspace.co.uk/page.asp>
- **DanceXchange** <http://www.danceexchange.org.uk/>
- **Grand Union** <http://grand-union.org.uk/>

By collaborating with these five organisations we have succeeded in working with audiences across contemporary craft, dance, music, theatre and visual art. With little or no precedent for this breadth

of coverage, this project has thereby investigated audience experience across a full range of art forms.

2. METHODOLOGY

Drawing on the expertise of Professor Pitts and Dr. Gross, the methodology employed in this project has been designed to respond to the particular challenges of investigating audience experience; the relationships that audiences have with organisations presenting contemporary work; and the strategies these organisations employ in attracting and working with their visitors.

Life History Interviews

Through the use of specifically developed, semi-structured, 'life-history' interviews, we gave audience members an unusually extended and 'open' opportunity to articulate their experiences of the arts; to track the development of their cultural experiences, attitudes, tastes and practices over their lifetime; and to articulate these experiences in relation to any parts of their life to which they are connected – such as work, family, education, friendships and other interests. The way in which these interviews were conducted also gave participants the opportunity to 'think out loud' and to answer the same question more than once, in a different way. These methods respond to the considerable challenges that face attempts to articulate experiences of the arts and their value; and create conditions in which the full importance of these experiences – embedded within rich biographical contexts – can be expressed.

The five organisations with whose audiences we worked sent out calls for participation to their mailing lists. Interviews were then arranged with those people who responded to these messages. In total, one-to-one life history interviews were conducted with 56 people. There was considerable diversity amongst those who came forward to be interviewed.³ The diversity of the interviewees extended across:

- Age: from 22 to 86 years old.
- Educational history: from school leaver to university professor.

³ The contemporary arts audiences involved in this research project were self selecting, of course, in the sense that they chose to respond to a call for participants. They were not chosen at 'random' from a pre-existing data set on the basis of their demographic profiles. This project was not looking to select a 'representative sample' in the way that the natural sciences or some (but by no means all) modes of social scientific method would employ, and there are strong grounds for rejecting the idea that selecting research participants for this kind of study on the basis of the classic demographic markers of age, class and ethnicity would constitute, in itself, a more 'representative' group of research participants. The life history approach allows us to explore the relationships between arts attendance and the full range of biographical and 'demographic' conditions within which participation in the contemporary arts takes place. In this way, in addition to having spoken to a large number of people (56 is a very considerable group for a highly qualitative study of this kind), and having used an inclusive recruitment method – sending out a call for participants through mailing lists - the 'representativeness' of our findings is established through the interview methods we employed as much as through the processes by which interviewees were 'selected'. For a statistically precise demographic survey of audiences for the contemporary arts in Birmingham, a quite different study will need to be undertaken: one which chooses broad quantitative reach rather than rich and deep qualitative insight.

- Occupation: including civil servants, administrators, community artists, an art therapist, students, a commodity trader, a consultant geneticist, social workers, teachers, and other occupations besides.
- Type, duration and intensity of previous involvement with the arts, including: recently developed interests in the arts; very infrequent attendance at live events; engagement in amateur art practice; advanced art school education; long-standing and/or extremely frequent arts attendance; membership (or financial support) of arts organisations in Birmingham.

Participant Observation

We supplemented these interview methods with participant observation, in order to speak informally with audiences *in situ*, in the immediacy of their arts experiences; and to observe the uses audiences make of particular organisational spaces. We conducted participant observation at Digbeth First Friday events, <http://digbethfirstfriday.com/>, at which a number of small and medium sized contemporary art galleries and studios in the Digbeth area of Birmingham open late and invite people to visit a range of venues during the course of the evening. We also conducted participant observation at BCMG concerts and rehearsals. Members of the BCMG Sound Investors scheme are given access to rehearsals, and - as discussed in the 'Findings' section below - for many participants this is a very important part of their overall engagement with BCMG. Being able to speak to people informally - before, after and during these events - provided important additional insight into participants' experiences of the contemporary arts and the value they place on them.

Audience Exchange Visits

We conducted four 'Audience Exchange' visits, taking groups of between 8 and 12 people to a performance or exhibition at an organisation presenting contemporary work, and holding a group discussion. Participants were encouraged to sign up for a visit to an art form or an art organisation they are less familiar with, or do not typically visit. This method has two significant benefits. Firstly, it creates opportunities - *in situ* - to explore audience experience of contemporary work with which they are unfamiliar. And secondly, it creates conditions in which research participants can share experiences as a group. This allows for important themes and ideas to develop through the group dynamic; encouraging responses to be exchanged, shared, and contradicted; and for matters of shared concern or interest to emerge in ways that only a group conversation can make possible.

Organisational Interviews

Finally, we conducted interviews with the directors of the five arts organisations with whose audiences we had conducted fieldwork. The reason for this was to explore with senior figures, in strategic roles within their organisations, the ways in which they currently work with their audiences, and what challenges the organisation faces in working with audiences in the future. This final method allows for the research to bring organisational and participant perspectives into dialogue, putting the project in the best possible position to produce findings that draw on – and respond to – the articulated experiences and concerns of all those with an interest in the contemporary arts, and the organisational conditions and challenges within which these experiences take place.

~

The conversations held through the life history interviews, 'Audience Exchange' visits and organisational interviews were recorded and transcribed; whilst each participant observation was recorded through field notes. Thematic analyses of the transcriptions and field notes were then made, and these analyses provide the basis for the findings set out below. At the centre of the data generated by this research are the 56 life history interviews conducted with audiences for the contemporary arts in Birmingham. Before laying out the findings themselves, it is therefore important to present a selection of these life histories, in order to illustrate the kind of material this research has produced, and to indicate how the findings set out below are drawn from detailed personal contributions made by a diverse range of research participants. The three that follow have been selected because they illustrate key findings in helpful ways, as well as demonstrating the textured, biographically located nature of the data we are working with. Together they also indicate the considerable diversity of experience, attitude and 'routes in' to the contemporary arts that we encountered. We could have chosen any of the life stories to include here, as each is rich and illustrative.⁴ Those that follow are typical in the sense that they indicate some of the key findings to emerge from the overall body of interviews. At the same time, as with all 56, they are each deeply idiosyncratic and distinctive, as is any personality and any life.

3. LIFE STORIES

*Penny*⁵

Penny is a retired public sector employee in her sixties. She says she is "not into" the contemporary arts. When she goes to the theatre, as she does every now and then, she likes to be "entertained", to "enjoy myself" and she does not want something "difficult". Despite saying she is not into the contemporary arts, Penny is participating in the research project via her involvement with the BE Festival. She came to be involved with the organisation as a volunteer, through a neighbour who told her that a new theatre festival was looking for people to host artists for a week whilst the festival was taking place, and would Penny be interested in doing this. Penny has volunteered all her adult life. Even whilst busy with a full time job and raising children, she has enjoyed volunteering for different local organisations, and in retirement she has continued to do so.

She agreed to host performers in her home, and through this then became involved as a volunteer at the festival itself, at the A.E. Harris factory in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham. Here Penny took on a range of roles, including driving artists to and from the station, helping clean the venue, and providing practical support for the meal that is served each night during the BE Festival, and at which all audience members, festival organisers and performers dine together. At first, Penny did not go and see performances. However, other volunteers and festival organisers encouraged her to watch

⁴ We hope that in publications to come out of this research in the future – for example, in academic journal articles – there will be opportunities to present more of these life stories.

⁵ Names and some identifying features have been changed.

some performances. Now she attends as an audience member, and she really enjoys watching the performances as well as contributing as a volunteer.

Describing the importance of the BE Festival to her, Penny emphasises the value she places on the friendships she has developed with festival organisers and other volunteers, and explains that one of the reasons she continues to go back is “to see everyone”. She also explains that the ‘Feedback Cafe’ has become very important to her. Each afternoon during the week of the festival, an informal gathering is held to discuss the four performances staged the previous evening, and to which audience members, volunteers and performers from across the festival are invited. Penny explains that at first she was not confident attending the Feedback Cafe. She felt she did not have anything worthwhile to say, or that she lacked the language in which to contribute. She describes how, over time, her confidence to take part in the conversations greatly increased, and that other participants actively encourage her to contribute.

Penny explains that one of the aspects of the Feedback Cafe that she particularly likes is the opportunity it provides to hear the response of the performers to each other’s work. She elaborates this point by describing a visit she made to a gallery with her son. Whilst Penny’s son enjoys abstract painting, she herself tends to be more immediately interested in portraits, landscapes and other representational art. On one visit to a gallery, she asked her son to tell her what he saw in a particular abstract piece, and as he described the features he was observing and interested by, Penny enjoyed “seeing what he saw”. She relates this experience back to the value she places on the Feedback Cafe, for the opportunities these discussions provide to see work anew through other people’s eyes. For Penny, who does not engage with contemporary theatre outside of the BE Festival, the opportunity to explore her experience of the performances through the responses of others is an important part of her enjoyment of the festival.

Outside of the BE Festival, Penny’s engagement with the contemporary arts is very limited. Occasionally she will visit galleries, and this might include contemporary as well as more traditional work. She is not in any way engaged with contemporary dance or music, with the exception that in 2014 she participated in BCMG’s participatory commission, ‘Crowd Out’, written by the American Composer David Lang, and performed by a thousand performers at Millennium Point. Penny enjoyed this experience very much, saying on several occasions that it was really “different”, and very unlike her experiences singing in her choir, where they sing songs from the shows. Penny says that she will continue to attend the BE Festival in the future, but she is not looking to expand her involvement with the contemporary arts beyond this. At the same time, she is anxious about the effects of public spending cuts, and whilst she feels there is a lot of contemporary art going on in Birmingham at the moment, she is concerned for its future.

Dave

Dave is a teacher in his forties. His principal passion is twentieth century classical music. He first became interested when hearing a piece on television as a child, and then sought out more by listening to BBC Radio 3. He explains that he always felt this music to be very “immediate”, and much more directly appealing to him than most nineteenth century classical music, for example. He first started going to orchestral concerts as a teenager, and was always very comfortable attending

on his own or with others. Since that time, he has listened to a large amount of twentieth and twenty-first century classical music. Developing out of this interest, he has come to explore the operatic repertoire – first the twentieth century, and then working backwards into the nineteenth – and in the last fifteen years or so, contemporary dance.

Dave normally attends several performances each week, and at times this can be as many as five events - spanning music, opera, dance and film. He explains the central place that attending live contemporary arts has for him, saying, “this is what I do”. In combination with his employment as a teacher, attending the contemporary arts is how Dave lives his everyday life. He describes the experience of attending a DanceXchange performance at the Patrick Centre midweek, having just seen a brilliant performance, sitting waiting for the post-show talk to begin, and thinking to himself, “this is the life”. Attending the contemporary arts is a central activity for Dave, and a key source of enjoyment and satisfaction.

He explains that when he buys tickets for performances at DanceXchange, he specifically books for the nights with post-performance events. What he likes so much about these events is the opportunity they provide “to be in that world”. Dave is not and has never been a performer, but he enjoys being part of conversations with artists. At the same time, he explains that he is not interested in socialising at arts events, and describes how at BCMG concerts he will often walk across the foyer with purpose, at speed, to avoid making himself available for casual conversation. He explains, “I like the solitary within the communal”, and gives the example of the unexpected, playful, public experiences he has had at Birmingham’s Fierce Festival.

I love fun sort of ‘happening’ things – you know, I mean the suggestion of sixties happenings – I love that kind of stuff. It’s just brilliant, the guys releasing the balloons in Symphony Hall that were playing harmonicas; a kickboxer in pitch blackness kicking a huge lump of clay flat that you only saw illuminated by flashes occasionally. I love going to see things like that. More please. why don’t we fill our lives with these things? [...] I think playful is good. And sometimes they just get in there, they get under your skin and you just think, ‘[Now] I feel a bit different’.

He also explains that he is attracted to the temporary, transient, ephemeral characteristics of live performances of contemporary classical music, and the unexpected experiences that these concerts can lead to:

I always knew that I liked that kind of music. I always very much liked new music, very contemporary music. I liked the experience of it. [“The sheer mental experience of it.”] And also a slight sense that, if I’m not gonna see it now, will this ever be performed again? Will I ever hear this again? And sometimes it throws up something that is startling beautiful, and I sit there and I’m thinking, goodness me, you know, this is just utterly transporting and utterly – well I’m not actually *thinking* that, because I am being transported by something that’s beautiful. But that is such a lovely experience of something that I may never get the chance to hear again.

In addition to the ephemeral performances of contemporary classical music, Dave is also interested in visual art. But he says that his tastes in visual art are more “conservative”, as he is very critical of much contemporary work. He explains that he is suspicious of a number of developments in visual

art in recent years, describing the movement around Charles Saatchi, Damien Hurst and the Young British Artists as “just a racket.” In the light of these highly commercial developments, he reassessed his interest in Andy Warhol and Pop Art, which as a teenager he had found interesting. He explains that being driven by commercial imperatives is one way arts can lack “integrity”. In contrast, this music he cares about most, contemporary classical music, he perceives to have integrity.

Dave explains that from a young age he enjoyed the experience of “difficulty” whilst listening to music. If the music did not strike him as immediately satisfying or straightforward, he said to himself “this will be good for me”. He says that this attitude made him a more “capable listener”, and that at this stage of his life he no longer experiences difficulty in this same way, and that he misses this experience of difficulty.

Dave is very keen for others to see and hear contemporary music and dance. At the same time, he stresses that contemporary music is more difficult than other contemporary arts, and that it simply will not “be for” everyone. Given how highly he values the contemporary arts, and how much he wants them to thrive and for other people to engage with them, it is painful for Dave when he sees tremendous performances poorly attended. He gives the example of a performance of “one of the great pieces of twentieth century art” by the American choreographer Mark Morris, which was packed out in London the week previously, but which in Birmingham drew a meagre crowd. Dave thinks the marketing and communications of contemporary arts in Birmingham could be better, and that they should have a higher public profile, and a greater visual presence in the city.

Dave is angry with the city council for not doing more to support and promote arts, citing the example of the destruction of the old library building. He is furious that “one of the most important post-war buildings in the world” is going to be pulled down, and he is opposed to its conversion into private, commercial space, suggesting that the council could have turned it into a receiving space for big exhibitions. In the context of austerity, he feels that the arts in Birmingham are “fragile” and “vulnerable”, in a way that the arts in London are not. Dave says he would leave Birmingham if the provision of contemporary arts significantly decreased, explaining, “I have this anxiety that cuts will end all of these things. Because they’re basically what keeps me in Birmingham, and as soon as all of this stops, I’m packing up and leaving. Because, you know, I couldn’t cope without it.”

Laura

Laura is in her 20s and recently moved to Birmingham to study. Alongside studying and paid employment, since her teens she has always done a lot of volunteering, and she now volunteers at galleries in Digbeth, and at organisations elsewhere in the city. One Digbeth gallery, in particular, was a gateway for her to other organisations.

When it comes to the arts she likes best, Laura says she is most interested in artwork you “can’t work out” straight away; and which presents a “challenge”. She explains that discussion and social encounter are very important to her, that she is drawn to pieces that raise questions like, ‘is it art?’, and work that allows or encourages people to engage with art in new ways:

If it's weird I like it, basically. I mean it doesn't have to be completely out of the box weird, but just *different*, there has to be something different about it. The ones I particularly remember are the ones that are a bit odd or people engage with it in a different way. Like in the V&A – it was part of one of the festivals, [...] and in a room full of traditional paintings, the floor was kind of this carpeted sculpture thing that you could just lay and roll around on; and people were just laying around, people were sleeping, people were kind of smooching in the corner; it was really weird – and that was a piece of artwork, which was really nice. [...] And there was a similar one in the Turbine Hall, where it was a big sun, and so it was a really bright light and mirrors to make it seem like a sun; and people were sunbathing in the Turbine Hall! And it's that kind of thing – it's the way people engage differently with it [that makes it so interesting to me]. Rather than just, 'yeah, it's a painting'.

Laura is excited by the opportunity to discuss work that is ongoing, 'open' or unfinished. But in addition to contrasting finished and unfinished work, she also draws a distinction between finished and unfinished *organisations*:

[The Ikon Gallery:] it's kind of too finished [...]. The Ikon has the finished product on display; whereas these kinds of more experimental [spaces, like Grand Union, Eastside Projects], the gallery seems like a canvas more – not really a canvas but a *sketchbook*; [...] the sketchbook stage; where each exhibition seems to change, and they're all experimental, which appeals to me much more than just the kind of final piece.

Laura is also interested in classical and traditional visual art, and says that contemporary work and older work should be presented together. Artworks and artefacts (non 'art' objects) should also be presented together, as they are both "social objects". But classical or traditional visual art in itself is not a high priority for her. It is new or contemporary work that she is primarily motivated to see and to be involved with; and most especially through organisations which are themselves "open", "unfinished", and facilitating of unprescribed response and exchange.

Laura occasionally attends theatre and live music, but this is not contemporary classical music, and she does not attend dance of any kind. She explains that, in general, she is most likely to attend events that are "different" or "unique": in other words, if there is some reason why she is not going to get another chance to see this event (or this kind of event). There are lots of factors that can make an event "different", be it the unique coming together of a group of performers, an unusual feature of the curation, or an unexpected location.

Overall, Laura explains, her experience of living in Birmingham has been better than she expected; and key to this has been the very positive experiences she has had of the city as a place to get involved in the contemporary arts.

What's particularly stood out [has been that] in London everyone's kind of out for themselves: although people do collaborate, it's nowhere near what it's like here. Here, through [one particular gallery in Digbeth], I know about a hundred different people just in the arts scene; so, artists, project managers, all that kind of stuff. [...] Which is quite nice. And when you go as a visitor to the [galleries] in Birmingham, you kind of feel like you're part of it, rather than just like 'they're the arts scene and I'm visiting'. It's more of a kind of communal thing.

Looking ahead to finishing her studies in Birmingham, Laura had intended to move back to her home town in Yorkshire. But given the very positive experiences she has had of contemporary arts in the city - and the many opportunities to get involved - she is now in two minds.

4. WHAT DO OUR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS MEAN BY 'CONTEMPORARY' ARTS?

Before turning from these three illustrative life stories - indicative of our overall data set and the themes that have emerged from this material - to the summary of our key findings, it is important to briefly consider the meaning of 'the contemporary arts'. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, in the early stages of conducting research in Birmingham it became clear that what is meant by 'contemporary', in its application to the arts, is often uncertain. Different research participants use the term in different ways. This project therefore took it as one of its tasks to investigate what people are identifying or expressing when they talk about artwork being 'contemporary'. From the fieldwork with 56 audience members, the following three senses of the word emerged:

- I. Some research participants imply that contemporary art is **any artwork made today**.
- II. In a more discriminating definition, but one that still identifies contemporary artwork in relation to being made 'now', research participants use 'contemporary' to indicate work that strikingly 'belongs to today': is '*con-temporary*', 'with its time' in some important respect. In other words, this is **work that expresses a widespread thought or feeling of the present historical moment, or responds to a particular event or issue of its day**.
- III. The third usage of 'contemporary', however, does something rather different. Rather than drawing any explicit relationship between the artwork and 'today', in these cases the term is used by research participants to indicate characteristics of artworks in ways that make 'contemporary' synonymous with "experimental", "avant-garde" and "alternative", and antonymic with "mainstream", "classic" and "traditional". In this third usage of 'contemporary', audiences are referring to **work that is experimental; or as many of them refer to it, "strange", "weird" or "different"**.

Taking the fieldwork as a whole, the third definition is the most prevalent. Visitors to the five organisations involved in the study frequently talk about their interest in work that is "challenging", "experimental", "new", "strange", "weird", "different", "at the sharper end". But the participants in the research also raise extremely interesting questions about the relationship between this third usage - indicating experimentation and challenge - and the second, contemporary work being expressive of some thought or feeling of the present, or responsive to present day events.

Interviewees indicate that some work that is identifiably 'experimental' in form seems very "derivative" to them. Other experimentation in form is experienced as being a necessary response to changing conditions. For example, one interviewee describes seeing an exhibition of painting at the Ikon Gallery which struck him as expressing the instability and vulnerability of existence living in

conditions of climate change. On the other hand, some work made ‘about’ today can feel very old fashioned (topical but ‘old’); whilst some work made many years ago can feel powerfully connected to and/or expressive of the experience of being alive today. One interviewee, for example, described hearing Andris Nelsons conduct Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* and it sounding so innovative and vital that she experienced it as “contemporary music”. Participants in this fieldwork often use the phrase “very contemporary”, employing it interchangeably with “very difficult”, “very experimental”, “very innovative”, “very incomprehensible”, “very strange” or “very weird”. The third usage of contemporary is therefore the most prominent, but different interviewees indicate a greater or lesser extent to which they are using the term to characterize work as both experimental (or challenging) *and* ‘with its time’.

Whilst some research participants actively struggle with the question of what distinguishes ‘contemporary’ work, for others the question is not pressing. However, in the key findings that follow, it will become clear that whether or not audience members are consciously engaged with the what is meant by ‘contemporary’, there are a broad range of ways in which – through their arts-going practices, experiences and attitudes – they are actively responding to and exploring the distinctive characteristics of those arts identified by cultural organisations and practitioners as ‘contemporary’.

5. FINDINGS

The life history interviews conducted with 56 research participants each produced a biographical narrative (or montage) comparably rich to the three presented above. Each of the 56 interviews provides powerful testimony to the experiences people have of the contemporary arts in Birmingham; the routes or circumstances by which each participant has come to engage with the contemporary arts; how this engagement continues to be connected to other aspects of life, such as education, work, family, friendships and personal interests; and how and why the contemporary arts are important to people (or not). These interviews were transcribed, and thematic analyses were then conducted to establish findings across the full range of interviews. This process of analysis extended to the ‘Audience Exchange’ group conversations, interviews with the directors of the five organisations with whose audiences we worked, and field notes generated through participant observation at contemporary arts events in Birmingham. The following findings are thereby drawn from the thematic analysis of each of the four strands of the fieldwork, and from across the full breadth of the enormously rich data they each produced.

I. FACILITATIVE ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS

Our fieldwork reveals that a number of conditions facilitate or encourage people to attend work that is new, unknown, unfamiliar, or unpredictable. These are:

- a) Access to rehearsals and the creative process.
- b) Opportunities to volunteer: to be actively involved in helping put on the event.
- c) Festival conditions: where people will see ‘anything’ or try new things.

- d) Performances in public spaces, in which people can dip in and dip out of a show.
- e) Free tickets / free access: through which people will try things they would not otherwise see.
- f) 'Gateway' organisations: trusted organisations encouraging people to engage with new work presented elsewhere.
- g) Arts venues being friendly, accessible, welcoming, inclusive, and "keeping the non-performance spaces alive": people being happy to be there, they try what's offered.

Some of these conditions will be applicable and useful for arts that are not 'contemporary'; but given that much contemporary work is by its nature 'new', unknown, unfamiliar, or unpredictable, all of which can present particular challenges to initial and ongoing engagement, these facilitating conditions take on increased importance for organisations presenting contemporary work.

II. FACILITATIVE AUDIENCE ATTITUDES

Not all experiences of contemporary arts are enjoyable. Interviewees report that attending these arts can be "difficult" and "challenging" (this word being used sometimes as a positive attribute and at others as a euphemism); and that enjoyment and interest sit alongside less satisfying experiences. Across the fieldwork, research participants articulated a series of attitudes and orientations to contemporary work that facilitate their enjoyment, even amidst the possibility of boredom, irritation, equivocation and incomprehension:

- a) I like some things and not others, and that is "how it should be".
- b) I have an interest in "experiment", "pushing boundaries", or "asking questions" – this is valuable and important, "even if I don't always like the work".
- c) I have a "curious disposition"; and an "open" attitude to trying new things.
- d) I do not need to "understand" a show in order to enjoy it.
- e) I want to be "challenged"; I want to see and hear "challenging" work.
- f) The arts make / allow you to "think differently", and this is what I want.

These accounts that audiences give of the attitudes they take to contemporary arts help open up important aspects of the value of this work: ways in which the contemporary arts are important to people. Arts organisations presenting contemporary work could give further thought to how they might facilitate these attitudes and orientations to their shows.

III. A KEY SITE OF AUDIENCE VALUE: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Audiences place particular value on organisations "opening up the creative process":

- a) Access to rehearsals, for example, can be an extremely important part of learning about and coming to enjoy contemporary art (especially in the case of contemporary music: access to rehearsals is a key feature of the BCMG Sound Investors scheme, and one of the features that makes it so effective.)

- b) For some people, there is as much interest in the conversations going on through or around an event as in the show 'itself'; and having access to or involvement in the creative process provides particularly rich and facilitating opportunities for dialogue and exchange.
- c) Many interviewees indicate the enjoyment they take - and the value they place - on being in proximity to artists; and being "part of that world".
- d) Volunteering is one important way of being "nearer the art" and behind the scenes.
- e) In some cases, people are very interested in having involvement in or access to the creative process for the ways in which it may contribute to their own creativity, be this an amateur, or a professional interest and perhaps connected to developing a career. (In this regard, Birmingham is seen to be particularly good for the openness of its artists and arts organisations.)

The value audiences put on involvement with or access to the creative process appears to be a particular feature of (and site of possibility for) the contemporary arts. These attractions of opening up the creative process may have implications for contemporary arts organisations both in terms of how they encourage people to be present in the first place, and in developing those audience attitudes and orientations to the work that we have found facilitate enjoyment.

IV. THE ENJOYMENT OF FACILITATED CONVERSATION

In response to our 'Audience Exchange' visits, a number of research participants reported how much they had enjoyed discussing with the group their experiences of the show they had just seen together. Several research participants chose to attend a second or third outing, because they enjoyed it so much. In one case a participant attended an exhibition he had already seen because he wanted to have the opportunity to view and discuss it with an Audience Exchange group; whilst another participant said she would come to "see anything" she was invited to as part of an Audience Exchange, because she liked the overall experience. These strong positive responses culminated in members of the final Audience Exchange visit suggesting that the research team relay to participating arts organisations that they would really welcome the opportunity to have similar facilitated conversations on a regular basis. They would be delighted if arts organisations offered the opportunity for groups of people, who may well not know each other, to come together to discuss their experiences of a show.⁶

Strikingly, these participants emphasised that the discussion should not involve 'experts'. This would be quite distinct from question-and-answer sessions with artists or performers. Instead, our research participants indicated that they really enjoyed the opportunity to explore and share their own experiences with other attendees. They indicated that this experience might be particularly important in the context of 'contemporary' work, which is often challenging, difficult to understand,

⁶ In swift response to this finding and proposal, BCMG has already programmed two post-performance discussions – to be facilitated by Dr. Gross – specifically intended to create a space for conversation between audience members about the concert experiences they have just had. Unlike typical pre or post-performance events, these discussions will not involve the performers, members of the creative team, or any other designated 'expert' contributor. The events will take place in November 2015 and February 2016, as part of BCMG's 2015-16 season.

and for these reasons there can often be an additional interest and pleasure in discussing one's experiences.

These findings strongly suggest that the provision of facilitated conversations may be an important and fairly straightforward way in which arts organisations presenting contemporary work can create conditions in which visitors (with potentially diverse levels of experience and confidence in engaging with contemporary arts) can enjoyably explore their sometimes equivocal, often uncertain experiences of challenging, experimental work. It also indicates an important way in which arts organisations can deepen and develop relationships with their visitors, and potentially encourage the kinds of organisational attachment and loyalty that we observed many examples of amongst our research participants during the fieldwork.

In addition to the enjoyment participants took in the 'Audience Exchange' activities, many also indicated how much they enjoyed the one-to-one 'life history' interview through which they were given the opportunity to discuss their interests in the arts, the changes and developments in their tastes and arts-going practices, and the connections between these and other aspects of their everyday lives. One interviewee found the experience so enjoyable and powerful that he wrote a letter to BCMG to say that the experience had been transformational to him. In combination with finding that the creation of welcoming, hospitable environments is important to many of our research participants - often a major factor in encouraging them to spend time at an organisation and to encounter contemporary work there - our fieldwork thereby strongly suggests that the research process itself can be an important mechanism through which contemporary arts organisations may develop strong, deep relationships with visitors. These findings suggest that embedding elements of these research practices within organisations – for example, through regular 'Audience Exchange' events – has considerable potential as an audience development strategy in itself.

V. THE CHALLENGE OF COMBINING DEEP PARTICIPATION WITH BROAD INCLUSIVITY

'Experimentation', 'participation' and, in some cases 'co-creation' are key values for contemporary arts organisations, but there are challenges and dilemmas facing the combination and institutionalization of these values. The Digbeth area of Birmingham turns out to be an illuminating case study for this.

Digbeth is a former manufacturing and light industrial area of Birmingham,⁷ just five minutes' walk from the Bullring shopping centre, but with a very different atmosphere and environment to the retail district that it borders. In the late 1980s and 1990s, what were once the Birds factory buildings - left derelict since the 1960s - were turned into 'The Custard Factory', a centre for creative industries, and which now describes itself as Birmingham's 'Creative Quarter'. The streets neighbouring The Custard Factory are home to an ever growing number of galleries, studio spaces, media companies and creative businesses; including Grand Union and Eastside Projects, two of the organisations involved in this research. The contemporary arts organisations in the area are often

⁷ Some of these activities continue to exist in the area today.

small in scale and limited in resources, run by small teams of committed artists and practitioners. In 2014 'Digbeth First Friday' was launched, a monthly event inviting people to explore a series of arts organisations on the same evening, encouraging people to visit the area and to discover the range of activities taking place there.

Through our fieldwork we found that some interviewees have a strong preference for engaging with contemporary arts within organisations that feel "unfinished", as we heard Laura explain it in the 'Life Stories' section above – or within "back stage" rather than "front of house" organisations, or those in which you can see the "ropes and pulleys", as other participants put it. This is where participation feels fullest and most involving to these interviewees, and where artwork most powerfully facilitates conversation and thought. For this reason they have a strong preference for the small contemporary arts organisations in Digbeth, where opportunities for these kinds of deep involvement and participation are offered. Unlike larger, more 'finished' organisations, these Digbeth galleries provide frequent opportunities for sustained interaction with artists; to participate in artist-led workshops (in some cases thereby contributing to the production of art work); to help hang or take down exhibitions, to volunteer (as a gallery assistant, for example); and to participate in a monthly reading group - at which to discuss pieces of writing connected to issues of art, aesthetics and politics.

For other interviewees, either they have little or no knowledge of the Digbeth arts scene – in some cases despite a very active interest in the arts in Birmingham – or they feel that the area is in some sense not for them, or not easily discovered and entered into. A number of people report that Digbeth is exciting, and should be recognised as Birmingham's "Cultural Quarter"; but that it is not as well known or as well attended as it ought to be. Digbeth should be better connected to the centre of Birmingham (and the arts organisations there), and better signage and visual presence would assist this.

For many interviewees the organisations in Digbeth are very open and interested in "dialogue". And this is one of the most distinctive and important things about these places. For others, even though they love what the Digbeth galleries do, and the opportunities for dialogue and participation they create, they suggest that the Digbeth scene needs to be more outward facing, to speak with a louder voice to let people know that they are there, and what is going on, and to attract more people not already 'inside' the Digbeth scene.

These findings raise the question: would it be possible for small contemporary arts organisations such as those in Digbeth - adventurous in seeking co-creative ways to produce art, often working on very limited resources - to attract significantly more participants, whilst doing so in ways that continue to fulfil their mission to provide a space for creative "dialogue"? How might the combination of deep *and* broad participation be achieved? These findings ask us to think about the diversity of modes of participation, and possibly the diversity of 'openness'. Perhaps it is understandable and right that different arts organisations will make themselves welcoming, inclusive and diverse in different ways, according to organizational size, location and mission. And perhaps arts organisations should be emboldened to articulate the value of their work in terms not only of the breadth of their reach, but also the depth of participation they make possible.

VI. WHO IS ATTENDING?

In an important sense the answer to this question provided by our project is the 56 semi-biographical narratives (or montages) produced through the life history interviews. It is possible, nonetheless, to report on the demographic profile of audiences for the contemporary arts – as represented by our research participants – in the following terms. The contemporary arts in Birmingham are attended by:

- People of diverse ages. Our research participants ranged from 22 to 86 years old. Participants were distributed across the decades between early twenties and mid eighties, with a particular concentration of participants in their fifties and sixties.
- People of diverse socio-economic statuses and professions.
- An even balance of men and women.
- A restricted diversity of ethnicities, with the large majority of attendees being white British or white European.
- People who, in many cases, have considerable professional and/or personal connection to the contemporary arts. (Though it important to also point out that in a substantial number of cases, there is no professional or personal connection at all.)
- People who, in many cases, have become involved through volunteering.

VII. WHY ARE THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE?

The second of our research questions asked, ‘what value do the contemporary arts have for audiences?’ Or, in other words, why are the contemporary arts important to people? We found that for some interviewees, engaging with the contemporary arts is a major part of how they spend their time and live their ‘everyday’ life. This was the case with Dave and Laura in the ‘Life History’ section above. On the other hand, for other interviewees, such as Penny, engagement with the contemporary arts plays a much more occasional or peripheral part of their lives. For some interviewees (such as Penny and Laura), sociality is a key aspect of the value they place on engaging with the contemporary arts. For others, (such as Dave), sociality is very secondary - or not does relate closely at all - to the key experiences and satisfactions that engagement with the contemporary arts brings. The contemporary arts are valuable to people for a wide range of reasons. These include:

- a) To be “in on the ground” of new work and creativity, and to be in proximity to artists.
- b) The forms of sociality, community or “camaraderie” some people enjoy through the contemporary arts, and, in some cases, the strong experiences of organisational attachment they have developed.
- c) Opportunities for dialogue, discussion and exchange.
- d) Opportunities to reflect on or develop one’s own creativity – be it an amateur interest or, in other cases, a professional interest and a wish to start or progress a career.
- e) Opportunities to volunteer and contribute.
- f) To experience something that is “different” or “new”.

- g) To experience something that is “challenging” or “difficult”.
- h) Having the opportunity to engage with work that is transient, unexpected, not commercial, or not a commodity.

In what follows, we make a series of suggestions as to the implications of these findings for researchers and cultural organisations working with the contemporary arts.

6. IMPLICATIONS

I. ARTS ORGANISATIONS (AND RESEARCHERS) SHOULD EXPLORE THE VARIETIES OF PARTICIPATION

Recent years have seen a rising interest in ‘participatory’ practices in the arts. This has run in parallel to increasing expectations (or demands) that arts organisations demonstrate themselves to be promoting ‘participation’. There has, however, been relatively little conceptual or empirical attention paid to what is meant by participation, or what variety of experiences of participation take place across time, place and organisational context.⁸ ‘Participation’ comes in many varieties; facilitating a potentially wide range of experiences, and embodying, facilitating or promoting diverse social, cultural and political values. Our findings in this project strongly indicate the need to address *the diversity of ways in which contemporary arts organisations create conditions for a variety of modes of participation*. And individual arts organisations might give further thought to exactly what kinds of participation they are most keen to facilitate within the particular conditions of the work they present and the overall organisational culture they are looking to create.

II. LET’S TALK LESS ABOUT ‘ACCESS’ AND ‘BARRIERS’ AND MORE ABOUT ‘CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP’

Recent years have also seen the idea of widening ‘access’ to the arts established as an obligatory ambition for all arts organisations, or at least for those who have any interest at all in receiving public funding. Accompanying the idea of ‘access’ is typically the idea of removing ‘barriers’ to access. The Artistic Director of one of the organisations participating in this study indicated his own long standing dissatisfaction with the idea of ‘access’ and accessibility as the dominant way to conceptualise and address audience development. Our findings suggest that thinking about who is attending the contemporary arts only in terms of ‘access’ and ‘barriers’ will limit arts organisations’ abilities to realise the potential breadth of their audiences, and the potential depth of audiences’ participation in the life of the organisation. Our fieldwork indicates that, rather than thinking in terms of ‘access’ and ‘barriers’, researchers and arts organisations should turn their attention to what another Artistic Director involved in this study referred to as ‘cultural citizenship’.

⁸ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012) and Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) for two examples of researchers identifying the lack of criticality in current discourses of participation. In their own ways they each point towards the need for much more work to investigate the varieties of participation.

With the term cultural citizenship we identify the ways in which ‘audiences’ for the contemporary arts are rarely if ever ‘just’ audiences, in the sense of purchasers of tickets whose involvement in the arts is understood simply in terms of discrete acts of attendance. Our research demonstrates widespread interest in civic vitality amongst audiences for the contemporary arts. People are often interested in the contemporary arts not only as the opportunity for personally satisfying or enjoyable experiences, but also with a keen interest in how these activities do and might still further contribute to the life of the city or the “community” in which they live. We also found a widespread interest and involvement in volunteering, which in turn challenges the implied distinction between more or less passive, consumer ‘audiences’ and active, producer ‘participants’.

The fact that such a large proportion of our interviewees is involved in volunteering activities connected to the contemporary arts has significant implications for how contemporary arts organisations might go about attracting and working with audience-participants in the future. To think about this in terms of ‘cultural citizenship’ is useful for the way in which it draws attention to the extent to which attendees at these organisations are actively involved in shaping the cultural life of the city - be it through volunteering at the BE Festival, Grand Union, or DanceXchange; playing the piano for a local choir; writing to Birmingham City Council to protest about a funding cut to the Birmingham Opera Group; contributing to a community arts project in a row of abandoned Victorian houses; or performing in a drama workshop above a pub. Moreover, the term ‘cultural citizenship’ indicates important directions in which contemporary arts organisations might consider taking their audience development strategies in the future, for example, by thinking about ways in which it would be possible and fruitful to connect contemporary arts organisations to other sites of civic participation (such as community groups that have a focus that is not the arts), and to other organisations that provide opportunities for volunteering.

III. THE POTENTIAL USEFULNESS OF EXAMPLES, MODELS, AND SHARING STRATEGIES

This project has identified a series of examples of strikingly innovative strategies by which organisations are developing deep relationships with their audiences, and facilitating new encounters between audiences and contemporary work. Examples can be drawn from each of the organisations involved in this study. To name just two: the BE Festival hosts a meal each evening, in an extended interval after the second of the four new plays being presented that night, at which audience members, festival staff, volunteers and performers eat together. Many interviewees described how hugely enjoyable this feature of the festival is, and that they are happy to attend the BE Festival for the overall communal experience. They do not need to know in advance what the performances will be like, as any sense of risk (as to whether this will be an evening well spent) is lessened by the high expectations of an enjoyable and enriching social experience. Within this fun and supportive environment, they are more than happy to try new things.

BCMG’s Sound Investor scheme provides Sound Investors (who contribute £150 towards a BCMG commission) with the opportunity to attend rehearsals of the new piece they have helped make possible. Those interviewees who have participated in the scheme strongly emphasised the importance of these rehearsals to their enjoyment and engagement with contemporary classical music. Through access to rehearsals, audience members are able to become familiar with work that

is often otherwise elusive - to observe processes through which it is developed - and this facilitates their interest, engage and enjoyment.

Through the conversations we held with thirteen organisations, and through the two project meetings in which representatives of these organisations came together, we also identified the extent to which organisations presenting contemporary work share common challenges and concerns. One important implication of this research is therefore to demonstrate the importance of contemporary arts organisations sharing experience and sharing ideas. Our findings give powerful testimony to the ways in which these organisations create conditions in which varied and valuable experiences of the contemporary arts can take place. By continuing the conversations established through this project between contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham, there is tremendous potential to explore what works and how it works; and by sharing experiences, examples and strategies, participating organisations each stand to learn a great deal from each other.

IV. FURTHER COLLABORATION IN MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS AND CO-PRODUCTION; AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SINGLE CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN BIRMINGHAM

The collaboration between contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham could fruitfully be extended beyond ongoing sharing of experiences, examples and successes. Many interviewees described feeling that they often miss out on contemporary work going on in Birmingham that they would be interested in attending if they knew about it sooner (or at all). Amongst some there is frustration that there is not a more streamlined channel of communication by which to hear about what is going on in the contemporary arts in the city. Our fieldwork suggests there is significant potential for organisations presenting contemporary art in Birmingham to collaborate further on communications and marketing. This could take a number of forms, from something as simple as reciprocal marketing (such as organisations including details of events put on by other organisations in their own mail-outs), to the development of a single e-newsletter for the contemporary arts in Birmingham – a suggestion that has drawn a lot of interest and support in our end of project reporting to partner organisations. These collaborations could also extend to further co-productions and joint events between contemporary arts organisations. This is something that interviewees indicated they were interested to see more of, and which, for some, has been a very effective way by which they have been introduced to contemporary work in other art forms.

V. CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUDIENCE CONVERSATION AND EXCHANGE

As outlined above, participants in this research made explicit their keen interest in further opportunities for facilitated conversations in response to contemporary work. As one participant put it, “we never get to have these conversations” about our experiences of the work and why they are important to us. The experience of the ‘Audience Exchange’ visits indicates the potential of these conversations as a way to deepen audience attachment to organisations; to facilitate social interactions through the contemporary arts; and to facilitate new and ongoing interests, enjoyments and satisfactions in work that is often unfamiliar, unexpected and challenging.

VI. THE POTENTIAL OF OPENING UP ACCESS TO AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS STILL FURTHER

Finally, we might ask, in what other ways might contemporary art organisations open up access to and involvement in the creative process? This research has found that the creative process is a key site of value for audiences for the contemporary arts: having contact with the creative process is often a crucial part of how people come to develop an interest in and enjoyment of the contemporary arts. This research has identified a series of strikingly successful examples of how contemporary arts organisations open up the creative process. What future possibilities for this might there be?

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

It has always been the ambition of this work in Birmingham to provide the springboard to a national project of collaborative research and network building between organisations presenting contemporary work across craft, dance, music, theatre and visual art. The intention is to develop collaborations in a series of UK cities, to investigate audience experience of the contemporary arts in each of these locations, and to share knowledge between a broad range of cultural organisations. The aim is that there will then follow an action research phase to the project, in which participating organisations will discuss the research findings with the project team, and look to develop new audience development initiatives, the effects of which will then be studied through a further phase of research.

Over the course of this national phase, in addition to the creation of a nationwide network of arts organisations looking to share knowledge of building audiences for contemporary work, a major additional benefit to the sector will come through the creation of a freely available Handbook. The intention is that this Handbook will support organisations looking to develop audiences for the contemporary arts by providing practical steps and considerations for organisations of all sizes.

We are currently in the process of applying to funding bodies to support this further work, with the aim of commencing the national phase in June 2016. If you would like to keep in touch with the development of this project, please contact one of the project team (below), and please do keep an eye on the website of the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC)

<http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/>.

Dr. Jonathan Gross	newjonty@hotmail.com
Professor Stephanie Pitts	s.e.pitts@sheffield.ac.uk
Tim Rushby	tim@bcmg.org.uk