



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Birmingham
Contemporary
Music Group



Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts

Dr Jonathan Gross & Prof Stephanie Pitts
Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre



Background to the Project

- Tim Rushby's question: *Is there crossover between audiences for the contemporary arts?*
- Theoretically contested nature of 'contemporary' art - including discussion of the implications of this work for audiences (difficulty / alienation / disregard)
 - *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 agenda: Cultural Value debates
- Practical agenda: Audience development strategies

Research Questions

Initial research questions:

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

Complementary questions from partner organisations:

- a) How do audiences **describe** and think about the kind of work presented by these organisations? (What are the **characteristics** they attribute to this work?)
- b) 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?

Participating Organisations

Main partners:

- **Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG)**
- **BE Festival** (Birmingham European Theatre Festival)
- **Craftspace**
- **DanceXchange**
- **Grand Union**

Additional organisations:

- Ikon Gallery
- Eastside Projects
- Stan's Cafe
- Town Hall, Symphony Hall
- Sanpad
- Fierce Festival
- Capsule
- Flatpack Film Festival

Research Methods

- **56 Life History interviews** with participants aged 22-86, variety of education levels, occupations and experiences with the arts
- **4 Audience Exchange visits**, taking volunteers to unfamiliar art forms and discussing these with them afterwards
- **Individual interviews** with the directors of the 5 primary partner organisations
- **Participant observation at events** including Digbeth First Friday, BCMG concerts and BCMG rehearsals.

A brief glimpse of our participants

Penny: Retired public sector employee in her sixties; “not into” the contemporary arts; enjoys volunteering; neighbour asked her to host a BE Fest performer; enjoyed hosting and now attends some performances. Occasionally attends art galleries with her son: enjoys talking about the art and *“seeing what he sees”*.

Dave: Teacher in his forties; enjoys C20th music; attends up to five performances (music, opera, dance, and films) a week; *“This is what I do”* *“This is the life”*. At DanceXchange, specifically books tickets for the nights with post-performance events, to be *“in that world”*. But doesn’t socialise (e.g., at BCMG): *“I like the solitary within the communal.”* Enjoys the experience of “difficulty”. *“This will be good for me”*. No longer experiences difficulty in this same way – and misses it.

Laura: Student in her twenties; volunteers at galleries in Digbeth, and organisations elsewhere in the city. One Digbeth gallery, in particular, was a gateway to other organisations. Interested in artwork you *“can’t work out”* straight away; presents a *“challenge”*. Excited by the opportunity to discuss work that is ongoing / open / unfinished. Distinguishes *“finished”* and *“unfinished”* organisations – enjoys the *“sketchbook stage”* of art.

What do our participants mean by 'contemporary' arts?

1. Any work made now.
2. Work that strikingly 'belongs to today': is '*con-temporary*', 'with its time' in some important respect → Expresses a widespread thought or feeling of that historical moment / responds to a particular event or issue of its day.
3. Work made in the tradition of experimentation in form we call 'modernism'.

With participants in this fieldwork: normally 3, with inflections of 2. ("Very contemporary" comes to be synonymous with 'very difficult', 'very experimental', 'very innovative', 'very incomprehensible', 'very strange / weird'.)

But there are really interesting questions about the relationship between 3 and 2:

- Some experimentation in form seems old hat. Other experimentation in form is experienced as being a necessary response to changing conditions.
- Some work made 'about' today can feel very old fashioned (topical but 'old'); whilst some work made 50 years ago can feel powerfully connected to and/or expressive of the experience of being alive today.

[1] Facilitative Organisational Conditions

1. **A number of conditions facilitate / encourage people to attend work that is new, unknown, unfamiliar, unpredictable:**
 - a) Access to rehearsals / creative processes.
 - b) Opportunities to volunteer: to be actively involved in helping put on the event.
 - c) Festival conditions: where people will see 'anything' / try new things.
 - d) Performances in public spaces, in which you can dip in and dip out.
 - e) Free tickets / free access – people will see things they wouldn't otherwise see.
 - f) 'Gateway' Organisations.
 - g) Arts venues being friendly, accessible, welcoming, inclusive, and "keeping the non-performance spaces alive".
- ***Some of these conditions might 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 may present particular challenges to initial and ongoing engagement, these facilitating conditions take on increased importance for organisations presenting contemporary work.***

[2] Facilitative Audience Attitudes

2. **Interviewees articulate kinds of attitude or orientation to contemporary work that facilitate their enjoyment:**
 - a) You will like some things and not others, and that is “how it should be”.
 - b) Interest in “experiment”, “pushing boundaries”, or “asking questions” – this is valuable and important → “even if I don’t always like the work”.
 - c) A “curious disposition” / an “open” attitude.
 - d) Not needing to “understand”.
 - e) Wanting to be “challenged” / wanting to see and hear “challenging” work.
 - f) The arts make / allow you to “think differently” (and this is what we want).
- ***Arts organisations presenting contemporary work could give further thought to how they might facilitate these attitudes / orientations to their shows.***
- ***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.***

[3] A Key Site of Audience Value: The Creative Process

3. **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 / around an event as in the show ‘itself’. Creative process → Dialogue. Exchange.
 - c) Enjoyment of proximity to artists / makers / performers. Being “part of that world”.
 - d) Volunteering – one important way of being ‘nearer the art’ / seeing behind the scenes.
 - e) Professional interest / developing a career
 - f) Birmingham particularly good for the openness of artists / arts organisations.
- ***The value audiences put on involvement with or access to the creative process appears to be a particular feature of (& 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 encouraging people to be present in the first place, and in developing those orientations to the work that we have found facilitate enjoyment.***

Implications for Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts

- 1. Need to address the diversity of ways in which contemporary arts organisations create conditions for a *variety* of modes of participation.**
'Participation' comes in many varieties; facilitating a potentially wide range of experiences, and embodying / facilitating / promoting diverse social, cultural and political values.
- 2. Need to talk less about 'access' (and 'barriers') and more about 'cultural citizenship'.**
 - Widespread interest in civic vitality and in volunteering.
 - Audiences as active participants, shaping cultural life
 - Challenge to audience / participant distinction
 - May indicate directions for contemporary arts organisations in thinking about their audience development strategies. (e.g., how can we connect our organisation to other sites of civic participation?)

For further details...

- A full report of the project is available on the SPARC website: www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk
- Further publications will follow...
- Contact: newjonty@hotmail.co.uk or s.e.pitts@sheffield.ac.uk

