

How does it look to you?

How should visual artists best document their work – and how should they approach galleries and public commissions with this documentation?

These were the questions addressed at the 'How does it look to You' training day, held in Lowestoft in June 2003.

This training event was held as part of **making art work**, the professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk. For more information about the scheme, please visit the Suffolk County Council web site at www.suffolkcc.gov.uk and follow the link from Leisure and Culture to the Arts.



making art work is a professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk, devised and managed by Suffolk County Council and part financed by the European Union European Social Fund and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.

The speakers were Barbara Taylor, Director of Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, David Wright, Director of Commissions East and Dr Michael Pinsky, lecturer and artist.

BARBARA TAYLOR, DIRECTOR, BURY ST EDMUNDS ART GALLERY

Barbara gave a brief overview of the Gallery, explaining that, as a public gallery, her remit is slightly different to that of private galleries, in that she has a greater responsibility to show work by local artists.

Private galleries tend to be smaller, more pressured and you must be very sure that they do the sort of work you produce.

Bury Art Gallery receives lots of information from artists – in loads of different formats and quantities. Solicited material must be looked at first, obviously, and unsolicited images will also be looked at – it may just take a little longer.

Key to selection is how successfully you put across what you do, so here are a few pointers to successful presentation.

- If sending slides **SELECT A FEW THAT ARE INDICATIVE OF YOUR WORK.**
- Don't send loads of shots of the same thing
- Don't send everything you've got, it merely demonstrates that you couldn't make up your mind about what best expressed your work — so why should the gallery?
- And please don't send your only copies of images — it can be nerve-racking for the staff knowing that no other images

exist of the work and things do get lost in the post, so always keep copies.

- A slide list is better than sticking loads of information on the slides as this often comes off inside the projector.
- Include dimensions of piece, which way up (if not obvious) and which way round.
- When sending written documentation, make it appropriate – and not too long Don't send a catalogue and just ask the staff to refer to it.
- If sending a video, DVC or CDROM, it's a good idea to let them know how long the running time is.
- Print outs of CD's are also useful.
- Send something they can keep. The Gallery programmes two years in advance so they really need something they can keep on file.
- The best way to approach them is to call and have a chat, then send in some images and ring a couple of weeks later to chat about it again.

Very few artists actually approach Barbara directly, she tends to hear about them indirectly – but she welcomes artists getting in touch.

Finally, before sending images, ask a friend to look at them and tell you if they represent your work. Then pack them off to the Gallery.

DAVID WRIGHT, DIRECTOR COMMISSIONS EAST

Commissions East acts as an intermediary between artist and commissioning agencies. As such, they don't always make decisions about individual artists.

They do, however, keep a database of artists and operate a slide index, which artists may be selected on to. The basis for selection is quality and appropriateness of work. Commissions East doesn't want to waste artist's time, so there's no point in putting an artist into the slide index if their work is not appropriate.

There are basically three ways of getting involved in Commissions East; through competitions, by David seeing the artist's work or via direct contact

Competition

- The last competition run by Commissions East received 600 expressions of interest and 200 submissions.
- There's often a very long short-listing and selection process.
- With that much work coming in, it is prohibitively expensive to return it all, which is why they ask for a sae with submissions.
- When sending a submission, keep it short, keep it smart.
- They prefer to receive slides – videos often take too long to view and often photographs get damaged in the post.

- Stick to the number of slides they ask for.
- Send a slide list with one liners of description per slide, rather than lots of sticky labels on the slide itself.
- Include a covering letter, listing what you're sending; this makes administration easier.
- DON'T send additional material. Their equal opportunities policy dictates that they can't consider anything they haven't actually requested – so it's a waste of your time and money.
- CV: only send what's appropriate – only include information that's relevant to the submission — and not too long.

If you haven't done much, remember the good old transferable skills. You may not have run public workshops but you may have experience of working with the public in other contexts.

- Your CV can be typed or hand written – it doesn't matter as long as it's legible.
- Artists should have multiple copies of slides. Please don't rely on having one good set and one second rate – and if you do, DON'T send the second rate set.
- If you send CDs, check that the software is compatible so that they can open it.

Often artists assume that commissioners know all about their work – this is not true and so make sure you inform them of all relevant professional practice.

Direct approach

Commissions East welcomes direct approaches from artists but they are wary of wasting artists' time – so artists should research carefully BEFORE approaching, to familiarise themselves with the type of work done by the organisation.

Send some images and cv and then call about 10 days later to follow up.

The final way is for David to visit your show – so invites to the ready.

MICHAEL PINSKY

Michael is a digital/installation artist with many years experience of working on public art commissions — as such he has had to submit loads of proposals and has developed numerous ways of doing this.

Michael stresses the need for the individual artist to be selective in the material they submit; don't send lots of different formats and leave the selection up to the viewer – when faced with a bundle of cards, transparencies, videos, catalogues and photos they may decide not to look at anything.

Michael also stresses the need to document ALL your work, so that in years to come you will have a record of pieces that may well have been sold in the interim.

His presentation contained 2 elements:
INPUT - or how you collect and document your images and work and OUTPUT — how you get that documentation in front of curators and commissioners.

INPUT

- SLR camera – a basic 'must' for all artists, particularly with a tripod, to record work in progress as well as finished pieces.
- Medium format camera – e.g. Hasselblad. These are available for hire and produce a far superior quality image than a SLR. The transparencies produced are larger than normal transparencies and as such not normally used for presentations, but are the best format for producing images for catalogues.
- Video camera — very useful for installation/public art work and again to record work in progress. It also means you can get views from all angles on the work, and as such capture far more information about it.
- Digital camera - these have come down so much in price recently that again it could be considered an artist's 'must have' item. Ideal for capturing loads of images cheaply and storing in digital form.

- Scanner — lots of work can actually be scanned rather than photographed and again it's an effective way of storing images on your computer or to disc.

OUTPUT

- Slides — Michael suspects that slides are on the way out. They're expensive to produce and until you see the actual slide you can't be sure of the quality of the image. Then, when you send them (which is also expensive) you can't be sure how they'll be received. Obviously if you are sending a solicited proposal the selection process will be appropriate with the proper equipment to view slides. If you are sending unsolicited submissions, bear in mind that the person receiving them may just hold them up to the light for a quick look — if it's grey outside this won't do much for your work.
- Video — again, you need to be sure that the equipment is available to view it. Include details of running time and name the actual video as well as the box it comes in. Michael feels that quite often commissioners/curators take videos home to watch – which gives you a greater chance that they will be in a relaxed frame of mind when viewing them and as such may give you the edge on other artists' submissions.
- Mini dvds – holds a lot of information and increasingly used to view work.

- CDRom — this format scored highly in Michael's preferred formats — and the example he showed certainly demonstrated their capacity to deliver: they can hold animated art works, facts and figures and the quality is superb. The same software and design can also be used to make your web site.
- Digital camera – this has the advantage of being instant — no days spent waiting for prints to get back from the chemist. And it's very useful for promoting work, e.g. the press want images yesterday so emailing jpegs is a superb way of getting stuff to them quickly.

Finally, Michael makes the point that, if a submission calls for transparencies and you don't have any — but do have a video of the work or some other format — then call them to discuss if you can submit an alternative form of viewing your work.