

Exhibiting participatory arts projects

In January 2006, David Collins ran a 2-day training event on how to exhibit participatory arts projects.

David's background includes time working in community arts, further education, graphic design, site-specific sculpture and exhibiting, collaborative/process-based art, as well as exhibiting in galleries and Higher Education lecturing.

For the past 10 years, his artistic practice has been as collaborative public art. Generally, he has presented this in public spaces - either physical or virtual; on several occasions he has been asked to re-present his work in galleries. To find out more about David's work, please visit www.davidcollins.info

Many of the examples and images used throughout the training came from projects David's worked on over the past few years. You can see many of the images, and read more about the individual projects at www.davidcollins.info/pastwork.html

Delegates actively participated in the training and were set a number of exercises, from brainstorming ideas about venues to creating a scale model of an exhibition space. This resource paper refers to some of those exercises; you might like to consider them, too.

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.

Introduction

The purpose of the training was to improve artists' skills in exhibiting work produced through community arts projects. It addressed both the generic problems of exhibition planning and the specific issues raised when presenting work created in a collaborative and/or community context.

The training was intended for artists who create work with other people and whose primary aims with that work are not defined by the need to exhibit within galleries or museums – but who will at times need to show the work in those kind of venues.

Section 1: Finding a venue – spaces you might use and how they could work for you

Delegates were asked to consider what they meant/understood by the concept of 'venue' and to examine what it might need to offer or what it could be, to fulfil the role of 'venue'.

Examples of potential venues include: -

- A building which generally hosts exhibitions – e.g. a gallery, library, museum
- A building which doesn't generally host exhibitions, but that has a connection to the project. Examples of that connection could be a shared location, participants or theme. So the venue might be a school, shop, sports centre, place of worship
- A media space - local newspaper, radio station, TV station, website, in-store radio, Billboard/Adshell
- Distributed or displayed object – e.g. the back of a parking ticket, a newsletter, calendar, book
- Publicly visible space or location, e.g. fence; window, recycling bin; van; taxi;
- One-off event e.g. a public screening

Another issue raised here was just how early on in a project one should consider the possibilities and requirements of exhibition or display.

When organising community art projects, plans for any exhibition are often left until the last minute. This may be, in part, because the end product is not the primary purpose, and as such attention is focused on the process of the project, rather than the final product.

But, if that's the case, then surely it makes sense to record the process – for example, via video clips, or rough drafts of work, brief interviews, photos, log books – all of which might be exhibited at some stage.

And more often than not, there is some notion of a 'showing and sharing' event, when family and friends are invited to view work.

Venue Exercise

It was at this stage that delegates were asked to choose one of the following hypothetical examples of community art projects and suggest potential exhibition venues.

Exercise 1.1

A youth arts project using digital cameras and PhotoShop.

Two artists worked with 16 young people for six weeks one evening a week in their local youth club. They learned how to use the cameras, how to take more interesting and creative photos, how to manipulate images and make digital photo collages.

They used photography to discuss their self-image and ultimately produced 12 collaged posters (most with text included). These were printed out at A3 and displayed around the club; each participant was also given a set to take home. The posters refer to issues such as unemployment and crap jobs, sexual health and STIs, fast food, healthy eating, body image, ASBOs and how young people are treated by society.

There are also many 100s of images on CD. These are pictures taken by the young people and images documenting two of the sessions, taken by the artists.

Exercise 1.2

A reminiscence project using sound recording and embroidery.

A white local historian and a community artist of Pakistani descent worked with elderly people from two different organisations: male and female members of a Luncheon Club at a community centre in a predominantly white area, and older women members of a local Pakistani Welfare Centre.

The project began as an aural history project with individuals being interviewed about their lives. Women from both groups were keen embroiderers and as the project developed they began to illustrate their stories with embroidery.

The final results are a series of edited interviews each 5-8 minutes long (eight from the Luncheon Club – including one conversation between two men who worked together at an aircraft manufacturers between the wars; six from the Welfare Centre) and 35 embroidered images between 10cm x 10cm and 50cm x 80cm (5 of these are a series which tell the story of one woman's journey from a small village in Pakistan to live with her new husband in a tiny two room flat in Britain).

Section 2: Working with a Space – how to get the most out of the space you've got

Delegates were asked to consider a wide range of display possibilities, from suspending, enlarging and projecting, to presenting sound and video and use of colour, for a range of visual media.

This encouraged them to examine how to use the physical possibilities of a space, to ensure that work was shown to its best advantage.

Exploit the possibilities of the venue

A venue might be a classic white cube, an enormous vaulted church, a shopping mall or a children's playground.

Not only do venue shapes and sizes differ enormously, but so, too, does the range of people who frequent them. The exhibitor needs to exploit the diversity of the situation – get a real sense of 'what goes on here, who normally comes here, what activities are associated with this venue' and use that information to the hilt.

Examples could be: -

- displaying work on the floor - e.g. in a shopping mall, where wall space is not available
- emphasising an atmosphere - e.g. within a church – by displaying work in a way that suggests religious ritual
- taking a number of days to build up an exhibition, so that bare walls are gradually covered by objects
- using entrance doors to display material

Consider how you want the work to be viewed

Are you inviting the audience to view artwork as they might watch TV? In which case, presumably you want to create a similar environment, providing easy chairs, a sofa etc.

Is the work itself not as arresting as it might be? Consider alternative ways of displaying it, e.g. slicing it into several horizontal strips and exhibiting it that way, or running half a piece of work into a corner and then onto the next wall.

Put yourself into the heads of the visitors

You obviously want to encourage visitors to view the work. You want them to feel relaxed about the experience – at least in terms of it being all right for them to look at the work, if not in terms of the emotions it subsequently evokes.

David recounted the story of an exhibition of work by first year art students.

The work was displayed in an area of the college library – in a space that was not associated by either public or college staff with exhibitions.

The students waited for the public to arrive – and although many people went past the door, no one actually entered.

David suggested they look closely at each other – how did they appear, as a group, to people arriving for the first time? Did they send out an appropriate message, i.e. ‘here’s a show and you are very welcome to come in and look, too’.

The students agreed that, far from sending a welcome-type message, they gave the impression that it was a closed event for students only. So, they left the space, and asked a couple of ‘safe looking’ people to go into the exhibition. They then observed as the area rapidly began to fill with people.

Display Exercise 2.1

Individuals were asked to choose an image provided by David. They then explored the training event venue – Endeavour House – to locate an ideal area to display the work.

They made sketches and then returned to the group, to discuss their choice of display space.

You could try something similar. Carry an image with you over the course of a few days. Imagine you have to display it in one of the places you visit during that time. Where would you choose, and why?

Section 3: Providing a Context

The aim of this part of the training was to demonstrate the importance of explaining the work clearly.

While it dealt with practical issues such as copywriting and typography, producing exhibition guides and appropriate credits and attributions, e.g. to other artists, photographers, etc, it also considered the importance of positioning work and preserving its integrity.

Making a visual link

This is one way to ‘position’ the work – i.e. the work, presumably made in response to a specific site or environment, is then exhibited in a way that reflects that site or environment.

Examples included

- ‘office-look’ displays for work sponsored by and created for a major advertising and PR agency
- open plan information panels, thus setting a context for the work.
- projecting silent videos in a central open plan office space

In 1999, David worked with ex-pupils of Foxwood Comprehensive School - built as Leeds' first comprehensive in the late 50s and closed under special measures in the late 90s.

The project resulted in multi-media installations in two massive stairwells of the building – including statements by the ex-pupils about the estates on which they grew up. These statements were printed on to acetate and displayed on the windows; viewers could read the comments and look beyond the words to the housing estates to which they referred.

Recreating the Process

Using an example of a magnetic poetry workshop he organised at a local primary school, David demonstrated different ways of recreating the process – thus adding to the viewers' understanding of the work, the project and the ideas behind both.

Large trays full of 'magnetic poetry', i.e. single words on magnetic strips, were placed on the floor of the exhibition space, in front of the images taken of work created during the project at a local school. In this way, viewers could both see the work and create their own.

Copy Writing

Whether you are making a poster to promote an exhibition, or writing catalogue notes, how you write about these things is very important.

Think like a journalist; people need to know who, what, where and when. Use short, snappy sentences – think about the articles you read in the press, and copy that style.

Spell out the things that matter, don't leave people to work things out for themselves.

Typography

This can transform any exhibition, as it sets the tone for the whole experience.

- Generally, you should use just one font (**USING** several **JUST** confuses the reader)
- Avoid the temptation of using *italics* **bold**, **CAPITALS**, underline just because you can; basically, if there's not a good reason to do it – don't

Create a hierarchy of information by using a number of different sizes or forms of display – vinyl text, foam board panels, short stand alone statements etc.

Consider how you have experienced exhibitions – have you been led round them, did you feel that there was an order in which to view the work, or did you have the feeling that there should have been an order but that you weren't sure what it was?

If you feel you were guided appropriately, how was that achieved. And if you felt lost, or swamped, how might it have been done better?

Suggestions included arrows, foot prints on the floor showing the direction to take, numbering work etc. And to what extent does the guide reflect the nature of the work on show?

Deeper Background Information

You can give the work greater impact by providing background information about the kind of work you do, how you do it, and who you do it for.

Providing rough drafts of the project involves the viewer in the process, and also maintains the integrity of the work, as it demonstrates how the project developed, other people who were involved in it, examples of work-in-progress, etc.

Explaining the techniques used to make work can really help viewers appreciate the final outcomes – and the levels of skill and talent that went into producing it.

And please remember that, while the norm is to write background information, using videos and/or CDs to explain the project can be far more appropriate to the project itself – and more accessible to audiences.

Context Exercise 3.1

Choose a project you have worked on which is either difficult to explain or where other people seem to find it hard to understand what was good or valuable about it. Consider what made the project important or of good quality from your perspective. Now consider what someone who knew nothing about the project would need to see or read to appreciate it in the same way.

How could you turn this material into an exhibition.

Make sketches or diagrams of how you would display it

Write a clear, short description of the project (Who - what – where – when – why) to accompany the visuals.

And finally

Before attending the training days, delegates were asked to respond to the following questions. Obviously, it was to help us prepare the training day - but it also helped individual artists focus on their practice. Several previously had not considered themselves as 'community artists' and it was only in addressing these questions that they realised it was a major part of their practice. The questions may also provide food for thought on how you would like your practice to develop.

The QUESTIONS

Which of the following have you done previously within your artistic practice?

Use either NO or an indication of how often you have done the thing asked about, e.g. once, occasionally or frequently.

1. Collaborated with other artists as equal partners
2. Collaborated with other artists where you are the lead artist or artistic director
3. Collaborated with other (non-arts) professionals
4. Collaborated with an arts organization to plan and deliver a project
5. Collaborated with a non-arts organization to plan and deliver a project
6. Worked with children
 - in a school setting
 - in an organized non-school setting (eg. youth club, gallery)
 - where they are accompanied by their guardians
 - in an informal setting (eg. on the street)
7. Worked with adults
 - where they are members of a pre-existing group
 - where you have formed a group specially for a project
8. Created an artwork which relies on the interaction or participation of others to complete it (not just as an audience).
9. Made a conscious artistic decision not to work with other people for a period of time
10. Made a conscious artistic decision to work with other people for a period of time