

Picture of youth: encouraging young people to engage with art



There was a time when the sole concession an art gallery might have made towards younger visitors was a cut-price entrance fee. This in itself appeared to acknowledge an inherent difficulty in appealing to that particular age group. There can be little doubt that nowadays the sector in general demonstrates a far greater willingness to cater for a more youthful demographic, but how successful are such efforts beyond the mere act of “getting them through the door”?

Research by the University of Exeter’s Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism aims to provide an unprecedented insight into how art galleries can influence and change the views, attitudes and perceptions of visitors aged between 13 and 25. It is hoped the findings of the study will help inform best practice – not just throughout the Tate network, which is supporting the project, but across the sector as a whole.

Overview

The criticisms historically levelled against art galleries are well known, even if they might never have been entirely justified. Elitist, unwelcoming, uninvolving, intimidating – all were shortcomings routinely cited by those the sector failed to attract. It is widely acknowledged that in recent years there has been a determined attempt to render such condemnations obsolete, with galleries' approaches to their potential audiences altering dramatically in a number of ways. First and foremost, galleries no longer regard collecting and caring for objects as their principal duty. They have become “visitor-centred”: it is the audience, not the artefact, that comes first. This welcome development has led to a significant shift in how galleries receive the young people they have traditionally struggled to reach. Artist Rooms, a post-war and contemporary collection jointly owned by Tate and National Galleries Scotland, is a leading example of this philosophy. It was specifically created to appeal to the 13-to-25-year-old demographic by offering an array of participative activities that encourage visitors to reflect on and express their personal responses to the art they encounter.

It is broadly assumed that projects like Artist Rooms benefit young people, yet the fact is that at present there exists no detailed understanding of precisely how this process works. A

study by the University of Exeter is seeking to fill this gap by analysing the nature and effect of young visitors' encounters with Artist Rooms – and its innovative and ambitious learning programmes – as the collection tours the UK throughout 2012.

The galleries associated with Artist Rooms are at the forefront of various participative modes of engagement for young people. Some of these activities create a dialogue between the art and the visitor; some are geared towards establishing – and subsequently collaborating with – “young curator” advisory groups; some invite youngsters to create their own art for display alongside established exhibits. Using a range of qualitative methods, the research will explore how these concepts can shape and strengthen young people's appreciation of and connections with art.



ARTISTS
WHO MAKE
“PIECES”

KEY FACTS

- Art galleries have traditionally struggled to attract younger visitors – that is, those aged from 13 to 25.
- In recent years this trend has begun to reverse in light of galleries' concerted efforts to become less “object-centred” and more “visitor-centred”.
- Even so, a precise understanding of how galleries can change young people's perceptions has yet to be developed.
- Research by the University of Exeter is aiming to fill this gap by analysing young visitors' experiences with Artist Rooms, a post-war and contemporary collection jointly owned by Tate and National Galleries Scotland.
- The findings could help determine best practice not just within the Tate network but across the gallery sector as a whole.

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Picture of youth: encouraging young people to engage with art (cont.)



Comments and implications

"The shift in identity that galleries have undergone in recent years has completely transformed how they interact with young people," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Stephen Vainker.

"Galleries now strive to be spaces in which young audiences can feel confident to express themselves and engage with art on their own terms. The purpose of our research is to contribute to establishing a far more complete picture of their experiences in galleries – and, more specifically, to understand how they change and develop through those experiences."

Vainker's study is based on close observation of the participative activities at Artist Rooms' associated galleries and a variety of interviews with young visitors. Some of these interviews will be structured and might involve providing interviewees with visual cues from which to talk about their experiences, while others will be comparatively informal and sometimes conducted during the activities themselves.

"In general, this kind of research is crucial to keeping up with the rapid changes that have taken place in how galleries approach their audiences," says Vainker. "Artist Rooms' funding purpose was to engage young people, a segment of the population that in the past has been particularly hard for galleries to reach. It's wonderful, for instance, to see the excitement children feel when their own work is displayed. This kind of philosophy shows galleries aren't 'object-centred' institutions any more – they're visitor-centred spaces that encourage people to construct meaning for themselves."

It is for this reason, says Vainker, that the study's findings should prove of interest well beyond the academic community. Indeed, Tate's prominent position in the field means it has a duty to commission research with the widest relevance possible. Artist Rooms has established a network within which galleries can share information and learn about best practice from each other, and the sector in general is also likely to take valuable guidance from the results of the three-year project.

"More and more learning schemes to enhance young people's experiences of art have been going on all around the country," says Chris Ganley, Artist Rooms' Learning Coordinator. "Going forward, it's vital to have someone do in-depth research on how young people experience Artist Rooms as we develop the programme."

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ESRC Researcher

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Chris Ganley
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