

Something remains for us to do or dare

Cultural entitlement in older age

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Older people are an increasingly important target for arts organisations to engage with. Whilst the overall population of the United Kingdom is set to increase by 3% over the next five years, the number of people aged 65 and over will rise by 12% and the number over 85 by 18%. By 2040 nearly one in four people in the UK will be over 60.¹ Participation in arts and cultural activity by older people has increased in recent years, but there is a drop in engagement (either as an active participant or audience member) as people grow older, with a sharp drop among people aged 75 or over. So whilst such engagement has increased among over 65s, older people are still significantly less likely than younger age groups to engage with arts and culture.² There will be different factors that cause this, and arts organisations will need to address these if they are to serve the needs of these audiences and maintain, or grow, their participation rates.

The contribution of arts and culture to addressing issues of health and wellbeing in older people is increasingly recognised – tackling loneliness,

improving quality of life for people in care settings, providing meaningful activity for people with dementia are all benefits that have been documented.³ However, we need to recognise that everyone has an entitlement to enjoy the arts and to participate in cultural life, no matter what their age or circumstances, notwithstanding the instrumental benefits that participation in the arts can bring. For arts organisations then – especially those in receipt of public funding – this means finding ways of enabling people to exercise that entitlement as they grow older.

In many ways, the current context is a positive one for arts organisations to target and develop work with older people. There is a growing body of research into the specific impacts that engagement in the visual arts can have on health and wellbeing, with an increasing focus on the benefits for people with dementia in terms of improving cognitive functioning and communication.⁴ As the number of people living with dementia increases there is a growing movement to create dementia-friendly communities in which people with dementia feel



understood, valued and able to contribute to and engage locally. As key cultural institutions in local communities, galleries and museums could play an important role in this – as some already do – and there are resources available to assist, such as the Age Friendly Museums Network (<https://agefriendlymuseums.wordpress.com/>) and a practical guide *Becoming a dementia-friendly arts venue*, published by the Alzheimer’s Society.⁵

Another issue that is gaining prominence when considering how to improve the quality of life for older people, is that of loneliness and isolation. *The Campaign to End Loneliness* has gathered research which demonstrates that having weak social connections carries health risks which are equivalent to those associated with smoking, excessive drinking, and obesity.⁶ The campaign has also published information on the important role of the arts in tackling loneliness.⁷

Arts for Health Cornwall partnered with the Exchange, a contemporary art gallery in Penzance, on two projects aimed at older people. One focused

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on people living in the community who may be experiencing loneliness and isolation, and one on people with dementia living in a care home. The first of these, *Celebrating Age and Ambition*, used the Exchange as a venue for showcasing the work made by older people during the project. The project aimed to highlight the skills and abilities of older people through the development of high quality artistic practice and to enhance social networks for participants. I recently met one of the participants who delighted in telling me that many of the people we had recruited for the project were still meeting regularly and engaging in creative practice, almost four years on.

There were a number of strands to the project, including the creation of a dance company for

mature dancers as well as visual arts and creative writing workshops. Over a period of 18 months a wide range of older people were recruited to these workshops which resulted in an impressive variety of work including printmaking, painting, 3D models and mobiles, textile design, poetry and stories. The culmination of the project was a two-day event at the Exchange, which included installations of the work created, projections and recordings, books of creative writing, three dance performances and a symposium for arts, health and social care professionals considering the issues arising from the project. Over 250 people attended the event, including many who would not otherwise have visited the gallery.

One of the challenges of this project was balancing the requirements of a contemporary art gallery – a need to ensure that the work to be shown was of a quality in which they could have confidence – with the need for the project to be co-designed and led by participants, facilitated by artists. Because of this, we were unable to be specific about what the final exhibition would look like until late in the day and I respect the gallery staff for keeping faith with the project over this time.

Following on from that work, the Exchange became involved in another project, *Home Service*, working with a number of other mainstream arts organisations to bring arts and culture into care homes for older people. They commissioned artist Jonty Lees to work in a specialist dementia care home, Crossroads House, near Redruth. Jonty



worked as artist-in-residence and spent his first few weeks going into the home, talking and eating with residents and staff and exploring how the role of an artist could impact on the care setting. He came up with a long list of ideas, some of which are being taken forward by care home staff, but the idea all agreed to implement as part of the project was to create a set of cups, saucers and plates, each printed with a different word. This responded to the need to engender conversations and the importance of meal times and tea breaks in the care home, a very significant part of the routine. The words were chosen to act as triggers for conversation and Jonty tested out words using flash cards, settling on the final hundred in discussion with care home staff. High quality ceramic tableware was produced by Reiko (see <http://www.reikokaneko.co.uk>). This has captured the imagination of all involved and many other care homes have asked if further sets can be produced. This is an example of where a conceptual artist in a care setting can bring a new perspective, seeing the daily routines with a new eye



and finding creative interventions that animate and engage. Jonty is now mentoring another artist and they have been commissioned by the Exchange to work in two more care homes in this immersive way.

In addition to Jonty's presence in the care home, a visit to the Exchange in Penzance was arranged. Despite the many challenges involved in this visit, it was seen as hugely rewarding for all involved, with the gallery's Learning and Participation Programmer describing it as 'one of the best days I have ever had at the gallery' and the Care Home Activities Coordinator vowing to repeat it. The exhibition they visited was of abstract, contemporary paintings and care home staff reported that they were able to engage the residents in conversations about the works in the days that followed. There is frequently an assumption that the type of visual art that older people will enjoy is traditional and familiar; I was speaking with a museum educator recently who commented that a proposed visit by a care home might be better when they had an exhibition of



local landscapes rather than the contemporary art that was currently being displayed. The experience at the Exchange shows otherwise. Older people, like anyone else, have a range of likes and dislikes, which are not affected by their age. There is also research that shows that aesthetic preferences are maintained in people with dementia so there is value in engaging them in art appreciation activities.⁸

A characteristic that might be displayed by some people with dementia is a lack of inhibition; this can be quite freeing in viewing previously unknown and sometimes challenging art. Some people looking at the large abstract works were asking quite clearly 'What is it? What is it supposed to be?' – questions which those of us more familiar with the conventions of the contemporary art gallery may not articulate out loud, even if we are thinking them. The sheer scale of the works, the depth and vividness of colour and the fact that the works were open to a range of understandings led to ongoing conversations following the visit, as though the



details of the visit had been lost to those experiencing short-term memory loss, the intensity of the experience was retained. The Exchange is committed to ongoing learning and development in this area as they not only see the benefits of being accessible to a wider audience, but, more importantly, the significant contribution of art and artists in understanding and exploring aspects of what it is to be human and to age.

It is often very difficult for care homes to organise visits for their residents. Staffing, transport and the

individual needs of residents can all mitigate against being able to do something as seemingly simple as taking a short trip to the local art gallery. Falmouth Art Gallery is working on a project aimed at enabling older people living in residential care to enjoy the works held by the gallery and have encouraged visits by first taking work to the home. Arts facilitator Laura Menzies and gallery educator Jo Lumber selected a number of works from the permanent collection, based around broad themes; 'Portraits and people', 'Nature and landscape' for example.



Works were chosen which represent a range of styles and periods. Copies of the works were mounted onto large boards and smaller versions were laminated to take into the home for residents to look at and discuss. Sensory stimulation was further prompted by objects inspired by the paintings; a block of carbolic soap, a starched white apron, a pair of ballet shoes. Laura and Jo talked about each picture with residents, allowing the conversations to flow where they would.

Following a series of visits to the home, the activities coordinator arranged for an afternoon visit to the gallery by three of the older women residents who had expressed an interest in going. Two of the women had lived in Falmouth all their lives but had never been in the gallery before. Whilst at the gallery they were introduced to the current temporary exhibition – a celebration of printmaking – and taken to the store to view the original paintings that they had been discussing in previous weeks. They also engaged in a simple printmaking activity.

The gallery intends to create a series of resource boxes containing prints of the gallery's works and related objects, and also information about the works and suggestions for creative activities that could be carried out in care homes. These resources will be loaned to care homes, which will be encouraged to bring residents in to visit the gallery. Many galleries and museums have reminiscence resources and these are very valuable, but there should also be emphasis on creating new memories for older people, on providing opportunities for them to connect to the present. Another important aspect of working with care homes is developing relationships with care staff, who may sometimes need encouragement themselves to enter the gallery space.

I return to the first point in this article – that of universal cultural entitlement and the ways in which arts organisations need to find approaches which enable that entitlement to be exercised as we grow older and may face more barriers to engagement. I don't know of a publicly funded gallery or museum that doesn't have a schools or young people's programme of some description. Given the drop in arts and cultural engagement for the over 65s, we should expect that they all also have a strategy and work programme for engaging older people.

Notes

1. *National Population Projections for the UK, 2014-based* (2015), Office of National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections>

2. Taking Part Survey, 2012/13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/taking-part>

An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People, Mental Health Foundation, 2011 <http://baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/EvidenceReview.pdf>

3. P. Camic, V. Tischler and C.H. Pearman (2013), 'Viewing and Making Art Together: A multi-session art-gallery-based intervention for people with dementia and their carers' in *Aging and Mental Health* 18(2) July 2013. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250921415>

Also see <http://dementiaandimagination.org.uk/art-and-dementia/art-and-dementia/>

5. Alzheimer's Society (2015), *Becoming a dementia-friendly arts venue*. London: Alzheimer's Society

6. Bolton, M. (2012), *Loneliness – the state we're in*. Abingdon: Age UK Oxfordshire

7. Cutler, D. (2012), *Tackling Loneliness in Older Age – The Role of the Arts*. London: Campaign to End Loneliness

8. A. Halpern, J. Ly et al (2008), "'I Know What I Like": Stability of aesthetic preference in Alzheimer's patients' in *Brain and Cognition*, No. 66, 2008, pp.65 – 72. Available online: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6231958>

Further information

Film about the *Home Service* project can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8Y6ITy12HU>

Images

1. Ceramic tableware created by Jonty Lees with Crossroads House Care Home and the Exchange Gallery, 2015. Image by Jonty Lees.

2 – 6. Visit to Exchange Gallery by Crossroads House Care Home, 2014. Images courtesy of Arts for Cornwall.