

Family Friendly Exhibitions Report

for
Arts About Manchester

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Introduction

The final report distils the experiences of the three Family Friendly exhibitions: **Comic?** at Oldham Art Gallery in 1998, **Long Time No See** at Leigh's Turnpike Art Gallery in 1999 and **Ryhope Walk** at Salford Art Gallery and Museum in 2000. It highlights some of the issues faced by artists, curators, education staff and other partners when developing accessible environments and exhibitions for family audiences.

Specific Arts Lottery (A4E) funding has enabled Arts About Manchester to have greater input into these projects, which were part of the wider, and established programme of Family Friendly arts events promoted throughout the Greater Manchester area. AAM funded elements of the exhibitions influencing their development to different degrees.

Participating galleries were selected because of their potential to respond to "Family" audiences as well as having established track records in audience development. All had identified families as a target audience, and indicated their receptiveness to new ways of working.

The exhibitions were intended to explore the practicalities of partnerships between artists, venues, funders and audiences when creating sustainable, effective and accessible exhibitions for family audiences.

Background

Each project was approached differently:

Oldham Art Gallery already had a project in mind, which was felt to fit the aims of the Family Friendly initiative. **Comic?** was co curated with the artist Mark Hampson and drew together disparate artists whose work dealt with many forms of humour. When Arts About Manchester became involved the exhibition was already developed, so their role was limited to that of funding partner, advising on the supporting information and family activities.

Long Time No See profiled portraits by photographer Dave Walker. After evaluation of **Comic?** it was decided that AAM should have a more proactive role. They became involved in meetings with the artist and curators from the early stages, facilitating discussions and agreements about project time scale and most crucially, responsibilities about interpretation and activities. They were not involved in technical aspects of the exhibition delivery.

The final exhibition, **Ryhope Walk**, was a specially commissioned floor based installation by Jen Southern, who in the initial stages worked with four Salford families (who were regular Gallery visitors). **Ryhope Walk** benefited from greater financial input from AAM, who had involvement in selecting the artist and establishing written aims and contracts. Greater emphasis was placed on documentation as a result of recommendations arising from previous evaluations.

Key questions and issues:

The Family Friendly projects aimed to explore what type of exhibition or artworks are suitable for family audiences, and to identify key issues affecting the relationship between curators, artists and visitors.

Is there a point at which an artist could, and should adapt his or her work to meet audience development objectives?

The three exhibitions revealed that communication about aims had not always been successful, which led to varying degrees of conflict, in approach and opinion, between artists and publicly funded galleries.

For example exhibition content became an issue in **Comic?** because the funders and exhibition organisers had very different ideas about the intended audience and the "appropriateness" of some artworks.

The exhibition was not specifically designed for a family audience, but as a result of Arts About Manchester's input, the publicity was targeted at this audience. Whilst the general idea of the exhibition was deemed suitable for a wide range of visitors, some artworks did deal with adult issues. AAM were a little concerned that these could upset some people, consequently there was some debate about the siting of these pieces within the gallery.

The situation was resolved when additional information for adults to use with children was made available. It did however, highlight the need to be very clear in publicity and marketing strategies about exhibition content, so that visitors can decide for themselves, rather than censoring exhibitions at late stages.

In contrast, the artistic content of **Long Time No See** was not considered controversial, but the artist was asked to consider how the photographs should be hung and what information and activities should accompany them.

The Turnpike Gallery's audience development emphasis had been directed at schools, and a Saturday club had been attracting older children, but they had not previously provided an exhibition especially for families. In an attempt to pre-empt possible difficulties, there were clear written aims regarding the target audience and Family Friendly objectives. However difficulties arose when technical debates, compounded already tight time scales and the exhibition opened without its full interpretation or activities. This situation was rectified afterwards, but not before substantial damage had been done to the partnership.

Salford Museum and Art Gallery already had established a good relationship with families and had been steadily building its audience over a number of years. **Ryhope Walk** differed greatly to the other Family Friendly exhibitions in that the project hinged on a specially created artwork, and therefore presented additional complicating factors. As it was planned after the evaluation of **Comic?** and **Long Time No See**, greater emphasis was placed on written aims, contracts and review meetings between the partners.

In many ways this project was the most unsuccessful in achieving Family Friendly aims. Jen Southern's theoretical approach to site specific installation highlighted an intellectual clash between "art practice" and family friendly aims. The difficulties encountered were a surprise to Jen, who felt her projects in other venues had been received enthusiastically.

The installation did not attract many of the intended audience, confusing those that did visit. It could be argued that site specific installation was just the wrong type of artwork to exhibit at SMAG at this particular moment in time, given that audiences were still being developed, and the Gallery was undergoing great change (the newly opened Lowry was attracting a great deal of publicity and a number of key artworks had been removed from SMAG).

The disappointing response may have been due to the unfamiliar nature of *Installation*, but visitor responses indicated the lack of supporting information was a major factor. Accompanying information and activities were placed outside of the room, which meant many families missed them. Confusion about the production of a leaflet meant that the resulting information was not necessarily family friendly in appearance or tone.

In all three instances the major difficulty has been accountability. Publicly funded galleries are accountable, needing to maintain profile and sustain audiences. To do so, they not only have to present physically accessible environments and create ways in which visitors can develop confidence, interact with each other and ultimately enjoy exhibitions. Artist's emphasis lie with creation. This distinction has been consistently one of the main areas of contention. Artists have felt suspicious of intervention, accepting some input from commissioning bodies, but ultimately feeling that their role does not really focus on providing interpretation for audiences.

It is not desirable to ask artists to change their work once it is installed, but it is acceptable to negotiate about the way arts providers, curators and interpreters work with artists and audiences to display and contextualise artworks. This will affect the selection of artists, the appearance of gallery spaces and the publicity materials. There is a responsibility also on artists to deliver artwork and interpretation as agreed with commissioning venues. If interpretation is a crucial aim for the project, all parties should be required to work towards its provision.

Do we need to re invent traditional curatorial models to achieve audience development goals?
This question is intrinsically linked to the previous one, as it is about process and the ways in which processes need to be reassessed.

Art Galleries have day to day running concerns; artists generally exists independently, but ultimately need their support . Therefore all are required to agree aims and devise a common language with which to express them. There is an issue about the responsibility of the gallery to select exhibitions and artists well, and support the intended audience through appropriate events, resources and non exhibition related facilities.

As successful family friendly projects require an holistic approach it is a way of working that affects the whole operation of the venue and the individuals working with it. Truly Family Friendly projects need the support of curators, those with responsibility for marketing and education (often the curator has all of these roles) ,attendants and crucially, artists.

There cannot be universal ways of curating exhibitions, especially when attempting to work with different audiences. As each venue is different, so is each project as illustrated by the three family friendly exhibitions.

Comic? was proposed by an artist who co-curated it. He had worked with Oldham Art Gallery before, and had no doubts that the exhibition was suitable and interesting to young people. The way the 4 exhibition looked was deemed to be less formal : cartoons were painted directly onto the walls, artists were available on particular days, there was a mini cinema running Nick Park 's animations featuring Wallace and Grommit, which was not only popular, but was considered unusual. A written guide for adults to use with children and a souvenir guide were produced in addition to interpretation panels that took a questioning, rather than purely didactic, approach.

Long Time No See was a collaboration between photographer, gallery and AAM who stressed the need to make the entire gallery building less intimidating. The exhibition consisted of large photographic portraits taken ten years apart, revealing not only the physical changes in individual's appearances but also changes in their circumstances. They were hung from the ceiling, back to back so visitors could walk around them and view from both sides. The images were accompanied by brief written extracts about each person and there were a number of activity stations dotted throughout the room, linked as a trail. It had been the intention to involve the artist in the creation of interpretation, rather than have it imposed upon the exhibition .

Ryhope Walk consisted of four computer generated aerial photographs of Salford, printed on carpet, the walls were painted to match the sky outside and the original parquet floor was overlaid with domestic wood laminate. The idea was for visitors to walk, sit and relax on the floor as they would at home, whilst reflecting on urban development, public spaces and the architectural legacies of industrial towns, such as Salford.

Four families had worked through some ideas with the artist, in the months leading up to the exhibition opening, mapping their own domestic spaces and creating their own ideal cities using computer packages. The process of creating installation was interesting to those families who worked with Jen Southern, but the process was not communicated effectively to the audience, who were visiting without having had any involvement.

In two projects, Long Time No See and Ryhope Walk the artists were being asked to respond to specific aims. They were required to work with curators to maximise the potential for audience engagement. In effect they were being asked to respond as co curators as well as artists. The two roles can be mutually supportive, but frequently the relationship is more problematic because too much is assumed about how people understand definitions, or interpret the aims or even time scales.

Greater input is required during planning to familiarise artists and the Art Gallery with each other and the audience at which the project is intended, rather than relying on written aims to hold the project on course.

Is there a need to clarify what audience development means for each of those with a role in curating an exhibition?

It is evident that any discussion about young children and arts activity has to be considered alongside a whole set of issues, such as how the exhibition is managed on a daily basis, how artists understand the project aims, and how front of house staff and management need to be prepared and involved throughout planning.

Artists are not necessarily hostile to audiences, they are often not asked to consider them. It is necessary to agree aims and intentions with all involved. If a venue is seeking to interpret artworks

then artists need to be clear about the nature of the exhibition and the kinds of interpretative materials that will be involved. It is vital to ensure everyone understands the definitions of broad terms such as *family* and *interpretation*.

Initially with **Comic?** problems arose because aims and responsibilities were not clarified, combined with initial unwillingness on the part of AAM to interfere too closely in curatorial matters. But as **Ryhope Walk** received substantial funding from AAM, and it was evident from the previous projects that AAM needed to be more proactive at the conceptual stages, they took a closer role in the project development. However the complexities of creating artworks for specific audiences and the differing approaches of all involved, combined with unavoidable staff changes at SMAG and AAM meant the project did not live up to expectations

Traditionally, the relationship between artists and venues during the commissioning process is that of a client requesting "a product" from the artist. If the emphasis of the process could focus on developing ideas, rather than being about defining an end product, it may alleviate artists concerns about the nature and appropriateness of interpretation, but also help artists become aware of different audiences needs.

Many aspects of the gallery experience contribute to the process of audience development. How should these relate to the work of artist and curator?

It was evident, from the first stage of the Family Friendly projects that exhibition content was often seen to be the main factor in accessibility. It became clear that the entire gallery environment and working methods are equally important.

If the venue is publicising something especially for families, then they need to consider how appropriate the Family Friendly tag is, and what it is that is Family Friendly. For example, is it the exhibition content that is Family Friendly? Are there activities and resources to support them? Or is it the Art Gallery environment that is Family friendly?

These considerations do impact on the work of artists and curators. Artists are not always aware that different audiences behave differently, and consequently their work may have to be displayed and interpreted differently. These ideas need to be discussed at a very early stage. Artists may assume that audience reaction in one particular venue will be echoed in another, which is not always so.

Is it possible to identify best practise?

Best practice is a number of over arching principles, rather than a specific case study.

Working with families in an art gallery environment does not automatically qualify as family friendly. Many aspects of the visiting experience contribute to success. Education and interpretation should be integral to exhibition planning in such a way it is accepted that they will affect the selection of artists, the look and tone of publicity and the gallery spaces. It is not just about selecting certain types of artwork, or putting in more seats or rewriting publicity materials.

Good practice is being aware that different audiences need different kinds of support. Responsive curatorship involves all personnel at an exhibiting venue, as well as supporting stable working relationships with outside partners, including artists. This is required in order to fully support family audiences.

Conclusions

Whilst Arts About Manchester's Family Friendly projects alone cannot realistically redress all these issues, they do serve to magnify the areas requiring greater debate.

Being child friendly requires a combination inclusive policy and planning, good facilities and responsive curatorship. Rethinking working methods and sustaining development will ultimately bring about better relationships between families and the arts, but there also needs to be a wider social change in attitudes to both.

The Family Friendly exhibitions were originally conceived as a natural extension and development of existing theory and each of the Art Gallery's policies. All three projects delivered some of the aims for venues and artists but not necessarily within the fullness of Family Friendly criteria. All parties involved in all three projects acknowledge that communication was not completely satisfactory, and the original aim of working in partnership, sharing skills and expertise was therefore not achieved to the levels expected. It was particularly disappointing that Ryhope Walk was not a satisfactory experience, as it potentially had the greatest benefit of previous evaluations.

Family Friendly is about empowering families, through physically accessible buildings and stimulating exhibitions that encourage and support families to communicate and explore together, rather than creating special one off projects.

In order to become truly family friendly, it is necessary to think about the role of play. Learning takes many forms, beginning with play. Access to Museums and Galleries is about recognising the many ways in which people learn. There is no fixed way in which families learn together. They all have different interests, motivations and structures. It is not always possible for Art Galleries and Museums to meet all the expectations, given limits of staffing and, budgets but is possible to establish supportive welcoming environments.

Family Friendly ideals are aiming towards new working practices, involving artists and arts administrators developing ideas together, utilising different skills to create art based concepts for a specific audience. This is an area of debate as artists generally feel that art is becoming secondary. However Family friendly does require a new way of thinking about curating. Art needs to become integrated into the whole process and function of the Art Gallery. Given the reluctance of many artists to consider interpretation, in the short term it may only be possible to select artists who are naturally able to think holistically. Alternatively it would be less fraught to target exhibitions at a particular audience than attempt to create new artworks specially.

Recommendations

1) When a project is attracting significant funding, or is considered crucial to a particular aspect of audience development, it is appropriate to rethink the artist commissioning and selection process:

*A portion of funding could be used to short list and develop embryonic projects to a greater degree, prior to final selection. Artworks would then be created for and with the exhibiting venue.

*Make it a condition of the commission that the artist spends time in the art gallery observing visitors, and experiencing the practicalities of day to day Gallery life.

2) As common practice ensure that all partners understand and have agreed written project aims. Revise these regularly.

* Agree a timetable of review meetings, and define partners responsibilities and expectations.

* Involve all areas of staffing in the project development.

* Ensure everyone understands the definitions of broad terms such as *family* and *interpretation*. Clearly your expectations of these terms, eg does "family friendly" mean certain types of exhibitions? or is it about families having special activities?

* Build in a degree to flexibility into the design stage of the exhibition to iron out display

3) as part of general housekeeping think about the building. How will families find their way around, what can you do to make the whole building family friendly?

Starting points- a checklist for developing provision for Family audiences

Define "family". Remember children do not visit alone, you cannot plan for them in isolation.

Consider the Building. Increased use of galleries by children may bring additional challenges in display and safety. Exhibition spaces may need additional seating and rest areas or the inclusion of more interpretation. These things affect the appearance of galleries and ultimately the atmosphere. Consider how people access the building- can they get in easily with prams and wheelchairs? Can visitors get pushchairs and wheelchairs around the exhibits? Do you have baby change facilities and areas for refreshments to be taken?

Plan with all partners. Education and interpretation should be integral to exhibition planning in such a way it is accepted that they will affect the selection of artists, the look and tone of publicity and the gallery spaces. Artists are not always aware that different audiences behave differently, and consequently their work may have to be displayed and interpreted differently. These ideas need to be discussed at a very early stage to avoid misunderstandings.

Publicise. Does publicity clearly say what is available for the family? What it is that is Family Friendly. For example, is it the exhibition content that is Family Friendly? Are there activities and resources to support them?