

Sharing learning: Alchemy Film & Arts Exhibition Programme



Exhibition 'Bog Myrtle and Flamethrowers' by Karel Doing & community groups (developed from workshops), Sept 2019, Hawick, Photo: Karel Doing

CENTRE FOR
CULTURAL VALUE

Upholding our commitment to art and audience

“The Exhibitions Programme was designed with the expectation that as long as the work shown was of high quality and produced well it would attract audiences. I quickly became aware that neither of these was adequate for meaningful arts engagement and that equal weight was needed to be given to audience and art, and that might mean starting with the audience.”

Rachael Disbury, Production Director, Alchemy Film & Arts

What’s the story?

When I arrived at Alchemy in 2018 - a new manager at the time, brought in to produce the creative programme - the Exhibitions Programme was a real point of excitement for me. The aim was to showcase the best of experimental film and artists’ moving image and it was a ‘tried and tested’ model based on previous successes of Alchemy’s annual film festival.

Alchemy has a healthy international audience of artists and experimental film enthusiasts who make up the bulk of our festival audience, and we also have ever-developing relationships with local groups and individuals in Hawick. The Exhibitions Programme sits outside the film festival and consisted of four works programmed year-round. We identified themes in each of the four exhibits to develop a dedicated marketing programme and had a pool of 150+ volunteers to invigilate the exhibitions. We felt the standard of exhibition and the professional relationships formed were of the highest quality; the artists all visited Hawick and enjoyed embedding themselves in the town for a few days and assisting with their installations, and the feedback from those who attended the exhibitions was positive.

Yet our audience numbers and engagement were low. Around 200 people visited each exhibition over each two-week run, but audiences did not travel beyond Edinburgh to attend. While we felt prepared to meet the challenge of attracting audiences to spaces with very little passing footfall through the quality of the exhibitions, we observed people peering in and not entering, or walking past and not engaging at all. It was disheartening to both volunteers and myself to see so many people walk past exhibitions. Not wanting to jump to conclusions as to the reasons why, and to remain open to different ways of working, we tried changing the location of exhibitions and programmed the third and fourth exhibition in a high street venue, with more footfall, to see if this would help. This did not significantly improve audience numbers, with few ‘walk-ins’ and once again, there were many peers and glances without crossing the threshold.

Hawick has a population of 14,000 people, with many interest groups and societies and a population diverse in age and socio-economic circumstance but we realised we needed to take additional steps to encourage people to cross the threshold of our exhibition spaces. We couldn’t rely on walk-ins (50% of our festival audience is not local) so we needed to identify points of interest in each of the four exhibitions as well as breaking down barriers for walk-in audiences – to provide an entry point.

We programmed additional events to create an active connection between individuals and the work, and to complement each of the four exhibitions. These helped broaden their appeal and were extremely popular; they engaged individuals/groups with relevant interest to the work and did succeed in encouraging some passers-by to cross the threshold into an unknown room.

But it was too little too late. Ultimately, we needed to acknowledge this was a different offer to the Festival. The programme had been designed for, and our expectations based on, an ‘already-engaged’ festival audience.

Our volunteers (a pool of 150+ people who had previously volunteered at our film festival) stopped signing up. It wasn’t so much that the volunteers told us why they stopped volunteering, the number of people signing up to help just dwindled across the series of four exhibitions.

The benefits for volunteering at the festival were clear – free screenings, lunches, being part of a significant cultural event and the overall ‘buzz’ of the festival. These benefits were lacking across the exhibitions programme and it was evident that these were key drivers of volunteer engagement. The structure of the programme and the lack of audience numbers resulted in a less social offer for volunteers, without much engagement with other volunteers or visitors. We needed to turn our attention to the programme itself.



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In year 2 of the programme, we shifted the focus away from the exhibitions. As a team we questioned whether we could better integrate art and film into either more ‘everyday’ spaces or overlap with activities and interests that already existed in the town. We began to shift our focus away from the exhibitions themselves, producing events where plural audiences intersect but also developing further focus on local need and interest.

This in turn affected our curation and programming decisions. We introduced a theme across all four film exhibitions which allowed a more strategic approach to marketing; we didn’t have to reinvent ourselves four times throughout the year, but instead created a through-line narrative, connecting with interest groups in the town and enabling conversations around climate breakdown and landscape respectively.

We also blurred the lines between programme strands to maximise resources, budget and commitments. We launched a community filmmaking programme; artists-in-residence stayed in Hawick longer and lead workshops with sections of the community allowing more time to build more meaningful relationships.

By year 3, the programme has become something else entirely. The exhibition is considered as a shorter term output, a celebration, culmination and coming-together point, rather than the core content. We are grateful we have shaken off the commitment to a rigid programme of four exhibitions per year, and have instead elected a year-round programme of talks, discussion and archive days, screening events and exhibitions.

Due to a close look at successes and failures over the years, we decided to fully integrate all the different programme strands. While this is on hold due to COVID-19, we have worked towards a more fluid practice that sees exhibition as a tool in a toolbox of many forms and outputs; one physical element of a more connected and engaging project, with audiences and interests identified early on.



Exhibition workshops at Burnfoot Community Hub with Burnfoot Community Gardeners and Moving Image Makers Collective, Photo: Karel Doing

What did we learn?

Make slow changes - one variable at a time - taking time to redevelop core aspects of your offer if necessary.

As well as adding additional events, facilitating longer artists' visits and appealing directly to groups in the town with established interests, we also dismantled the rigid structure of the programme to something more fluid and multi-faceted, integrating talks and events. We're still rethinking our volunteer offer completely - the pool had continued to dwindle and we deemed it damaging to continue to expect them to take part with no return. Prior to COVID-19, we were investing time in building a more meaningful volunteer offer that directly addressed the key reasons our volunteers engage - social opportunity and skills development.

Don't make assumptions on behalf of your audiences and listen to a range of direct feedback.

It's not as simple as putting on exhibitions 'about' Hawick, there needs to be tailored opportunities for engagement. By closely monitoring audience uptake and volunteer interest, we acknowledged spikes in engagement when artists had more time in the town and when interests were matched to local issues or interests, such as landscape and climate breakdown, in clear ways. Now we are more actively curating, considering our town more closely, to really draw on the themes and issues in each work to create multiple and varied ways to engage with our projects - for example, an artist who has developed a way of making films using plant chemistry worked with a local group of gardeners and filmmakers, appealing to their respective interests.

High quality is not a reason in itself for people to engage with your work.

I am always confident the work we show is high quality. However, while I'm fully of the opinion that not everyone needs to engage, and that people should be able to not participate, there's often that moment when you realise that you may be more driven by a commitment to the work and the artists, rather than considering your wider audiences. Some believe that quality has to take a back seat to engagement, but I believe it's making sure that you're upholding a commitment to both.

Systematically interrogate why you have made a decision in the first place.

Like many arts organisations, we are a charity and we have to consider the beneficiaries of all aspects of our work - this is absolutely crucial. As a result of this process, we have developed three core questions that we consider as the cornerstone of all our decision-making as a company:

- quality - does the project uphold artistic integrity?
- meaning - will the offer engage in a real way with audiences? and, crucially,
- deliverable - is it doable with existing resources?"

Additional resources and information

Founded in 2010, Alchemy Film & Arts is based in the Scottish Borders' town of Hawick, a town of 14,000 people. An organisation invested in film as a means of generating discussion, strengthening community, and stimulating creative thought, Alchemy produces a range of year-round events – including exhibitions, commissions, residencies and their flagship annual film festival. They seek to deinstitutionalise the art experience - repurposing Hawick's disused industrial and retail spaces plays a key part in their curatorial strategy. For more information, visit alchemyfilmmandarts.org.uk

You might also find useful these resources on CultureHive including a '[Toolkit: Returning to Volunteering](#)' and '[How to co-create an exhibition with your community](#)'.

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