

Giving Audiences Remote Control

What's the stereotypical adult audience for our industry in museums and galleries? 'Around or over 70 years old' is a typical response by some. An educated guess in itself: pensioners are retired; presumed to have disposable incomes and time on their hands.

Statistics from the Museums Association indicate that between 2016 and 2017, the highest proportions of adults visiting museums and galleries were aged in the 25-44 and 65-74 brackets. So the general preconception isn't completely incorrect: older generations do visit museums, and they visit in their droves. Similarly adults with young families, spend a good proportion of their time visiting institutions like ours.

What really stands out to me though is that the lowest proportion of those visiting museums and galleries are aged 75 and over, with less than a 35% share in attendance statistics. What more can be done to engage older generations with the wealth of art we have to offer? To ask this we must question: what's in it for over 75's to visit?

These questions that are being hypothesised, tested and trialled by myself and other staff at Birmingham Museums Trust with support from the Arts Council Collection's National Partnership Programme (NPP). The NPP was funded by Arts Council England with the aim of the Arts Council Collection building a deeper relationship with regional audiences, like that of Birmingham Museums Trust, through a range of supported exhibitions and outreach work.

As part of the outreach work for the first round of the NPP (2016-19), Birmingham Museum and Gallery have developed and tested a new initiative combining livestreaming to and from care homes with object handling – culminating in on site gallery visits. Answers are emerging, more poignant and hopeful than I could imagine.

“With contemporary art exhibitions, my first consideration wasn't to expect them to find relevance in the Collection, rather myself and the Collection demonstrating its relevance to them.”

Background to the project -

Contrary to what's assumed, those over 75 are sometimes unable to access the wealth of material museums and galleries offer due to a range of issues. As Arts Council Collection Learning Officer at Birmingham Museums Trust, I've seen first-hand the reasons why visiting a venue for someone over the age of 75 might seem the last on a list of possibilities for them. Mobility declines beyond 75, so we've found many people over 75 sadly feel as if they can't get to a museum to visit. There are also economic reasons as to why this generation may not be able to take a trip to a museum. Factoring in additionally that some visitors living with dementia for example need extra support, provision and resources can often add to a sense of isolation from our collections.

Statistics from Alzheimer's Research UK¹ reveal that around 2 in 100 people aged between 65 to 69 have dementia, and that this figure rises to one in five people when aged between 85 to 89. Dementia is increasing in older generations so finding mechanisms to live well,

combat isolation and benefit from new stimulus has been a driving goal in our outreach sessions.

Our partnership with the Arts Council Collection has produced moving testimonials to prove museums and galleries have the ability to bring hugely positive change to people's lives. Our programme began with just 14 clients over 75 living well at varying stages of dementia, along with one client in his late 60's, an iPad, some important museum artefacts and a short taxi ride to a local care home.



Back in May 2017, a relationship blossomed with a care home not far from Birmingham city centre, Tandy Court, which is a branch of Anchor Homes. Developed alongside the popular Arts Council Collection National Partner exhibition <http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/exhibition/i-want-i-want-art-technology> we wrote and facilitated a session using object handling resources inspired by works found in the exhibition. This session was a first for me into witnessing just how successful taking the exhibition virtually beyond the walls of the gallery would be, and the effect on the lives of those living at Tandy Court.

The pilot programme was split into two parts: object handling and a live gallery stream via Facetime.

The session began with an object handling session on site at the care home, using Stefan Gec's Arts Council Collection piece from the exhibition, *Untitled (Apollo - Soyuz Test Project)*, 2003. This hugely important artwork was created surrounding the context of the historical moment in 1975 when two space crafts, Apollo from the U.S. and Soyuz from the USSR, docked to work on the first ever U.S. Soviet space mission.

Using Gec's artwork as a springboard for reintroducing clients to an era they all experienced first-hand, I introduced the clients to various original domestic objects from the 1970's, with the aim of this object handling session allowing those living at Tandy Court to reminisce freely with us.

In addition, a live stream via Facetime was run between a mobile device at the residential care home and the gallery space, with a museum enabler on hand moving and being directed live for those at Tandy Court. Clients made active decisions here – where the enabler at the other end looked, the direction they walk in, whether to get closer or further away from artworks.

“Clients make active decisions on how to engage, at their comfort level, matching their sensory needs.”

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery had suddenly been brought back to these clients, some of whom shared with us they had not visited the venue in decades. Not only this, but the 1970's, an era they remembered well, was suddenly brought back to them – a commonality bringing clients together.

Through the medium of technology, something that many of the over 75s might not usually use on a daily basis, we were able to help the participants reminisce. The collision of these two worlds brought new life to the clients.

“Livestreaming is a powerful and immediate way in which we can connect with audiences. Digital in our gallery practice is key in integrating communities to our collection, reaching out beyond the gallery walls and breaking an expectation that people always have the finance, leisure and mobility to join us in person.”

Following this pilot session, residents of the care home were invited to Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery itself, where I gave the participants a guided tour, as well as tea and cake in the Edwardian Tearooms. To end their day at the museum, an artist drew the participants' portraits and each could take their drawings home, as stimuli for further reminiscence activities back at the care home.

Through working with Tandy Court and other care homes on a variety of reminiscence-based sessions such as with objects from the 1970's from the 'I Want! I Want!' exhibition and later with another care home, Kerrier Court, focusing on the 1960's with the highly anticipated 'Coming Out: Sexuality, Gender and Identity' exhibition- we encountered some highly moving, incredibly poignant and emotional responses from the participants.

Rebecca Williamson, a volunteer learning assistant at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, experienced an incredibly touching, moving moment from one of the participants. “I experienced a very special moment with an 84-year-old lady. As soon as I approached her and introduced myself, she lit up and became engaged. She was overwhelmingly positive and responsive, commenting on images of actors in the 70's magazines; telling me about the sorts of things she used to wear and marvelling at the concept of the museum & art gallery. During the course of the interaction she expressed some very poignant and philosophical views, including: 'don't take any of this for granted' and 'there is so much beauty in the world' in response to the livestream.”

“We later learned from a member of staff that she is not always so responsive, and in fact that on many occasions she can be insular. To witness her in such a bright and positive state of being was truly a joy and privilege, and will remain as both a personal treasured memory, and a point of significant personal growth and experience.”

So how does a museum and gallery become such a good outlet for exercising this vital task; creating new memories and creativity?

Practical Considerations -

The work of this partnership between the Arts Council Collection and the trust hasn't been without its challenges however. There are a lot of considerations to be had when working with potentially vulnerable clients. The programme of events had to be meticulously

developed in the best way possible, so that the over 75s who participated continually felt safe, secure and happy to take part.

There were various logistical considerations that had to be thought of before the session could go ahead for those living at the care home. Abstraction on screen can be tricky for those with dementia, so as a team we had to find the best way to livestream the gallery from the comfort of their home and allow the participants to realise what was happening was in real time.

The decision made was to have a museum enabler on the other end of the livestream in the gallery, allowing participants to ask questions and encouraging the over 75s to tell the enabler where to head next in the gallery space.

“Our livestreams are never passive experiences- periscope allows for immediate response to questions and comments. The ability to direct the tour, asking to return to a piece, linger or move on is crucial in equality between ourselves and the audience.”

Livestreaming from care homes to the gallery is a hugely important part of outreach. It's both moving and stimulating to see clients who may have not been to Birmingham city centre for decades wander the galleries via the screen in front of them. There was a concern that it would feel as if they were just watching something on TV, but by having the museum enabler interact with the participants, it became clearer that this was something that really was happening in real time.

There were also emotional implications surrounding a project such as this pilot scheme, particularly as the gallery was being brought to the participants in their home. We wanted to make sure this was achieved in an approachable way, so that this session didn't feel intrusive for the participants. There can be an emotional toil involved, for both parties. Some of our participants became incredibly animated once they had encountered recognisable objects from the past, and this was hugely moving to see. However, this kind of sudden emotion needed to be handled with care.

Similarly, there is an emotional toil for those of us running the sessions. Dealing with such an emotional, poignant situation can be tough, and the only way I can describe how sometimes it feels the next day after running a session is quite literally an emotional hangover; we're all fatigued.

This partnership between the Arts Council Collection and Birmingham Museums Trust has been a strong success. We have built lasting, meaningful relationships with those participating in the sessions; the elderly participants are having meaningful, human interaction; a group of people that has long been unable to engage with the power of museums is now able to join the heritage conversation.

Since the scheme launched in May 2017, around 15-27 people participate per care home. Not only are those living well with dementia able to have a window opened to new interactions, conversations and happy memories, they are able to move from social isolation to social interactions: and that is the unswayable power of museums and galleries, a poignant connection to history and art.

artscouncilcollection.org.uk/national-partners-programme

ionstagram: @artscouncilcollection

Twitter: @A_C_Collection