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Title:

The gallery as therapeutic venue: exploring visitor perceptions in a contemporary space.

ABSTRACT

This prospective qualitative study explored the social and psychological impact of an exhibition at a contemporary art gallery. Three focus groups, including 8 people aged 45-69, were held following a guided tour of an exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary gallery. The exhibition *Uneven Geographies* featured the works of a variety of international artists focussing upon the politics of globalisation through different media including film, installation and photography. Focus group transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's 6-phase model of thematic analysis. Three themes were identified: 1) 'It's almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle', 2) Interpreting the Message and 3) Dissolving Social Barriers. Results indicated that the exhibition helped participants make sense of a variety of experiences, art interpretation was a key educational skill, and attending the gallery promoted social inclusion. These findings build on previous studies that indicate the potential for cultural institutions, such as art galleries and museums, to promote education, health and wellbeing at individual and societal levels.

INTRODUCTION

This study concerns the potential social and psychological impacts of visiting art exhibitions and art galleries. From a historical point of view, there is an open debate on the date art was made available to the general public. The renaissance period was a crucial time for artists, art writers and connoisseurs, but public art galleries did not exist at that time. The opening of the royal art collection to the general public in the eighteenth century was probably the first example of art made visible to everyone, but in practice, until 1785, it was necessary to present personal credentials, follow court protocols and observe aristocratic etiquette whilst viewing art (Carrier 2006). This advanced the notion that viewing art and visiting galleries was an elitist pastime; an activity that is the preserve of the middle and upper classes (Hanquinet 2013).

The situation has now radically changed, with relatively recent surveys showing that 42% of adults had attended either a museum or an art gallery in the previous twelve months. The same research indicated that the number of leisure activities in which the general public had taken part in the previous 12 months had increased from 5.5 in 1970 to 10.3 in 2000 (Renaissance 2007). Arts institutions are now expected to demonstrate impact beyond entertainment, with a commitment to engage marginalised populations. As the Arts Council England, the major funder of public galleries in England states:

Art and culture give us joy, make us healthier, let us reflect and help us empathise. The arts also bring benefits to our society, our culture, our education and our economy (Arts Council, 2016).

Art-viewing has been reported to be an effective low-cost and non-clinical tool to provide social and psychological support to carers of people with mental health problems (Roberts et al. 2011). Other studies indicate that art-viewing may help people with cognitive decline, for example dementia, with particular benefits in terms of improved mood and self-confidence, reduced social withdrawal and verbal fluency (Eekalar et al. 2012, Camic et al. 2013 & Young et al. 2015). The viewing of art has also been linked to improvements in positive dimensions of mood in older people, such as happiness, peacefulness, satisfaction and calmness (Wikström et al. 1993).

Participation in cultural activities has been linked with improved health outcomes. Studies have shown that those who engage in cultural activities have higher rates of survival than those who do not participate (Bygren et al. 1996), and subsequent research showed better general health in emergency hospital workers who attended cultural activities in their spare

time (Iwasaki et al. 2005). The benefits radiate beyond the gallery, for example, hospitalised adolescents who were experiencing suicidal ideation and created artwork related to future perception, were found to experience increased self-esteem, improved future perspectives, and decreased levels of depression (Walsh 1993).

In view of the success of using art galleries to facilitate the involvement of socially excluded groups, and to positively address significant health issues such as dementia, there is a clear rationale for the use of art galleries in health promotion and public health interventions (Camic and Chatterjee 2013). Art-viewing experiences in galleries have also been associated with improved learning skills in both adults and children. One study suggested that introducing young children (up to 8 years) to art viewing during mainstream education could aid both their learning and development (Eckhoff 2008). Other research found that medical students who had attended a course focusing on viewing visual arts in an art museum had better observational skills in the context of their clinical practice (Elder et al. 2006).

Despite the improved accessibility and utilisation of art galleries, there is still evidence suggesting that some members of the public feel excluded from art-viewing experiences. As shown in a survey in which free entry to museums and art galleries was provided to the participants, although the number of people visiting museums has gone up since 2001, the increase is greatest among groups who traditionally visit such venues, and much less among those who might be described as socially excluded, e.g. people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Martin 2002).

Some suggest that the fear of not understanding art prevents people from attending galleries. A study found that 60% of Londoners who didn't visit galleries stated that they did not want to explore something they knew nothing about. They indicated that they would either find the visit 'boring' or that museums and galleries required some specialist knowledge that they lacked (Harries Research Centre, 1993; Trevelyn 1991).

Other research indicates that young people's opinion of what constitutes modern, relevant art does not match standard art criteria, and that most exhibitions do not mesh with their worldview. This means that many young people feel disconnected to, or unable to learn from art (Mason and McCarthy 2006).

Public spaces such as museums and galleries can increase opportunities for communal activities and have been described as nurturing public life, especially in socially deprived areas such as American 'ghettos'. Public spaces can act as a link that brings people together

in pursuit of mutual enjoyment, regardless of their culture or background (Carr et al. 1993). The same benefits can be seen where art galleries facilitate community and social integration (Sharp et al., 2005).

It has been recommended that museum visits should be linked with positive outcomes such as educational attainment and social engagement. Maintaining a family-friendly environment is also crucial to ensure that the public continue to attend (Yamada and Fu 2012). This is also likely to nurture the next generation of visitors.

Supporting families and groups who attend art galleries has become a key topic of research (Tolmie et al., 2014). Studies indicate that many families with children visit museums for the purpose of education as well as enjoyment (Sterry and Beaumont 2006). Various learning theories and initiatives have been utilised to enhance the education of visitors with one such theory being Dewey's 'Discovery Learning Theory'. A progressive thinker from the early 20th century, Dewey suggested that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey 1938). Museums adopting this approach report enhanced parental satisfaction with the venues (Demski 2009). Furthermore, studies have shown that children enjoy exhibitions that allow them to interact and play with art (Debenedetti et al. 2009).

Bourdieu introduced the idea of cultural capital, which proposes that those engaging in cultural pursuits build resources and habits that facilitate personal and social enhancement. He considered that the elitism of cultural institutions represented a form of symbolic violence leading to the exclusion and suppression of those outside wealthy and upper class milieux (Bourdieu, 1986). Increasing access to, and engagement with, cultural institutions therefore can combat symbolic violence and enhance health and wellbeing.

Given the encouraging results in this area of research, efforts to engage larger numbers of people in art-viewing could be of significant importance. New programmes and strategies are being developed and implemented in art galleries with the aim of broadening appeal to a wider range of people, including those who would not normally visit them. One example is the staging of special events (Axelsen 2006) such as the *Changing Minds* weekend at London's SouthBank centre (Feb. 2016). This event focused upon arts and mental health, offering a wide range of speakers and participative activities. Visitor loyalty and the introduction of initiatives such as season tickets have also been shown to encourage return visits to art galleries, and to increase customer satisfaction (de Rooij 2013).

The current study

Visiting art galleries is a popular pastime, yet little is known about the impact of visual art exhibitions on members of the public, especially in terms of understanding what makes people visit and what impact the activity has on them. This study aimed to investigate the social and psychological impact of one exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary gallery. The gallery was the first cultural venue to open in the city since the Nottingham Playhouse in 1996 and New Art Exchange in 2008. It is housed in a Brutalist-style building designed by Caruso St John architects, with a bold green and gold exterior incorporating Nottingham lace patterning. Its temporary exhibitions feature political, social, historical and economic themes. It has a public programme funded by the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University, that aims to engage the wider community with exhibitions and their themes.

The study took place at Nottingham Contemporary 8th May - 4th July 2010 during the exhibition *Uneven Geographies*. The group show was curated by Alex Farquarhson and T J Demos and explored the international impact of globalization. It featured work by artists including Steve McQueen, Öyvind Fahlström, Goldin & Senneby and Yang Zhenzhong. Prior to the study a member of gallery staff took the participants on a tour of selected works in the exhibition. The tour lasted approximately 30 minutes and featured selected work by Eduardo Aboroa, Steve McQueen and Öyvind Fahlström.

The work exhibited by these artists during the exhibition is described below:

Eduardo Aboroa

The art works included; *Amphibian-Alphabetic Proliferation* 2008, *Proposal: We Just Need a Larger World* 2008 and *Another World and Another, and Another* 2008.

[insert image 1 about here]

Steve McQueen

Gravesend (2007). This film focuses on the harvesting and refinement of a metallic ore (columbite-tantalite or coltan), a component of commonly used gadgets such as mobile phones. The film featured young men labouring for the material in the Congo jungle. The geopolitical message of the film suggests the problematic relationship between Western

consumption and the violent civil war in the Congo fuelled by demand for this precious metal (Demos, 2007).

Öyvind Fahlström

Garden- A World Model (1973). This work is an installation comprising sixteen flowerpots, wooden dowels and potting soil. The work is contained in a room with bright green walls and floor.

[insert image 2 about here]

Study questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1) How do the public respond to the art works on display, specifically what are their emotions and views related to the exhibition's themes?

2) What social and psychological impact does the gallery and its environment have on visitors?

3) What are the barriers and facilitators regarding public attendance at art exhibitions?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were visitors to *Uneven Geographies* at Nottingham Contemporary in 2010. Individuals were purposively recruited via an advertisement in the gallery's events brochure. The study was also publicised via a local community arts organisation - *City Arts*. This group facilitates arts activities for socially excluded groups such as those with mental health problems, young people outside the education system, and elderly people living in residential care.

Participants gave written informed consent to take part, however one participant later withdrew and their data were removed from the analysis. Participants were invited to attend

three focus groups at Nottingham Contemporary over a period of six months. Each group took place approximately 2 months apart.

The focus group discussions used a semi-structured topic guide that explored whether the exhibition changed their perceptions and ideas over time, and investigated their responses to the gallery in general. Focus groups were used as this technique allows participants to explore, introduce and clarify their own ideas and concepts in ways that are not always possible in one-to-one interview settings; this technique also encourages participation from more reluctant or less confident participants (Kitzinger 1995).

All focus groups were facilitated by the lead author (VT), with an observer/note taker present (JM and Sophie Markham). Notes were made during the interview in order to capture non-verbal communication. Six females and 2 males participated in the focus groups, aged between 45 and 69 (mean age 56 years). All were of White British ethnicity and occupations varied, e.g. student, unemployed, clerical assistant, artist and retired.

The three focus groups lasted on average 62 minutes each. In the 2nd and 3rd groups participants were encouraged to recall art works from *Uneven Geographies* using photo reproductions as prompts. The topic guide was tailored to explore what they remembered and, without leading, whether the work had had any influence on their attitudes, emotions or behaviour.

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were anonymised before analysis to ensure anonymity.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Nottingham medical school ethics committee (E04 2010, 27/5/10).

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative research is often used when collecting sensitive and in depth data that considers different perspectives of situations such as life events, quality of care and, service evaluations (Wray et al. 2007). Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for the current study, as it provided the highest level of flexibility and enabled the researchers to explore the emotions

and complexities of individual experience. Such level of in depth exploration would have not been possible using quantitative research (Joffe and Yardley 2003).

Analysis was carried out by one of the authors (LC) and the findings discussed and refined with the other authors (VT & JM). This helped reduce researcher bias during data analysis. Braun and Clarke's six phase model for completing thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This model has been summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Analytic Process- Thematic Analysis

Phase	Measure taken
1. Immersing oneself in the data	Transcripts were read and re-read several times to allow the researcher (LC) to become immersed in the data. Field notes were also read to understand the contextual meaning of the interviews and to become more immersed in the data. Transcripts were also read and checked against the original audio recordings. Initial observations were made on the individual transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes	Initial codes were derived from the transcripts, and a coding book was produced. Codes were discussed with the fellow researchers (VT & JM).
3. Finding themes	Initial themes were derived from the codes using a 'thematic map' and again the themes were discussed at length with the other researchers (VT & JM).
4. Refining themes	The themes were distinguished and refined using the concept that "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (Leininger 1985).
5. Defining and naming themes	The themes were defined and named, and each theme had a detailed analysis in order to tell its own story. Emerging themes from the transcripts helped form frame work within which subthemes were identified (Crabtree 1999).

6. Producing a written report	A report was produced with an introduction, method, results and conclusion.	

RESULTS

Three themes were identified, these were:

1) 'It's almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle'

2) Interpreting the message

3) Dissolving social barriers

1) '*It's almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle*'

The participants discussed the role of the exhibition as a form of education, and in making them think differently. The levels of education the gallery provided varied. One participant suggested that they learnt more about art:

"*When I first started coming to the [focus] group I used to think art was a painting. I couldn't look at it really as anything else, I didn't know, I guess I didn't really know there is any other sort of art, but I'm learning*". *(Vicky)*

Another reported that the gallery visits helped them to develop different ways of thinking:

"*Perhaps [I] have listened to overhear somebody talking about something, [it] can make me think, oh yeah, I never thought of it like that*". *(Vicky)*

One person suggested a wider impact on their cognitive processes and confidence in their capability to learn:

"*When I come in here I think you know, it sort of fills a space, it's almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle in my own thinking. And it sort of helps me understand my thinking in a bigger context and it makes me feel confident about asking questions and thinking well, it's alright to ask those questions*". *(Dave)*

The exhibition themes about capitalism and poverty seemed to have little impact on the participants, as they appeared to struggle to recall the meaning and messages of the exhibition:

"Six hundred million or something about 6 people being as rich as the 6 million or something [yer] that's the only thing I remember [yer] off-hand". (Oliver)

2) Interpreting the Message

It was suggested that art needed to be understood to have an impact. This required knowledge of what the artist was portraying including their artistic intentions.

This sometimes was described as effortful, almost like a task, rather than an enjoyable and stimulating experience:

"I try and umm search for, for something within a piece of work but sometimes umm it is so subtle that it is really hard to find" (Oliver)

This, at times, resulted in the participants feeling lost:

"Yer and umm and the fact that I didn't feel that I understood it things and there wasn't enough information to help me understand it. It was a lot of information but unless you err were okay with that information and figures and statistics [….] this is over my head. I was a bit lost you know perhaps lost yer". (Jo)

The participants acknowledged however, when the art was understood, it had a powerful impact:

"Well you're not just looking at paintings, you're looking at real life employment, art can relate to life as well." (Diane)

"It may not have happened at this exhibition [Uneven Geographies] but something in an exhibition can absolutely blow you away." (Oliver)

"Well that then, looking at it I didn't, it's err stating really horrible facts about stuff you know. I know it's true and that it's life but it, it sent me into a false sense of niceness [uh huh] and back to something horrible if you know what I mean." (Jo)

Viewing art was described by the participants as 'thought changing' and some described that the way they viewed art had changed, moving beyond materiality to meaning:

"suddenly you know, bits of wires and papers, strange things my mother would have looked at and gone 'for God's sake that's not art', 'it is Mum, it is, it really is'. Somebody else's take on something and the more that [you] interact with it the more you realise that there is

something there, you don't really know what it [emotion] is, could be [shared sensation] a shared interpretation." (Diane)

3)   *Dissolving Social Barriers*

Participants indicated that the gallery provided an accessible, communal space although concerns were expressed about the wider community being potentially excluded:

"I think [it] can only be good for a place like this because it breaks those barriers down but err, err the people living out in the local community, do they actually see this space as inviting and, and somewhere with err, umm where they can have a quality experience that isn't over their head?" (Oliver)

The gallery was perceived to be a place where people could relax, socialise and meet new people. This included meeting people from different socio-economic backgrounds in a non-commercial space, which may address social exclusion:

"its a place where people can come and meet new people and talk to people and meet different kinds of people, in a way that there's no market pressure on you" (Diane)

The gallery was described as a place that nurtured positive emotion and enhanced community integration:

"I just think diversity, creativity, makes people feel happy and makes me feel happy and makes other people feel happy" (Diane).

Despite these comments, and although the gallery was free to enter, some participants indicated that they still found access difficult:

"It's supposed to be for the community but we aren't allowed in unless [we have a purpose], yes." (Lucy)

"To me to be honest coming here feels…it doesn't feel like we can just come in and – it feels like we ought to have been meeting somebody which we were. I don't know whether it does feel like you could just wander and walk in and just have a look round [I think that's the thing.] I don't [just need to reflect] I don't know whether it's accommodating […] inviting enough, come and have a look you know." (Vicky)

Participants spoke about the physical design and layout of the gallery and suggested that more could be done to make them accessible and welcoming, and to encourage interaction:

"I think they could – they could you know there's the coffee bar space, restaurant, [it] could be [exciting] it could be – you could have, you know you could have shared tables so that would encourage people to speak to each other" (Diane)

The price of food and drink in the café was also noted as a potential barrier for those from less affluent backgrounds:

"the issue with, of the food and drink here is limiting because it's a waiter service, I think that puts a premium on the price and certain people can't afford that [uh huh] and I think that it, it takes people away then and they may think again…with that in their mind, lets not go in there" (Oliver).

Discussion

The results suggest that participants felt they were learning something new by visiting the gallery and discussing art, and in some cases, this changed their ideas and perceptions. This reinforces Deeth's proposition that the discursive aspects of art consideration are especially important, particularly in relation to viewing contemporary work (Deeth 2012). The role of art in education has been studied in depth. Research indicates that art has a positive impact on academic, spatial, social and personal skills (Sharp et al. 1998), and that art helps promote and encourage learning in individuals, with a study showing that, among 243 adult participants, 84% felt more confident about what they were capable to do since being involved in the art activities, 37% decided to take up training or a course, and 80% learned new skills (Matarasso 1997). The findings support other studies indicating that contemporary art can act as a stimulus for learning (Weir, 2009) and that community-based art projects act as a catalyst for experimental learning (Williams 1997).

Our results support such studies as participants reported enhanced understanding of art appreciation and were considering views and ideas they had not previously considered. They expressed feeling positive about new learning, an experience that often evokes anxiety amongst adult learners (Bigdeli 2010).

Our results highlighted that participants were frustrated when they did not understand the artwork. They felt that they needed to understand the artist's message in order to benefit from the experience. Lack of understanding acts as a barrier to gallery attendance (Schuster 1995). Visitors feel uncomfortable about trying new cultural activities because they are

concerned that they might not understand them, do not know how to respond, or feel they might not enjoy them (Bunting 2008). This reinforces the utility of experiential learning, facilitated by gallery educators, that can help visitors 'construct' their views and understanding (Deeth 2012).

Another common misconception was noted; participants believed in a clear and correct meaning for each piece of art (Lachapelle et al. 2003). When understanding was present, the works of art had the potential to stimulate and trigger powerful emotions. This finding reinforces the importance of gallery activities such as tours and workshops that facilitate discussion and consideration of work. This is even more important considering that art can directly stimulate the same cerebral areas that are activated in various emotional states (Lusebrink 2004). The power of images to deliver messages to the public (Jowett and O'Donnell 2014) and to impact on human emotions and behaviour (Freedberg 1989) underscores the therapeutic potential of art viewing.

The participants spoke positively about the impact of the gallery on the community, supporting its role in promoting social inclusion. It was suggested that the place and space acted to bring the community together and to extend social networks. Despite this, some still felt inhibited about visiting, and suggested that the gallery was an elite venue, indicating that Bourdeiu's symbolic violence may be a barrier to inclusiveness.

Barriers remain for those in marginalised groups when accessing cultural venues. The exact reason for this remains unclear, but exposure to cultural activities as a child and higher socio-economic status are associated with access (McManus and Furnham 2006).

People from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with lower levels of educational attainment are less likely to engage with and visit art projects (Gayo-Cal 2006). It is noted that individuals who experience social exclusion also experience barriers in cultural participation (Granerud and Severinsson, 2006; Kitchin 1998). Those with mental health problems report hat art promotes their wellbeing (Lawson et al. 2014; Stacey and Stickley 2010). More could therefore be done to ensure that cultural access is promoted to all, particularly those with health problems and other types of exclusion.

Increasing access to particular activities is not by itself sufficient to promote socially inclusive venues (Allin 2000). Activities such as targeted special events can widen the appeal of galleries, in comparison to what is normally offered (Axelsen 2006).

Studies indicate that the physical environment of an exhibition has a direct impact on viewer satisfaction (Jeong and Lee 2006), with the layout of the building being important. A poorly designed building can make the visit feel more task rather than leisure-oriented (Greenberg 1996). Participants were keen to promote accessibility and comfort in public spaces in the gallery such as cafés. This is likely to encourage interaction with other visitors thus enhancing social networking. They noted that high prices in the café could act as a barrier to gallery attendance, especially for people from low-income households. The design, layout and facilities are therefore potentially as crucial as the art in welcoming members of the community to exhibitions. Given that some participants identified as mental health service users, it is possible that they expressed stronger views on these issues than other members of the community.

Past research suggests that creating more interactive viewing experiences that physically engage the viewer with the art can make the visit more enjoyable (Hooper-Greenhill 2013). This promotes the gallery as a context for constructivist learning and experience (Deeth 2012). Particular groups such as young people are currently underrepresented in art-viewing experiences, as most exhibitions and marketing methods do not target them (Williams 1997). This suggests that galleries should do more to target specific groups who may find it difficult to access cultural experiences.

Meeting new people and socialising during art projects are benefits that have been reported in previous research, with particular focus on the concepts of 'social cohesion', 'community empowerment, 'self-determination' and 'local image and identity' (Matarasso 1997). This research noted that 91% of participants in art projects made new friends, 54% felt that they had learned about other people's culture, and 84% felt that they had become interested in something new. This demonstrates the potential for cultural venues to promote social inclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study indicate that art-viewing is a form of activity that has significant social and psychological impact but it requires careful facilitation to aid understanding, interpretation and inclusiveness. The gallery was viewed as a community space yet visitors sought reassurance in the way in which they were welcomed, including the design and

facilities in other spaces such as café areas. The viewing and discussion of art was linked to positive outcomes such as understanding and confidence as well as group cohesion.

Interestingly, whilst participants recalled *Uneven Geographies*, they struggled to explain the meaning of the works included, nor the broader themes of the exhibition. This was despite the exhibition's emotive and topical themes, a guided tour, and extended discussion about the art. This meant that the study found little direct evidence to suggest any sustained impact on attitude or behaviour for this group of individuals related to the exhibition. However, what was shown was that the participants had developed a broader understanding and appreciation for contemporary art. They described the emotional impact of the work, even more conceptual pieces. It may be therefore that the type of work viewed is less important that the experience of discussing it. Participants reported a desire to transfer what they'd learnt to other consideration of other artworks, indicating a growing confidence that is important to explore further. This exhibition's focus on conceptual rather than figurative and traditional work, may still have required additional interpretive skill. Further research is required to investigate what may make galleries more appealing to those who are less likely to visit them, how hidden messages in art could be communicated better to the public, and to replicate this study in different galleries.

The findings should encourage galleries to build upon existing programmes and engagement events to help translate and deconstruct complex or abstract art works for the public, and to encourage a wide range of the population to visit and consider exhibitions. This could include activities to facilitate engagement and inclusion with different age groups, interests and abilities. This can be extended to include groups who experience social exclusion and could benefit greatly from art viewing opportunities, for example people with intellectual disabilities who have been shown to develop feelings of attachment and belonging whilst viewing art in public spaces (Hall 2010).

Study limitations and future research

The study focused on one gallery and one exhibition within it, future studies should consider the impacts of different exhibitions in a variety of gallery spaces to ensure that we better understand why people attend different exhibitions and galleries, and how they can be best used to present interesting and stimulating art, that can promote education, health and well-

being. As well as future research examining why people attend galleries, it would also be beneficial for future research to focus on why some members of the community continue to feel excluded from art galleries, and to consider solutions to address this issue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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