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Audiences for the contemporary arts: Exploring varieties of participation across art forms in Birmingham, UK

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Abstract:
This article provides an overview of the key findings of the research project, *Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts*, a collaboration between the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC) and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG). The project investigated the experiences of audiences for 'contemporary' work across art forms (craft, dance, music, theatre and visual art), and helped develop a collaborative network of contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham. This article provides an account of the distinctive research design employed during the eight months of collaboration in Birmingham and a summary of the project's six main findings. The paper indicates the implications these findings have for organisations presenting contemporary work and how they might widen and deepen relationships with audiences. It concludes by suggesting the need to move beyond the prevailing vocabularies and conceptualizations of audience 'access' and 'barriers', and for researchers and cultural organisations to instead address the varieties of participation and the possibilities of 'cultural citizenship'.

Keywords: Audiences; contemporary arts; cultural citizenship; participation.

Introduction

Contemporary art is often the most daring, challenging and risky. It generates strong feelings and frequent controversy. Yet whilst the history and nature of those cultural practices we call 'contemporary' – and their relationships to cognate practices and nomenclatures such as 'modernist', 'avant-garde' or 'new' – have long been contested in many areas of art history, aesthetics, cultural studies and music, (Groys, 1992; Born, 1995; Williams, 2007; Smith, 2009; Stubbs, 2009; Meyer, 2013; Bishop, 2014), almost no research

has investigated the experiences audiences actually have of this art, and why 'experimental', 'cutting-edge' or 'new' work is important to the people who engage with it. The absence of this research constitutes a significant gap in the 'Cultural Value' debates currently taking place across academia, government and the spaces between (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2014 and 2016; Hewison, 2014).

In recent years a handful of papers (Sifakakis, 2007; Van Dyke 2010; Hanquinet, 2013), have begun to ask questions about audiences for the contemporary arts. These are small scale studies, working in single art forms, and tend to conduct their research primarily with practitioners, or through quantitative methods, rather than engaging in depth with audiences themselves. As Freshwater (2009) points out, the influential demand made by cultural studies in the 1970s to pay closer attention to the experiences and practices of present-day audiences through rich, qualitative research – and above all, to pay attention to what audiences *do* with cultural texts and experiences – has seen a proliferation of work with audiences for electronic media (film and television), but surprisingly little with theatre audiences – and, we might add, with audiences for classical music, dance, and the visual arts. There are, of course, notable exceptions to this, and we can observe a growing interest in studying audiences of all kinds through the use of qualitative methods drawn from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and ethnomusicology (see, for example, Burland and Pitts, 2014).

When it comes to the live contemporary arts, not only is the evidence thin on who is attending, what experiences they have, and how they might be encouraged to attend more; there is almost no evidence as to why they attend in the first place. In going beyond broad demographic indicators, Craig Upright (2004) calls for greater research attention to be paid to 'social networks' and their effects in modifying 'standard predictors' of arts engagement. We recognise the need to address social networks as just one potential factor influencing arts attendance; but would add to it the need for researchers to pay attention to the full range of personal, social, cultural, geographical and professional connections through which people live their lives. As outlined in the methodology section (below), the 'life history' interviews we have conducted were deliberately designed to start filling the substantial gap in knowledge about what brings people to contemporary arts, what keeps them away, and what might bring them in the future.

This project has therefore asked three questions:

I. Who is coming to the contemporary arts, and what experiences are they having of this work?
II. What value do the contemporary arts have for audiences?
III. What strategies are contemporary arts organisations currently employing to develop relationships with audiences? (And what strategies might they employ in the future?)

The initial weeks of the project were spent in conversation with arts organisations across Birmingham who present contemporary work. The aims of these conversations was to spread word of the project; to see which organisations might like to be most fully involved in the research by putting us in touch with their audiences as potential research participants; and to find out from these organisations what their current challenges are in developing audiences for the contemporary arts. Through these conversations a number of supplementary and complementary research questions emerged, which it became clear our fieldwork needed to address in order to fully answer our overall research questions. In particular, arts organisation staff indicated the importance of exploring:

IV. How do audiences describe and think about the kind of work presented by these organisations? (What are the characteristics they attribute to this work?)
V. To what extent are there crossovers between audiences for contemporary work at organisations in different parts of the city, and at organisations of different size and type?

Even for experienced professionals working within the contemporary arts – and certainly for many audiences of various degrees of familiarity with contemporary work – there remains considerable uncertainty with regards to what is meant by 'contemporary' art. Addressing this uncertainty is an important part of understanding the processes and experiences through which audiences engage with this work, and the extent to which audiences take there to be key features or characteristics connecting contemporary work across art form. Through these initial conversations we also found that arts organisations in Birmingham were interested in the extent to which geographical location and organisational size affects who attends their work, and whether audiences make crossovers between organisations in different parts of the city. This issue was therefore also incorporated into our set of research questions, and shaped our collection and analysis of data.

Methodology

This project was always highly collaborative in nature, having been initiated by an approach from Tim Rushby, Marketing Manager at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG), who posed the central challenge of investigating crossover between audiences for contemporary art forms. Tim's hope of expanding and developing audiences through such crossover was shared by his counterparts in other contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham, who from the outset were keen to share in discoveries that might meet the needs and interests of their organisations. The process of developing and refining the research questions and methods took place through ongoing conversation and consultation between a range of arts and cultural organisations and the research team. Moreover, it has always been the ambition of the project to directly benefit arts organisations by generating knowledge that can feed into future audience development initiatives. The new understanding of audiences for the contemporary arts this research produced, therefore,

not only makes interventions in debates around cultural value. It also has concrete implications for arts organisations, by providing them with new insights and new examples through which to design and implement audience development initiatives. Such processes of 'knowledge exchange' are becoming familiar in applied academic research (Abreu et al. 2009), though not always unproblematically: we felt fortunate in avoiding the difficulties of 'knowledge resistance' described by some music researchers (Williamson, Cloonan and Frith, 2011), attributing this to the initiation of the project by the organisations themselves, and the collective engagement with challenging academic and practical questions throughout the project.

In total we held conversations with thirteen arts organisations across Birmingham, five of whom became most fully involved as the organisations with whose audiences we conducted our fieldwork: BE Festival (Birmingham European Theatre Festival); BCMG; Craftspace; DanceXchange; and Grand Union. The organisations were self-selecting, through their interest in the project and their willingness to recruit their audience members to participate, but we also ensured a diversity of art forms, organisation size and location, in order to represent the range of contemporary arts activity in Birmingham and to explore the different factors that might contribute to audience crossover. Through these five organisations, the research project worked with audiences across contemporary craft, dance, music, theatre and visual art, in Birmingham city centre and further afield, and in formats ranging from regular concert series to festivals, and from conventional venues to converted warehouses.

We chose to use semi-structured, 'life-history' interviews (Roberts, 2002; Chamberlayne et al., 2000) in order to give audience members an unusually extended and 'open' opportunity to articulate their experiences of the arts; to track the development of their cultural experiences, attitudes, tastes and practices over their lifetime; and to articulate these experiences in relation to any parts of their life to which they are connected – such as work, family, education, friendships and other interests. The way in which these interviews were conducted also gave participants the opportunity to 'think out loud' and to answer the same question more than once, in a different way (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). These methods respond to the considerable challenges of articulating experiences of the arts and their value; and create conditions in which the full importance of these experiences – embedded within rich biographical contexts – can be expressed.

The five organisations with whose audiences we worked sent out calls for participation to their mailing lists. Interviews were then arranged with those people who responded to these messages. In total, one-to-one life history interviews were conducted with 56 people. There was considerable diversity amongst those who came forward to be interviewed.[1] The diversity of the interviewees extended across:

- Age: from 22 to 86 years old.
- Educational history: from school leaver to university professor.

- Occupation: including civil servants, administrators, community artists, an art therapist, students, a commodity trader, a consultant geneticist, social workers, teachers, and other occupations besides.
- Type, duration and intensity of previous involvement with the arts: including recently developed interests in the arts; very infrequent attendance at live arts events; engagement in amateur art practice; advanced art school education; long-standing and/or extremely frequent arts attendance; membership (or financial support) of arts organisations in Birmingham.

We make no claim that this group is representative of all current participants in the contemporary arts in Birmingham. By virtue of being self-selecting, the participants in this research – as a segment of all current visitors to the five organisations involved – are likely to be disproportionately committed attendees. With a few exceptions (for example, Benzecry, 2011; Gross, 2013) there is little work that has paid particular attention to highly-engaged audiences, and our findings make a valuable contribution to understanding the factors involved in people becoming more than one-off or very occasional attendees. But beyond than this, as outlined below, these insights into how a diverse range of people became (in many cases) highly-engaged has broad implications for understanding the current and potential relationships between contemporary arts organisations and participants of all kinds.

We supplemented our interview methods with participant observation, in order to speak informally with audiences *in situ*, in the immediacy of their arts experiences; and to observe the uses audiences make of particular organisational spaces. (Other examples of this approach include Helen Graham's research in art galleries; Graham, 2013) We conducted participant observation at Digbeth First Friday events, http://digbethfirstfriday.com/, at which a number of small and medium sized contemporary art galleries and studios in the Digbeth area of Birmingham open late and invite people to visit a range of venues during the course of the evening. We also conducted participant observation at BCMG concerts and rehearsals. Members of the BCMG Sound Investors scheme are given access to rehearsals, and - as discussed in the 'Findings' section below - for many participants this is a very important part of their overall engagement with BCMG. Being able to speak to people informally - before, after and during these events - provided important additional insight into participants' experiences of the contemporary arts and the value they place on them.

Additionally, we conducted four 'Audience Exchange' visits, taking groups of between 8 and 12 people to a performance or exhibition at an organisation presenting contemporary work, and holding a group discussion. Participants were encouraged to sign up for a visit to an art form or an art organisation they were less familiar with, or did not typically visit. This method has two significant benefits for audience research, demonstrated in previous studies by the co-researchers on this project (Pitts, 2015; Gross, Jankovich and Walmsley, 2014). Firstly, it creates opportunities - *in situ* - to explore audience experience of contemporary work with which they are unfamiliar. And secondly, it creates conditions in

which research participants can share experiences as a group. This allows for important themes and ideas to develop through the group dynamic; encouraging responses to be exchanged, explored, echoed and contradicted; and for matters of shared concern or interest to emerge in ways that only a group conversation can make possible. Over a period of two weeks, volunteers in this study were taken to four events: a 'family' concert at BCMG; a performance by the Vincent Dance Company at DanceXchange's Patrick Theatre; the 'Birmingham Show' exhibition at Eastside Projects; and two concurrent exhibitions at the Ikon Gallery.

Finally, we interviewed the directors of the five arts organisations with whose audiences we had conducted fieldwork. The reason for this was to explore with senior figures, in strategic roles within their organisations, the ways in which they currently work with their audiences, and what challenges the organisation faces in working with audiences in the future. This method brings organisational and participant perspectives into dialogue, putting the project in the best possible position to produce findings that draw on – and respond to – the articulated experiences and concerns of all those with an interest in the contemporary arts, and the organisational conditions and challenges within which these experiences take place.

What do our Research Participants Mean by 'Contemporary Arts'?

Before turning to the summary of our key findings, it is important to briefly consider the meaning of 'the contemporary arts'. As mentioned in the introduction, in the early stages of conducting research in Birmingham it became clear that what is meant by 'contemporary', in its application to the arts, is often uncertain. Different research participants used the term in different ways. This project therefore took it as one of its tasks to investigate what people are identifying or expressing when they talk about artwork being 'contemporary'. From the fieldwork with 56 audience members, the following three senses of the word emerged:

I. Some research participants implied that contemporary art is *any artwork made today.*
II. In a more discriminating definition, but one that still identified contemporary artwork in relation to being made 'now', research participants used 'contemporary' to indicate work that strikingly 'belongs to today': is '*con-temporary*', 'with its time' in some important respect. In other words, this is *work that expresses a widespread thought or feeling of the present historical moment, or responds to a particular event or issue of its day.*
III. The third usage of 'contemporary', however, does something rather different. Rather than drawing any explicit relationship between the artwork and 'today', in these cases the term was used by research participants to indicate characteristics of artworks in ways that make 'contemporary' synonymous with 'experimental', 'avant-garde' and 'alternative', and antonymic with 'mainstream', 'classic' and 'traditional'.

> In this third usage of 'contemporary', audiences were referring to *work that is experimental; or, as many of them referred to it, 'strange', 'weird' or 'different'.*

Taking the fieldwork as a whole, the third definition was the most prevalent. Visitors to the five organisations involved in the study frequently talked about their interest in work that is 'challenging', 'experimental', 'new', 'strange', 'weird', 'different', or 'at the sharper end'. But the participants in the research also raised extremely interesting questions about the relationship between this third usage - indicating experimentation and challenge - and the second, contemporary work being expressive of some thought or feeling of the present, or responsive to present day events.

Interviewees indicated that some work that is identifiably 'experimental' in form seems very 'derivative' to them. Other experimentation in form was experienced as being a necessary response to changing conditions. For example, one interviewee described seeing a set of illusive paintings at the Ikon Gallery – featuring a series of swirling, white images – which he had found disorientating. For this interviewee, the paintings - and the response they elicited in him - expressed the instability and vulnerability of existence living within conditions of climate change. On the other hand, some work made 'about' today could feel very old fashioned (topical but 'old'); whilst some work made many years ago can feel powerfully connected to and/or expressive of the experience of being alive today. One interviewee, for example, described hearing Andris Nelsons conduct Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and it sounding so innovative and vital that she experienced it as 'contemporary music'. Participants in this fieldwork often use the phrase 'very contemporary', employing it interchangeably with 'very difficult', 'very experimental', 'very innovative', 'very incomprehensible', 'very strange' or 'very weird'. The third usage of contemporary was therefore the most prominent, but different interviewees varied in the extent to which they used the term to characterize work as both experimental (or challenging) *and* 'with its time'.

Whilst some research participants actively struggled with the question of what distinguishes 'contemporary' work, for others the question was not pressing. However, in the key findings that follow, it will become clear that whether or not audience members are consciously engaged with the what is meant by 'contemporary', there are a broad range of ways in which – through their arts-going practices, experiences and attitudes – they are actively responding to and exploring the distinctive characteristics of those arts identified by cultural organisations and practitioners as 'contemporary'.

Summary of Findings

Each of the 56 interviews was powerful testimony to the experiences people have of the contemporary arts in Birmingham: we heard about the routes or circumstances by which each participant had come to engage with the contemporary arts; how this engagement was connected to other aspects of life, such as education, work, family, friendships and personal interests; and how and why the contemporary arts were important to people (or not). The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analyses were then conducted to establish

findings across the full range of interviews. This process of analysis extended to the 'Audience Exchange' group conversations, interviews with the directors of the five organisations with whose audiences we worked, and field notes generated through participant observation at contemporary arts events in Birmingham. The following findings are thereby drawn from the thematic analysis of all four strands of the fieldwork, and from across the full breadth of the rich data they each produced.

I. Facilitative Organisational Conditions

Our fieldwork reveals that a number of conditions facilitate or encourage people to attend work that is new, unknown, unfamiliar, or unpredictable. These are:

a) Access to rehearsals and the creative process.
b) Opportunities to volunteer: to be actively involved in helping put on the event.
c) Festival conditions: where people will see 'anything' or try new things.
d) Performances in public spaces, in which people can dip in and dip out of a show.
e) Free tickets / free access: through which people will try things they would not otherwise see.
f) 'Gateway' organisations: trusted organisations encouraging people to engage with new work presented elsewhere.
g) Arts venues being friendly, accessible, welcoming, inclusive, and 'keeping the non-performance spaces alive': people being happy to be there, they try what's offered.

Some of these conditions will be applicable and useful for arts that are not 'contemporary'; but given that much contemporary work is by its nature 'new', unknown, unfamiliar, or unpredictable, all of which can present particular challenges to initial and ongoing engagement, these facilitating conditions take on increased importance for organisations presenting contemporary work.

II. Facilitative Audience Attitudes

Not all experiences of contemporary arts are enjoyable. Interviewees reported that attending these arts can be 'difficult' and 'challenging' (this word being used at some times as a positive attribute and at others as a euphemism); and that enjoyment and interest sit alongside less satisfying experiences. Across the fieldwork, research participants articulated a series of attitudes and orientations to contemporary work that facilitate their enjoyment, even amidst the possibility of boredom, irritation, equivocation and incomprehension. These included:

a) Liking some things and not others, and that is 'how it should be'.
b) Having an interest in 'experiment', 'pushing boundaries', or 'asking questions' – and seeing this as valuable and important, 'even if I don't always like the work'.

c) Having a 'curious disposition'; and an 'open' attitude to trying new things.
d) Not needing to 'understand' a show in order to enjoy it.
e) Wanting to be 'challenged'; wanting to see and hear 'challenging' work.
f) Holding that the arts make / allow you to 'think differently', and 'this is what I want'.

The accounts that audience members gave of the attitudes they take to contemporary arts help open up important aspects of the value of this work: ways in which the contemporary arts are important to people. There are elements of intellectual and emotional response in their descriptions, and an understanding that the unpredictable qualities of new works will lead some experiences to be more immediately satisfying than others. There is also a strong sense of the relationship between the art work and the viewer (or listener) – with perhaps a greater license to interpret, accept or reject the work than is articulated by audiences for established repertoire (e.g. Pitts and Spencer, 2008).

III. A Key Site of Audience Value: The Creative Process

Audiences place particular value on organisations 'opening up the creative process':

a) Access to rehearsals, for example, can be central to the process of learning about and coming to enjoy contemporary art (especially in the case of contemporary music: access to rehearsals is a key feature of the BCMG 'Sound Investors' scheme, and one of the features that makes it so effective.)
b) For some people, there is as much interest in the conversations going on through or around an event as in the show 'itself'; and having access to or involvement in the creative process provides particularly rich and facilitating opportunities for dialogue and exchange.
c) Many interviewees indicated the enjoyment they take - and the value they place - on being in proximity to artists; and being 'part of that world'.
d) Volunteering is one important way of being 'nearer the art' and behind the scenes.
e) In some cases, people are very interested in having involvement in or access to the creative process for the ways in which it may contribute to their own creativity, be this as an amateur, or in a professional capacity perhaps connected to developing a career. (In this regard, Birmingham is seen to be particularly good for the openness of its artists and arts organisations.)

The value audiences place on involvement with or access to the creative process appears to be a particular feature of (and site of possibility for) the contemporary arts. These attractions of opening up the creative process may have implications for contemporary arts organisations both in terms of how they encourage people to be present in the first place, and in developing those audience attitudes and orientations to the work that we have found facilitate enjoyment.

IV. The Enjoyment of Facilitated Conversation

In response to our 'Audience Exchange' visits, a number of research participants reported how much they had enjoyed discussing with the group their experiences of the show they had just seen together. Several research participants chose to attend a second or third outing, because they enjoyed it so much. In one case a participant attended an exhibition he had already seen because he wanted to have the opportunity to view and discuss it with an Audience Exchange group; whilst another participant said she would come to 'see anything' she was invited to as part of an Audience Exchange, because she liked the overall experience. These strong positive responses culminated in members of the final Audience Exchange visit suggesting that the research team relay to participating arts organisations that they would really welcome the opportunity to have similar facilitated conversations on a regular basis. They would be delighted if arts organisations offered the opportunity for groups of people, who may well not know each other, to come together to discuss their experiences of a show.[2]

Strikingly, these participants emphasised that the discussion should not involve 'experts'. This would be quite distinct from question-and-answer sessions with artists or performers. Instead, our research participants indicated that they really enjoyed the opportunity to explore and share their own experiences with other attendees. They indicated that this experience might be particularly important in the context of 'contemporary' work, which is often challenging, difficult to understand, and for these reasons there can often be an additional interest and pleasure in discussing one's experiences.

These findings strongly suggest that the provision of facilitated conversations may be a valuable and fairly straightforward way in which arts organisations presenting contemporary work can create conditions in which visitors (with potentially diverse levels of experience and confidence in engaging with contemporary arts) can enjoyably explore their sometimes equivocal, often uncertain experiences of challenging, experimental work. They concur with other recent studies of the benefits of audience dialogue (Dobson and Sloboda, 2014), but differ in highlighting the benefits of peer-to-peer discussions, through which audiences work towards a shared understanding rather than one led by expert performers or producers. By deepening and developing relationships amongst audiences in this way, arts organisations can potentially encourage the kinds of organisational attachment and loyalty frequently communicated and demonstrated by our research participants.

In addition to the enthusiasm participants showed for the 'Audience Exchange' activities, many also indicated how much they enjoyed the one-to-one 'life history' interview through which they were given the opportunity to discuss their interests in the arts, the changes and developments in their tastes and arts-going practices, and the connections between these and other aspects of their everyday lives. One interviewee found the experience so enjoyable and powerful that he wrote a letter to BCMG to say that the experience had been transformational to him. In combination with finding that the creation of welcoming, hospitable environments is important to many of our research

participants - often a major factor in encouraging them to spend time at an organisation and to encounter contemporary work there - our fieldwork thereby strongly suggests that the research process itself can be an important mechanism through which contemporary arts organisations may develop strong, deep relationships with visitors. These findings suggest that embedding elements of these research practices within organisations – for example, through regular 'Audience Exchange' events – has considerable potential as an audience development strategy in itself.

V. The Challenge of Combining Deep Participation with Broad Inclusivity

'Experimentation', 'participation' and, in some cases 'co-creation' are key values for contemporary arts organisations, but there are challenges and dilemmas facing the combination and institutionalization of these values. The Digbeth area of Birmingham turns out to be an illuminating case study for this.

Digbeth is a former manufacturing and light industrial area of Birmingham, just five minutes' walk from the Bullring shopping centre, but with a very different atmosphere and environment to the retail district that it borders. In the late 1980s and 1990s, what were once the Birds factory buildings – left derelict since the 1960s – were turned into 'The Custard Factory', a centre for creative industries, and which now describes itself as Birmingham's 'Creative Quarter'. The streets neighbouring The Custard Factory are home to an ever growing number of galleries, studio spaces, media companies and creative businesses; including Grand Union and Eastside Projects, two of the organisations involved in this research. The contemporary arts organisations in the area are often small in scale and limited in resources, run by small teams of committed artists and practitioners. In 2014 'Digbeth First Friday' was launched, a monthly event inviting people to explore a series of arts organisations on the same evening, encouraging people to visit the area and to discover the range of activities taking place there.

Through our fieldwork we found that some interviewees had a strong preference for engaging with contemporary arts within organisations that feel 'unfinished'; within 'back stage' rather than 'front of house' organisations, or those in which you can see the 'ropes and pulleys', as other participants put it. This is where participation feels fullest and most involving to these interviewees, and where artwork most powerfully facilitates conversation and thought. For this reason they expressed a strong preference for the small contemporary arts organisations in Digbeth, where opportunities for these kinds of deep involvement and participation are offered. Unlike larger, more 'finished' organisations, these Digbeth galleries provide frequent opportunities for sustained interaction with artists; to participate in artist-led workshops (in some cases thereby contributing to the production of art work); to help hang or take down exhibitions, to volunteer (as a gallery assistant, for example); and to participate in a monthly reading group, discussing writing connected to issues of art, aesthetics and politics.

Other interviewees either had little or no knowledge of the Digbeth arts scene – in some cases despite a very active interest in the arts in Birmingham – or felt that the area

was in some sense not for them, or not easily discovered and entered into. A number of people reported that Digbeth is exciting, and should be recognised as Birmingham's 'Cultural Quarter'; but that it is not as well known or as well attended as it ought to be. Digbeth, they felt, should be better connected to the centre of Birmingham (and the arts organisations there), and better signage and visual presence would assist this. Our organisational interviewees expressed a similar sense of disconnection between the city centre arts activities and those on the outskirts, and also felt that the solution was not only physical. Attracting people into the Digbeth arts organisations was seen as requiring both improved visual presence and more effective channels of marketing and communication, through which to reach a larger proportion of the Birmingham population.

Our findings in this part of Birmingham raise the question: would it be possible for small contemporary arts organisations such as those in Digbeth – adventurous in seeking co-creative ways to produce art, often working on very limited resources – to attract significantly more participants, whilst doing so in ways that continue to fulfil their mission to provide a space for creative 'dialogue'? How might the combination of deep *and* broad participation be achieved? These findings ask us to think about the diversity of modes of participation, and possibly the diversity of 'openness'. Perhaps it is understandable and right that different arts organisations will make themselves welcoming, inclusive and diverse in different ways, according to organizational size, location and mission. And perhaps arts organisations should be emboldened to articulate the value of their work in terms not only of the breadth of their reach, but also the depth of participation they make possible.

VI. Why are the Contemporary Arts Important to People?

The second of our research questions asked, 'what value do the contemporary arts have for audiences?' Or, in other words, why are the contemporary arts important to people? We found that for some interviewees, engaging with the contemporary arts was a major part of how they spend their time and live their 'everyday' life. On the other hand, for other interviewees, engagement with the contemporary arts occupied a much more occasional or peripheral role in their lives. For some interviewees, sociality was a key aspect of the value they placed on engaging with the contemporary arts. For others, sociality was secondary – or unrelated to the key experiences and satisfactions that engagement with the contemporary arts brought to their lives. The contemporary arts are therefore valuable to people for a wide range of reasons. These include:

a) To be 'in on the ground' of new work and creativity, and to be in proximity to artists.
b) The forms of sociality, community or 'camaraderie' some people enjoy through the contemporary arts, and, in some cases, the strong experiences of organisational attachment they have developed.
c) Opportunities for dialogue, discussion and exchange.

d) Opportunities to reflect on or develop one's own creativity – be it an amateur interest or, in other cases, a professional interest and a wish to start or progress a career.
e) Opportunities to volunteer and contribute.
f) To experience something that is 'different' or 'new'.
g) To experience something that is 'challenging' or 'difficult'.
h) Having the opportunity to engage with work that is transient, unexpected, not commercial, or not a commodity.

Some of the essential differences between contemporary and 'traditional' arts are evident in these emergent values, as the immediacy of seeing art made 'now' comes to the fore in participants' articulation of their experiences. While contemporary arts audiences are just as likely to come to an event with preferences for particular art forms, practices or previously encountered makers and works, they are less likely to know the 'repertoire' than a frequent attender at, say, classical music concerts. Their choices of attendance are therefore more strongly shaped by the process of arts engagement than its product; and by an openness to being challenged or surprised than by the anticipated guarantee of enjoyment. Arts organisations presenting canonical repertoire might wish for more of this exploratory engagement with art, and the experiences reported by these contemporary arts audiences offer some clues as to how greater dialogue, backstage access and volunteering could help to engender that approach. Meanwhile, our organisational partners were encouraged by the finding that their audiences prioritised 'experience' over 'explanation' at the heart of their arts engagement; that, even though contextual and verbalized knowledge and explanation have their places, this was not always necessary, and sometimes it was sufficient to engage but not to 'understand'.

Conclusions and Implications: 'Cultural Citizenship and the Varieties of Participation

Each of the findings presented here could be illustrated, unpacked and discussed in much greater detail and depth, and we intend to do this in future articles. The purpose of the present paper has been to provide an overview of the project: what we did and why, and a summary of our key findings. We have provided preliminary indications of the significance of this these findings throughout the paper. However, by way of an initial statement of the overall implications of this work, in our conclusions we focus on the first set of key findings, concerning *facilitative conditions* - in order to draw out two particularly important points, regarding 'cultural citizenship' and varieties of participation.

The identification within our research data of a set of facilitative conditions – those environments and opportunities which encourage people to engage with work that is 'new', unfamiliar, unpredictable, different, or strange, and which increases the likelihood of their enjoyment of this work – has immediate implications for organisations presenting

contemporary arts. These conditions indicate a range of directions in which organisations might look to take their audience development strategies. As just one example, in what new ways might contemporary art organisations open up access to and involvement in the creative process? This research has found that the creative process is a key site of value for audiences for the contemporary arts: having contact with the creative process is often a crucial part of how people come to develop an interest in and enjoyment of the contemporary arts. Future research might consider whether this approach has potential as an education or audience development strategy: could new audiences develop interests in the contemporary arts by the provision of tailored opportunities to engage with its processes and makers?

But the significance of these facilitative conditions – identified by our research participants – extends beyond their implications for 'audience development' strategies. These findings also raise important questions for how arts organisations, funders, public authorities and researchers *conceptualise the relationship(s) between arts organisations and the people who are, might be, or definitely are not involved with them*. The years of New Labour cultural policy, 1997-2010, were the period in which the vocabulary of 'access' (Jowell, 2004) and 'outreach' established itself as the unavoidable language in which cultural organisations had to articulate and demonstrate their social worth. As part of the overall regime of 'targets' by which the arts and culture received increased funding – in return for which they were increasingly expected to contribute to a wide range of social and economic ambitions, including reducing crime, boosting urban regeneration, and improving public health – cultural organisations had to demonstrate their socio-economic 'impact' and their success in increasing 'access' (Hewison, 2014). Under the coalition and Conservative governments, this approach to cultural policy – and this way of understanding the social role of cultural organisations – has remained fundamentally unchanged.

In an interestingly parallel (but very distinct) development, alongside the vocabularies and expectations of 'access' emerging from within these neo-liberal (Hewison, 2014) approaches to cultural policy and funding since at least 1997 (but with roots traceable as far back as the 1980s), recent years have seen a rising interest in 'participatory' practices in the arts (Freshwater, 2009; Bishop, 2012; White, 2013), in which audience members, spectators and visitors are drawn into the performance as 'actors' or 'contributors'. Freshwater, Bishop and White each explore these developments, and challenge the presumption that these recent innovations in participatory practice are in and of themselves ethically and/or politically 'progressive'. Much more work needs to be done to open up the politics of participation.

Andy Miles (2013), amongst others, has attacked the government's discourses of 'access', by challenging the idea – implied in the language of access and in the uses to which the Department of Culture, Media and Sport looks to put its 'Taking Part' survey – that there is a 'deficit' of cultural participation, and that 'access' needs to be increased. Coming out of this critique, through the Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP) project, http://www.everydayparticipation.org, he and colleagues are currently exploring the ways

in which people are actively 'participating' in culture regardless of whether they engage with publicly subsidized arts organisations.

Beyond the UEP studies, however, there is still an enormous amount of research to be done into the varieties of participation that take place – and could take place – *within* organizational contexts. 'Participation' comes in many varieties: facilitating a potentially wide range of experiences, and embodying, facilitating or promoting diverse social, cultural and political values. Our findings in this project strongly indicate the need to address the diversity of ways in which contemporary arts organisations create conditions for a variety of modes of participation. And whilst researchers begin to open up this question, arts organisations themselves might give further thought to exactly what kinds of participation they are most keen to facilitate within the particular conditions of the work they present, and the overall organisational culture they are looking to create.

Accompanying the idea of 'access' is typically the idea of removing 'barriers' to access. The Artistic Director of one of the organisations participating in this study indicated his own long-standing dissatisfaction with the idea of access and accessibility as the dominant way to conceptualise and address audience development. Our findings suggest that thinking about who is attending the contemporary arts only in terms of 'access' and 'barriers' will limit arts organisations' abilities to realise the potential breadth of their audiences, and the potential depth of audiences' participation in the life of the organisation. Our fieldwork indicates that, rather than thinking in terms of 'access' and 'barriers', researchers and arts organisations should turn their attention to what another Artistic Director involved in this study referred to as 'cultural citizenship'.

By adopting the term cultural citizenship ourselves, we highlight two key ways in which our research indicates that audiences for the contemporary arts cannot be understood as 'just' audiences - in the sense of purchasers of tickets whose involvement in the arts is constituted by discrete acts of (comparatively) passive and private cultural consumption. There is a fairly extensive existing literature that deals with cultural citizenship, referring to the ways in which 'culture' can serve as a basis for individual identity and social participation (for example, Stevenson, 2003; Miller, 2006). More specifically, the recent work of Flinders and Cunningham (2014) explores how participatory arts may contribute to higher levels of political and civic engagement. Our research demonstrates widespread interest in civic vitality amongst highly-engaged audiences for the contemporary arts. They are often interested in the contemporary arts not only as the opportunity for personally satisfying or enjoyable experiences, but also with a keen interest in how these activities do and might still further contribute to the life of the city or the 'community' in which they live. We also found a widespread interest and involvement in volunteering, which in turn challenges the implied distinction between more or less passive, consumer 'audiences' and active, producer 'participants'. The fact that such a large proportion of our interviewees is involved in volunteering activities connected to the contemporary arts has significant implications for how contemporary arts organisations might go about attracting and working with audience-participants in the future. To think about this in terms of cultural

citizenship is useful in drawing attention to the extent to which highly-engaged attendees at these organisations are actively involved in shaping the cultural life of the city – be it through volunteering at the BE Festival, Grand Union, or DanceXchange; playing the piano for a local choir; writing to Birmingham City Council to protest about a funding cut to the Birmingham Opera Group; contributing to a community arts project in a row of abandoned Victorian houses; or performing in a drama workshop above a pub.

To be clear, then, by challenging the language of 'access' and 'barriers' we are not arguing that there is not value – and, indeed, in many cases, both financial and ethical *necessity* – in cultural organisations continuing to address how to engage a broad diversity of people in their work. On the contrary, our findings speak directly to that challenge. The term cultural citizenship indicates important directions in which contemporary arts organisations might consider taking their audience development strategies in the future, for example, by thinking about ways in which it would be possible and fruitful to connect contemporary arts organisations to other sites of civic participation (such as community groups that have a focus that is not the arts), and to other organisations that provide opportunities for volunteering.

However, there is a second sense in which we are employing the term cultural citizenship, and in drawing out the implications of our research here, it is in fact this second meaning that is the more important of the two. Involvement in the contemporary arts may begin from – or lead to – other locations and activities through which people participate in the life of the towns and cities in which they live. But the primary use we are making of the term is in the more restricted but potentially consequential sense in which participants in the contemporary arts (just one small domain of 'culture', of course) need to be understood not as the passive recipients of their experiences, but as actively involved in shaping and contesting those experiences – and the *value* of those experiences – for themselves and others. We especially found this to be the case when organisational conditions conducive to informal conversation were cultivated. In this sense, participants in our research were enacting a kind of citizenship within the inchoate community (or communities) of the contemporary arts: actively contributing to the discourses, practices and contestations of value taking place within and across those organisations. Documenting these modes of highly-active involvement, our research thereby suggests significant new directions for researchers, cultural practitioners and policymakers to take in imagining what it can mean to be an attendee, visitor or audience member.

The specific 'facilitative conditions' in operation amongst the organisations presenting contemporary arts in Birmingham may or may not strongly overlap with facilitative conditions found in relation to other arts in other geographical contexts. But what the significance of these specific environments and opportunities in Birmingham indicates more broadly is that the prevailing discourses of 'access' and 'barriers' – and perhaps many of the audience development strategies, analyses of box-office data, and project evaluations that take place in their name – can obscure the diversity of people's routes into an arts organisation, what leads them to return (or not), and what 'attending' or

'participating' in that organisation actually involves. We suggest that life-history interviews and audience-exchange methods have an important future role to play here, in opening up further the varieties and value(s) of participation.

By highlighting the distinctive series of environments and opportunities that facilitate engagement with and enjoyment of the contemporary arts in Birmingham - each of which extends far beyond the domain of 'marketing', however broadly conceived – our findings thereby indicate promising new strategies through which organisations presenting contemporary work might seek to deepen and widen their relationships with audiences. Alongside these practical implications for arts organisations and practitioners, however, our findings highlight the need for a broad programme of organisationally located ethnographic research to explore varieties of participation – in order to strengthen understanding of arts engagement, its diversity, and its value.

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Notes:

[1] The contemporary arts audiences involved in this research project were self-selecting, of course, in the sense that they chose to respond to a call for participants. They were not chosen at 'random' from a pre-existing data set on the basis of their demographic profiles. This project was not looking to select a 'representative sample' in the way that the natural sciences or some (but by no means all) modes of social scientific method would employ, and there are strong grounds for rejecting the idea that selecting research participants for this kind of study on the basis of the classic demographic markers of age, class and ethnicity would constitute, in itself, a more 'representative' group of research participants. The life history approach allows us to explore the relationships between arts attendance and the full range of biographical and 'demographic' conditions within which participation in the contemporary arts takes place. In this way, in addition to having spoken to a large number of people (56 is a very considerable group for a highly qualitative study of this kind), and having used an inclusive recruitment method – sending out a call for participants through mailing lists - the 'representativeness' of our findings is established through the interview methods we employed as much as through the processes by which interviewees were 'selected'. For a

statistically precise demographic survey of audiences for the contemporary arts in Birmingham, a quite different study will need to be undertaken: one which chooses broad quantitative reach rather than rich and deep qualitative insight.

[2] In swift response to this finding and proposal, BCMG has already programmed two post-performance discussions – to be facilitated by Dr. Gross – specifically intended to create a space for conversation between audience members about the concert experiences they have just had. Unlike typical pre or post-performance events, these discussions do not involve the performers, members of the creative team, or any other designated 'expert' contributor. The events took place in November 2015 and February 2016, as part of BCMG's 2015-16 season.