

## **From audiences to users: changing art galleries and museums together**

**By Claire Antrobus**

From commerce to healthcare, from Obama's election campaign to education, professionals and businesses around the world are unlocking the power of their publics – through user and open innovation – to develop new products and deliver more effective services and social changes. Technology is often the enabler and powerful tools make sharing information and developing ideas collaboratively faster, easier and cheaper than ever before. And at the heart of these developments is a more open approach to involving others – customers, peers, beneficiaries – in how we work.

Corporations, such as Proctor & Gamble have Open Innovation strategies because whilst it is impossible to hire all the talent available, they still want to have access to our ideas. A new role of 'community manager' enables firms to work with users in developing, testing and improving products. User-led innovation is generating significant commercial value in the UK and global economy (Flowers, 2008).

Speaking the slightly different language of 'co-production', and as part of the wider discourse of 'personalisation' in public service modernisation, politicians and professionals alike are proposing a new equality between professionals and users in the design and delivery of services, leading to improved efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability (Boyle & Harris, 2009).<sup>i</sup>

Underpinning current interest in user-innovation and co-production in the cultural sector – where it is usually discussed in terms of participation – is a belief that involving people in shaping cultural institutions can lead to greater ownership (Holden, 2009; Simon, 2010). Many point to an increased appetite for creation facilitated by technology (Leadbeater, 2009; Jones, 2009) and see a surge in participation transforming how people engage with culture and the role culture plays in society (Holden, 2008; Simon, 2010).

### **Art galleries and museums: a crisis of relevance and resources**

Evidence suggests art gallery and museum audiences have plateaued at around 21% of the adult population, despite continued efforts to increase reach (Oskala & Bunting, 2009). As we, the gallery and museum community, do not invest in research, we do not have sufficient information about who visits and why to enable us to increase reach, improve services advocate effectively for our funding (Jackson & Jordan, 2006, p.55).

Relevance is one of our fundamental challenges; the other, with which user engagement could also help, is one of resources. In comparison with other artforms supported by Arts Council England (ACE) we generate the lowest proportion of our income, and recent research indicates a diminishing return on public investment.<sup>ii</sup> Many visual arts organisations have a business model which is fundamentally flawed: greater engagement creates costs without generating corresponding additional income.<sup>iii</sup>

Therefore, with its offer of unlocking additional resources and achieving greater relevance and involvement, user engagement looks attractive for the visual arts – but what might it mean in practice?

### **User-centred art galleries and museums**

I suggest it is helpful to consider the implications of placing users at the centre of galleries and museums around a framework<sup>iv</sup> based on three overarching principles:

1. *Openness* – we actively seek the ideas and contributions of others and open our working practices to enable this. Galleries and museums offer a platform for a full range of cultural and creative opportunities, not just their own content.
2. *Equality* – art and audience are equally important and it is the role of art galleries and museums to support both equally.
3. *Pluralism* – diversity of views and artistic approaches are essential and art galleries and museums are places where through looking, thinking and talking about art we explore, discover and express our identities, as individuals and as part of society.

Table 1 outlines what each of these principles might look like for different part of our institutions: leadership, staffing, programme, interpretation, audiences and business model. In the rest of this article, I highlight some of the key questions they raise for art galleries and museums.

**Table 1: Characteristics of a user-centred art gallery or museum**

	Openness	Equality	Pluralism
Leadership & Vision	<p>Transparency: open recruitment of Trustees, publication of artistic policy etc.</p> <p>Actively innovating, researching impact and sharing learning with peers and public.</p>	<p>Confident artistic vision, coupled with strong audience focus.</p> <p>Public service ethos.</p> <p>Strong audience voice within the Board and senior management.</p>	<p>Distributed leadership within the organisation.</p> <p>Strong collaboration with peers.</p>
Staffing	<p>Making full use of expertise and ideas within the organisation.</p> <p>Skills and capacity augmented by users as volunteers and 'super users'.</p>	<p>Galleries led by staff with varied backgrounds – learning, marketing etc.</p> <p>Art and audience championed equally throughout the organisation and reflected in structures and in HR systems.</p>	<p>Porous models for sharing expertise with multiple entry routes.</p> <p>Diversity of workforce (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, age).</p> <p>New roles and skills developed around engagement.</p>
Programme (online, offsite and in the gallery)	<p>Collaborations with other institutions (e.g. co-produced exhibitions).</p> <p>User-generated content.</p> <p>Use of the facilities by other cultural organisations.</p>	<p>Programme decisions informed by artistic and audience intelligence.</p> <p>Activities conceived as services, not products.</p> <p>Strong focus on good visitor service.</p>	<p>Exhibitions and displays selected by non-curators given space in the gallery and wider programme.</p> <p>Artist-led participatory arts practice.</p> <p>Artists working in response to collections.</p>
Audiences	<p>Opportunities to engage at different levels – creative, critic, collector, spectator.</p> <p>Promotion of wider cultural opportunities e.g. art classes, broadcasts about art.</p>	<p>Mutual respect between audiences and professionals.</p> <p>Audience voice in planning and review.</p> <p>Investment in understanding audience behaviour and impact on audiences.</p>	<p>Users able to interact with the organisation on their own terms (personalisation).</p> <p>Multi-layered experiences - gallery, offsite and online.</p>
Interpretation	<p>'Re-mixing' and re-appropriation of content by users in other contexts – e.g. through posting images in Flickr.</p>	<p>Enabling users to look at and understand art for themselves, rather than telling them what to think.</p>	<p>User voices present in labels/ texts, talks and tours, online forums.</p> <p>Discussions – formal and informal, in the gallery and online – about art.</p>
Business model	<p>Users contributing time (volunteers, participants) and financial resources as members and donors.</p>	<p>Good customer service maximises income from trading (café, shop).</p> <p>More visitors means more income from trading.</p>	<p>User willing to pay for additional ('premium') services such as talks or classes. Additional services are self-sustaining.</p>

## 1. Openness

Making better use of existing staff and volunteers, before then reaching out more widely to peers and public, could transform many organisations. Openness also means rethinking where the art gallery and museum fits in the wider creative and cultural aspirations of its users and finding ways (often through technology) to open access to these other opportunities: be those amateur, commercial or through other institutions. Transparency about how we run our organisations, and artistic decisions in particular, is essential for building legitimacy and understanding.

### *Changes to the role and position of the curator*

The role of the curator is important to the user-centred gallery but equal with roles in interpretation and learning. In many cases these professional boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred through integrated programming teams and roles. The relationship with the public has also changed: the curator is no longer principally a gatekeeper exercising quality-control of content on our behalf (Jones, 2006; Connor, 2009). Instead we look to cultural professionals to enable us to experience art for ourselves through introducing us to things we might not otherwise encounter, helping us understand our options and articulating what we enjoy. We expect a 'conversation' with professionals about our interests and an explanation of their choices or recommendations.

#### **Example: opening up curatorial thinking**

The Northern Art Prize encourages audiences to make up their own mind about the work on display through exhibiting short-listed artists in the run-up to the announcement of the winner.

In 2010 members of the public could also vote and the public choice was announced before the judges' decision. Does it matter that the experts and the public didn't agree? No: but if the judges explained why they had chosen Pavel Büchler, what it was about his work that they valued, then this could have offered audiences new perspectives and greater understanding of artistic values.

### *Opening up organisations*

Many learning projects involve young people finding out more about how the gallery works. For example, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven is experimenting with inviting visitors 'backstage' during an installation period to offer insights into the roles and views of art handlers. Other galleries encourage staff, including curators and information assistants, to blog about their experiences. Galleries and museums working with living artists can open up the creative process, either through providing a platform for the artist to talk about their work (through an event, video in the gallery, online), hosting an artist during the production of their work and providing public access (e.g. through having a studio space, or opening the gallery during installation periods).

### *Open programming and co-creation*

Artists have been finding ways to open up access to exhibiting since the Salon des Refusés in 1863 (Connor, 2009). This continues today: Café Gallery Projects, an artist-run community gallery in Southwark Park, has long held open exhibitions and 'hosted' exhibitions by young people and students alongside high-quality professional artists. Openness doesn't just mean open submission. Co-creation, where artists and public work together to create artworks and projects, is widely seen within the gallery and in offsite projects with artists such as Antony Gormley and Jeremy Deller capturing both the public imagination and critical acclaim.

In many galleries co-creation (or 'participatory practice') forms a significant aspect of programming but is not usually presented in the gallery (for example Ikon, Birmingham and Serpentine Gallery London). Unless this activity is scalable so that the opportunity for participation can be extended to all (and often it isn't) levels of engagement are high, but numbers tend to be small. Alternatively, these projects are presented as displays in galleries, raising complex questions about authorship and whether the audience is interested in viewing non-professional work.

Does everyone want to be an artist, or a creative, as some might suggest (Leadbeater, 2009)? Recent research into use of social technologies indicates creatives account for 24% of us, with the vast majority still enjoying spectating.<sup>v</sup> But most importantly, it points to a wider range of activity than simply creating or viewing - including 'critics' (who enjoy rating others' content, writing reviews etc) and 'collectors' (who aggregate content for personal or social consumption and organise links). These roles are not fixed and people play different roles in different contexts. The challenge, then, to art galleries and museums is to offer a range of participatory activities that appeal to all - not just those at the extremes of the spectrum (creatives or spectators). This may go some way to dispel the notion that greater participation inevitably leads to galleries filled with co-created content.

## **2. Equality**

There's a widespread, and mis-placed, fear among cultural professionals that being user-centred means disregarding quality and the role of expertise. It doesn't - but it entails championing the art and the audience equally, and separating expertise from control, as Pluralism implies.

### *New leadership models, and leaders, that champion audiences and art*

There are many professionals in the visual arts sector who are committed to art and artists equally, and we have seen the emergence of joint leadership models, for example at Tate Liverpool and St Ives, where an artistic director and executive director jointly run the gallery. However the vast majority of organisations are led by a curator and while there are those whose vision encompasses audiences, it is not surprising that curator-led galleries tend to concentrate more on art than audiences.

### *Audience champions – many and senior*

Gerri Morris and Andrew McIntyre (n.d., p.5) underline the importance of interdisciplinary structures and a culture where ‘it is the responsibility of everyone in the organisation to understand, think about and respond to audiences’. There is also a need for senior audience champions at management and Board levels and a corresponding increase in resources dedicated to market research.

### **3. Pluralism**

Hearing others’ perspectives can open up new insights, encouraging users to respond to art in their own way, and it allows us to engage in conversations around art, and ideas. Rather than seeing the gallery purely as a place to experience art, it becomes a place where through looking, thinking and talking about art we explore, discover and express our identities, as individuals and as part of society. Already this happens daily in learning departments in many galleries and museums, but it is time we extended this opportunity to *all* our visitors by integrating pluralism across all programming, including the gallery space.

#### **Example: modelling pluralism in the gallery**



Rineke Dijkstra’s *The Weeping Woman, Tate Liverpool, 2009* is a video installation inspired by the ways school groups discuss art.<sup>vi</sup> The artist observed the children as they looked at works from the collection. Rather than being offered an art historical explanation, the children are simply asked ‘what do you see?’ They are guided, through questioning, to explore the formal aspects of the work and its subject and the context in which it was produced (art historical but also social and political). Learning curator Abigail Christenson explains the approach thus: ‘each viewpoint is taken on board – it’s a layering of interpretation, multiple viewpoints, the workshops are about the children’s voices and what they see’.<sup>vii</sup>

The video portraits which emerged from this process show the children looking at, and talking about Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* (1937), but the viewer’s attention is channelled towards the children’s response rather than the artwork itself. Their observations and reactions reveal far more about themselves than about the picture. This work prompts two thoughts: first, that we all see different meaning in artworks and quite often our response

will be personal, and second, that art can provide a social opportunity to come together and share these perspectives. By displaying this work the gallery is illustrating the kind of responses from audiences it would like to enable.

### *Collections and contemporary opportunities*

Collections and contemporary practice offer different opportunities to engage users. With living artists their practice can often be participatory either in how it is presented or produced. With collections, there are many examples of engaging users in the selection or interpretation of displays. Worcester City Art Gallery's *Top 40* exhibition<sup>viii</sup> is one such example, or the Van Abbemuseum's *Kijkdepot* below. Other museums have involved users in leading tours or creating labels and other interpretation materials.

#### **Example: visitor selection and interpretation with collections**



The Van Abbemuseum, a contemporary art museum in Eindhoven, is experimenting with different models for engaging users in programming including the *Kijkdepot* ('Viewing Depot') where anyone can request a work from the collection and every two weeks a new work is shown – alongside the request from the public which sets out why they want to see this work. Users are also engaged in interpreting the collection by 'tagging' individual works through which they can suggest particular meanings or approaches to navigating works which the museum hope will create 'multiple players and multiple meanings in the museum domain.'

### *A place for technology*

Technology plays a key role in enabling multiple perspectives to be shared. Increasingly users can engage with the gallery through social media to augment the experience of physical visits. But there is a tendency to keep user engagement safely online (or offsite) and away from the 'real' space of the gallery, and if we focus exclusively on fostering discussion through

online activity, we miss out on the social value this can bring to a gallery experience.

### *Personalisation*

As professionals we need to find ways to develop sustainable channels to enable dialogue with users, supported by technology. For example, some online communities develop 'super users' (similar to the expert patient model in medicine) where keen and skilled users take on a supporting role with less experienced users. Nina Simon offers a detailed consideration of other design principles we could consider including personalisation and 'recommendation engines' which use intelligence gathered through a personal profile to make suggestions about content you might like (Simon, 2010, Ch.2). For example, many online retailers (such as Amazon) use these devices to suggest products and services, based on what you've looked at or purchased before, and the behaviour of customers with similar profiles.

### **User-centred leadership**

User engagement requires a radical change to how we operate as professionals and institutions. It is both our greatest challenge and our biggest opportunity, and I suggest the principles of equality, pluralism and openness also apply to how we might approach finding a way forward.

Equality of artist and audience: because we need to engage not just those with strong artistic vision, but equally those professionals who champion the audience.

Plurality is important as different approaches to user engagement will suit different institutional aims: there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

Above all openness is essential as we need to harness the widest possible range of ideas and perspectives to find new ways of working. In the course of my research I have spoken with many professionals, from the largest national museums to community-led spaces, in the UK and overseas. Whilst all recognise the changing role of users as a key issue, few were confident that anyone yet understands what this really mean for galleries and art museums.

As professionals, working together to share experiences and ideas will require this new spirit of openness. For me, this article is a way of contributing to this sharing of ideas, my blog is another ([www.claireantrobus.com/blog/](http://www.claireantrobus.com/blog/)). Openness to working in new ways means accepting that we won't get everything right straight away. Therefore, we need to approach our work as research from which we can learn.

User engagement will transform our art galleries and museums – I can't say exactly how as professionals alone will never find the solutions – they will only come through further conversation with all our users.

## Conclusion; Back to us

There's something exciting happening to the art gallery in our town. The once quiet galleries are now bustling with people and conversations – attracted by a world-class programme. Alongside exhibitions and events programmed by the staff, other voices can clearly be heard. The public has been involved in selecting some displays and interpreting others. Talks and events offer a space to share ideas and consider the programme and wider issues about the place of art in society. The gallery is the hub for cultural activity in the area: all kinds of organisations use the facilities for their meetings and events – whether formally through hiring meeting rooms, or by colonizing the café for a monthly book club. The gallery is on the must-see list for visitors to the town, and it's equally popular with locals: more than 40% of residents attend regularly – twice the national average. Entrance is free but earned income accounts for one-half of turnover. Users contribute financially through membership and spending in the café and shop, and a growing volunteer programme supports visitor services and interpretation activities.

The picture wasn't always so rosy. A few years ago the gallery had to reduce its opening hours and cut its programme due to fundraising difficulties. A downward spiral of reduced activity, falling profile and declining audiences gathered momentum, making it harder to attract sponsors or grants. When the Council proposed a budget cut to the gallery two years ago, there was very little local support for the campaign to save its funding because local people didn't value or use the facilities – even though the exhibitions programme had an excellent national reputation and attracted visitors from other cities. Like many of its peers, the gallery only captured visitor figures. It didn't know who was attending, or why, and so couldn't make a case to its funders about its impact.

What has changed? Has a dynamic new Director arrived and transformed the programme, its profile and the fundraising? No – the person who has turned this gallery around is you and me – or I should say *us* – the users.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Third Sector Foresight offers a useful summary of the key issues and debates in relation to personalisation and public services <http://www.3s4.org.uk/drivers/personalisation-of-services> [Accessed 1 March 2010].

<sup>ii</sup> Selwood calculates subsidy per attendance rising from £3.40 per visit in 2004/05 to £4.35 per visit in 2006/7 among ACE funded galleries (Selwood, 2008, pp.32-33 & Table 1).

<sup>iii</sup> 'If you get the business model right, then the harder you work, the more money you make (Google is an example here). If you get it wrong, then the

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harder you work, the more money you lose (Napster is an example here)', Bruce Firestone on flawed business models cited in Falk & Sheppard (2006).

<sup>iv</sup> This framework draws on aspects of Gerri Morris and Andrew McIntyre's seven pillars of C21st organisations (Morris & McIntyre, n.d.), John Holden's model for a 'democratic culture' (Holden, 2008) and Hasan Bakhshi and David Throsby's model of 'aspects on innovation' within arts and cultural organisations (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> Forrester Research, 2008. *Groundswell: Winning in a world transformed by social technologies*, cited in Simon (2010) p.8.

<sup>vi</sup> The work will be displayed as part of the exhibition *I See A Woman Crying* at Tate Liverpool 27 April – 30 August 2010, and an extract from the video can be viewed online at

<http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/weepingwoman/default.shtm> [Accessed 31 March 2010].

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with the author, 2 March 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> An account of this project is available online at

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/11/guest-post-top-40-countdown-at.html> [Accessed 8 April 2010].