

Engagement with contemporary visual art can improve the lives of older people

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This research was conducted by **Anna Goulding** at **Newcastle University, UK**

Summary

Over a period of 21 months, 43 participants aged 60-92 visited three contemporary art galleries in the northeast of England. They listened to a talk before taking part in facilitated discussions in which personal responses to the artworks were encouraged. The study responds to the idea that developing effective lifelong learning opportunities for post-retirement people can have positive implications for the cultural, health and voluntary sectors. However, engagement in the arts decreases significantly in people over the age of 64. Gender, disability, ethnic background and socio-economic group can impact upon participation, and education will often play a determining role in the level and frequency of engagement. How can galleries ensure that a diverse range of older people are able to benefit from engaging with contemporary visual art?

Arts activities should involve a social element

The feedback from the participants indicates that experiencing contemporary art as part of a group builds confidence. Providing participants who are not engaged in the arts with a social context in which they can relate the art to their own lives can remove feelings of exclusion. Tours and facilitated discussions provide this social element and are cost-effective ways of increasing engagement for this demographic.

Guiding participants towards a personal response

Participants do not have to like a particular piece of art to find their experience of it stimulating. The tendency of contemporary visual art to divide opinion actually makes it a useful tool for encouraging engagement, but it has to be made accessible. Participants should be guided through the multiple or open-ended meanings associated with contemporary visual art so that they are not overwhelmed and can arrive at their own interpretation. The findings indicate that large font and simple language should be encouraged on panels and labels.

This summary was written by **Richard Mason, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

visual art **focus group** **UK** **elderly** **contemporary art**

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