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ROTOR Transdisciplinary Dialogue And Debate: A Public Engagement Case Study

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Abstract

In 2011, the University of Huddersfield commenced a partnership with Huddersfield Art Gallery, to offer a public engagement exhibitions programme, entitled “ROTOR”. Featuring the art and design work of University staff, this series of exhibitions, public events and talks acts as a platform for disseminating and communicating practice-based-research, showcasing a community of artists, designers and curators whose ideas and connective practices migrate and span art and design production. For ROTOR, interpretation acts as a pivot between academic research, interpretation and public engagement, where points of intersection are considered and debated from multiple perspectives. In 2013, we hosted a symposium at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, which questioned how we measure the role and effects of public engagement in art and design. This paper presents the ROTOR public engagement exhibitions programme as a case study of public engagement in light of these questions.

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1. Introduction: Setting the Scene

“Art and culture can connect with, and create connections between, individuals, groups and communities in uniquely personal and highly engaging ways. It can provide inspiration, understanding, solace and entertainment. It enriches our lives in deeply personal ways. It provides the context for the richest of social interactions. It creates

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space for intellectual engagement and enlightenment.”- Di Lees (Director-General of the Imperial War Museum, in *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, Arts Council England, 2010).

Surrounded by countryside and with a population of approximately 146,000 and rising, Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, England, is the 11th biggest town in the country. With its rich vista of historical architecture, much of which dates back to the early 19th century, it boasts the third highest number of listed buildings in the country after Westminster and Bristol. In 1845 Friedrich Engels described Huddersfield as “the handsomest by far of all the factory towns in Yorkshire and Lancashire by reason of its situation and modern architecture”, and more recently the Guardian newspaper described it as “the Athens of the north” (The Guardian, 2004).



Fig. 1. A view of Huddersfield Town from Castle Hill. Source: Harvey, 2005.



Fig. 2. Looking out towards Castle Hill from the town. Source: CW Genealogy, 2014.

Despite the idyllic image depicted here, Huddersfield suffers from its share of problems. Relative to other UK towns of a similar size it suffers from high levels of deprivation, including significant income deprivation, high levels of health and mental health problems and is lower than average for education and skills. The wider borough of Kirklees is one of the 50 most disadvantaged local authorities in England (of approx. 433 boroughs) in terms of income and employment.

Many studies have highlighted the significance of an area's cultural offer for the health, well-being and social cohesion of its communities, yet while Huddersfield's architectural and industrial heritage is fairly well-celebrated and supported, the area is arguably in its cultural infancy where contemporary art is concerned. Huddersfield's municipal Art Gallery, situated unobtrusively above the town's library, is currently confronted with diminishing funding and finding itself facing increasing existential challenges, including a recent media assault which asked whether the Gallery should sell off parts of its much-loved collection to offset budget cuts.

While only decades ago, artists critically exploring the gallery's roles and functions were asking questions about whether art can exist apart from the aesthetic object, new issues about how art is encountered and engaged with are ever emerging. As new technologies continually shift both modes of viewing and ways of thinking about art, and as

funding bodies demand increasingly comprehensive evidence of the value of art to its public(s), the questions artists are now required to ask about art's public role are becoming increasingly complex. Ordinarily the exhibition can be regarded as 'a medium' that exposes a kind of 'tension between [...] known and unknown, silence and sound' (Ferguson, 1996). As artists and galleries respond to the 21st century challenges of presenting their work to the public, these tensions between the exhibition space, the artworks on display and the people who visit, appear increasingly evident.

2. Introducing ROTOЯ

In 2011 the University of Huddersfield signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Huddersfield Art Gallery, signalling the start of a formal partnership between the two organisations, and instigating an ardent period of collaborative working through a public engagement project entitled "ROTOЯ: transdisciplinary dialogue and debate". ROTOЯ acts as a platform for disseminating and communicating practice-based research through exhibitions, and supporting events and activities, including tours, public talks, reading groups, film screenings, workshops and some outreach activity. The programme showcases a community of artists, designers and curators – all current staff at the University – whose ideas and connective practices migrate and span art and design production. The ROTOЯ programme of exhibitions and events has been a cornerstone of the University of Huddersfield's efforts to introduce new audiences to contemporary art and design, as encouraged by successive Arts Council policies for enhancing public engagement. It also aims to help break down the 'ivory tower' view of universities by taking research outside of the University and into the public realm, making it visible and compelling, and enabling a sense of understanding, community ownership and civic pride in relation to the University and its work.



Fig. 3. ROTOЯ part 1 (2012) brochure, cover image: Patrick Procktor, Jimi Hendrix III (detail), 1973. Source: Estate of the Artist and The Redfern Gallery, London.

The programme has mutual benefits between the University, the Gallery and its publics. Our intention with ROTOЯ was to locate the interpretation of the exhibition content at the pivot between academic research and public engagement, where points of intersection are considered and debated from multiple perspectives. It provides an opportunity for shared dialogue, not only with the Gallery itself – its staff and collections – but with its audiences – and for students to engage with, and potentially critique their lecturers' practice. The Student Ambassadors programme developed for ROTOЯ enables participation on another level: As providers of tours and interpretation for visitors, the Student Ambassadors serve as the public face of ROTOЯ. It is also hoped that longer-term, ROTOЯ will provide support the Gallery's future prospects by contributing to widening audiences, and nurturing its reputation as a deliverer of dynamic and diverse art programmes.

While the programme has featured as case study in the University's 2014 Research Excellence Framework submission, an assessment crucial to the University's research income, our interest in developing a public engagement exhibitions programme goes far beyond the seeming bureaucracies of governmental impact agendas. The programme ultimately reflects a sense of responsibility for bringing together members of the public with

research; to enable “shared access to knowledge and information” and, ultimately, for making a contribution to cultural enrichment (Nicola Dandridge, 2014). Making contemporary art accessible however – in particular for those publics who might find themselves confronted by real or imagined barriers to art and art galleries – is no easy task, but one which has underpinned our collaborative approaches to interpretation and education for ROTOЯ. The partnership MOU was founded in the Arts Council England (ACE)’s strategic framework 2010 – which foregrounds the need to make art accessible to a broad public (Art Council England, 2010). The subtitle of the programme; ‘transdisciplinary dialogue and debate’ foregrounds the dialogic element underlying ROTOЯ. The Cultural Leadership Handbook (2011) provides a comprehensive definition of public engagement, highlighting the significance of this two-way approach, “[Public engagement is] the interaction between an organisation and its audience when it mounts a performance, stages an exhibition, issues a publication or provides a service of some kind – in other words, what it does when it performs its self-defined function as a cultural organisation. More and more, this is a two-way process: it is launched by the organisation, but has to be genuinely responsive to the needs and opinions of the audience. To work, this engagement has to be judged successful by both the organisation and its public. And that will depend not only on the competence of the organisation and its willingness to respond, but the creative way in which it approaches that engagement” (Hewison and Holden, 2011).”

As well as its endeavours locally, ROTOЯ also has a national and international aspiration: Recent ROTOЯ exhibitors have also shown in Italy, America, South East Asia and Australia, and we hope to inspire participation from artists, designers, architects and curators from other countries in the future.

3. ROTOЯ’s role in place-making

While it is our aim that ROTOЯ broadly contributes to visitors’ sense of cultural identity and cultural ownership, some of the exhibitions have more specifically addressed ways of engaging the public to encourage a sense of ‘place-making’: One element of the recent ROTOЯ exhibition entitled *Trace*. [instructions for mapping space], for example, was conceptually underpinned by the notion of identity and place-making. As well as the work of University staff, *Trace*. Featured artworks by local community groups in an exhibition which further invited members of the public to contribute their stories, narratives, and artworks to those already on display. The exhibition presented maps and ‘non-maps’ (drawings, films, photographs, texts) by artists Rob Lycett and Juliet MacDonald, and by participatory arts facilitator Sophia Emmanouil working in collaboration with members of the health and arts organisations. Participants and contributors investigated modes of mapping based on personal experience and memory through creative workshops which explored the idea that ‘spaces’ can have significance far beyond being just a location (Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, 2010). Collected objects and fragments of artefacts (see Figure 6.) were collected by participants and encouraged groups to consider the role of the gallery and museum curator in meaning-making. It encouraged also the idea of remapping art galleries and museums in a number of ways: as site, institution, category, a set of social practices, a technology through which values are produced, and as a domain of interaction’, where ‘overlapping engagements, contradictory intentions, multiple mediations and critical reformulations’ are being played out (Corrine A. Kratz, and Ciraj Rassool, 2006).



Fig 4. Opening night of Trace. Exhibition. Source: ROTOЯ, 2012

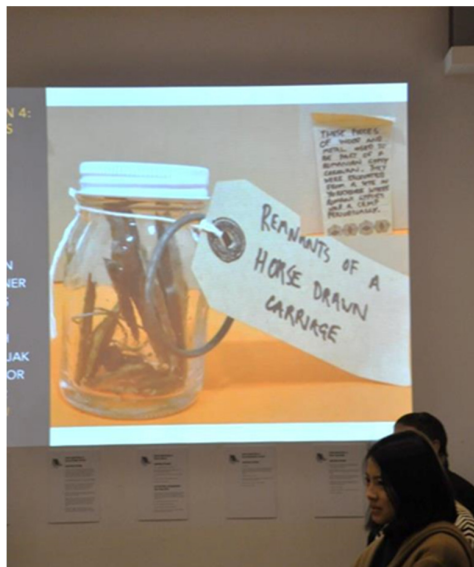


Fig 5. Artist's talk, Trace. Exhibition, image shows a work produced by members of HOOT and OOB. Source: ROTOЯ, 2012.

4. Gauging ROTOЯ's public engagement successes to-date role in place-making

In its first year, ROTOЯ attracted around 14,300 visitors. Another 1,100 attended related events. These numbers have continued to grow steadily. Alongside the ROTOЯ exhibitions and events there is also an eponymous project weblog, which not only allows for the posting of announcements, dissemination of information and archiving of reviews, but it also provides another platform for debate. The blog is attracting a small but dedicated following of around 3000 views a year from over 50 countries. The blog offers the possibility of interactivity and provides an alternative site for audiences to engage with the artworks.

A number of methods were used to try to gauge the extent and success of the engagement arising from each exhibition and its associated activities, including questionnaires; evaluation reports; on-line surveying; weblog forums; and workshops. Feedback appeared to demonstrate that ROTOЯ had increased access, opportunity and understanding for a wider audience and shaped attitudes and knowledge: In an online follow-up survey 60% of respondents said visiting the exhibitions had changed their opinion about art and/or design, while 90% said they had

learnt something new. Kirklees Council Cultural and Leisure Services remarked, ‘ROTORЯ [...] has attracted new audiences to the gallery and into the town centre. It has allowed people to engage in research outside of the academic institution and has provided new opportunities for people to share in and understand the School’s research. The exhibitions have been thought-provoking and memorable.’ Huddersfield Art Gallery’s Manager added, ‘The partnership is important – we’re very aware at the moment that we don’t want the Art Gallery to be [...] standing alone in Huddersfield. We want to be part of a bigger discussion about visual art, and involvement and engagement.’

ROTORЯ has also strengthened community links with a range of local organisations, such as the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). A WEA tutor for Speakers of Other Languages stated that previous to their ROTORЯ visit, her group, “Believed art was for other people and not for them. This was completely changed by the visit. It was a hugely successful trip and provoked lots of discussions [...] [which] further enhanced learners’ understanding of each other, and helped cement relationships of trust and respect (interviews conducted by Anna Powell, 2014).”

Other groups to draw on the ROTORЯ experience have included local performance dance groups, which have incorporated exhibitions into their performances. ROTORЯ also collaborated with Kirklees Library to disseminate exhibition content, leading to new book purchases and increased lending. Kirklees Library assistants reported a 50% rise in borrowing for the books selected for the ROTORЯ reading group, including some that were rarely borrowed previously, noting, “[ROTORЯ] has been very positive [...] It brings the University into a different space.”



Fig 6. *Insufficient Allure* (2012) exhibition by Kevin Almond and Kathryn Brennand. Source: Image courtesy of Jamie Collier.

Evidence suggests that ROTORЯ has so far provided a degree of cultural enrichment by acting as a conduit for bringing nationally and internationally commended work to Huddersfield and West Yorkshire. Works exhibited included *Sisyphus* which won the 7th International Arte Laguna Prize, Venice, in March 2013, while *Insufficient Allure* (Figure. 8) became a *permanent exhibition (Behind the Seams)* when it was acquired by Leeds’ Armley Industrial Museum following its ROTORЯ appearance. ROTORЯ exhibitions have been reviewed by art historian Jonathan Harris, feminist art critic Griselda Pollock and Art Monthly’s Peter Suchin, as well as in *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *Frieze*, among others. *Online surveys have shown ROTORЯ to have influenced views about local culture, with visitors’ comments including ‘It’s more cutting-edge than I had realised’, ‘My ideas about its role in Huddersfield have changed’ and ‘[ROTORЯ] makes [the work] relevant to the broader public in terms of cultural ownership’.* Kirklees Council further noted: ‘We have a huge number of creative industries [that] can benefit enormously from having an interaction with the University. ROTORЯ helps to make that connection and bring the work out to those people’ (quotations taken from interviews conducted by Anna Powell, 2014).

5. Measuring the immeasurable? ROTOЯ as a catalyst for further research

We were aware, however, that much deeper evidence of impact was needed for us to be able to justify the cultural value of ROTOЯ and programmes like it. While data collected seemed to show that, more often than not, people were taking something positive from their experience of encountering art and design practice-based-research in a municipal gallery environment, interestingly from a research perspective, it has been difficult for visitors – and equally for us – to be able to articulate why this is and what comprised these positive experiences. It has also been difficult to gauge the accuracy and objectivity of our data-collection systems; the extent to which our interview methods and surveying may unwittingly have been ‘leading’, and how representative of the broader (visitor and non-visitor) community these responses are. Evidencing the current significance of this complex issue is the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)’s endeavour to find innovative ways of overcoming the question of measurement, via its Cultural Value project. The Cultural Value project is an open call for funding to academic research on the subject of how to quantify the seemingly unquantifiable.

It is here that my paper turns to offer these as yet unanswered questions as the next stage of enquiry for ROTOЯ; of how, for art and design, a correlation can be identified between public engagement and the impact of an art activity, and how this can be used to articulate the value of art and culture to the public. When ‘number-crunching’ is regarded – and rightly so – as insufficient measure of the effectiveness of public engagement endeavours, how, then, do we go about quantifying their effectiveness? These issues are high on the policy agendas of funders and policy makers for both HEIs and cultural organisations. They are questions that have been addressed by a number of across the spectrum of art and design fields in the UK, but have recently been addressed with renewed vigour by today’s proviso that it is not enough to suggest – without concrete evidence – the value of art and design research in terms of its ‘intrinsic’ value (John Holden and Jordi Baltà, 2012). It was observed in a 2010 Research Council Report to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) entitled *Measuring the Value of Culture*, that central government and parts of the publicly funded cultural sector now recognise the need to ‘more clearly articulate the value of culture using methods which fit in with central government’s decision-making’ strategies (Dave O’Brien, 2010).

As noted by Michelle Reeves, however, the most important reason for monitoring, measuring, assessing and evaluating creative work remains that genuine desire ‘to help to make the complex and intriguing web of creative exchange more visible, to articulate actual and potential achievement, to help us all move forward’ (Michelle Reeves, 2013). And as artist Eleanor Turney noted in her article for *The Guardian* (January 2014), “Yes, we want to know who is engaging with our work, but it’s always worth looking at why we’re asking the question and how we’re asking it. [...] Is it merely a condition of funding that we segment audiences and examine them? We need to be asking meaningful questions, whose answers then feed back into decisions that are made about the work we make and how we make it (Eleanor Turney, 2014).”

It is with these challenges in mind that we enter into the next phase of the ROTOЯ project, looking beyond the pressures of the current UK funding climate for the arts, with a view to understanding how we might do more than simply provide opportunities for people to encounter art and design research. After all, these are challenges that constitute a more deep-seated profundity; challenges that are fundamental to our understanding of how arts and culture ‘work’.

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