

Financial models for community exhibitions

Skyscapes was a project leading to an exhibition working with a number of organisations who themselves work with adults with learning disabilities.

The exhibition was stunning and included some of the works from the Ingram Collection but essentially was the work of the participants.

The reaction to it of the participants themselves and the public, that is their families and friends who came was very, very positive.

They got a huge amount out of it.

The public in general didn't come in very large numbers and the spend in the café and the shop was greatly reduced.

One reason that income did fall was footfall.

But also we strongly suspect it's to do with it being a different audience.

That disability itself actually reduces the spending power of the individual and their family.

So the likelihood is that that has also been a factor, a significant factor, in the much lower spending in the café and the shop, given the footfall.

Clearly not all new audiences have lower spending power.

I would suspect, for example, that some teenagers have quite high spending power.

So it's not just a matter of new audiences, it's the particular sorts of audiences for particular exhibitions and projects.

Because it's very easy to get overtaken by big glamorous exhibitions but the community work is so important that it deserves to be seen in a big space.

The main gallery exhibitions

for our community work
have to be funded externally.
But it's very useful for us
in that most of our mainstream shows
generate a profit and then we can put that back
into our community work.
So it's a really good cycle of moving funds
from one place to another.
Even if we can raise the money
to use the main gallery,
there are a lot of other considerations.
One is that community exhibitions receive
just the kind of curatorial judgement process
as any other exhibition, as a Damien Hirst
or a Grayson Perry exhibition.
If it's small work, if it's intimate,
it needs a different space.
The Joy exhibition is a really good example.
Very small work, very personal,
very intimate, lost in the main gallery space.
Another consideration is that we have
lots of collaborative decision making
with our community partners.
And that includes where does the money get spent.
So they might say, "We would much rather have
another three months of workshops.
We might have people involved.
We don't want an exhibition."
So it's collaborative decision making about money.
And the third issue is very practical;
we programme two years in advance,
so when we're programming,
that community project might not even have started.
And we found that we were getting
lots of really good work
and we didn't have the space to show it.

So now the Art Fund Prize Gallery,
which is our small gallery,
we leave gaps deliberately
and we know that good work
will have come up in that time,
so we can always facilitate
an exhibition if we want to.
With the main gallery, we can't take that approach.
It's too risky, it's our workhorse,
it's where we earn a lot of our money.
So we've compromised, we're aware it's a compromise,
but it's working well for us.
I still aspire to the main gallery.
The difficulty for us is
that our clients move through very quickly,
so we might not have the same people at the end,
if I've got to say book in two years in advance.
It's important for our clients
that they see what they've achieved
and they feel that sense of pride over the end result.
So currently we're quite happy with the wall we've got.
We're well aware that community
exhibitions can make money
but our approach is we want to give
as broad a range of organisations
the chance to work with us,
so we need to financially plan across that broad range.