

the Whitworth

So far and yet so near:

Ambition for arts and ageing in Hong Kong and Manchester

Esmé Ward

Recently I was invited by the British Council and Hong Kong Arts Administrators to speak about ambition for arts and ageing at a Cultural Leadership summit in Hong Kong. Alongside my presentation, I led a workshop with arts professionals, exploring how organisations might become more age and dementia friendly and perhaps most exciting of all, I also ran a workshop with a group of local older people in an arts venue in North Point, Hong Kong. Garry Robson, Artistic Director of Birds of Paradise Theatre, a hugely respected director and innovator, also spoke at the conference about his experiences and work with disability arts in the UK and globally. The theme was *Social Gains through Arts* and it explored the ambition and aspiration amongst arts leaders to extend partnerships above and beyond the cultural sector and work collaboratively for wider social impact.

The theme for the conference seems timely and important, wherever you are in the world. As we heard of the ambitious and exciting plans for the West Kowloon Cultural District and the challenge of how arts organisations might shape and enrich the experience of life in the city for all residents, I was reminded of debates closer to home. There are ongoing conversations in Manchester about how, in the context of devolution, culture might shape the liveable city and how cultural organisations and activity of all shapes and sizes might be valued and play its part in people's broader lives.

I'd never previously visited Hong Kong. Upon first sight, it's hard to see beyond the skyscrapers, high-end shopping and upmarket brands. Cranes and building sites for new large-scale ambitious developments crowd every view. This is a growing city with significant wealth, but you don't have to scratch the surface too far to notice the inequalities of daily life here. Most people I spoke with highlighted these, particularly the housing and care crisis (in terms of both infrastructure and cost) and by heading slightly off the beaten track, down a few side streets, you discover the other Hong Kong. This is a tale of two cities.



A room with a view on the Hong Kong waterfront

The British Council's arts programme led by Anthony Chan and his team, had asked me some weeks previously to lead a workshop with older people at one of the city's smaller community-based art museums. They were keen for me to encounter and work with local Hong Kong practitioners and residents. We were all curious to see how an existing programme (developed in Manchester) would translate to downtown Hong Kong. I proposed adapting *Coffee Cake and Culture*, a programme at the Whitworth and Manchester Museum, which uses collections and sites to open up conversations and focus on in-the-moment creative activity for older people and those who care for them. Participants focus on key objects or artworks enabling discussion and conversation, followed by sensory-based activities such as handling objects, making their own artworks, responding to resources or listening to music. It is a social activity for the whole group to enjoy together, aimed at encouraging conversation, engagement with surroundings and each other and creating a context or space for creativity and expression.

In 1908, Oi! Art Space was built as the Clubhouse for the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club on the seafront. Today, urban development has reclaimed the sea and it now sits several blocks inland in an area called North Point. Oi! aims to nurture young artists, promote community art and develop as an innovative and engaging venue for encouraging collaboration and co-creation in art. There are two galleries, a tearoom and small garden. An exhibition of contemporary paper by local artists set the scene.

http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/APO/en_US/web/apo/about_oi.html

The day before the workshop, I co-developed the session with skilled practitioner Grace Cheng, Director, Art in Hospitals Hong Kong. Grace shared her expertise, insight and knowledge of the group with real generosity and between us, we created a workshop that we hoped would be relevant to and engage the group.

I had a restless night, perhaps it was the heat or nerves and excitement about the following day.

We stood on the pavement as the coach drew up. The participants; 7 older women, one carer and one family member, looked mildly terrified as we greeted them with smiles, welcomes and hand-waving (there is a lot of handwaving in Hong Kong). They'd come from a day centre in New Territories, about an hour's drive from Oi! As the group settled I outlined the format. The first 20 minutes were a guided tour and discussion of the exhibition (led by myself, translated by Grace) looking at three key works, carefully chosen the previous day. These included an artists' reimagining of a local amusement park from 1950s called Lunar Park and a beautiful paper book sculpture showing the change in landscape of this area, North Point, over the last 100 years.



Paper book looking – Informal tour of exhibition at Oi! Art Space

We headed to the tearoom, set up as a workshop space, prepared with simple participatory art activities; an ipad with the Whitworth's sensory app Artsense encouraging play and digital manipulation; fan decorating activity inspired by one of the paperworks in the exhibition and a masking-tape drawing activity where together you draw in tape, colour and then pull the tape to reveal your image. Alongside the art activities, we served drinks and cakes. We wanted to create an informal atmosphere that encourages expression, making and conversation. Two women, sat side by side, started to make a drawing together, chatting and giggling as they worked. They told us they'd never really connected before today and that they'd made friends through art.



Two women making together – Collaborative drawing in Coffee, Cake and Culture Workshop

In contrast, one of the women opposite them, an ex-teacher, was deeply immersed in her drawing. She worked alone and focused for nearly an hour. This is a true power of art. It can absorb you, you lose all sense of time. It confers an agency and autonomy often rarely experienced elsewhere in daily life.

Once her drawing was completed, she refocused on the room and was eager to share her work with everyone, animated and clearly delighted by her creative expression, by the marks she had made.



Es and participant dancing – Actions speak louder than words

On the one hand I found it deeply frustrating not to understand and easily join in with their conversations and banter. On the other, it was an opportunity to observe more closely and connect in other ways. Touch, eye contact and exaggerated gesticulation, became my most effective forms of communication. I was acutely aware of my own body language and noticed changes in others'. One lady, living with early onset dementia, was agitated and isolated at the beginning of the visit. She stood, tense, apart from the group. As the tour and workshop progressed, she became both more settled and more animated. By the end, her daughter commented that she was like a different person, engaged with the people and place around her. Both were reluctant to leave.

We see this regularly and often ask ourselves how, at the moment of cognitive decline (e.g.: dementia) might museums and culture more widely encourage and stimulate imagination, creativity and connectedness?



Group photo outside Oi! - Obligatory group photo outside Oi! Art Space

Before leaving, I handed out the small gifts I'd bought from England, we took the obligatory photos (I have never had my photo taken as often as in Hong Kong), helped participants back onto the bus, waved a lot and said our farewells.

Over tea and cake, we reflected on the visit. For me, there were some key differences, not least the language barrier. Also, humidity is not a problem in Moss Side (it was over 80% humidity and 33 degrees, with no air conditioning). There was much handclapping (to show appreciation) and photograph-posing, more than you could imagine. We were joined by four academics, journalists and students, who had been participant-observers at the workshop. Their perspectives were fascinating; it was unusual in Hong Kong for art museums to be so informal. All the activities during Coffee Cake and Culture (now re-named Tea, Dimsum and Culture) were more open-ended and encouraged collaboration and expression far more than usual. Usually, structured step-by-step skills-based lessons or colouring-in sheets would be used in art workshops. Also, refreshments would be served more formally after the art activity rather than as an important social element of the workshop. The prevailing delineation between workshop leader, participant and carer was blurred. There was a sense that 'we were all participating together'. Everyone commented on the high level of care and personal engagement with the group, from the minute they stepped off their bus.

From my brief time in Hong Kong and wonderful conversations with Grace Cheng and colleagues, what really struck me is how similar our aspirations and ambitions are. We want to tell a different story about ageing (from a narrative of loss or deficit to one of aspiration, creativity and experience) and believe culture, museums and artists are central to this. I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to share our work and spend time with a group of interested, engaged older women with stories to tell and ideas to share. Care, creativity, art and laughter cross continents.

Esme is Head of Engagement at Manchester Museum and the Whitworth, at the University of Manchester and Strategic Lead (Culture) for Age Friendly Greater Manchester.

To find out more watch the British Council Hong Kong's video *Tea, Dim Sum and Culture*:
<https://youtu.be/FNwEY3w3qd4>

Details of the Hong Kong Arts Administrators Association Cultural Leadership summit can be found at <http://www.hkaaa.org.hk/doc/18568>