



I AM
NOT
LIMITED
BY AGE

I AM
FREED
BY IT

In conversation
with older artists

the **Whitworth**

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FOREWORD

Since 2010, the Baring Foundation has focused its arts funding on participatory work with older people, as described in our report *Towards the End*. We do this because we believe in everyone’s fundamental human right to be creative regardless of age and because this has been neglected when it comes to some older people. We have always seen the Whitworth as a leader in this work – as in so much else – and were delighted to support their highly influential *Handbook for Cultural Engagement with Older Men*.

The great majority of our funding has been for professional artists (of whatever age) to use their skills to support the creativity of older people who have not had their training. Less often we have funded celebrations of the work of established older artists, for instance through our eleven *Late Style Commissions* in 2015 and the *(B)old Festival of creative ageing* at the Southbank Centre in May 2018.

But what about someone who sees later life as an opportunity to break into professional arts? Would their work look and sound different from someone starting in their twenties? Would they have different things to say? It is very encouraging to see that the Arts Council England has removed the age limit from its *Developing Your Creative Practice Fund*, and their Chair, Sir Nicholas Serota has said that the arts mustn’t be seen as ‘a young person’s game’.

‘Emerging artist’ has been a phrase that for too long has been synonymous with youth. The Whitworth’s pioneering work challenges this lazy stereotype and I hope is a step towards affirming that anyone can aspire to create significant new work, at any age.

David Cutler

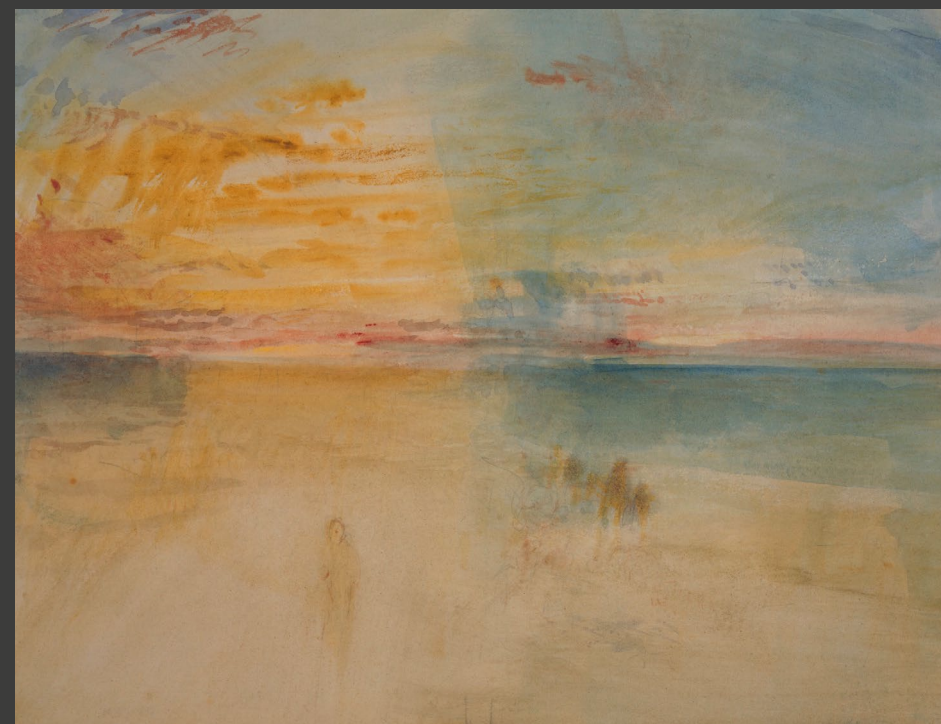
Director of The Baring Foundation

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the Whitworth's findings of our exploration of how cultural organisations work with older artists, which was supported by the Baring Foundation. It follows successful work with older audiences through research and participatory projects with partners such as Age Friendly Manchester and MICRA (Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing, the University of Manchester).

Our initial ambition was to explore embedding sustained working with older artists across the whole of our programme including, but not limited to: residencies; exhibitions; performance and creative practitioners. The intention was to initiate an organisational shift in thinking that draws on the creative and intellectual potential input of our older population, both in terms of practicing creatives but also our audiences, volunteers and staff. While the visual arts has placed a long-held emphasis on 'the new', it has also traditionally embraced older artists, most overtly through the practice of the retrospective. As an alternative to this we would like to propose an emphasis on new work produced by older artists and emerging practices of the over 50s. Instead of acknowledging primary value in the work made by older artists in the past, we wish to draw attention to the possibilities of creative action that continue throughout a person's life; indeed, artists do not retire but rather continue to work, with positive consequences not only for their own wellbeing, but as a model of the productive contribution of older people to our society.

The starting point of this research was to connect with a broad range of older artists and organisations across the UK. Our aim was to look afresh at how creative action pursued, either over a lifetime, or during latter stages of life, can be articulated through residencies, performances, exhibitions and workshops. Organisational structures and shifts in thinking for audiences, volunteers and staff was also a key strand of the early research. We would like to thank the artists and organisations for their involvement and invaluable insights.



Sunset over Wet

JMW Turner, Age Produced: 70

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

ARTISTS, AGE AND AGENCY

Julia Davis-Nosko, Lead Researcher

The initial research and development was agreed by the project team, based at the Whitworth; Claire Cowell, Age Friendly Culture Coordinator, Samantha Lackey, Senior Curator (Programmes) and Ed Watts, Engagement Manager. The group commissioned an older artist/researcher Julia Davis-Nosko to develop the research and produce these initial findings.

The following structure was outlined:

- A period of investigation to look at some of the research and projects already in circulation;
- The development of a small round table conversation with older artists from the North West;
- A series of visits to organisations throughout the UK who are working with older artists to provide case studies, and the production of this initial short report which aims to outline key themes and ideas explored.

Insights, time, energy and commitment by the artists who took part are the centre of these initial summary findings. The conversations brought to the fore many issues for established organisations such as the Whitworth. People shared candid and deeply felt perspectives. The first half of the discussion was open ended; as an important way to find out how people responded to the idea of researching the opportunities for older artists in the first place. We then posed a series of questions about agency, inclusive practice, role of organisations, discovery and engagement.

The response was diverse. A few common themes arose and these have been presented in the summary thoughts following this section. These thoughts are not individual to artists - rather a snapshot of collective thinking to inform the initial stages of debate and research for the Whitworth to develop ideas.

The summaries of these conversations give an indication of the most frequent responses to the areas we explored and give really useful pointers for future work and developments.



St. Mark's Venice

Helen Allingham, Age Produced: 53

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Agency

How do artists experience balancing paid work and facilitating creativity, and what is important for profiling work?

“I am not limited by age I am freed by it”

One of the central themes cutting across our conversations at the round table was the lack of opportunities open to artists wishing to develop and extend their practice. This links into the work of organisations such as Luminate Festival in Scotland where the support for growth is perceived by artists, participants and facilitators as central to developing inclusion for artists at all ages.

Inclusive practice

Has anything changed and what do artists feel about present attitudes to age?

“Older artist is not a term I would use...perhaps the discrimination comes more from institutions than artists”

There were a variety of responses to the idea of identifying as an “older artist” and our early conversations lead us to consider how living as an artist throughout life works across the structural need for inclusivity at all levels in cultural organisations. It is critical for all artists either beginning work or looking at creating more in their existing practice to feel there are opportunities whatever their identity or set of identities, and indeed current age.

Role of organisations

What is, and should be, the role of organisations in curating, showing and supporting work?

“Organisations should reach out. We have such a lot to offer. Often people so resourceful have an important role to play in sustainable practice...in training we used the back of envelopes to sketch!”

The need for organisations to reach out to artists is clear. Many artists work together and through contacts made through existing work and connections. Cultural organisations can be seen to be keeping “themselves to themselves” and a key area to explore now is how curators and promoters (across all art forms) pro-actively seek to include artists from all ages, which will include the “older artist”

Discovery

Cultural organisations often focus on the “new”. What role might the “older emerging artists” and the sharing of their work play in organisations?

“Older emerging artists in the public eye can create positive images more widely”

How do we celebrate the work of artists who are older? This is a key theme and running alongside it the necessity to delve more deeply into the achievements and the rich perspectives this can bring, respecting the diversity of identities and range of experiences involved.

Engagement

What do we mean by engagement and how are artists making artistic practice known?

"Good to connect with like-minded artists to find opportunities, approach unusual places, you might find old art college students there!"

Artists who are assessing their previous work, possibly over their whole lifetime, or artists embarking on new artistic practice, and others maybe between these two positions often share a common perspective. They are seeking to make artistic practice a way of life and are looking at new ways to do this by connecting together, with their audiences and with the cultural organisations around them.



Untitled

Anna Zemankova, Age Produced: 50+
Gifted to the Whitworth, The University of Manchester by
the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Trust, 2010. © the artist

“

I suppose for older professional artists it's about just having that opportunity to keep making new work and maybe for organisations to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of older artists.

”

SUMMARY OF ARTISTS CONVERSATIONS

Taking the conversation at the round table, the individual responses from artists and together with the context of on-going research we have some initial conclusions to share.

Perspectives are diverse and we deliberately looked for a spread of practice to inform these initial findings. For some, the element of age is not a critical factor. For others being older brings a specific set of challenges and ideas. Talking about "age" is not necessarily the key issue for many. Ensuring that cultural organisations are truly diverse in terms of their outlook, structure and employment practice was articulated as being of paramount importance; to be open to artists of all ages, including older artists. The term "older artist" was not generally considered to be useful.

The role of digital communication was generally welcomed with people keen to use the new forms of communication and promoting work. Creating collective groupings and conversations is central for many. This form of sharing practice, venues and ideas is growing and not necessarily connected to the existing infrastructure of our cultural organisations. Retrospectives and emerging "older" artists were of less interest than the call for cultural organisations to be more open and to experiment more with the form and nature of the work they support and curate. There was consensus that more paid opportunities are required to value work appropriately.

Above all there was the sense of the vast pool of talent and creative ability which has been largely ignored by cultural organisations which, for the main part, are still very much working towards becoming, rather than being, inclusive in terms of their working practice and structures.

ARTISTS IN CONVERSATION

Anne Tucker

Alison Kershaw

Ian Mckay

Fiona Moate

Ekua Bayunu

Geli Berg

Cheryl Martin

John Hyatt

Keiko Mukaide

John Newling

Simon Warner

Kate Herbert

Cilla Baynes

TALKING WITH ORGANISATIONS

Initial research on organisations working with older people, and specifically artistic practice, identified a series of innovative peers with whom we wanted to have conversations. These organisations are all experimenting with new ways of working, our interest in the visits was to seek out good practice and the changes being made in terms of policy, creative vision, staffing and volunteer structures as well as ways in which residencies, exhibitions, performance and space were being created.

The Last Supper

Albrecht Durer, Age Produced: 52

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester



Luminate Festival, Scotland

Summary of recorded Conversation between Anne Gallacher, Director, Luminate Festival and Claire Cowell, Age Friendly Culture Coordinator, the Whitworth

- The festival was set and funded by Baring Foundation, Creative Scotland and Age Scotland in 2012. Primarily to address the drop off in older people's engagement in the Arts,
- Since 2014 we've been an independent charity and we've been gradually diversifying our work so as we move, this year we're now becoming much more of a developmental organisation with a year round programme of work with our festival becoming biennial.



- Mela in Edinburgh in August 2012 . It involved a group of older Sikh women and they'd created an installation that was exhibited in the field at the Mela, a big outdoor event as a kind of oasis of calm inside a container, it was amazing. They all felt, the artists and older people who worked on it that it had more mileage so I gave them money to carry on working on it and they took the work a bit further and also reimagined it for an indoor space and exhibited in an art centre in October. So again enabling them to do some more work but also allowing them to take it to another audience.
- Even if we wanted to we don't have the resources to go into a community, run a project and leave. We have to be dependent on the local arts officer if there is one, local arts organisation or community groups to lead and shape and we learn from them and they learn from us and as we back off they have ownership of it and that work is far more likely to be embedded and to continue
- That first year really reinforced for me that if Luminate was to be successful and also for people to be engaged with it we had to work collaboratively.
- So it was about working out what worked but it was also about working out where hadn't we made the connections, which of the strands that we'd anticipated developing hadn't really happened and at that point it was work in care settings.

Les Moyettes à Eragny; Cornstooks at Eragny

Camille Pissarro, Age Produced: 57

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Turner Contemporary, Margate, England

Summary of conversation between Molly Molloy, Curator and Fiona Parry, Senior Curator, Turner Contemporary and Samantha Lackey, Head of Collection and Exhibitions, the Whitworth

- No explicit strategy for working with older artists, but embedded within an institutional desire to work with as diverse a range of artists as possible.
- More interested in the overlooked artist, overlooked histories and a range of artists, rather than age specifically.
- Important to their engagement and commissioning work is the concept of intergenerational exchange.
- The demographics of Margate and Thanet are weighted towards an older population and this is played out in visitors and types of engagement.
- Turner contemporary participate in the Ageless Thanet project which seeks to work with the over 50s in identified areas.
- Turner contemporary are an Age-Friendly business and offer discounts in the shop café for example. This also happens across the town – there is an awareness that the regeneration of 'new' Margate could lead to segregation between the older population and the new in-comers.
- Interested in the significance of craft and skills brought from the workplace by the groups they work with and how these can be put to use in TC's projects.



Untitled

Martha Grunenwaldt, Age Produced:50+

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

“

I think age is an issue of diversity,
its about shining a spotlight on that
community in order to challenge
some of those structures.

”



Untitled

Francis Mayor, Age Produced: 50+

Courtesy the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, England

Summary of recorded conversation between Andy Barry, Theatre Director and Lead for Elders company, Royal Exchange and Claire Cowell, Age Friendly Culture Coordinator, the Whitworth

I suppose for older professional artists its about just having that opportunity to keep making new work and maybe for organisations to be flexible and adaptable and the needs of older artists may be different and they might not necessarily fit in to the structures that we've created about how we make work.

- Elders Company, generally we are talking about non-professional artists and people who have had careers doing lots of different things and in my experience of those people I think there's been a real sense of art or creative expression taking a back-seat, while life gets busy and other things take over like career and family and through the course of our work you might then find that people maybe did a bit of theatre years ago or had a bit of a go at writing and say "Oh I've always written" but not necessarily valued that as being artistic.
- In terms of our organisation we have a programme called Open Exchange which is about emerging artists, and there's not an age limit on that but it does tend to be younger people and I think there does need to be a shift about at what age can someone emerge as an artist.
- In terms of taking the long picture of working with artists in their 60s, 70s or 80s as we are in the Elders Company, when they were younger what level of professional artistic opportunities were there, people went into other things, but actually maybe if they were younger now they might be emerging, they might see themselves differently and their life experiences and their educational experiences might have helped them value creativity and artistry and they might have tapped into that a bit quicker, but now they're doing it at this point in their life, so they should be emerging.

- Potentially a bigger indicator might be around class and socio economic background. If you're an older person who's been able to retire and is financially stable you might not need to worry about having part time work and can do a lot of volunteering and take care of your own artistic needs without the financial worry. But if you're an older person who's not in that financially secure situation is it going to affect what else you can do.
- We have older people in the Elders Company with their cultural experience and heritage who have said " My parents steered me away from that because its not proper so I became a nurse and its only now that I'm reconnecting" but then when you start to look at aspects of their career there was a lot of playfulness or artistry in what they were doing in what wasn't necessarily an arts based career. I guess those cultural, heritage and socio economic factors cross divides about age.
- I think age is an issue of diversity, its about shining a spotlight on that community in order to challenge some of those structures potentially or societal attitudes. We live in quite an ageist society in a way that's very casually accepted I think and one of the ways to combat that is to bring a focus on to older artists.
- Its also about celebrating someone's career and their work and that's important too but if the artist is wanting to make new work...and I guess in that instance I don't know if there was a compromise of like 'lets have a retrospective centred around new work' and whether the artists was like 'no I don't want a retrospective I just want new work', that's just something that needs to be worked out. But I guess even when you think about music artists and pop artists when they have a greatest hits album there'll be new stuff on it.
- We've been doing a lot of work in the Elders Company that is about identity and self exploration and the more different stories and backstories and experiences we've got in the room the richer and the more interesting it becomes. In terms of the work we've been making in the Elders Company it has been about co-creation and working together.
- One of the things the Elders Company tell us is that they enjoy working in a professional environment and for some of them if they've not worked in the arts before that's quite a new experience so they're gaining new knowledge about how we put on plays at that scale and about that process and about how actors prepare.
- Some people struggle with the term 'Elders' and I'm always having this conversation. What actually has happened as does happen with languages, there's people who have been in the Elders program and the Elders Company and who now there word has shifted and now its a badge of pride and they love saying they're in the Elders, even some of those people who had real issues about it as a name. I think there's a lot of reasons for that, its because they don't want to go near being old or thinking about ageing. I think also the word elder has for some people a kind of 'Christian elders', religious connotation. I think some people love it because it implies wisdom and experience and others equally hate it for that because its like well not everyone whose older have wisdom should be respected and we should respect people of all ages and not all older people are wise, that's also a stereotype.



Key points from the conversations

- **Emerging artist** can be perceived as meaning younger artist, and also seems to mean graduate in many circles. This is one of the areas that the round table pointed to and an area that Luminate (the Scottish organisation) have looked at; the many issues around the use of language. There have also been many discussions about the use of the terms professional and amateur.
- **Isolation.** An area the organisations continue to explore and can go hand in hand with the feeling of being at a vulnerable point in life. How this plays out for artists can be multifaceted; for example, artists taking HE courses feeling isolated from peer experience, artists working on their own in rural areas, how to gain confidence to move to higher technical level requiring very new multiplicity of skills to develop work in new practices.
- **Challenging perceptions.** Create another narrative to that of “you are older therefore not capable of innovation”. Equating age with the development of new ideas is a key area for facilitators and promoters of work.
- **Organisational responsibility.** Organisations themselves need to think about older artists when commissioning across the board. Illuminate has had strategy of connecting research and development with cultural organisations establishing strong channels for artists to show and perform work. Key to ensure creative and artistic directors, as well as education and community sectors are involved in leading commissioning process.
- **Mainstreaming older artists** is crucial for this area of work.

Male Head

Ronald Moody, Age Produced: 78

Permission kindly granted by the Ronald Moody Trust

A REFLECTION FROM THE RESEARCHER

The team at the Whitworth asked me to write a reflective note on our exploration of ideas in bringing together this initial research piece. I was struck by one of Claire Cowell's (Age Friendly Culture Coordinator) initial comments that artists may at some point literally "tear up ideas of where they are and start again". For myself, I have become known as a writer, particularly as a poet and initially used clay as downtime to help support the intensity of writing time. Soon writing and clay connected and I began sharing inscribed ceramic pieces. This led to a shredding of previous preconceptions of publishing and has led to new directions and opportunities. A great example of Claire's thinking and, I guess, an example of how artists can change tack after long periods of time.

In discussing the term "older artists" it has become very clear that very few people either identify this way or wish to use this specific grouping; maybe another descriptor is; an artist who has been experimenting for a long time, whether through practice or other activity. The term is a challenge.

This initial research has made a start in looking at what we accomplish over set periods of time, how we accomplish these things and, for me, how an artist chooses to live their practice. This raises questions around organisational structures and how curators, educators and facilitators work together to establish a truly diverse range of work; looking again at who holds key positions within these cultural organisations. This issue was very central to the conversations at the round table.

I have reflected too on the idea of time as central to artists rather than thinking so specifically about age and age groups. Artists who have lived over a longer period of time call on many different perspectives and the term "older artists", for me, does not express these deep and layered experiences; political, social and economic.

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The artists we talked with in researching this report all brought these experiences to the table whether or not the individual had recently started their practice, had been practicing for many years or in Claire's words had torn things up and "started again".

Working on this material has led me to consider the central need for our cultural organisations to consider the pressures on them to conform, maybe thinking about the term "time based practice" as referencing people as well as the work that is created.

Julia Davis-Nosko

Lead researcher