

## AUDIENCE/PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

The actual spectrum of those who use and benefit from the Project's activities reverses - or turns upside down - the usual user profile for a cultural project. Most cultural projects derive much their greatest support from members of the educated, professional, and middle classes. The Project reverses this. The greatest use of the Project derives from the less privileged members of society - women, the unemployed, those without higher education, those without money, those with ethnic minority backgrounds, and those who have grown up surrounded by urban deprivation.

Opening up a cultural centre to involvement with one single group of the many groups discriminated against or disadvantaged is no easy matter - and indeed all such groups contain sub-groups of greater and lesser disadvantage. But to open up a centre which aims to take in a broad spectrum of groups discriminated against or disadvantaged is another matter again.

Something of the uphill obstacles to such access and involvement may be recognised by viewing the problem, so to speak, from the wrong end of an arts administrator's telescope. Such a reverse view was presented at a conference focusing on the arts and the needs of those who are unemployed. An arts administrator speaking from the platform confessed to an unfulfilled ambition to enter a betting shop and place a bet - but also confessed that his unfamiliarity with the procedures of laying a bet, his sense that he would know no one in the shop, and his lack of confidence as to the manners and the language which might be expected had to date prevented him from ever doing so. The speaker was in fact educated, of the professional classes, nearing his middle years, and male - arguable a member of one of the most privileged and confident sectors of our society. And yet he had hesitated to cross the threshold into a betting shop.

How much greater must be the obstacles which confront someone who has never done so from crossing the doors to enter a building for the arts. And how much will need doing to persuade such people to take such a step and then to make them feel welcomed and at home once they have stepped inside. There is no single, simple answer to such an issue - and the Project has tackled the question of involvement and participation with groups discriminated against and disadvantaged through a number of strategies.

The Project takes an '*unsnobish*' view of the arts. Cooking, fashion, discos, and jewellery making are programmed along with the fine arts. Recreation, games, keep fit, and sporting activities are programmed around the margins of the mainstream contemporary arts programme. The Project itself is open, outside of timetabled activities, from 10.00am to midnight every day of the week (Sundays, 12.00noon to midnight) some 360 days of the year, for people to come in and socialise.

Regular sessions for young people (centred on creative activities but also involving adventure play) mean that young people and their families make regular use of the building and feel at home there. Distribution of a newsletter means that some 7,000 people already involved with the Project are updated whenever finances permit such a publication (currently once a year).

The location of the Project's base, close to the city centre and yet at the heart of a residential area, coupled with the approaches indicated in the paragraph above, have guaranteed the Project of what is now virtually a family audience which has grown up over twenty years - an audience which includes the unemployed, those from the working classes, those without higher education, women, and those with African and Caribbean roots (indeed, it was thought by many that the Project was known as the Blackie because so many black people were involved in the activities).

It is this unique audience which participants in and supports events and activities at the Project - which means, for example, that at least 50% of the audience for "Blind Dates" or "Vigils" in 1984 or for "Going Solo" in 1988 was made up of individuals who would never have encountered the magic and strong medicine of the contemporary arts without their involvement in the Project.

But such a participating audience cannot be taken for granted and the Project puts time, effort, and energy into targeting and reaching identified groups - in part by going out to such groups through a touring programme, and in part by attracting and welcoming such groups into the Project's base.

Parties of the elderly have been welcomed to the performances with special transport arrangements. Parties of the deaf have been welcomed to performances which have included translations into sign language as part of the performance. Parties of youngsters with Down's syndrome have been welcomed to sessions for young people.

Currently the Project's Gallery is exploring a series of weekly visits with residential centres for young people. On all these occasions the aim is to welcome such parties and individuals into the participating audience as a whole. On other occasions the Project has gone out to lead events and workshops with groups which are discriminated against or disadvantaged - for example the creation and screening of cartoon films in schools and centres for those with physical disabilities. Publicity, and the circulation of information about the programme, is shared with personal contacts, networks, and organisations that are also committed to combating discrimination and disadvantage - such outreach is a constant part of the working programme, involving contact with women's groups and publications, black groups and publications, the youth service and individual youth clubs and organisations, etc. etc.

In addition, leaflets and circulars are often hand delivered to residential parts of the city and region where such publicity and invitations do not normally find their way through the letter box. All the foregoing does not mean that the audience which traditionally supports the contemporary arts is excluded from the Project - indeed they make up a significant cross section of the audience for many events. But at the Project they may be sharing their enthusiasms with others who might normally be excluded from such events - or they may be learning new enthusiasms as they encounter cultural forms which are new to them.

Such an overall commitment cannot be undertaken without extensive monitoring and planning. All those attending an event at the Project sign a Visitors' Book, those attending for the first time are asked for their address too, and notes are made of those joining in workshops etc. Indeed there is a record of visitors at all times, whether for a timetabled event or not and where a visit is for a particular event then this is noted. A review of such attendances enables the balance of those involved to be reviewed - were there enough young people or too many? - was the target reached or over reached? - do any changes need to be made in the future? These questions can be answered not only on the "feel" of the occasion itself, but on the basis of records kept, including the records of previous such events. Such records may for example indicate that young women are participating less in some activities than young men - indeed it was as a result of a review based on such records that the Project initiated a programme of workshops and scholarships for young women which continues to this time.

Underlying the programme of timetabled and organised activities are the possibilities and opportunities which audience and participants can undertake for themselves - there are musical instruments and various kinds of equipment which can be borrowed and used - space which can be made available for rehearsals, meetings, and performances - teaching and training may also be made available - and there is the opportunity to come along with proposals (or simply with curiosity) to the weekly open management meeting.

There is also access to the Project's files, libraries, records, works, etc. - and the possibility of joining in virtually any aspect of the programme which the Project is promoting - including the possibility of adding to the programme and of originating initiatives. Sometimes such involvement is virtually instantaneous (for example a group of unemployed musicians without instruments borrowing the Project's instruments and space to make music together): sometimes it has to be nurtured and supported (for example a group of young women wanting to make music but in need of musical tuition): and sometimes it takes years to grow (for example the decision by an association of Chinese parents to hold a series of Chinese cultural Sunday schools at the Project).

Such involvement is open to all, but where priority choices have to be made (for instance on the basis of available resources) then priority is given to those whose special needs are recognised by the Project through its equal opportunities policy and programme of positive action to combat discrimination and disadvantage. Such a policy and practice requires specific provision - for example a crèche is a constant factor in the entire programme - and a ramp provides wheelchair access to the spacious semi-basement area (where most performances take place and where there is also a toilet for those with physical disabilities). It also requires planning, structures, targeting, monitoring, and constant review. But it requires something else as well which is less easy to define. An attempt was made to define it in the Project's report for 1983/84.

The Project does not claim to succeed in this area on every occasion, but it does represent an aim on which the Project's sights are set, and which is basic to equal opportunities in terms of audience/participants.

"It might be called sociability - homeliness - a positive welcome. The Project attracts visitors from different backgrounds, from different areas, of different ages - mixing them is a definite skill. The Project sets out to provide a homely setting and a sociable atmosphere. You can get tea and coffee any time of the day or evening - during Holiday Play Projects and Kids' sessions there is a coffee bar - and during Performances and Exhibitions there is an eating area, open throughout the event, with homemade food and hot drinks. In addition the Project's workers and friends act as hosts - visitors are shown round, introduced, brought together, and looked after. The same skills are brought into play as are needed in other settings - for a garden party or a dinner party. It is this "**positive hosting**" which gives the Project's events their special feel - makes the event more approachable for those to whom it is unfamiliar - and makes something special of the event for those to whom it is already familiar."

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