

Archiving The Nottingham Contemporary AHRC Fellowship Report



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Nottingham Contemporary opened its doors to the public in 2009, in what has since become an iconic building in the city. Its location on the edge of the historic Lace Market, and within a few metres of ancient buildings such as St Mary's Church and the Galleries of Justice, gives NC a unique context within which to reflect upon its role, its own history in the making, and its possible contribution to the city's future.

NC is a venue for the exposition and interpretation of contemporary art through the medium of the temporary exhibition. It houses no permanent collection. What is more, the education and learning activities organised to complement the exhibitions programme are by their very nature also temporal and transient. Even some of the art forms themselves, such as digital or performance work, may leave no physical trace. The exhibitions range from those focused on individual artists (such as David Hockney, John Newling, Piero Gilardi) to others centred on themes that bring together artefacts from different periods and contexts (The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things, Aquatopia), thus creating surprising juxtapositions and stimulating debate.

This fellowship responded to a perceived need to create an archive and legacy for NC, some form of lasting digital and physical record that would both document its activities and provide an exemplar of good practice. It involved interviewing members of NC's management team, and some of their immediate collaborators, to explore and shed light on different notions of what a possible archive might look like, its purpose, what 'artefacts' it should contain, and how they might relate to each other. Related organisational aspects of such an archive are also considered, for example, the contribution it would make to future information management policies.

Such an approach has allowed me to appreciate that beyond the exhibitions, which give a chronological and linear account of NC's core activity and *raison d'être*, there are a great number and variety of events that take place in relation to these

exhibitions; these respond to the needs of different local, regional, national and, increasingly, international stakeholders.

The public programme, aimed at enriching and keeping the exhibitions alive and fresh for the public, is also partly linked to research and widening participation activities at The University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University. Digital audiences all over the world have access to some of the talks and interviews via its website and YouTube.



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Furthermore, NC organises an active Learning Programme that reaches out to schools, families, youth organisations, and to important community initiatives such as Platform 51. The importance of developing funding streams to support these activities cannot be underestimated.



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The main challenge of these initiatives is to develop frameworks and activities to engage groups of people with contemporary art as a meaningful and participatory experience. The matrices do not simply create a guide to ‘contemporary art for dummies’ that would undermine the creative and intellectual ethos of the organisation.

The relationship between the temporary exhibitions, the Public Programme, and the Learning Programme lies at the heart of any future archiving project. The archive would need to reflect and contribute to NC’s mission and values in relation to its various stakeholders; this way, it would maintain its status as ‘an international art centre with a strong sense of local purpose’.

The interviews and focus groups happening during this fellowship have supplied valuable information that will be used to develop an academic journal publication

(acknowledging the support of the AHRC). They have provided a starting point for an ongoing conversation at the heart of NC regarding the current information storage

systems and the development of a future archive. Of course, conversations and initiatives in these areas have indeed taken place prior to this point; however, the fellowship has given an opportunity for participants to focus on such issues in relation to their daily activities, their work with colleagues, and their engagement with visitors and other stakeholders.

An interesting parallel development worth mentioning has been the creation by Isobel Whitelegg and Emma Moore of a new section on the NC website called 'research', which replaced the existing 'archive' tab. This involved reorganising the digital content into new and interrelated areas to facilitate access.

As part of the fellowship I have also interviewed a curator and an archivist at the Djanogly Art Gallery (Nottingham) and the BALTIC (Gateshead) respectively. The interviews were conducted at organisations that share similarities with NC (in being temporary exhibition venues) and, in the case of the BALTIC, as providing a model of digital archiving practice. The possibility for collaborative work with both (and other) institutions may be explored in the future.

The fellowship has allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of NC as an organisation: its strengths, organisational culture, and ambitions for the future. It has also provided me with the opportunity to identify some preliminary areas where mutually beneficial research projects could be developed. They include: the organisational impact; the development of IS policies so as meaningfully to embed archiving in daily activities; NC's future legacy and its contribution to the city's development, and the development of a dedicated archive system. The identification of suitable funding streams such as those offered by KTP, TSB, ESRC, AHRC will be explored in 2014. There is also the possibility of a PhD project funded by the Nottingham Business School to support a suitable initiative.

Summary of Main Activities

- Meeting with Alex Farquharson (Director) and Isobel Whitelegg (Curator of Public Programmes)
 - Terms of reference, identification of relevant departments of interest, time-scales
- Meeting with NC's Management Team
 - Presentation of the objectives of the Fellowship; Q&A; identification of relevant organisational documents, and initial interview dates. Creation of a Dropbox folder to share general documents
- Interview 1 with Isobel Whitelegg (Curator of Public Programmes)
 - NC's general context and organisational environment and history; organisational chart; identification of key NC team members to invite to interviews and focus groups
- Interview with Lynn Hanna (Head of Marketing and Development)
- Interview 2 with Isobel Whitelegg (Curator of Public Programmes)
- Interview with Emma Moore (Curator Assistant; Local Artists' Group)
- Interview with Kay Hardiman (Head of Learning)
- Interview with Vicky Godfrey (Marketing Officer)

- Focus Groups 1 & 2
 - Designed to include team members from different departments, and including at least one person employed at NC since its foundation

- Interview with the archivist and librarian at the BALTIC (Gateshead)

- Interview with the curator at the Djanogly Art Gallery (Nottingham University)

Other related activities:

- Attending 'Ingenuity Workshop' at Nottingham University
- Familiarisation with and analysis of documents (business plans, contextual documents, activities), as provided to the management team by email and Dropbox
- Transcription of interviews (tapes and videos)

- Presenting at the *AHRC Regional Creative Partnerships: A Showcase of the Archive to Assets Programme*, Broadway Media Centre, Nottingham, 18 December 2013.
- Future event: Attending the *AHRC Creative Economy Showcase 2014*, King's Place, London, 12 March 2014.



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NOTTINGHAM
TRENT UNIVERSITY

Summary

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Introduction

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Public Programme



Learning



Digital



Vision

