

VISUAL ART REACHING OUT TO COMMUNITIES IN THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS: A CASE STUDY

Veronica Davies

The Open University, Milton Keynes

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533792842.05>

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces and evaluates the visual art component of a collaborative outreach initiative which took place in South Wales. It was conducted in the period from 2020 to 2022 under the name Blaenau Gwent residents engaging in arts, community and heritage. Aimed at adult learners of all ages and backgrounds, the project targeted geographical areas which had been impacted by closures in local industries leading to social deprivation and isolation. In particular, the paper discusses ways in which art historians and practising artists can work collaboratively to produce engaging and accessible learning events with satisfactory and successful outcomes for all participants.

KEYWORDS:

visual art, community, heritage, collaboration, participation, deprivation

INTRODUCTION

Blaenau Gwent residents engaging in arts, community and heritage, referred to as BGReach, was a collaborative initiative targeting potential adult learners in an area in south-east Wales where the closure of the traditional industries associated with coal and iron mining in the later 20th century left local communities experiencing social deprivation on many levels. The area comprises a series of broadly parallel, densely populated valleys which run down towards the south coast of Wales. It should though be stressed that the present social deprivation does not imply that these areas are deprived of community spirit, pride in their history and heritage, and an interest in

lifelong learning. The various activities associated with BGR Reach took place in the South Wales Valleys between early 2020 and summer 2022, though, like so many similar projects, they were impacted in many ways by the Covid pandemic and months of lockdown.

This paper therefore focuses on the visual art component of BGR Reach, taking a broadly chronological, and at the same time evaluative, approach. This covers some of the challenges in successfully getting this project off the ground in the first place, as well as those posed by the outbreak of the pandemic before the first series of sessions was completed, its continued impact on all those involved, and how the project was resumed and extended in 2022.

INITIATING THE PROJECT

Partners in this project, together with The Open University (OU) in Wales, were Linc Cymru Housing Association, a social housing provider, and Aberbeeg Community Group, all of whom collaborated in making a successful bid to secure funding from the public sector to get the project off the ground. Since this paper was first delivered in 2023, the overall project lead, Dr Richard Marsden, has published an article which includes an overview and evaluation of the project since its inception.¹ In explaining the overall aims of the project, Marsden focuses on the benefits both to the participants in the targeted local communities, and to the scholars involved in setting up and running it. At the level of the individual participant, “the acquisition of new creative skills and the reactivation of old ones” aimed to foster increased wellbeing and connection

1) Richard A. Marsden, “Heritage, Identity and the Creative Arts in the South Wales Valleys,” *National Identities*, no. 26/1 (2024): 237–265.

with their immediate community.² At the community level, it was hoped to give a voice to those frequently marginalised in post-industrial Wales, both in reflection on, and articulation of, an understanding of their shared history in terms of a wider “cultural and natural heritage.”³ In terms of scholarship, it was envisaged that evaluation of the project would contribute to a richer understanding of perceptions of Welsh national heritage in the wider community at this particular point in its history. The visual art component therefore needed to be planned to address these aims while offering participants an interesting, engaging and worthwhile series of sessions.

The OU’s significant presence in higher education in Wales includes arts and humanities tutors, associate lecturers such as I am, who normally teach undergraduate and postgraduate courses to part-time distance students registered for degree programmes. We were contracted as facilitators of the BGReach sessions, which covered music, creative writing and history, as well as visual art in the sense of both art history and art practice. In the case of visual art, facilitation was shared between me, as an OU art historian, and two artists from an arts collective called Malarky Arts, who have extensive local experience of running classes and community art events for all ages and abilities. This collective aims “to start every project with an open and creative conversation with clients and participants to spark new ideas and a fresh approach,”⁴ and this meant I could plan a series of topic-led sessions, knowing that they would take their cue from me in enabling participants of any ability to realise a worthwhile piece of art in response to the ideas and images I presented.

2) Ibid., 238.

3) Ibid.

4) Malarky Arts, accessed August 13, 2023, <https://malarkyarts.co.uk/about-us/>.

The first series took place in just one venue, Aberbeeg Community Centre, identified as already having a lively constituency of users from this former mining village. The key to the successful launch was good local publicity, including setting up a Facebook page, and a Saturday-morning launch event with refreshments, which actively sought to dispel known reservations and fears from potential participants, given the perception of art history as an “elite”, academic subject (as one of the community organisers later said: “You were from the university. We thought you’d turn up in cap and gown.”).

Reassuring everyone that we were not delivering university-level lectures, and that no previous experience was necessary, was crucial. It was also helpful to be able to reassure participants that art history no longer simply offers a focus on the so-called fine arts such as painting, but also encompasses visual and material culture: this opened out the possibilities of what could be explored both in slide presentations and discussions, and in the more practical parts of the sessions. In terms of the latter, showing the participants the wide range of possibilities for visual creativity dispelled the idea inculcated in many at school that “I can’t paint!”

The facilitators liaised closely to plan a series of six meetings, with the linking themes of local Welsh history, heritage and memory, broadly interpreted. The theoretical basis underpinning our development of these themes, together with that of the construction of national identity, is further explored in Marsden’s article. To encourage a fairly informal engagement, and as wide a participation as possible, sessions were scheduled for different days of the week and at different times, though in retrospect this might have meant some people could not get to as many sessions as they would have liked, due to work or caring commitments.

SESSION CONTENT

Each meeting started with an art historical topic, followed by practical art-making. In order to make the art history contribution as relevant as possible to our participants, I carried out research and site visits to the local area beforehand. In the very first session, I gave a short illustrated talk built on my research into the Pitmen Painters, a group of miner artists in north-east England in the 1930s and 1940s. Their story suggested connections with Aberbeeg's local mining heritage, and also with what we hoped to achieve in our workshops. Where possible, I also drew on the collections and displays of the National Museum Wales in Cardiff for visual material. The following examples from a couple of the sessions give a flavour of what we discussed, based on this. One session considered the connections between the depiction of landscape and place and of everyday life. Laurence Stephen Lowry's 1962 painting of the nearby colliery village of Six Bells, the scene of a devastating mining disaster in the early 1960s, proved very popular with all groups; it brings together a familiar and resonant local place with an artist that a lot of our learners already knew for his "matchstick men" style.⁵ It was, though, noticeable that none of the participants knew of this particular work, nor were they familiar with the Welsh national art collection, which led us to consider whether a gallery visit might be a useful supplement to the weekly sessions in terms of enhancing the participants' cultural capital, although ultimately the pandemic prevented this from happening. The narrative of Kevin Sinnott's large-scale painting *Running Away with the Hairdresser* (1995) equally takes place in the steep streets of former miners'

5) Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887–1976), *Six Bells, Abertillery, South Wales*, 1962, oil on canvas, 132 x 169 cm, National Museum Cardiff, *ArtUK*, accessed August 13, 2023, www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/six-bells-abertillery-south-wales-162106.

cottages typical of valley towns and villages.⁶ This method of familiarising participants with the art-historical approach to the art we were exploring proved very helpful.

The session on *Tradition, protest and activism* drew on historical and political events in the area such as the 19th century Chartist uprising in nearby Newport. A contemporary engraving of the event served as a prompt for printmaking activities in the practical artist-led part of the session. It also proved to be a catalyst for some of our participants to develop their own art projects with facilitators' support, one on the tradition of strong Welsh female "warrior queens", and another related to recent activism to save a local area of natural beauty.⁷

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

When the pandemic lockdown halted the course prematurely, after only four of the planned six sessions, ways of keeping in touch and maintaining momentum included newsletters and support for continued art-making at home by providing learners with kits containing art materials. The art history component of the newsletters offered activities around analysing one work of art, or a related group of works, and also included links to museum collections and the free OU resources for art history study provided via the public-facing platform OpenLearn. As a result of maintaining this continued contact, an online exhibition and a celebratory "live" online event bringing together art works, music and creative writing were organised during this time.

6) Kevin Sinnott (b. 1947), *Running Away with the Hairdresser*, 1995, oil on canvas, 132 x 169 cm, National Museum Cardiff, *ArtUK*, accessed August 13, 2023, www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/running-away-with-the-hairdresser-160198.

7) "Visual Art – Blaenau Gwent REACH," *OpenLearn*, accessed August 13, 2023, www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/visual-art-blaenau-gwent-reach.

Following the lifting of Covid restrictions in early 2022, a celebratory exhibition showcasing the work produced in all the BGReach workshop strands, *Our Place – Celebrating Blaenau Gwent*, was held at St Fagans National Museum of History, near Cardiff, with support from the Welsh national museums, and representatives of the Welsh Senedd (Welsh Assembly Government) at the opening ceremony.⁸ The work on show from participants in the visual art sessions demonstrated how effectively they had synthesised the art history and practical art-making aspects of these classes, and provided a well-received overview of what they had achieved despite the disruption to the original programme.

RESUMING THE PROJECT

At the same time, funding was secured early in 2022 to start a new series of three sessions and workshops in each of three locations: the original community centre venue at Aberbeeg, another community centre in the town of Abertillery, and at a care home in Ebbw Vale which had participated in an oral history project during the first programme. This time we based the visual arts theme around an exhibition running at the time in the National Museum Wales in Cardiff, *The Rules of Art?*. This involved designing the sessions around learning about the traditional academic hierarchy of genres, while exploring ways in which modern and contemporary artists have both engaged with and subverted this, and how our learners could develop this in a practical way, under the overall title *Exploring Art, Exploring Art History*.

8) "Valleys History Exhibition Arrives at St Fagans," *Linc Cymru*, accessed August 13, 2023, www.linc-cymru.co.uk/our-news-latest-updates/valleys-history-exhibition-arrives-at-st-fagans/.

It became clear from attendance that Aberbeeg had retained its active and inclusive community spirit, and the residents of the Ebbw Vale extra care home, many with multiple physical and mental disabilities, were ready to engage with enthusiasm: it was interesting that feedback from them at the end of the workshops was that, although some came along just wanting an art activity, and some wanting to listen to a talk, they really enjoyed the mix that we offered. We felt this endorsed the collaboration between art historians and artist facilitators that we had developed. This contrasted with the almost total lack of take-up in Abertillery: it is difficult to pin down whether this was because of continued post-Covid reticence to go out and mix with others, a lack of targeted and timely advertising, or because it is simply a different kind of community.

CONCLUSION

Overall, and despite all the challenges of the impact of the pandemic, we felt by the end of the second series of meetings that we had arrived at a format that offered a balance of art history and art-making that seems to have worked for our learners, and been generally well-received: this paper has been just one way of disseminating this experience.

Looking to the future, moves have been underway to instigate the development phase of a *Wales REACH* project (*Residents Engaging in Arts, Culture and Heritage*), funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, with a view to ultimately engaging marginalised and disadvantaged communities right across Wales with national heritage explored through the creative arts. It is exciting to think that our experience between 2020 and 2022 has contributed to a successful bid to broaden the project from Blaenau Gwent to – potentially – the whole of the Welsh nation.

