CultureCase

(Re)constructing identity using contemporary visual art

This research was conducted by **Andrew Newman, Anna Goulding and Chris Whitehead** at **Newcastle University, UK**

Summary

This paper looked at the responses of people to a contemporary art exhibition and their involvement in activity relating to it. In particular the research examined how people talked about art in relation to their identities. The study was attached to the British Art Show 6 in 2005 at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, northeast England. The research gathered data via two focus groups and found that some people used their experience to articulate, reinforce, or reconfigure their own personal and group identities. This was a positive experience for the some of the participants, but also negative, or neutral for others.

A contemporary art exhibition makes for an interesting setting in which to examine people’s attitudes

This is because contemporary art has such a mix of complex and contradictory discourses surrounding it (e.g. 'it’s rubbish' or 'I don't get it' etc.). 19 people participated in the research. One focus group of four people met twice (once before a series of artist talks, and again afterwards). The second focus group was comprised of 15 people who had participated in an artist-led workshop.

All of the participants were over 50 and many were adjusting to life after retirement

In all cases, participants in the study were ‘encouraged to discuss their ideas, understandings and uses of art and their intellectual, affective and artistic

responses' to the work they had just encountered. The building, its location, the medium of the work, as well as the existing artistic preferences and general artistic knowledge of the participants all played a part in how they talked about the work. The responses were highly individual and related to people's own sense of themselves.

Keywords

focus group **UK** **elderly** **visual art** **identity** **contemporary art**

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