

# The barriers that prevent older people engaging with contemporary visual art

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

## Summary

This study set out to explore the factors that influence older people's engagement – or indeed lack of engagement – with contemporary visual art. Specific factors addressed in the paper are social class, education, taste, social confidence and status. During a 28-month study, researchers investigated the responses of 38 older people to three contemporary exhibitions in northeast England. The research was carried out within the context of a wider government initiative to improve the lives of older people.

## Education and social background impact upon older people's engagement with contemporary visual art

Assessing the 'legitimacy' of an artwork and arriving at a 'correct' or 'valid' response pose challenges for those not versed in the language and signs of contemporary art. Participants with more formal education were more capable of adapting to new forms of art. Those from working class backgrounds tended to dismiss the art or to interpret the art in relation to their personal histories, rather than responding to it 'on its own terms'. However, over the three visits, those who had initially shown signs of marginalisation or exclusion began to navigate the 'codes' of the artwork.

# Overcoming barriers through accessible interpretation

The study recommends that galleries overcome barriers to engagement for older people by recognising that responses to exhibitions may initially have little to do with the 'field' of contemporary art. It also recommends allowing for 'everyday' and thematic interpretations of works rather than restricting the information accompanying artworks to the less inclusive discourses of contemporary art.

This summary is by **Richard Mason, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

## Keywords

**UK** **audience** **interview** **class** **visual art** **elderly** **contemporary art**

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