

EPISODE 4

Claire Coia: *In terms of engagement is absolutely crucial. And working with people to do that from the get go, from absolute ground zero, from scratch, to form projects and decide how they're going to go.*

Intro:

HR: My name is Halina Rifai and I'm a podcast producer and mental health advocate. I was asked by The Baring Foundation to take a deeper dive into their work surrounding a report written by Director David Cutler titled '*Creatively Minded at the Museum*'.

The report was written to highlight targeted work by museums to engage people with mental health problems, especially using participatory arts.

In this podcast I'll be exploring a number of themes over the series which look at difficult pasts helping us understand collections, participatory arts work in hospital settings, partnerships, new generations of museum professionals, diversity and much much more.

I'll do this with the help of a number of people who work, run, volunteer and practice creative arts with museums spread over the length and breadth of the UK.

HR: In this, the fifth and final episode of this series, I focus 'the art of co-curation with people with lived experience of mental health problems

Glasgow Museums

HR: Glasgow Museums cover the city of Glasgow including museums such as Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Riverside Museum, the Burrell Collection and more. Glasgow Museums cares for over 1.4 million objects with fewer than 2% on public display at any one time. The Remaining 98% of the collection is stored at a world-class publicly accessible museum storage facility Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC). There is also an outreach arm of Glasgow Museums called The Open Museum which takes the collections out of storage and into the heart of Glasgow's communities to people who can't, won't or don't access museum venues. Health and wellbeing is also a strategic priority for Glasgow museums and embedded in a lot of the projects the venue-based staff do.

In this episode, I sit down with Claire Coia, who works in spaces of confinement and with communities all over Glasgow with all areas of Glasgow Museums' collection depending on the project and what people want to explore. In this conversation, Claire focuses on one particular collection - Art Extraordinary, the museums' unique collection of Scottish based Outsider Art.

[INTERVIEW]

Halina Rifai: Why is it so important for you to work on the basis of co-curation? And how did this impact the work that you were doing?

Claire Coia: So co-curation is what the Open Museum is all about. We always work with communities to co-curate displays, but with this particular collection Art Extraordinary, the collection was donated to Glasgow Museums in 2012 by Scotland's first ever art therapist, Joyce Laing. What an amazing woman. And, um, she was very interested in so called "Outsider Art" and Art Brut. Those are the terms that the art museum hierarchies, art hierarchies are familiar with this concept of outsider art. And she got, um, a tiny amount of funding in the 1970s and she went around asylum spaces in Scotland to collect kind of Scottish examples of this so called outsider art. But it didn't stop there. You know, she was going into asylum spaces and collecting objects in the most unusual spaces because nobody thought that they were art. Because this idea outside art is some, um, created by people beyond the mainstreams of the art hierarchy world. Usually with no formal training, often in species of confinement, whether that's hospital, prisons, or people confined to the spaces of their own homes or confined by mental health issues and so on. But the collection is very diverse. But Joyce was very aware that outsider art, uh, was a kind of problematic term, so she didn't want to call it that. Uh, and she called it Art Extraordinary, because when people saw it, they would exclaim that's extraordinary. And it comprises not only of just works of art films and psychiatric hospitals, but she mentored people, she worked with people, and she just continued collecting until she died, basically. She passed away, um, last year. Because of the way that Joyce collected these objects often. I mean, the majority of objects that we have in the collection, which is over a thousand artworks that came in in 2012, we don't know the stories behind them. We don't even know the names of the artists in some cases. There's a lot of the collection that we know nothing about. And, um, there's a lot of debate currently, um, in communities of interest. It's like, well, why is Glasgow Museums this faceless institution? Why are you curating this collection of art created beyond the mainstream of the art world? So that was a big question for us, and it wouldn't have been ethical for us to curate that display, and we didn't know a lot about the objects. So what's the best way to curate that display was people who have lived experience of mental ill health and explore the collection with them and become aware of all the debates that are going on and all the issues that are going on and create that space for dialogue so that we're all learning together and sharing our expertise. Because with this collection, we are not the experts. It's the people with lived experience who are the experts of this collection. So everything that we've done, all the outputs, all the outcomes, has been completely curated by people with lived experience of mental ill health in raising that dialogue so we can get people talking and out into a wider public platform.

Halina Rifai: No, definitely. You've mentioned lived experience there, which is such an important thing. I guess you've maybe answered my next question regarding lived experience, and it being something that's become, well, it's so paramount to what it is that you're doing. It seems to be more recognised, especially within reports now that are coming out as well. They seem to be bringing more people in with lived experience to help do the research, to manage projects to steer them. How important is it for you, maybe, going forward and with this project to continue to have that in mind?

Claire Coia: It's absolutely crucial to work with people who have lived experience of whatever issue it is that you are working with because museums are hierarchies of the powerful, of the mainstream and so on. So what right do we have to put an exhibition on using our voices to tell someone else's story? And most of the time, it's from our perspective, not theirs. That's why it's crucial and to explore a lot of the themes and a lot of the art within

our collection with people with lived experience. And we couldn't have created this collection of Art Extraordinary without that, it wouldn't have been ethical to do that in the first instance and you wouldn't have been getting the right information. We could have got it really wrong. We could have made so many mistakes if we had decided, oh, we're going to curate this exhibition, we're going to write all the labels and create something that's false and not true because we don't have that lived experience.

Halina Rifai: Yeah. The engagement aspect of things, because I think what you're saying there, for me personally, when you start talking about the communities that you're working with, especially when it comes to the hierarchy and the demographic of people and the communities that you're trying to reach, did you find by the co-curation and working with people with lived experience enhanced the engagement of your audience?

Claire Coia: Working with people with lived experience opened up those platforms for dialogue. Basically what we did and what we do is we scaffold the process for dialogue. We don't go in there with a set agenda or whatever. So when you're working with, um, communities, they're taking a major role in the dialogues that are happening. So what you're doing is you're bringing lots of different people together to discuss and often very difficult or contentious themes and as a curator, that's something that I want to take responsibility for and get it wrong or create conversations that aren't relevant to people. So in terms of engagement, it's absolutely crucial in working with people to do that from the get go, from absolute ground zero, from scratch, to form projects and decide how they're going to go. Um, so when you're talking in terms of engagement, it's about bringing lots of different individuals, organisations, and even within institutions themselves. It's changing the way that people work or changing the way that people can research certain things. And you're promoting all these different ways of knowing because there are so many different ways of knowing. And researching this co-curation process is all part of that.

Halina Rifai: There's another aspect to co-curation, which is partnerships. I know that you work with Cheryl McGeachin from the University of Glasgow and she explores geographies of mental illness, but also Scottish History Curator, Dr. Tony Lewis. I'm aware of Cheryl's knowledge and research and her approach when it comes to mental health, class and societal issues and it's phenomenal. How does that partnership work. And what have been the positives?

Claire Coia: Well, we call ourselves Team Triangle because triangles are strong. And I suppose that in terms of partnership, it's always a cliché, and I'm going to use it, but when people get together to pull the resources and share their expertise, that's a bit of a cliché. But when you unpack that and what it actually means, it's actually really, really important because if you accept that you have expertise in a particular subject area, it means that you don't have expertise elsewhere. If each of us were working in our own little silos, there's no way we would have achieved as much as what we've done together. And I think that it has had an impact on how we work within our institutions and well, and how we influence other people within our institutions as to how we can work. So, I mean, having Cheryl on board, we're still on board, but having share on board is absolutely amazing because doing this actual research and also evaluating, um, it in terms of impact and teaching her students, this is how we co-curate, this is the importance of mental with the experience of mental health and so on. And then you've got Tony who works in the museum venues and he is part of that museums, I think that the main body museums can be very slow moving beasts. There are

so many procedures involved in so many different people that are involved and it can seem frustrating, but there are reasons for that is because in somewhere like, even with one venue like Kelvingrove, you might have ten different things happening in the one month from display, changeovers to events. And within that, there's lots of people in their own departments helping to make that happen. So you've got documentation, you've got conservation, you've got logistics. But it is a very slow, um, process. So what I learned from Tony doing that is how to navigate this slow moving body and how to bring conversations from the margin to the core and then Tony's learning as well about this is the invisible labour that's involved in setting up relationships, which is very difficult to articulate, but the invisible labour involved in doing that. So Tony will now have that kind of insight into, well, this is how we create the right environment for partnerships and relationships to flourish. So it's really influenced how each of us work within our own organisations. And what's amazing about it is that working in partnership with different organisations and different individuals and seeing how it's impacted on their organisation and individuals going forward. So we've got partners that are off doing lots of new projects, going in lots of different tangents and directions. So it really is your multi way process of learning from each other. That's how we get change.

Halina Rifai: Totally, and I think it promotes compassion, empathy and understanding for you collectively as professionals, as a team. So legacy, which is so important. And unfortunately, when it comes to a lot of creative and arts projects, they seem to have a certain deadline or you have to work to a certain time frame and so on. With regards to what you're doing, what is the legacy that you'd like to take forward with what Glasgow Museums is doing around mental health?

Claire Coia: I think that Glasgow museums are already doing some really good stuff around mental health and, wellbeing, as I said, it's part of what is one of our priorities. And recently they've actually set up, um, our mental health working group and we'll see what that involves, I think it's going to involve an order and measuring impact. And I know they're working on a specific wellbeing handling kit to actively encourage discussion around themes around mental ill health. So that's all really positive. And going forward, I think that because we've got this permanent co-curated case in Kelvingrove Museum with so called outsider art, which wouldn't have been brought into a main museum art venue before. And for it to be recognized as art is an amazing thing. And also the processes of co-curation. So that's the Art Extraordinary display in Kelvingrove. That's our first ever permanent co-curated display in Kelvingrove. Over the next year or so, I'm going to be working on doing another two co-curated display cases in Kelvingrove. Um, again co-curated with people who have lived experience of the criminal justice system. And, um, I think that the hope is that as we go forward, more and more displays in our actual museum venues will be co-curated by people. So it's giving a real platform for voice. So I think that things are looking really positive in going ahead.

HR: A network and its relationships is a fundamental part of this type of work. The benefits as Claire has illustrated are significant. From the lived experience of those helping curate, volunteer and take part in projects to those who are heading up and steering the direction in which collections are managed. I was glad that Claire talked about hierarchy in this episode. It has been often stated that museums can feel inaccessible because they may feel elitist or have little to offer various communities. Art Extraordinary as a concept from the offset was

one of these projects that looked to address that with aspects such as the collection being for people with no formal art training, who were marginalised and whose mental health was cared in and out of hospitals and its thanks to Joyce Laing and her foresight that this is the case. That approach has in itself helped challenge the hierarchical stereotype that is so often cited. The legacy the museums and their working force are taking forward is a positive move forwards and from the aforementioned intrinsic approach to lived experience to the core team understanding each others working practicies not to mention the bringing of their work to communities outside of venues proves they are understanding of creating change.

Outro

HR: We are at the end of this series, thank you to my guest Claire Coia, you will find out more information about Glasgow Museums in the notes to accompany this episode. Please do take time to listen to the episodes that precede this which visit and talk to a number of other people working with museums across the UK across a range of other subjects relating to mental health and wellbeing and of course Creatively Minded at the Museum report. Thank you for listening.