

Understanding audiences for the contemporary arts: a review of recent literature

Recently the SPARC team have been reading about how contemporary arts are thought about by performers and audiences, and in particular how the perspectives of those two groups might be different. This review outlines some of the recent academic literature on audiences for the contemporary arts, drawing on a range of disciplines including market research, music psychology and sociology, and specific arts and cultural studies. We have not included the literature that was familiar to us from previous SPARC research and publications (see <http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/research/>) but have searched outside the field of classical music audiences, looking for relevant findings and approaches in other arts, and in audience retention and development strategies, particularly those that use media and technology.

Some headline findings that will inform future projects are summarised here, and a reference list follows:

- Several studies (notably Sifakakis, 2007 on art galleries) note a difference of expectations between the art curators/performers and the audience members they are trying to reach: there is sometimes a confusion of understanding and enjoyment, with an expectation that audiences must be able to articulate their appreciation of what they see, rather than making a purely emotional response.
- Different kinds of audience responses are considered in relation to dance (Reason & Reynolds, 2010), theatre (Sauter, 2002) and opera (Jobst & Boerner, 2011), each with a consideration of empathy – how do audience members connect with the performers on stage? Quality of art and connection with performers are seen as the strongest factors in audience satisfaction (Sauter, 2002), with the ‘peripheral’ aspects of venue comfort and friendliness having least overall effect (Jobst & Boerner, 2011), but helping to mitigate the risk of attending an unfamiliar work in a familiar setting (Maitland, 2000).
- Presentation of new art to audiences is often done over-cautiously (Maitland, 2000), and perhaps reinforces the ‘fear’ factor evident in audience segmentation studies which show general audiences to be more risk-averse than those who attend contemporary arts events (Baker, 2000). Targeted marketing that selects most appealing events and describes them in emotional rather than technical terms has been shown to increase first-time attendance (Maitland, 2000).
- Studies concerned with engaging audiences more fully in the live event have considered changes in marketing and ticket offers to reduce risk (Maitland, 2000), use of Facebook (Baym, 2012) and Twitter (Deller, 2011) to increase connection with performers, and post-performance discussions (Heim, 2012; Scollen, 2008).
- The role of live events in relation to the ubiquity of recorded and mediated arts is presented with varying degrees of optimism for the future of arts organisations (Auslander, 1999/2008; Barker, 2013). Auslander is particularly dismissive of the community and sense of ‘being there’ that has been shown to be important in previous research (e.g. Pitts & Spencer, 2008; Pitts & Burland, 2013); meanwhile attempts to monitor the effects of listening with other people have been inconclusive (Egermann et al., 2011), though patterns of attendance are affected by social decisions (Upright, 2004).

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