Age is no barrier to the Digital Arts

City Arts Nottingham has been developing programmes for older people for over ten years. More recently with 3 year funding from Arts Council and The Baring Foundation, we have been able to enhance our work through the *Imagine* programme, working with older people in care.

Our *Imagine* programme goes from strength to strength with further funding from the Nominet Trust and Baring Foundation to develop our Armchair Gallery App. The App will be launched in September 2018. Our development of innovative work with older people 55+ continues through a *Celebrating Age* grant (Imagine Celebrates). To date the Imagine programme and Armchair Gallery App has generated a lot of interest nationally and internationally, being presented in Australia, China and South Korea.

We have been privileged to continue the success of this work through the development of strong partnerships that enables this work to grow and flourish. Our approach to this work is grounded in the need to be person centred, to stimulate and inspire co-production which in turn generates mutual benefit.

It is always our aim to remove hierarchies in the project and participants have been central to the work from the outset. Artists have been working in collaboration with older people, activity co-ordinators, family members and volunteers. Everyone sharing experiences, knowledge and learning new skills. Each setting can be very different, therefore new and flexible approaches need to be constantly developed and reviewed in order to respond to the needs of individual participants and varied environments.


During the *Imagine* programme artforms explored include the visual arts, film, dance and movement, puppetry, carnival and music. This variety of approaches has been important as different options reach out to participants in distinctive ways.

Initial digital artform consultations with residents living in care settings received an unenthusiastic response. Technology

was definitely deemed as entering into the unknown. This is precisely why we were drawn to using digital technology and wanted a challenge and wanted to challenge!

We have delved into the digital arts in several ways. Exploring e-sensors and sound boards. E-sensors are often used in fashion to light clothing, they can for example also respond to touch and make materials vibrate. The sound boards have been used to create musical fruit and to record participant's voices, creating poetic phrases that are triggered by touch and have been incorporated into several public art installations.

We have explored live streaming, taking piano concerts into care homes and are developing the Armchair Gallery App. This is a digital based exploration of curated art work on tablets using the Timeslips model (http://www.timeslips.org/).
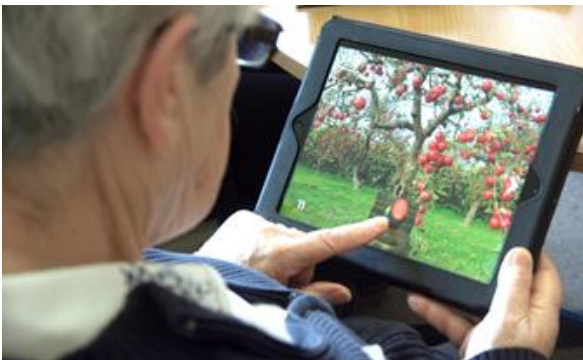
What we have learnt through Armchair Gallery:

- The introduction of digital technology may induce fear in participants initially; however once presented it often results in a good level of engagement and is exciting

- The use of Apps in particular can support the spontaneous interests suggested by participants. This stimulates conversation, group working and can act as a springboard for the introduction of practical creative exploration using different arts materials

- Digital technology can offer sensory and non-verbal approaches that are particularly effective for individuals living with dementia

- The virtual visits we have created through Armchair Gallery take people to a range of cultural venues and access to interesting collections. This material stimulates critical debate of culture and the arts. Whilst the art shown may not be to everyone's taste, conversation and people's views are definitely encouraged

- People's initial perception of artworks can change once more context is given and creative tasks are formulated around them – this approach promotes understanding and breaks down the barriers of *'art is not for us'*

- Whilst some of the content in the Armchair Gallery App stimulates memory and reminiscence, incorporating the use of the Timeslips model promotes the use of imagination and a sense of being in the present. There are no right or wrong answers, this in turn promotes a sense of confidence in participants taking part

- The Armchair Gallery App promotes access to a range of diverse interests that are immediate, replicable and multi-sensory

Maureen commented that she would like to spend time on the iPad with her family as a result of exploring the Armchair Gallery App *"oh yes, I could see myself doing this with my grandchildren".*

Margaret said *"I really enjoyed that, it was really relaxing".*

Feedback from volunteers was very positive in a review of the session afterwards.

Comments included:

"it had extended my experience of creative sessions"

"there was a lot of laughter in the room"

For more information on Imagine and Armchair Gallery visit: http://imaginearts.org.uk/programme/armchair-gallery/

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