

CIRCUIT FESTIVALS – A NARRATIVE REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Circuit, supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, emerged from the aftermath of the UK riots in 2011 with the aim to transform access to arts and culture for 15-25 year olds. Producing a festival was a key strand to this work. Using *Circuit* galleries as a base, core groups of *Circuit* participants from around the UK would produce a festival for young people by young people, with significant budget (c. £40K) and professional support. These were heralded as ‘landmark national youth festivals’ in 2015:

● Our young *Circuit* members have put an immense amount of effort into the programming of the ●
● upcoming *Circuit* festivals. Each contribution from each partner group has its own unique style; the young people involved have really captured the spirit of the places they live in, and are using art to both express themselves and create ●
● access to cultural activity for others. It’s been an inspirational journey so far; we hope you’ll join us to see the fruit of their labour at these large-scale *Circuit* festivals nationwide.’

– Mark Miller, *Circuit* Programme National Lead

This brief report looks back over the last three years and the mountains of collective energy and effort that created

- Affinity (Nottingham Contemporary),
- Blueprint (Tate Liverpool),
- Flipside (Firstsite, Colchester),
- GLITCH (MOSTYN, Llandudno),
- Hyperlink (Tate Modern),
- SWITCH (Tate St. Ives),
- Unlock Cambridge (Kettle's Yard and Wysing Arts Centre)
- and WARP (The Whitworth).

This is not an impact assessment, rather a thought paper on emerging patterns that might be relevant for gallery and museum practitioners engaged in learning and participation, as well as producers and curators of cultural activity, interested in doing something like this in the future. I spent just five days with *Circuit* galleries over two years, so these impressions should be treated as such.

CONTENTS

A Word on Festivals	06
Aims and Outcomes	09
What Emerged	15
Concluding Thoughts	22

A WORD ON FESTIVALS



A WORD ON FESTIVALS

For *Circuit* groups, the festival was defined as an ambitious, time-bound and large-scale event with an identity distinct to the institutions' regular programme.

Working definitions are elusive. The Latin 'festus' implies joy, joviality and a sense of holiday. Festivals embody a sharp sense of place but are bound by time, with a start and end. Institutions, historically, are vice versa. If bricks and mortar rise vertically, a festival site spreads horizontally – they are different ecosystems.

'When we asked young people 'what is a festival': we spent three months looking at that. There's something quite leading about the word 'festival'.

– Sally Noall, Programme Manager – Young People, Tate St. Ives

The word 'festival' sparks fear and hope into the hearts of cultural institutions. Festivals force departments to work together quickly, often exposing an organisation's structural vulnerabilities, stress-testing policies, procedures and resources. When it comes to festival delivery, newly recruited volunteers might become the public face of an organisation, and external contractors deliver one-off services that are out of the ordinary. The programme will likely confirm a lot later than the marketing or facilities teams might like. All of this can induce anxiety.

In terms of hope, cultural festivals attract varied audiences. They're often free to attend (or have a substantial free programme), and can appeal to people designated 'harder to reach', or who might not feel like a museum or gallery is 'for them'. Festivals create exciting and inspiring moments of togetherness, and demonstrate cultural institutions as centres for community. This imagery changes perceptions, boosts morale and makes memories.

The Affinity festival was a momentous occasion for us at Nottingham Contemporary. It was the culmination of over a year's careful planning by a collective of twenty young people who showed the most incredible dedication and enthusiasm for putting on an event to attract new, diverse young people in their thousands. The fact they achieved this – bringing over 4000 young people over 2 days to a takeover of films, music, dance and creative workshops was so rewarding to see. However, for us as an organisation, the impact was far longer than that weekend. Over that year we worked together with young people in our Exhibitions, Public Programme, Marketing, Front of House and Learning teams – and this continues with young people in paid positions within our organisation today. As an organisation we learnt how to give freedom and support, how to collaborate across departments and change ways of working. Affinity was the catalyst for this.

– Kay Hardiman, Head of Learning, Nottingham Contemporary

AIMS AND OUTCOMES

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AIMS AND OUTCOMES

The stated aim for *Circuit* festivals was to bring thousands of young people into cultural buildings, amplifying their voices and with it the impact of the programme as a whole. Tapping into this potential at scale and connecting with each other across the UK, these events would disrupt the social fabric. Ultimately, it was hoped that the festivals might become sustainable cultural brands driven by young people for young people.

Equally important was the experience for the core groups of volunteers. Large-scale events present significant learning and training opportunities with possible skills transfer in a wide range of activities, from copywriting to marketing, design to production, event management to curation, promotion to performance. With a one to two-year lead-time and significant resources and expectations, the festival would be the *Circuit* groups' key outward-facing activity. All the galleries' learning and engagement teams recognised the prime importance of the quality of experience for the young people volunteering their time.

In line with other *Circuit* strands of work, a third aim was for the festival to affect structural change within host organisations so that the legacy of the programme might be an altered landscape for young people. Specifics on this organisational change were unclear, but the gauntlet had been thrown to cultural organisations to take the risk of handing over their building and brand.

Circuit galleries shared a scale of ambition for their festivals, and positive intent to care for and guide the core groups of young people. There was much excitement for what these events might bring and become. I felt lucky to watch the groups' development and to navigate the learning journey with producers and practitioners over the two years. Amazing things happened, the festivals became a platform for young people to take creative risks, embed themselves within cultural organisations, and create awesome experiences. The festival strand evolved significantly over the three years and in retrospect, a number of assumptions underpinned its structure that lead to creative and logistical tensions. It is worth considering these before reviewing what emerged.

THAT 15-25 YEAR OLDS CAN BE CONSIDERED A HOMOGENOUS GROUP

From the outset the term ‘young person’ was problematic – participants hadn’t chosen it – and the label complicated the process of forming identity, festival mission and brand. *Circuit* groups had to navigate what this label meant (if anything) before a similar process with place: what does it mean to be from North Wales, from the coast, from the town, from the gallery? These conversations took considerable time and energy.

The same is true for audiences: whether the targets for the festivals were 15-25 year olds, or broader local audiences with a strong focus on young people. Some galleries brought other partnership work to the festival, and the crossover of activity and audience proved fruitful.

‘We brought all our partnership work to it – partners want to be involved in another way, and bits in the festival were theirs. Looking at the whole organisation – the festival allowed all the moments to really come together.’

– Andrew Vaughan, Learning Manager, The Whitworth.

THAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO RUN A FESTIVAL

Most *Circuit* core groups formed around pre-existing programmes for young people at the galleries, which were already offering a wide range of creative and cultural activities, albeit at a reduced scale. Understandably, the planning and execution of the festival came to dominate, particularly in the months leading up to the festival delivery. This came at a cost: in the words of one producer ‘the group just didn’t want to work. They want to go back to making art.’

It’s a point of difference that learning and engagement programmes in the UK focus heavily on skills acquisition and knowledge transfer, alongside creativity and ‘making art’. Personally I think this is a great thing, introducing young people to a wide range of roles in the cultural sector, and providing them with the vocabulary to articulate these activities in ways that make sense professionally down the line. Commercial festivals employ a huge number of people under 25: the festival strand of the *Circuit* programme provided participants with useful vocabulary and experience to bridge into that sector. But this didn’t appeal to everyone.

It’s worth noting that the number of commercial music festivals in the UK exploded in the 2000s and peaked before the financial crash in 2008. Festival production has matured as an industry: start-up costs are high, the market is very busy, young people have less cash to spend. Attending events that used to be a rite of passage are now too expensive for many young people to attend, and there’s widespread research to demonstrate pressures on the commercial festival and urban entertainment industries.

What this means for cultural festivals is unclear; there’s a growing awareness that urban arts festivals’ impact on civic policy is in the ascendant, particularly when it comes to the tourism agenda. Likely too that this will become more pronounced post-Brexit.

So it's perhaps ironic that just as the opportunity for young people to impact and influence the places they live in is increasing, the will to do so is at a low ebb. Shock politics of 2016 have spiked interest in politics from younger people: there isn't yet evidence to show a translation from social media to increased active political or civic participation.

THAT YOUNG PEOPLE DOING COOL STUFF + AN INSTITUTIONAL BRAND = THRONGS OF NEW AND DIVERSE AUDIENCES

Two assumptions here – that young people would be more able to attract their peers than an organisation’s professional marketing team, and that the core group of *Circuit* participants will be able and motivated to work with ‘hard to reach’ groups of other young people, as much as or more than professional practitioners.

Beginning a new event and new audience from scratch takes time and committed investment. For the metropolitan galleries in towns with large student populations living locally – The Whitworth, Nottingham Contemporary – it was possible to achieve a critical mass with marketing and content so that attendance numbers were very high. For coastal galleries such as Tate St. Ives and MOSTYN, an audience in the thousands was not possible with the resources available.

There was a creative tension between the urge to attract new audiences and the desire to build the groups’ experience. Much of the pressure associated with the former came from the groups themselves, returning to anxieties around how a festival ‘should’ look and feel.

WHAT EMERGED?



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The festivals differed enormously in shape from a one-day series of town-centre interventions (Unlock Cambridge) to a two-week gallery takeover (Flipside Firstsite), to a weekend-long inside-and-outside series of events (The Whitworth). The use of independent producers, creative practitioners, paid positions for young people and artists-in-residence varied from gallery to gallery and reflected local circumstances.

At the time of writing, it is not certain which of the festivals will repeat in the future – the *Circuit* galleries did not have the capacity to plan for and leverage future funding while the programme was in motion. Nevertheless, the festivals' impact on participants and the organisations has been significant; it's beyond the scope of this report to consider lessons learned from each venue. Common themes emerged however, and the conclusion of the programme offers the chance to reflect on the festival strand as a whole.

THE ROLE OF THE PRODUCER

It might sound obvious, but a festival needs a single point of contact within a cultural organisation to channel conversations and manage internal stakeholders.

Common tasks included:

- co-ordinating the marketing strategy
- preparing the event plan
- preparing contracts, sometimes writing them from scratch (when the organisation didn't have relevant templates)
- significant upwards management to coordinate an institution's senior management team and manage expectations
- risk management
- managing event-based staff – other volunteers, front of house, organisational staff involved in the delivery of the festival
- co-ordinating artist practitioners or other freelancers engaged in the festival development or delivery
- delivering on film, social media and photo coverage of the event itself in collaboration with a marketing team

When built into existing job roles, the producers struggled to dedicate the time and energy to the festival while maintaining the rest of their duties. This led to at least one case of burn out, and to considerable fatigue across a number of sites.

The festival was an opportunity for me to produce a large-scale event and to work with international, ambitious artists. I learned a lot from Superflex about co-producing and peer-led practice. The ambition of the festival allowed me to develop new skills, which I feel I've been able to harness in my Circuit role since.

It was so interesting to produce such a public-facing event, interacting with people who'd never had come into Kettle's Yard or Wysing – making art as part of their everyday life – something they just came across. I'm interested in doing more of this kind of work, wanting to capture that playfulness in communities' own spaces.

On reflection, although it was a demanding time and at times I felt stretched, I am proud of what we achieved as a team and I feel that producing the festival is my personal highlight of working on the Circuit programme.

– Tahira Fitzwilliam-Hall, *Circuit* Programme Manager,
Kettle's Yard and Wysing Arts Centre

WHO IS THE EVENT MANAGER?

As a new event with multiple stakeholders, there was a risk of confusion around organisational hierarchy. Any institution considering similar activity needs to identify the Event Manager at the outset, with whom the bucks stops, and whose name appears on the bottom of any event plan. This will most often be an institution's Director or a member of the Senior Management Team. With high external visibility and programming that crosses spaces and departments, there are elevated reputational and practical risks, which will usually extend beyond the job description of the festival producer.

Responsibilities might well include:

- Championing the festival internally during preparation to galvanise staff support and participation
- Oversight for the event, monitoring the institution's duty of care to staff, volunteers and visitors
- Being the voice of the institution when necessary

Circuit galleries were well-versed in running large-scale events of their own. Different here was the scale of the young people's involvement and the diversity of national stakeholders, considering Tate and other *Circuit* galleries. Managing the long list of visitors and partners required time and energy, as well as navigating the organisational hierarchy. Having buy-in from Senior Management and gallery Directors was very important, especially in galvanising organisation-wide support and clarifying expectations from gallery staff not directly involved with young people (Marketing, Front of House, Operations, Collections etc.)

AS A NEW EVENT FOR A NEW AUDIENCE, A FESTIVAL BRAND TAKES TIME TO BUILD

New events tend to take three iterations to embed within an organisation's calendar – legacy and sustainability were always going to be a challenge to the *Circuit* programme. All the galleries have recognised that repeating their festival to a similar scale will not be possible without alternative external support. This doesn't negate the positive impacts the festivals have brought, which have included:

- over 40,000 people participating in *Circuit* festivals across the 8 sites
- young people recruited into permanent positions within the cultural organisations
- new or deeper partnerships with local stakeholders, including new connections with existing urban arts festivals
- precedent for ambitious programming putting young people at the heart of cultural activity

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CONTEXT

It's hard to understate the impact of local context on the shape and outcomes of the *Circuit* festivals, keenly felt in the planning and development stages. Smaller, coastal towns would be heavily affected by the seasons, as young people travelled away to work or to study. Core *Circuit* groups reflected the geographic spread of young people, with some participants having to travel for many hours each week to reach the host gallery.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS



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According to one head of learning, ‘a festival forces you to make building blocks that aren’t already there, whereas in the gallery you work with what you have and what you know’. *Circuit* festivals agitated the galleries to try new things and experiment with different ways of working.

The Circuit festival project was, I hope, a sincere reflection of all the GLITCH members’ interests and enthusiasms. I feel the visual appearance and emotional feel of the festival in the gallery felt completely different to what normally existed in MOSTYN gallery, and I feel this allowed individual group members to increasingly feel more ownership not just of the project, but also the gallery spaces too.

– Michael Powell, Datrys, Festival Producer, MOSTYN

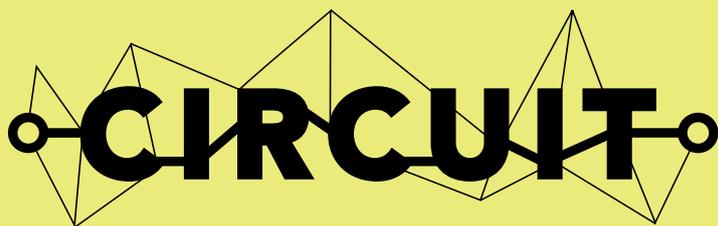
Given the rising star of urban arts festivals, it’s likely that we will see more attempts to steer young people’s programming more in this direction, particularly if funding avenues open up within urban contexts through tourism, wellbeing or other civic agendas.

This isn’t without its problems, particularly as this drive isn’t necessarily coming from young people themselves, or from practitioners engaged in young people’s programmes. And festivals are expensive to run: as one producer pointed out, the budget for the weekend festival could have been used to maintain much of the learning programme for another year.

The celebration at the heart of festival practice appeals at a time when young people live under increased pressures. And as a methodology, *Circuit*-type festivals are a fantastic way to showcase an organisation’s partnership work in a number of areas, and convene people who might not otherwise meet, while giving primacy to the contributions and voices of young people as part of a larger community. Perhaps this is where the potential is greatest, to demonstrate to young people that they are a valuable and critical part of our society’s complex web.

Alex Rinsler is Creative Lead for Blackpool Illuminations and LightPool, based in Manchester. He has worked on festivals in the UK and internationally over the last 15 years, increasingly with cultural institutions in urban contexts. He worked with Tate Collective in Liverpool as a freelance producer for Blueprint festival then joined the Tate National team in 2015 to work with *Circuit* galleries and groups as Festival Consultant. He makes large-scale public art that focuses on communities.





CIRCUIT

phf Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

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