

Case Study

WEX, Arnolfini 2002 – 2007

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Process

Each year I engaged a team of young people in a practical and critical research process which involved questioning Arnolfini's mission statement, programme and operations. The teams were then given an original design brief to produce an outcome the organisation could use to mediate contemporary art and/or the institution to wider audiences. I worked closely with staff to identify and write the design brief. Where possible I choreographed opportunities for staff and young people to meet and discuss their jobs, exchange perceptions about Arnolfini and input into the design process.

Outcomes

Outcomes from WEX projects included an exhibition leaflet, a map for the British Art Show in Bristol, a guide to contemporary art and Arnolfini itself. We also produced passes for a live art festival and a series of photographs imagining how Arnolfini could look when it reopened after a period of renovation. Designers were involved in each WEX project to enable each team to realise their ideas to a professional standard. Some of these outcomes had a relatively short shelf life (e.g. specific to a particular event) whilst others continued to be use for two to three years.

Awkward Moments

Part of my intention with WEX was to draw the institution into dialogue with young people and for them to in turn to shape the institution. At times WEX worked really well and at other times there were really awkward moments. For example at times I sensed the young people felt as though their ideas were being processed and edited by staff and designers into a final outcome that was unrecognisable to them. As far as I know WEX was one of the first regular programmes for young people at Arnolfini before Young Arnolfini. WEX originated as a work experience project and as a result the young people were asked to produce something that served the institution's needs and was carefully vetted by staff. Whereas Arnolfini current Young Arnolfini programme clearly positions young people as artists and writers. They are acknowledged as creatives in their own right.

Questions

The differences between WEX and Young Arnolfini raises key questions about how cultural institutions absorb, accept and represent the voices of others. For example:

What happens to young people's contributions when they don't fit with the institutions brand?

How are young people's' voices edited before being shared or made public by the institution?

Who do institutions want to participate in their programmes and why?

How comfortable are institutions with young people identifying themselves as artists and writers?

How can young people not only shape and institution but appropriate it as a platform for their own agenda?