

<b>Institution: Newcastle University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 36 Communication, Cultural &amp; Media Studies, Library &amp; Information</b>
<b>Title of case study: Northern Spirit: Co-producing North-East visual culture, histories and identities at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The 'Northern Spirit' research project entailed the co-production of a new gallery about the visual culture, histories and identities of North-East England at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, the region's foremost public historical art gallery. The project generated a range of impacts across the local and national cultural, social and policy spheres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cultural life:</b> It contributed to the production of a new permanent display which challenged, changed and enhanced the ways that the visual culture of North-East England is presented to, and understood by, the local public and tourists.</li> <li>• <b>Civil society and public discourse:</b> It brought together diverse members of the local community including marginalised and disadvantaged groups, making their perspectives visible in the gallery for the first time. It offered new precedents for combining art historical display with issues of social history and regional identity using digital media and participatory methods.</li> <li>• <b>Policy making:</b> It explored and theorised the opportunities and challenges of working collaboratively with diverse community groups on the production of a public gallery display, resulting in the production of new policy guidelines and feeding into the gallery working and wider staff training.</li> <li>• <b>Public services:</b> Through the production of a new permanent and well-received gallery display it directly enhanced the provision of cultural services, promoting the artistic heritage of the region and increasing visitor figures for the Laing. Since its opening in October 2010 the 'Northern Spirit' gallery has been visited by an estimated audience of 800,000.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>For 'Northern Spirit' the research team investigated what constitutes a visual sense of place and how a gallery like the Laing, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, contributes to the public's understanding of this. At the same time, the research team investigated how a gallery-based representation interacts with people's own understanding and lived experience of the visual culture of North-East England. To understand this, the research team carried out extensive consultation and collaboration with individuals and groups drawn from the local community and from the wider arts sector (regionally and nationally) to co-produce a range of digital media which were integrated into the new 'Northern Spirit' display. As part of the gallery redesign, the researchers conceptualised and delivered the audio-visual content of the new display, producing a photograph projection, an interactive map, a sound-bench and six digital touchscreens. Involvement in the overall gallery redesign enabled the team to investigate their other research agenda: how to design exhibitions that offer multiple points of entry and interpretive routes to a diversity of audiences with a wide range of existing knowledge and specific cultural capital relating either to art or place.</p> <p>'Northern Spirit' is part of a long trajectory of research undertaken in the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies (ICCHS) at Newcastle University, which focuses on the representations of identities within the museum and within visitor and non-visitor groups. This research led to the successful award of a two-year Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project as part of the AHRC Museums and Galleries Research Programme 2008-2010 and then to two AHRC funded follow-on projects, all linked to the original research.</p> <p>The Principal Investigator (PI), Rhiannon Mason, joined ICCHS in 2001 and has researched and published extensively on issues of the representation of identities and places within museums, most notably in relation to a study of the National Museums of Wales and how they present Welsh identities, histories and cultures (1). Mason's other strand of research concerns new museological theory and issues such as polyvocality and the ways that public histories come to be presented in museums displays (2, 5, 6). In 2009 Mason also co-authored a literature review commissioned by English Heritage about sense of place, heritage and capital as part of a larger project with the</p>

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Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University. This research expertise was brought to bear on the project at the Laing Art Gallery which was about how the visual history of a region is presented and which kinds of voices, histories, identities, and perspectives come to be included in a gallery's representation.

Chris Whitehead, the Co-Investigator (CI), joined ICCHS in 2002 and has a long track record of researching and publishing about art galleries and issues of place-identity (6). Whitehead had previously published extensively in the area of art museums and epistemology, problematizing the conventional representational work of art museums (3); this informed the 'Art on Tyneside' project conceptually. He had also written a number of papers on the relationships between art museums and place, including three journal articles on the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and one book chapter on the 'Art on Tyneside' gallery at the Laing which was the focus of the subsequent 'Northern Spirit' development (4). This paper analysed the gallery in relation to issues of regional identities. Insights include understanding of place identity, visitor studies and the role of place as an organising principle in the museum context in terms of collections, displays and interpretation. This is the first time that place identity has been mobilised in a display context from a scholarly perspective.

**3. References to the research**

1. Mason R. (2007) Museums, nations, identities: Wales and its national museums. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
2. Mason R. (2005) Museums, galleries and heritage: sites of meaning-making and communication. In: Corsane, G., ed. Heritage, museums and galleries: an introductory reader. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, pp.200-214.
3. Whitehead, C. (2009) Museums and the Construction of Disciplines: art and archaeology in nineteenth-century Britain. London: Duckworth Academic. REF2 output: 336.
4. Whitehead C. (2009) 'Locating art: The display and construction of place identity in art galleries'. In: Peralta E; Anico M, ed. Heritage and Identity: Engagement and Demission in the Contemporary World. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 29-46.
5. Mason R., Whitehead C. and Graham H. (2012) 'One Voice to Many Voices: Displaying Polyvocality in an Art Gallery'. In: Modest, W. and Golding, V., eds. Curators and Communities: New Approaches to Collaboration in the Museum. Blackwell.
6. Mason R, Whitehead C, Graham H. (2012) The Place of Art in the Public Art Gallery: A Visual Sense of Place. In: Davis, P; Corsane, G; Convery, I, ed. Making Sense of Place. Boydell and Brewer.

All outputs are available from HEI on request.

**Grants:**

- AHRC Museums and Galleries Research Programme (2008-10). 'Art on Tyneside: Redeveloping a Permanent Display about Art, Place and Identity at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle'. Value: circa £346,000 (includes £112,000 for the gallery development). PI: Rhiannon Mason. CI: Chris Whitehead.
- AHRC follow-up funding. 'Intellectual Property and Informed Consent: Partnerships and Participation in Museum and Heritage Projects' (2011-12). Value: circa: £40,000. PI: Rhiannon Mason, CI: Helen Graham (ICCHS), CI: Nigel Nayling, University of Wales. <http://partnershipandparticipation.wordpress.com/>
- AHRC follow-up funding. 'Heritage, Health and Wellbeing – Mapping future priorities and potential'. (2011) Value: circa £40,000. CI: Rhiannon Mason; PI: Helen Chatterjee, University College London.

**4. Details of the impact**

This research has benefitted a diverse range of audiences including artistic and museological communities of practice, local community groups and Laing visitors. It made a significant impact upon Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM) by directly contributing to their gallery redevelopment and leading to an enhanced public presentation of the visual culture of North-East England.

### **Impact on cultural life: enhancing the presentation of cultural heritage in North-East England**

'Northern Spirit' is a permanent display created for the Laing Art Gallery to replace its former 'Art on Tyneside' exhibition, which was over 17 years old, with out-dated content and in urgent need of a redesign when the research project began. The AHRC grant won by the Newcastle University team brought a direct financial benefit of £112,000 to the overall gallery redevelopment project, enabling investment in new digital media content and equipment. This input enabled TWAM to match this funding with money from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Woolfson Fund, resulting in an overall project budget of £1.1 million. The Director of TWAM stated that "The Art of Tyneside Research Project has had significant direct benefits for TWAM venues, TWAM staff and TWAM audiences. The previous display had reached the end of its life and the contribution of research funding made a significant difference in helping secure other match funding in order to set much-needed changes in motion. In particular it provided support with the development of new media content, which is very much enjoyed by visitors to the Gallery" **(IMP1)**.

In the new 'Northern Spirit' gallery the significance of the Laing collection was extended through the inclusion of new commissioned and co-produced participatory content presented through a mix of digital media based platforms, including a sound bench, touchscreen displays, an interactive map and digital projection. Through these, 62 separate media content elements were integrated into the new display, including audio soundscapes, digital stories, short film interviews and crowd-sourced digital photographs. A series of film interviews with regional and national artworld figures (including artist Antony Gormley, Director of Tate Nicolas Serota and Director of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art Godfrey Worsdale) offered new perspectives on the significance of North East art and culture. The redesign also introduced a new platform for showing iconic photographic images of the region. As the Laing does not normally collect photography this was a new opportunity to introduce this aspect of the region's heritage into the gallery **(IMP1)**.

### **Impact on civil society and public discourse: coproduction of cultural heritage**

Over the two years of the project 67 individuals worked with the research team to co-produce digital stories for the new gallery. Participants included older people and under-represented groups e.g. people with disabilities or learning or mobility difficulties, refugee and asylum seekers and young people at risk of exclusion from school. A Flickr competition also ran alongside the gallery redevelopment generating new online participation in the project (84 members joined the Flickr Group, contributing over 200 images). The project generated new ways of working collaboratively by putting into practice theories about co-production and participatory research through practical workshops and creative activities. The films, photographs, sound pieces and digital stories produced were then integrated into the final display and published on the web. The research team worked with gallery designers, curators and learning professionals to create platforms for showcasing these co-produced audio-visual outputs, producing insight into the changes to design processes necessitated by collaborative working **(IMP1)**.

### **Impact on policy making: informing professional museum practice**

The 'Northern Spirit' project introduced innovative research relating to new museology, co-production and use of digital media into the TWAM gallery development process. Researchers ran workshops around theories of interpretation and place-identity for staff and shared community and public feedback on the gallery plans with the project team. The team also collaborated with TWAM to create guidelines and training for front-of-house gallery staff to help them respond to questions from the public, such as why the perspectives of asylum seekers were included in the gallery. TWAM's Director confirmed that: "The benefits of the project have been embedded within working practices and significantly contributed to the way TWAM now approaches Gallery interpretation" **(IMP1)**. Joint panel sessions by ICCHS and TWAM on collaborative partnerships between HEIs and museums and galleries were presented at the 2010 Museums Association Conference (Manchester). These were attended by 90 UK museum and gallery professionals. The research team's partnership with TWAM was further developed through participation in the Tate/TWAM public engagement initiative the Great British Art Debate (<http://www2.tate.org.uk/greatbritishartdebate/index.html>) and the digital storytelling project

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Cultureshock (<http://www.cultureshock.org.uk/about.html>).

In 2011 the 'Northern Spirit' research developed into an AHRC follow-on project 'Partnership and Participation: Copyright and Informed Consent'. This focused on questions of participation and intellectual property in museum and gallery projects that had emerged as key issues in the 'Northern Spirit' study. Working with staff at TWAM and at Newport City Museum and Heritage Service this project resulted in the production of a PDF report directed at heritage sector professionals which offers practical advice and guidelines on ethics and ownership when working collaboratively with the public and digital media. Graham H, Mason R, Nayling N. *Earning Legitimacy: Participation, Intellectual Property and Informed Consent*. This is available from the project blog (878 views to date) (IMP2).

### Impact on public services: increasing visitor numbers and satisfaction for the Laing Art Gallery

Over 400 people attended the 'Northern Spirit' launch event, many of whom were project participants. In the first week of opening of the new display the Laing received 9,000 visitors. As a free exhibition the gallery does not provide separate visitor numbers for 'Northern Spirit', but overall Laing visitor figures have increased from 250,000 per annum prior to the gallery redevelopment to over 270,000 in the year following the opening of 'Northern Spirit' (an 8% increase) (IMP3). Two separate evaluations carried out by the Laing itself and by the project researchers demonstrated that visitors overwhelmingly report increased satisfaction with the improved quality of the new gallery, its new content, the audio-visual resources, and the co-produced content. One recent visitor liked the way the new display "mirrors the history of the city" noticing in particular how the region had "a big art history"; another described the exhibition as "snapshots of lives....a sort of celebration"; while a third noted how the new media content "expands the social context of the gallery" (IMP4).

'Northern Spirit' has created a valuable new education resource for TWAM. Whereas the previous display was not regularly employed for educational activity, the new 'Northern Spirit' gallery is used extensively by the Laing learning team, both for its on-going programme of targeted schools workshops for different education keystages and for teacher training, e.g. as part of its popular 'Bigger Picture' series (IMP5). The display is also the focus of a new 'Identity Tour' aimed at older secondary school students. Based on figures provided by the Laing around 40 separate school and college groups from across North East England now engage with 'Northern Spirit' each year, some making multiple visits to the gallery (IMP6). In addition the Laing also offers two family trails that include 'Northern Spirit'. In a follow-up interview (February 2013) learning team staff spoke about the way in which the new display now offers clear themes which schools and teachers find easy to relate to. They particularly noted the popularity of the interactive map and suggested that they would like to see the extension of AV material and projections into the adjacent café space. The 'Northern spirit' gallery is the focus of curator-led tours and is also used as a resource for more informal activities including creative writing workshops managed by a local writing group and activities led by the Laing Writer in Residence (IMP7).

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

(IMP1) Letter from Iain Watson, Director of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM).

(IMP2) Link: to project blog: [partnership-and-participation-intellectual-property-and-informed-consent/](http://partnership-and-participation-intellectual-property-and-informed-consent/)

(IMP3) Summary of Laing Gallery Visitor figures (2009-2013). Available on request.

(IMP4) In-gallery Northern Spirit visitor survey (February 2013). Full results available on request.

(IMP5) Bigger Picture series: 'The Women' Teaching Resource. Available at: <http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/schools/laing-art-gallery/workshops/the-bigger-picture-the-women.438.html>.

(IMP6) Education participation figures compiled by the Laing Learning Team. Available on request.

(IMP7) Notes from follow-up interview with TWAM Learning Team. Available on request.

All sources are available at: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/macsicchs/people/staff/rhiannon.mason>.