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The consumption of contemporary visual art: Identity formation in late adulthood

Introduction

This paper examines how a group of older people consume contemporary visual art as content for identity processes. The research¹ reported upon is an exploratory study of older people's responses to the British Art Show 6² and the corresponding programme of events that ran from 24 September 2005 to 8 January 2006 at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art³, Gateshead, UK. There were two elements to the programme: talks given by artists whose works were included in the British Art Show 6, and an artist-led workshop in which participants produced their own work in response to works on display in the exhibition. This research involved the qualitative analysis of participants' responses to these activities and adopted an analytical framework that related to identity formation.

While there has been research on the effects of engagement with the arts (Matarasso, 1997; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004; Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, among others), there is little that attempts to explain the mechanisms through which those effects are developed and sustained. For example, a 2004 US-based study (McCarthy et al., 2004) notes that most of the empirical research on the impacts of the arts suffers from conceptual and methodological limitations. McCarthy et al. (2004) note that much of the research does not go further than establishing correlations between arts involvement and the presence of certain effects in the study subjects. The empirical literature they surveyed lacked critical specifics about such issues as how the claimed benefits are produced, how they relate to different types of arts experiences, and under what circumstances and for which populations they are most likely to occur. This paper aims to contribute to resolving these issues by exploring how a group of older people use contemporary visual art as content for identity processes. Theoretical links between identity formation and the construct of wellbeing are also examined, providing a possible direction for future research.

This research is prompted by the need to understand and respond to the needs of an ageing population. The number of people over pensionable age in the UK is projected to increase from nearly 11.4 million in 2006 to over 13.9 million by 2026⁴. The challenges associated with this are increasingly the focus of UK government policy⁵.

There have been few studies that have explored the impact of cultural programmes upon older people. An interesting example is that reported upon by Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens (2006). The authors measured the 'impact of community-based cultural programmes on the physical health, mental health and social activities of individuals aged 65 and over' (p. 762). Participants were assigned to an intervention group, where they joined a choral group, or carried on their normal activity. Results were assessed a year after the intervention started. They concluded that they could identify a number of major areas of improvement in wellbeing including self rating of overall health. Other studies point towards the benefits for older people engaging in leisure activities, suggesting reduced mortality (Simone & Cesena, 2010; Lennartsson & Silverstein, 2001), and improved wellbeing (Everard, Lach, Fisher & Baum, 2000).

This paper is constructed in the following way. Firstly, a theoretical framework is presented that provides a structure through which the responses of the respondents are interpreted. It is important to note that this is used as a guide rather than a ridged framework. Following this the methodology adopted is introduced which includes an introduction to the British Art Show 6 and the respondents themselves. The use of contemporary visual art as content for identity processes, by these respondents, is discussed in the following analysis. A discussion is then presented and conclusions drawn.

Theoretical framework

The approach to consumption adopted for this paper is that presented by Baudrillard (2001, p. 25) who sees it as 'a systematic act of the manipulation of signs' on behalf of individuals and groups which are used for the purpose of communicating meanings. Mackay (1997) discusses the history of the use of

the term emphasising how consumers have come to be seen as active rather than passive in the construction of signs and subsequent meanings. He states that in postmodern accounts cultural consumption is seen as the 'very material out of which we construct our identities: we become what we consume' (p.2).

The definition of identity adopted is that given by Whitbourne, Sneed and Skultety (2002, p. 30) who view it as a:

broad bio-psychosocial self-definition that encompasses the individual's self-representation in the areas of physical functioning, cognition, personality, relationships, occupation and social roles broadly defined.

Its roles and functions are defined by Kroger (2002, p. 82) as through 'its processes and contents it provides meaning, form and continuity to one's life experiences' (p. 82). Kroger and Adair (2008) state that an optimal sense of identity:

is experienced as a subjective sense of sameness and continuity across time and space. An optimal sense of identity provides feelings of wellbeing, of being 'at home' in one's body and in one's psychological and social worlds. Behaviourally, identity enables a person to move with a sense of direction and purpose in life, recognising and being recognised by meaningful social contexts and significant others (p. 6).

A number of authors have considered aspects of identity formation in later life. Hill, von Mering & Guillette (1995) draw parallels with identity formation in adolescence. Both adolescence and later life require adaption to new circumstances and are seen as transitional, being the years before and after significant life course responsibilities. Kroger (2002) states:

Adolescence and late adulthood each encompass times of important biological, psychological and social changes demanding new identity considerations and consolidations (p. 82).

From a study based in New Zealand, Kroger (2002) uses Marcia's (1966, 1967) identity status framework to explore identity processes and contents in late adulthood. The processes identified were split into two major groups: firstly revision processes associated with adjusting to change, such as reintegrating important identity elements from the past and readjusting following loss. The second group identified included those processes associated with the maintenance of identity, expressed in terms of identity defining commitments, such as establishing visible forms of continuity and maintaining a predictable daily life structure.

Whitbourne, et al. (2002) suggests that 'identity assimilation and identity accommodation describe how the individual negotiates new experiences associated with the ageing process throughout adulthood' (p. 30). They state that people prefer to view themselves in a positive light:

This set of positive self-attributions is maintained primarily through the process of identity assimilation, which, as in Piaget's theory (1975/1977) is defined as the interpretation of new experiences through the existing schema of identity. When experiences become sufficiently discrepant from an existing identity, the individual may then begin to make appropriate shifts through identity accommodation (p. 30).

The authors suggest that those who can maintain a balance between assimilation and accommodation are best placed to age well. They can adapt to changes while retaining a sense of continuity in their lives.

It is acknowledged that not all would have the ability or resources to engage in identity processes equally as identities are not the outcome of free or unmediated choice (Isin & Wood, 1999). The variable ability amongst people

to utilise resources to manage identities in modern societies is explored by Cote (1996). In order to develop and implement a strategy to maximise life-course outcomes, for example to enable social class or status mobility, the individual needs to develop what Cote describes as identity capital. The individual:

invests in a certain identity (or identities) and engages in a series of exchanges at the level of identity with other actors. To do this in a complex, shifting social milieu requires certain cognitive skills and personality attributes. These investments potentially reap dividends in the 'identity markets' of late modern communities (p. 425).

The optimisation of identity depends on the availability of resources and the ability to utilise those resources for identity processes. Newman & Mclean (2006) identified from a study of socially excluded museum and gallery visitors that the 'forms of identity created were an attempt to overcome aspects of exclusion and to manage their lives more effectively' (p. 64). One of the case studies examined was an initiative developed by the Glasgow Museums' Community Outreach Department. A group of people from Pollok⁶ were constructing an exhibition on the history of their area. The themes chosen 'privileged particular representations of Pollok history and created a representation that provided residents with a positive community history that they could be proud of' (p. 62). Participants were responding in identity terms to the deprived nature of their environment. The project gave them the resources and abilities to construct a collective identity which they, within particular structures, determined.

The possible ways that identity processes might function in broader society is discussed by Bourdieu (1984) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1979). Their thesis states that cultural forms, such as high art, are given particular meanings by dominant groups that may be inaccessible to the less dominant. Therefore, familiarity with those cultural forms, described as cultural capital, potentially gives access to power within society and this is passed between generations, maintaining existing social structures. This has been explored by

a number of authors, such as DiMaggio (1996) who concludes that the relationship between socioeconomic background and cultural capital is weaker than Bourdieu's work might suggest. Also du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus (1997) who argue that too great an emphasis is placed on class, thus not recognising the subtle ways that social divisions can be crossed, creating new social identities and differences in the process. It is argued, by the authors of this paper, that the process of constructing, manipulating or attempting to manipulate meanings is one that can be used to explain the ways that people behave within local social environments. In this paper the construct of cultural capital is defined as 'symbolically valued cultural accoutrements and attitudes' (Greenfell & Hardy, 2007, p. 30) and these may consist of clothes or a particular political stance rather than fine art.

However, fine art and contemporary art in particular arguably provides radically significant content for identity processes. Associated with elite social and intellectual groupings and with high-status, high-profile publicly-funded organisations (i.e. galleries), contemporary art can allow for identity positions related to feelings of belonging within an elite milieu. Alternatively, the same associations can be off-putting and excluding. Meanwhile, individuals may elect to dissociate themselves from contemporary art because of popular critical discourse surrounding it. This includes the popular stereotypes frequently reproduced in print news media of contemporary artists as needlessly subversive and not possessed or concerned with technical skill and ability, industriousness or conventional artistic talent (e.g. the talent to produce mimetically accurate images), and of contemporary art as inherently worthless (a position tantamount to pointing out the absurdity of the emperor's new clothes). This confusion of available discourses about contemporary art, as material for elite consumption or as widespread cultural fraud, arguably puts those who attend contemporary galleries and gallery activities in a position of choice with regard to identity, a position which for some may prove invidious. In this view, people's responses to, and value judgements about, works of art, as well as their implied definitions of art, can bespeak complex identity positions relating not only to aesthetic preferences but also to desired or actual group belonging, cultural dispositions and even moral sensibilities

(for example, in being offended by the content of works of art or in censoring the absence of evidence of skill or application in conceptual art).

Methodology

The British Art Show is presented at different cities across the UK every five years. The British Art Show 6 was organised by Hayward Gallery Touring and was opened at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead on 24 September 2005 and then toured the country until 17 September 2006. The show included work in all media including painting, sculpture, installation, film, video and performance. Fifty artists contributed and the work was made in the five years prior to the show.

The activities analysed were part of the Fivearts Cities initiatives which was a partnership between Channel Five and Arts Council England. Fivearts Cities funded and worked with the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art to deliver a programme of activities and events for the over-50s inspired by, or relating to, the British Art Show 6. The programme ran from 24 September 2005 to 8 January 2006. This research focuses on two elements of the programme: the talks given by artists whose works were included in British Art Show 6, and an artist-led workshop in which participants developed their own work in response to works on display in the exhibition.

Data was collected in relation to the 'meet-the-artists' talks with Hew Locke⁷ (12 October 2005) and Zineb Sedira⁸ (19 October 2005), both of which were prefaced by brief introductions by the art historian Paul Usherwood⁹. The data collection was based on qualitative focus groups with four subjects immediately before the first activity and then some seven weeks after the last one, on 6 December 2005. The long gap between data collecting events was due to difficulties in arranging for all four participants to be available; however, the time lapse also added some depth to the data as it allowed the participants more time for reflection. As the first focus group took place immediately prior to the second of three artists' talks, the data collection was not intended to reflect a 'before-and-after' model; however, the fact that two artists' talks took place between one focus group and another meant that the

data from the focus groups did have a longitudinal aspect. This manifested itself in the depth of participants' responses to the talks, but their attitudes to contemporary art in general did not substantially differ in qualitative terms between the two focus groups. Researchers were also present at the artists' talks themselves for observational purposes, although it should be noted that not all four participants attended both talks. Three of the four members in the first focus group were retired teachers, and would be categorised by Chan & Goldthorpe (2007) as cultural omnivores. As such, they are more likely to engage with a wide range of cultural forms.

The second group consisted of 30 individuals who were given a guided tour of the exhibition and then attended an artist-led workshop, run by Bernadette O'Toole¹⁰ on 25 October 2006, where they constructed an artwork in response to what they had seen. At the end of the exercise the researchers were introduced to the group and the participants were asked by O'Toole to reflect informally on their experience of the day and to discuss their artworks. The formal session then concluded and participants were invited to remain if they wished to discuss their experiences of the workshop or their responses to the exhibition further. A focus group was then established by those who wished to remain, totalling half of the participants (n=15) (it is important to note that this means that focus group members were self-selected); the focus group was co-ordinated by researchers in the presence of the artist and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art's staff.

This research project adopted a qualitative approach as it is more likely to gauge subtle shifts in affect (Denscombe, 2003) and was felt appropriate for addressing the complex nature of identity construction. The data set consisted of two groups.

While no attempt was made to ask participants to define art, or 'good' art, attention was paid to the implicit definitions and judgments which emerged in their responses. In some cases this could be formulated within the terms of analytic philosophy as an expression of necessary and sufficient conditions of ontology. This, while much debated for its value in defining art in any

essentialist way (Warburton, 2003, p. 118), is nevertheless of use in describing how *individuals* might define art.

A summary of the data set, data collection points and methods adopted is given as Figure 1.

BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK	Data collection points and methods
<p>Group 1 Meet-the-Artist Talks</p> <p>Zineb Sedira, 28 September 2005 Hew Locke, 25 October 2005</p>	<p>Guided tour of British Art Show 6</p> <p>Two focus groups – semi-structured and reflexive questioning – (n=4) prior to and after talks</p>
<p>Group 2 Artist-led Workshop</p> <p>In response to the exhibition – 7 October 2005</p>	<p>Guided tour of British Art Show 6</p> <p>Responses from whole group (n=30) Focus group – semi-structured and reflexive questioning – (n=15)</p>

Figure 1 Research data set summary, data collection points and methods

The general responses and focus groups were of between 30 and 120 minutes' duration and were digitally recorded (audio only) and transcribed; the transcripts were then coded using Nvivo 8¹¹ software, which is designed to help manage qualitative data. The coding was based on existing categories identified in the theory such as identity processes and cultural capital, and other themes identified from the data, such as art and place used as identity content.

The questioning was semi-structured and reflexive. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and their backgrounds and then they were encouraged to discuss their ideas, understandings and uses of art and their intellectual,

affective and artistic responses to the British Art Show 6. It is acknowledged that it is not possible to generalise the conclusions beyond the data set. However, as Perakyla (2004) notes in the context of comprehending the validity of data obtained from conversation analysis, beyond the 'traditional 'distributional' understanding of generalization' lies the opportunity to understand results of this kind through the concept of possibility, where responses by participants in this study represent '*social practices which are possible*' (p. 296-7, original emphases).

The respondents – Meet-the-Artist Talks and Artist-led workshop

The respondents in both groups had either been selected by BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art's staff or they had responded to publicity materials¹². They represented a mixture of both users and non-users of the gallery.

The first participant, [participant 1] in the 'meet-the-artists' talks was a male aged 72 who lived locally and had a long-term interest in art. He had worked in the printing industry before taking early retirement. The second and third participants were a married couple; the female was aged 56 [participant 2] and the male aged 58 [participant 3]. These respondents also lived locally and had taken early retirement from teaching in a primary school. They stated that they were not art teachers and had limited understanding of contemporary visual art. The final participant, [participant 4] who again lived locally, was a male retired art teacher aged 68 who had worked in a secondary school.

The participants in the artist-led workshop (group 2) were all over 50 (aged 53-72). A number of people had attended with friends or spouses in order to accompany them. All of the respondents are described as being in early late adulthood (Kroger, 2002) in that they are adjusting to changes in various roles but not to a decline in physical health.

Analysis

The analysis presented below seeks to explore how respondents used the experience of the 'meet-the-artists' talks or the artist-led workshop as content for identity processes. In doing this it explores the possible motivations of

respondents placing them centrally in the analysis. This approach differs from conventional studies of cultural consumption which focus on the art form and are interested in variables that control how the art itself is consumed, for example, socioeconomic group etc. (for example, Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Bennett et al. 2009). Inevitably, this analysis requires a level of inference as motivations are not directly articulated by respondents. However, the suggested reasons for the ways that processes are engaged with are supported by the literature. While a series of themes have been identified it is not possible observe distinct boundaries between them and this has determined the organisation of the analysis below.

Responses to contemporary visual art and possible motivations

The first respondent, who attended the 'meet-the-artist' talks, [participant 1] stated:

After a career...a full-time career in the printing industry for over 40 years, I took early retirement. Prior to that I was always interested in all different types of... not just art, music, literature, I've got a wide range of interests, but I have always liked culture... Because of work, there were lots of things I would have wanted to go and see and I couldn't have the opportunity and now I have. And...because there's more and more opportunities in this area, which we never had before, the facilities are fantastic, so I'm making the effort to come to them, and I find it very rewarding.

This respondent is maintaining and developing an existing interest into retirement enabling a sense of continuity with his earlier life (Kroger, 2002). He has the cultural capital to confidently use different cultural forms for this purpose and has a clear and well-established positive attitude towards art. He is investing in a stable identity-defining commitment which is an aspect of his self-construct.

The older retired art teacher's (participant 4) responses could also be seen in terms of identity maintenance processes (Kroger, 2002), but they used the

content of contemporary visual art in a very different way to participant 1. They state:

I have got a degree in art from Newcastle University, and taught art for a long time. But apart from teaching it, which I enjoyed, I couldn't really see the point of it, especially contemporary art; I just don't see the point of it. So I keep coming to these galleries and places like the Waygood¹³ and Vane¹⁴ and so on, to try and... I may, you know, one day get an inkling as to what it's all about. I strongly suspect that most of it is absolute rubbish. And this has been confirmed by this exhibition here.

This respondent had more confidence talking about the subject than the other respondents, having been an art teacher in a local secondary school. While he gave the impression that his mind was made up, he continued to engage with contemporary visual art, stating that he hoped that he may at some point understand what it was about. A possible interpretation of this is that his opposition to the art form provides a level of distinction amongst his peers. He indicated that because of his background he understood art, so his views had authority, but had just about concluded that this form of it was valueless. By emphasising the authority of his views he aimed to have his opinions recognised by others.

The responses of the younger retired couple [participants 2 and 3] showed that they were unsure about the validity of contemporary visual art and could be seen as engaging in exploratory activity associated with identity revision processes (Kroger, 2002). The female retired teacher [participant 2] stated:

I probably came in with a fairly closed mind and having sort of had a whisk round on previous... the Sunday before and thought 'what are we doing here?' After the first talk I was certainly inspired to come back and look at it properly, rather than come in and just sort of think 'Oh, it's a load of rubbish.' And yeah there are certain pieces of work... I look at it and I think '1. Is this art? Even if it's contemporary art. 2. Do I particularly want to look at it?' Which I didn't, but there was an awful lot

more here when having sort of spent a bit of time listening and talking, that... that I thought yeah, okay, there maybe is... some of it, attracts me. I mean, nothing is going to attract everybody all of the time you know, but there was certainly...

The male retired teacher [participant 3] had a similar view:

Also [laughs] [we came] to smile at some of the stuff that, yes, we found less than stimulating. But certainly the opportunity this morning to meet artists, as we have done for this series, it's been great to have an insight into some of the things that they have tried to achieve, and have achieved, or perhaps not achieved as the case may be.

The judgements being made by these respondents about the use of contemporary visual art as content for identity processes are complex and a number of possible levels of engagement can be suggested. They appear open to the possibility that the art form has value but their understanding is limited by the cultural capital they can bring to bear. They might have been trying to recognise structures that simplify or guide their engagement (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 130). However, remaining unconvinced but still engaged might have had certain advantages. Peer groups might encourage scepticism but also value apparent open-mindedness. This attitude could be theorised as representing a particular habitus¹⁵ (Reay, 2004) which is an expression of the cultural capital held by respondents (Lash, 1993). The performance of this habitus might generate more cultural capital (see next section) and so change the original habitus.

Their possible use of contemporary visual art in this way may also have been determined by their perceptions of the sort of people that visit galleries and enjoy this sort of art. For example, their uncertainly might reflect doubts over whether they wish to be seen as part of a group that like contemporary visual art. Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje (2002) argue that 'when collective identities are concerned, the level of commitment to a particular group or category determines how group characteristics, norms or outcomes will influence the

perceptual, affective and behavioural responses of individuals belonging to that group' (p. 164). They state that 'the context provides feedback about one's social position (on the person in the group, of the group in relation to other groups), that can provide a sense of security (even superiority) or engender a source of threat to self' (p. 165). It can be argued that people are 'motivated to belong to groups that are superior to other groups in terms of status' (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1999, p. 99). In this case the status of the group seemed unclear to the respondents and may differ depending upon context. The respondents might have been making judgements about the risks associated with aligning themselves with this particular group (Threadgold & Nilan, 2009). They appeared to have a low degree of commitment (although this might change in the future) and membership of this group might threaten the identity positions they already had. It is interesting that the younger retired female teacher [participant 2] stated:

We received information from the arts chaplain at church about the BALTIC – there was a flyer came out. And because neither my husband nor I have ever been particularly interested in contemporary art, we thought 'never too old to learn something new'.

Belonging to their church placed them within a social context that provided validation for identity processes using contemporary visual art, which encouraged their participation. Turner (1999, p. 14) states that 'psychological group formation is not based upon interpersonal attraction (attraction between members as unique individual persons) but creates identity-based liking between members in terms of their mutually perceived group identities'.

In response to retirement these respondents explored new possibilities as a way of adjusting to the changes in their lives. The younger retired male teacher [participant 3] stated:

Since becoming retired, I've had an opportunity to explore a lot of things about perhaps my life, my nature. My wife and I got ourselves into digital photography. And we had an opportunity to explore all sorts

of ideas and all sorts of locations. And we came along to some of these events, maybe looking for reasons why as well, but looking at the way people have interpreted situations, and moods and themes and one thing or another. Maybe to crib a few ideas, maybe to see where somebody's done something well, or you know, where we've had some sort of empathy with it.

Changes in identity were occurring at retirement as identified by Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff (1983). However, these changes are not the inevitable consequence of more time becoming available but are also dependent on internal change processes. Kroger & Green (1986, p. 489) state that 'factors such as one's degree of openness to experience, ego resilience, self esteem, and cognitive complexity may serve to mediate external pressures in the identity formation process'. This might consist of 'new ways of thinking about the self and others' and that 'such changes might later propel individuals into new external contexts and/or forms of relatedness with others' (p. 488). The respondent was able to respond to retirement by taking advantage of new opportunities that became available.

Engagement producing new cultural capital

There was also evidence that the artist-led workshop and 'meet-the-artist' talks provided some of the respondents with the cultural capital that gave them the option of using contemporary visual art for identity processes. An example of this was a male aged 71, who had attended the artist-led workshop to accompany his friends and his wife, stated:

I came here with very low expectations. I didn't know what to expect and have been very pleasantly surprised. I don't agree with a lot of the art work that was presented, as examples for us to help stimulate us, but having said that I was stimulated, and have done something which I felt I wouldn't be able to do. I took some inspiration from textured work, which was downstairs. And although we didn't have oils to texture things with, I've done something with the acrylics, to give the impression.

A female member of the artist-led workshop group aged 66 stated:

I got to quite a few of the talks here, but it's the first time I've actually been to a workshop, this is supposed to be a bit like Gary Webb's¹⁶ work, (laughs) and I wouldn't say it was the thing that inspired me most about the exhibition, but it was probably the only one I had the confidence to try, you know.

The process of exploration, associated with identity revision processes, is also seen in the ways that one of the respondents spoke about the artwork they had made. A 69-year-old female made a piece in response to an artwork by Enrico David, entitled *Madreperlage* (2003, mixed media) which was a large reclining doll or effigy. She states:

I really enjoyed the exhibition. And when I came in to here I didn't know what to expect, what to make, and I looked over the Tyne and I thought of the Salvation Army hostel, and the tramps, so I thought 'Oh I'll make this little feller here' and insulate him with this. And how I came here, I got a letter from the (inaudible), it's a group of people who have a lot to do with older people, and at the moment they're having a meeting in November on the cold, and you know emphasizing the risks of the cold. So I think it must be an assimilation of ideas. I've mixed the whole thing in my subconscious it must have been there; it's really great, you know, to think like that, to open your mind. I thoroughly enjoyed today.

This person was the most reflexive in the group and this approach can be seen as identity assimilation (Whitbourne, et al., 2002) where new experiences, for example, the visit to the British Art Show 6, are being interpreted through the existing schema of identity and then, in this case, given expression through the artwork. New cultural capital is being generated through the workshop allowing the respondent to make meaning from new experiences.

Responses to difficulties in decoding the artwork

In one particular case the lack of cultural capital to use contemporary visual art as content for identity processes caused a strong reaction. A female (aged 58) who took part in the focus group that took place after the artist-led workshop stated:

Personally, I really feel as if I'm totally on the outside of this because these people love it, and appreciate it, I can see it, they talk about it, I just wish I felt it. This is why I keep coming back, until I can finally see something that makes the hairs on the back of my neck zizzle.

Later she also stated:

I really am furious and I've been bellyaching about it amongst these three [her friends] and bashing their ears for the last three years. I have never seen anything here, for me personally, and I agree my knowledge of art is very limited, and I'm one of these people that if I like it, I like it, if I don't I don't. I don't understand the art downstairs, but it annoys me, it makes me angry, I don't like it I think it's a waste of space. I'm afraid when I've been all the way round the BALTIC and I haven't seen anything that just gets the hairs on the back of my neck zizzle I go out that door and I'm spitting feathers.

This complex response includes a number of contradictory elements. Firstly, the respondent starts by expressing a feeling of exclusion because she is unable to understand the art and many of the others in the group appear to be able to. She feels that the art, for this reason, might have value that she cannot recognise. It is evident she finds this situation frustrating and she responds to those feelings by denigrating the art rather than blaming her own lack of understanding. This respondent has a sense of how she feels that art should affect her and evidently contemporary visual art does not have that effect. The fact that this art form was enjoyed by her peers and validated by the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art is possibly a source of internal conflict because this situation contradicts her sense of self as someone who

understands art (Whitbourne, et al., 2002). She is displaying what Whitbourne (1987, p. 191) describes as 'defensive rigidity', an unwillingness to change.

In a similar way to the older retired male art teacher [participant 4], this respondent appears to need constantly to revalidate her response to contemporary visual art through repeat visiting. She states that she wishes to understand what contemporary visual art is about, but it is possible that in particular social contexts it provides a level of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Theoretically this re-visiting might have become a structuring pattern (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 131), providing a context within which a particular approach could be taken.

This response mirrors that identified by Bennett et al. (2009, p. 116) in their study of cultural consumption where a group of respondents were labelled as 'defensive'. In that situation the authors suggest that the response was caused by feelings of exclusion. Participants did not have the knowledge they felt was expected of them within the interview situation and felt 'uncomfortable in a field they felt they don't belong' (p. 121).

The artistic preferences of respondents

The artistic preferences of respondents help to explain how they engage with the art form and how that experience is being used for identity processes. The participant discussed above was asked to name an artist or exhibition that she had liked:

The last artist that I saw that I really like was a... [at a] Shotley Bridge Catholic church coffee morning sale, Annette McKinnon¹⁷, she's an artist from Consett. She works mainly in pastel; her eyes aren't so good now so she says she's going to go onto watercolour. Well why she thinks that's easier than pastel I don't know. But she is phenomenally good, and it's not just the scenes that she chooses it's the expertise - how in God's name did she do it?

When asked the sort of art she produces she states:

Fairly traditional things, fairly traditional things. But whether I like each one is not important, you can see the talent, you can see the effort, you can see the workmanship that's gone into it, and I just appreciate that it makes me feel good.

The same participant explained:

I don't want to be forced to think of things I don't want to think of, I don't want to see violence in front of me; it's out there, you know, it's already out there and I want to come to a gallery for nicer things, and I want to have a warm glow when I leave.

This evident need for engagement with a relatively sanitised selection, or history of art has complex relationships with identity formation and with cultural capital. Without the cultural capital to decode critical and challenging artworks, the participant constructs her identity in opposition to consensus views about the legitimacy of such art.

There was evidence that respondents found it difficult to see video art as art, participant 4 the 68-year-old retired art teacher stated:

Well most of the videos I think are like watching paint dry. Um they're not... some of them are pleasant to look at, nice sound tracks, but I don't consider it art, the five minute programmes on the television perhaps something like that, but they don't belong in an art gallery or anything.

One other participant, a female member of the group making an artwork aged 60, also adhered to similar notions of art, placing specific emphases on representation and mentioning some of the artworks which have featured most heavily in popular media critiques of contemporary art:

I think it's... I've never been in the BALTIC until today, and quite frankly [inaudible] I would never come over the door, because I've heard so many adverse comments from people, half a dozen balls in a row, you know. To me, that isn't art, just balls in a row, or stones or something like that or rocks. I like to come and see a painting or something, or maybe the queen [Hew Locke's works on display in British Art Show 6¹⁸] which does represent something, but I can't see anything in half a dozen balls. Cows wrapped in formaldehyde, a pile of bricks on the floor, an unmade bed, to me that isn't art...

The respondent was then asked why this was not art for her.

Personally I like to see a painting something which represents something, you can look and see oh well that represents a... that the very paintings, the water colours [by Silke Otto-Knapp¹⁹]... looked a bit like Monet's.

You know something's gone... something's gone into that, rather than just...

This participant was then challenged by another respondent (a female aged 63) who referred to Tonico Lemos Auad's *Fleeting Luck* (2005) (animal forms made out of carpet fluff which appear to emerge from the surface of the carpet):

I know what you're saying there, but since I tried to have a go at the cotton wool, you know to make something like the carpet fluff, and seeing how difficult it is, you know it's really difficult, and it must have taken hours and hours of work to get that carpet fluff to look like a creature dead on the carpet there.

The first participant responded:

Well I didn't like it, because if there'd been a head there, if there'd been a head there, it wouldn't have been so bad.

And the second:

It was quite chilling, but I appreciated the expertise and all the time that they had used, and I think it's good craftsmanship.

In analytic philosophical terms the definition of art constructed by the first participant in the exchange can be formulated as follows:

X is art *if and only if* 1) it is representational, 2) it requires craft skill and 3) it excludes subject matter seen to be uncomfortable

Notably, this artwork responded in various ways to the first participant's criteria for evaluation: as stated by the second, it was representational and required high levels of technical craft skill on the part of the artist. However, the apparently subversive element of the artwork (the decapitated creature) nevertheless meant that the participant remained unable to decode the image (e.g. to accept, as the second participant does, that the work was "quite chilling" and to identify value therein). This response could be interpreted as reflecting the cultural capital that the respondents bring to the encounter. The art was being used as content for identity processes with meanings being constructed by the respondents from their own definitions of art which were in conflict with the official narrative that was communicated by the institution.

The use of place as content for identity processes

A number of the respondents were using the art gallery, quayside and surrounding environment as content for identity processes. The use of place for identity formation is discussed by Proshansky (1983, p. 62) who defines place identity as 'a complex cognitive structure which is characterized by a host of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings and behaviour tendencies that go well beyond just emotional attachments and belonging to particular places'.

In a study of elderly residents of an Appalachian community, Rowles (1983) identified elements of attachment to place such as physical, social and autobiographical insideness. The latter 'embraces not only the place of the present but also a series of remembered places, of which the drab contemporary setting is but a remnant', place becomes a mosaic of 'incident places' (p. 303).

A sense of insideness can derive from residential inertia, a sense of security, fear of venturing outside, or a desire to belong. He concludes that attachment to place is highly personal, idiosyncratic, often constructed and intimately related to a sense of self. The author suggests that in order to generate and sustain a self-concept in old age a process of life review takes place, which involves reminiscence. Different approaches to the use of space in this way could be identified. A female member of the group who attended the artist-led workshop said:

Well I'm 68 years old, I was born just along... further along, past that bridge, a little bit further along, and I know all about the Tyne. And it was fascinating when I was a little girl, and you know when you come down now and you see the BALTIC and the Sage²⁰ and that, and I think back to what the Quayside was like, it was brilliant the Quayside, it was full of intrigue. And that sticks in your mind, you don't lose that you know, but it's wonderful to see all these changes, and life is changes isn't it?

The respondent was using memories of the River Tyne and the environment for identity maintenance processes (Kroger, 2002) and was able to incorporate changes to that environment caused by the regeneration of the area.

The female aged 58 referred to earlier who rejected contemporary visual art focused on the fact that the area was losing its regional distinctiveness and

that local artists were not featured the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art's programming. She stated:

This is a Geordie town, this is supposed to be... this is a gallery in Geordieland²¹, we're not Manchester or Liverpool, we don't want to be like that; we don't want to look like them. And this Tyne is beginning to. I've been coming here since the beginning, and bearing in mind I'm a Geordie, and I've known this building all my life and I have loved it all my life, loved the Tyne. I think it's a tragedy that they [the BALTIC staff] have restricted it [the exhibition programme] to other people and not Geordies.

The use of the dialect/colloquial term 'Geordie' reinforces the distinction that the participant made between herself and people from elsewhere. It may be that the possibility of experiencing art from a regional perspective would permit her to access an existing stock of cultural capital (relating to regional identity). This in turn would allow her to be able to access artworks in an intellectual and attitudinal sense more effectively than she can in other exhibition contexts.

The participant chose to describe the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art as 'they' attributing an otherness to the institution and therefore separating it from herself and other people from the region. The use of the word 'tragedy' in referring to the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art's programming shows the extent to which the participant felt excluded. This indicates it was less available to the respondent as content for identity processes. It is difficult to determine whether in this case the participant's sense of insideness came from residential inertia, the need for a sense of security, a fear of venturing 'outside' or a more positive inherent desire to 'belong'. The words such as 'love' used to describe the building and the river suggest a positive desire to belong, whilst the aggressive tone when describing the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in its new function as an art gallery, suggests a defensive attitude.

Another participant in the art making group (a female aged 63) discussed the reuse of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art's building. She states:

That's one of the things that struck me, that that size of these walls, and you know, the tiny bit of carpet²² ... I mean it was great, very good, but when you go in, you think 'Ee, all that space just for... all this empty space.' And it's the volume of empty space that has to be used... And I think the architects... you still know that this is the Rank Flour Mill. And when I'm in it, I'm picturing all these men working and all the machines, it's going through me mind you know, what were they doing, all the work they had. And to me it's still a Rank Flour Mill.

This respondent was making a moral judgement about the use of space and indicates that its use as a flour mill might have been more appropriate than as an art gallery as much of the space appears unused.

Participants' motivations for visiting the art gallery, the perceived benefits of endorsing or criticising contemporary art, personal preferences regarding art and the relationship participants had with the original building of the gallery all contributed to participants' articulation and formation of their identity position/s. The change in lifestyle presented by retirement seemed to offer participants opportunities to engage with contemporary visual art, which within this particular context, appeared to have an impact on their self-construct.

Discussion

It is theorised from the literature that an optimum sense of identity (Kroger and Adair, 2008) and identity balance (Whitbourne, et al. 2002) lead to increased wellbeing. While it is not possible to directly observe this in the participants' responses, as was demonstrated by Cohen et al., (2006), the processes that might lead to it are observable. It is also possible to observe situations where an optimised or balanced sense of identity, using contemporary visual art and the gallery itself as content, was proving difficult or impossible to achieve. This caused considerable frustration on the behalf of one respondent who was very critical of the art form as a result. What determined whether people were

able to, or wished to, use contemporary visual art as content for identity processes was complex. Judgements were being made by respondents which were determined by the type and amount of cultural capital they could bring to bear and their perceptions of contemporary visual art. Despite the difficulties in decoding the artist's intentions respondents were aware that the art form was validated by the institution and this influenced their thinking. The motivations of respondents were often very different, as could be seen in the responses of those who attended the 'meet-the-artists' talks. The ways that an individual engages with these processes according to Whitbourne (1987) is determined by their 'identity style' which controls their openness to experience.

Whitbourne, et al. (2002) theorise that identity-balanced individuals have a 'sense of personal control and self-efficacy with regard to the aging process' (p. 33). The authors of that paper then make links with research that shows that perceived personal control is associated with decreased mortality. Although normally associated with choice over daily activities, the benefits of control in terms of providing positive emotional and physical health outcomes (Rodin, 1986; Cohen et al., 2006) and so wellbeing have been well documented. Rodin (1986) suggests that the 'strength of the relationship between control and health increases with ageing' (p. 1271). She presents three general reasons why this might be the case. Firstly, that issues of control might have special relevance for older people because the 'loss of friends and family members or retirement, for example, might affect the types of outcomes that are actually attainable in old age or may deprive the individual of regular feedback concerning their competence' (p. 1271). Secondly, the relationship between lack of control and suppression of the immune system may become closer (Laudenslager, Ryan, Drugan, Hyson, & Maier, 1983) because of a 'general loss of immunological competence in the aged' (p. 1271). Finally, as medical care restricts control and older people have greater contact with the health care system than younger people, they may suffer the effects of this disproportionately.

This research has practical implications for institutions planning interventions to encourage engagement with art. The BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, through establishing the activities for older people described above, was enabling some of the respondents to overcome the barriers that prevented them using contemporary visual art as content for identity processes. However, this was not the case in all circumstances. The outcomes of and motivations for engagement were personal and did not necessarily relate to the wider educational objectives of the institution. This questions government policy that assumes that defined inputs can be translated into predictable, generalisable and measurable outputs (Osborne, 2010) by the action of the museum or gallery. An example of this is policy designed to address social exclusion (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001).

Conclusion

The approach taken has allowed aspects of the consumption of the British Art Show 6, by these particular respondents, to be understood. The analysis presents a possible way through which correlations between certain effects in the subjects and engagement with the arts might be explained. The analysis explores how the respondents engage in identity processes and what controls their use of contemporary visual art as content. While processes that might lead to increased wellbeing are observed, so are processes that might be ambiguous or even deleterious to wellbeing.

This exploratory study needs to be followed up by further research that examines the responses of a wider range of older individuals, such as those who are excluded from the arts (Keaney & Oskala, 2007). The use of longer timescales and an examination of how responses differ in response to different types of contemporary visual art would be valuable. It would be helpful to observe more closely how identity processes are engaged in by respondents and how contemporary visual art is used as content than this data set allows. Further qualitative research into which socio-economic groups engage with contemporary art and possible barriers to engagement would be useful.

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² <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/britishartshow6/>

³ <http://www.balticmill.com/> The BALTIC centre for Contemporary Art is funded through Arts Council England, Gateshead Council, Northern Rock Foundation and is supported by the European Regional Development Fund and One NorthEast. It is housed in a converted Rank Flour Mill and is situated on the Gateshead Quayside. It shows exhibitions of contemporary visual art. <http://www.balticmill.com/>

⁴ <http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/ageing-population.asp>

⁵ http://www.dwp.gov.uk/ageing-society/first_report.asp

⁶ Pollok is situated to the South West of Glasgow and consists of a housing scheme that was built to house those who were cleared from slum areas and those homeless after the Second World War. It suffers from a range of social problems.

⁷ <http://www.hewlocke.net/> *Black Queen* (2004) and *El Dorado* (2005) investigate icons of power and how these have changed over the last 50 years.

⁸ <http://www.zinebsedira.com/> Video installation, *Mother Tongue* (2002) explores communication across different generations.

⁹ http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sass/about/arts/vastaff/p_usherwood/

¹⁰ http://www.aa2a.org/artists/bernadette_otoole

¹¹ <http://www.qsrinternational.com/>

¹² The BALTIC staff drew on their contacts from the community development work they had been involved with and a number were recruited from an advert placed in a local council newsletter that was distributed to all households in Gateshead.

¹³ <http://www.waygood.org/>

¹⁴ <http://www.vane.org.uk/company/About.php>

¹⁵ Habitus is defined by Reay (2004, p. 435) as 'a complex internalised core from which everyday experiences emanate'.

¹⁶ <http://www.balticmill.com/whatsOn/past/ExhibitionDetail.php?exhibID=5>

¹⁷ http://www.minigallery.co.uk/Annette_McKinnon/index.asp

¹⁸ Please see note 7 above.

¹⁹ <http://cms.sbc.signoff.info/britishartshow6/bas6.html>

²⁰ The Sage Gateshead is both a live music venue and a centre for music education.

<http://www.thesagegateshead.org/index.aspx>

²¹ 'Geordie' is a regional nickname for a person from the Tyneside region of England, or the name of the dialect of English spoken by these people.

²² Referring to Tónico Lemos Auad *Fleeting Luck*, 2005

²³ <http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/>

²⁴ <http://www.five.tv/>

²⁵ <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>