

Regional arts venues: less out in the sticks, more out on a limb

by Alfredo Cramerotti

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Running an arts space outside the city is challenging but, once you realise the range of your potential audience, rewarding too



MOSTYN works to find imaginative solutions that draw in national and international visitors (even journalists) while retaining strong links with their local audience. Pictured work by Nikolaus Schletterer. Photograph: Nikolaus Schletterer/MOSTYN

As anyone who has worked in the sector will tell you, running an arts space outside major cities is a hugely rewarding experience, not least because of the challenges that arise from reaching out to an audience in ways that can't rely on a ready-made critical mass of potential visitors in the immediate area.

MOSTYN is [Wales'](#) largest gallery dedicated to contemporary art with an audience of roughly 80,000 per year, but being located in the 18,000-strong Victorian sea town of Llandudno and surrounded by a predominately rural area brings with it issues that an equivalent metropolitan space might not need to consider so carefully.

Another part of the challenge is encouraging journalists to visit. The three hours direct train from central London is less an issue than the bias towards reviews focusing on galleries and events in the bigger cities. Obviously there is a responsibility for media to cover stories of interest to as wide an audience as possible, but responses range from "I don't know where I'd put it" (the same review pages you would put any show on) to "we're fully booked up covering a major event".

It's not that these exhibitions or events don't warrant media attention, but major institutions and blockbuster events hardly need the publicity to encourage public interest.

So, how are we tackling these issues? Like many other organisations reliant on quality of programming, audience engagement, media coverage and visits to secure funding, we are working on finding imaginative solutions that draw in national and international visitors (even journalists) while retaining strong links with our local audience.

A key element of this is an ambitious curatorial programme featuring world known artists from Wolfgang Tillmans to Elizabeth Peyton. We've also initiated a major international exhibition programme including co-curating this year's [Wales in Venice show](#) at the 55th Venice Biennale with Oriol Davies Gallery and the Arts Council Wales – an incredible platform for all involved.

Upcoming shows will draw on our history by inviting artists to indirectly respond, through their work, to the history of the MOSTYN building which has gone from being a gallery for female artists when it launched in 1901 to a WW1 drill hall and piano storage, before returning to a gallery space in 1979.

Partnership is a vital part of our engagement work, showcased by linking with initiatives such as the [Artes Mundi](#) visual arts exhibition and prize, the biggest in the UK at £40,000. We are also part of [Plus Tate](#), a major UK network which includes 20 contemporary art organisations outside London.

Building on the success of last year's Plus Tate-funded [Ninjas initiative for 11 to 13-year-olds](#), we successfully applied to be one of five national partners to be part of [Tate's Circuit programme](#), a national youth network for the visual arts. Funded by the [Paul Hamlyn Foundation](#), Cylch/Circuit seeks to spark a long-term transformation in the way that young people aged 15 to 25 engage with art and take control of their own learning.

The demographic here is older on average than in cities, and we are developing ways to include those who might not normally visit a contemporary art gallery through exhibitions and events which have a cross-art form approach.

For example, our current show [YOU](#) is a conceptually strong group show (Felix Gonzalez Torres, Aurélien Froment, Jeppe Hein, Július Koller, Rivane Neuenschwander) that questions the idea of what art is: the viewer 'produces' the artwork through their visit. It's had an amazing response from families who would never think to visit an art gallery, lured in with an event outside the venue during the [Llandudno Victorian Extravaganza](#) when the town was heaving with visitors.

On a marketing level, besides the reviews and articles on specialised art press, particularly helpful are features on magazines, blogs and websites such as [ThisIsTomorrow](#) and [WeHeart](#) since they are bringing MOSTYN out into the eyeline of the style and culture conscious nationally and internationally.

What have we learned that might be useful for other organisations in a similar situation? Surely, understanding that an organisation such as ours does not have a single, cohesive public but multiple [audiences](#) (including our staff, not to forget) who demand attention and have different ways of engaging.

This is not to say that we have to please everyone, but we do have to have a firm strategic direction and a flexible range of delivery via the three main areas of exhibitions, engagement

and learning – equally important and each with a dedicated curator and budget.

It's also crucial to seek and establish a range of platforms and partners that match our values and make the most of our programme in space and time: from local residents, schools and higher education to wider partnerships across the country and abroad.

It's a long-term strategy, and long-term planning matters for our exhibitions, partnerships and funding agreements alike. Currently we are planning well into 2017 but potentially, a cultural institution like a gallery should look into society 20 or 50 years from now and then work back.

Alfredo Cramerotti is the director of [MOSTYN contemporary art gallery](#) in Llandudno – follow it on Twitter [@MOSTYN_Wales_](#)