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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780429053498-14>

<b>Title</b>	Understanding the audience experience of contemporary visual arts at Geevor Mine World Heritage Site : a dialogue between a contemporary artist and a sociologist
<b>Authors</b>	Bagnall, G and Randall, JM
<b>Publication title</b>	Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces
<b>Publisher</b>	Routledge
<b>Type</b>	Book Section
<b>USIR URL</b>	This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/51118/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/51118/</a>
<b>Published Date</b>	2020

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# **Understanding the audience experience of contemporary visual arts at Geevor Mine World Heritage Site: A Dialogue between a Contemporary Artist and a Sociologist**

Gaynor Bagnall and Jill Randall

## **Introduction**

This chapter examines the outcomes of a collaboration between an artist, Jill Randall and a sociologist, Gaynor Bagnall, to explore how the use of contemporary visual art might engage audiences and generate new knowledge about, and understanding of, an industrial heritage site. It also considers how bringing together the different methodologies of practice of an artist and a sociologist might allow fresh insight into why, how, and for whom art is produced and displayed in this context. In doing so this chapter explores an on-going conversation between practitioners from different fields about what constituted ‘meaningful’ audience engagement from their differing perspectives, and on the best methods for capturing and representing the audience response to, and experience of, contemporary art in heritage settings.

In 2016 the contemporary visual artist Jill Randall exhibited new work in a solo exhibition ‘Aftermath’, at Geevor Mine World Heritage Museum, Cornwall, as part of the artist’s wider strategy to employ contemporary visual art as means to explore and reinterpret the unique post-industrial landscapes of Cornish Mining World Heritage sites. The art was exhibited in a white cube style room situated in The Hard Rock Museum at Geevor. The Museum opened in 2008 and tells the story of tin mining through interactive displays, artefacts, oral histories, and film. It

employs a form of presentation, representation, and display that is in stark contrast to the cool bare white walls of the room where the ‘Aftermath’ exhibition was located and displayed. This juxtaposition of modes of presentation and the differing methodologies behind them offered a unique opportunity to explore how audiences respond to this intersection of a particular kind of heritage space and art.

The exhibition also provided the opportunity to examine how bringing together the different disciplinary perspectives of an artist and sociologist might provide new insight into ways of analysing audience engagement within this art-heritage intersection. Randall and Bagnall are both academics at the University of Salford, Randall in the School of Arts and Media and Bagnall in the School of Health & Society. From their different disciplinary perspectives, both have an interest in the relationship between people and place, and the representation and valuing of working-class culture. They began to work together on research impact capture for the ‘Aftermath’ exhibition because the location of this type of exhibition in an industrial heritage museum was both original and innovative, and as such offered an exciting research opportunity.

The chance to collaborate on investigating how visitors responded to the ‘Aftermath’ exhibition, offered the opportunity to explore how the methodological practices of a sociologist and the practices of a visual artist might usefully combine and intersect. The idea was to explore whether Bagnall’s knowledge of researching audience experience and engagement, alongside her expertise in using social science methodologies in heritage and museum contexts, could be used to examine the impact of Randall’s challenging, non-representational artwork at Geevor.

## **The Museum, The Artist and The Exhibition**

Geevor Tin Mine is the largest preserved mine site in England, set in an area of outstanding natural beauty in Cornwall, a key location within the Cornish Mining World Heritage Site. One of the great industrial landscapes of the world, and designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Cornwall and West Devon mining landscape is valued alongside the Taj Mahal and Stonehenge for its world importance.<sup>1</sup> Cornwall was part of the first industrial revolution, it created vast industrial landscapes and developed cutting edge technologies which were exported all over the world, to at least 175 places across six continents<sup>2</sup>. It is a unique natural environment as a direct result of the tin and copper-mining industry and the derelict, post-industrial land that remains is testament to the contribution Cornwall made to the Industrial Revolution in the rest of Britain and beyond<sup>3</sup>.

Mining ceased at Geevor on 16th February 1990, but the site offers visitors the opportunity to go underground into the old working mine and see the preserved mine buildings and machinery. Poignant reminders of the closure of the mine can be found in the miners' graffiti in 'The Dry', the miners changing rooms. The site, its buildings and machinery are becoming ever more interesting as the years pass, a time capsule of 1990; the miners having downed tools and left at the end of the last working day. Certain areas of the site are ethereal and fascinating, visually resembling art installations, especially in 'The Dry', where mine-stained clothes and Wellington boots hang in lines, and open lockers contain pinned up news cuttings of the time. This part of the site is not constructed, or reconstructed, as many mining attractions are, but simply left as it

was. This gives it an extra level of reality, of vividness, of connection with now. It is immediately accessible and made more real by several of the ex-miners now working as volunteers at the site.

The site also houses the Hard Rock Museum, an interactive museum which opened in 2008 and tells the story of tin, and which is very typical of museums that emerged out of ideas around *The New Museology*.<sup>4</sup> In this genre of museums there is the use of multimedia strategies of address and an emphasis on engagement and interaction.<sup>5</sup> The development of this type of museum represented a shift towards providing a museum experience, drawing on emotions, sensations and imagination <sup>6</sup>. The Hard Rock Museum uses hands-on and interactive exhibits to make accessible the science aspects of the museum, and its selection and way of representing artefacts, from video to oral histories, reflect the tin mining industry through human and experiential dimensions.

Perhaps surprisingly, tucked away in a corner of the upper levels of the Hard Rock Museum, and entered via a glass and wood closed door, is a temporary art exhibition space. The Hard Rock Gallery is a clean white box-like space which is used to display original art exhibitions. Past exhibitions at the Hard Rock Gallery include the inaugural exhibition of Cornish artist Kurt Jackson 'The Mining Paintings' (Oct 2008 -March 2009), expressive painterly figurative paintings recording mining in South Crofty Mine Cornwall and Aguas Tenidas Mine in Spain; many documentary photographic exhibitions such as 'Wildlife on the edge', recording wildlife on the Geevor Mine site; 'Geevor Then and Now', historic photos of the site over the last 150 years; and Sally Booth 'Edges and Extremes', art and poetry Shetland and Cornwall: people,

place and industry. There has been an emphasis on the representation of Cornish artists or artists with a local connection, and most exhibitions are figurative, documentary, and make obvious and literal connections between the exhibited work and the Geevor site.

This space is very different from the ‘busyness’ of the rest of the museum with its presentation and production of the gallery as a white cube, and the suggestion that it contains special perhaps even, ‘sacred’ objects inside it<sup>7</sup>. It is in this space that the ‘Aftermath’ exhibition was housed. Importantly, Randall’s work provided a much more abstract, and a less literal and figurative approach to interpreting Geevor and its post mining landscapes, than had previously been displayed in the Hard Rock Gallery. This proved to be an interesting, challenging, but perhaps rewarding juxtaposition for the museum visitor.

### **The Artist**

Jill Randall’s work explores the relationship between contemporary fine art and the environment. She is particularly interested in the harnessing of post-industrial mining landscapes to create artworks, and to use contemporary fine art as a means to an alternative perspective on ‘heritage’. The art and public engagement activities around it, seek to provoke memories, and reconnect communities with their industrial past. The outcomes are determined by Randall’s response to the site and its specific cultural context. The outcomes are also open-ended, resulting in a broad collection of works, sculpture, prints, drawing, video and found objects.

Randall has an enduring interest in working class histories, informed by her childhood in the coalfields of the East Midlands, and later her time working in artist's studios in abandoned textile mills in central Manchester. She has huge respect for the arduousness and toil of mining, and the secret underground worlds revealed in the process. There is reverence for the expertise, skills, labour and knowledge of the workforce that goes unsung, and Randall believes there is a need to celebrate and reinvest in forgotten working-class lives, technical skills and lost environments. There is nostalgia, too, for the demise of Britain's manufacturing past, the making of things, the 'workshop of the world'. This has led to Randall having a fascination for the closed, invisible, mysterious world of the factory or mine, where people spend lifetimes. This sits alongside her desire to make this visible and accessible through artworks which explore and expose these contexts.

Metals are the material and conceptual thread throughout Randall's gallery and site-specific practice. Her interest in mining and mining landscapes stem from this preoccupation with materiality, and in industry the transformative and alchemic processes she sees at work. Her work frequently involves the recycling of materials invested with history and narrative through their past use, and reinventing and reinvesting lost or forgotten, discredited and discarded objects, places, and periods in history. The art is also firmly rooted in contemporary sculpture practice, making and materiality, however, Randall enjoys playing with, and subverting the conventions and values of modernist abstract sculpture. Her practice questions and subverts notions of material value, and reveals an interest in the unfinished and incomplete, the broken and damaged. It celebrates the aesthetic of ugly and abject, improvised and the 'ad hoc'. Her

work has been influenced and inspired by artists and art movements such as the Italian Arte Povera movement<sup>8</sup>, with their celebration of ‘poor’, improvised, discarded objects and materials, and artists such as Jannis Kounellis<sup>9</sup> who used humble materials and industrial materials such as coal. Also influential is the concept of ‘Merz’, material or materials re-appropriated and transformed into art, as seen in the works of the Dada artist Kurt Schwitters<sup>10</sup>.

Randall’s process of working with a specific industrial site has become a defining characteristic of her practice, and her approach has many parallels with the Artist Placement Group (APG), founded in the UK in the 1960’s by Barbara Steveni and John Latham, which pioneered the practice of engaging artists to work in industry. The APG marked the start of the artist emerging from the studio and engaging with the wider world, and they were the first to coin the term ‘Artist-In-Residence’, creating innovative well-paid residencies for artists to spend time in factories, cargo vessels, government organisations and hospitals<sup>11</sup>. The artist was often seen as a force for change within the organisation, but many artists also utilised the unique environment to create new ways of working, often involving interventions with the workforce. Their purpose was to create art in a social context for the first time, and their slogan ‘Context is Half the Work’<sup>12</sup>, which has been one of the driving forces in the last 50 years in fine art practice, accurately describes Randall’s approach. Context for Randall provides a starting-point and inspiration and her art always involves location in and a considered response to a specific site, such as Geevor.

## **The Exhibition**



In 2014, Jill Randall approached the Assistant Curator Nick Thomas at Geevor Tin Mine World Heritage Site in Pendeen, Cornwall, with a proposal to create an exhibition of work for the Hard Rock Gallery. This was to be the first of several proposed interventions by Randall in mining sites throughout Cornwall and is an ongoing project. Although the nature of Randall's work was different from previous exhibitions, Nick Thomas was supportive of the proposal from the outset and keen to present a more challenging interpretation for the visitor. The exhibition's connection with and relevance to the Geevor site was key to this. The resulting 'Aftermath' exhibition at Geevor in 2016 reflected and epitomized Randall's approach, using contemporary visual art to attempt to promote knowledge, understanding, and a connection to place and industrial heritage.

Randall spent time on site, working with archival maps from Geevor's collection and studying rare botanical specimens which thrive on contaminated post-mining land. As she notes, 'the exhibition draws strong connections between the environment of the working mine and its aftermath landscapes, offering a different way of interpreting these sites, their history, unique ecology, and alternative beauty'<sup>13</sup>. To achieve this Randall brought together work created especially by and for Geevor Mine, alongside work from her acclaimed Artist's Residency at Parys Mountain Copper Mine, Anglesey, and allowed for connections to be made between the two sites, through the metals of copper and tin. The art also represented the unique ecology of Geevor as a post-mining site, and the rare and peculiar plants and mosses such as bryophytes which thrive on contaminated soil. Access to unique hand-drawn maps of early drawings and cross-sections of the mine workings in the Geevor archives inspired several works in the exhibition. Many of the prints explored a dual idea - 'making visible' the tiny flora which

colonise and thrive on contaminated post-mining soils, alongside the exotic new species of subtropical plants which were introduced into Cornwall by plant hunters sent on expeditions by wealthy mine-owners, thus changing the British landscape forever.

The art aimed to enable the revelation of an ‘alternative nature’ and an alternative subversive beauty, and is part of a broader project, ‘Another Eden’, which seeks to celebrate these overlooked and denigrated industrial sites. <Fig. 1 here> The exhibition comprised more than 40 different pieces of work and included sculpture and video as well as large drawings created in abandoned underground mine workings, prints created from steel plates etched in acidic pools, and a large floor-based mixed-media piece, ‘Toxic Garden’ as shown in Figure 2. <Fig. 2. here. The exhibition ran in the Hard Rock Gallery from Feb 15th-Oct 23rd, 2016, and its estimated visitor numbers were more than 30,000<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Collaboration and Conversation: Intersecting Practice & Methodologies**

As we saw earlier, Randall’s artistic practice centres on the act of creating physical things and allowing others to share in the viewing and making experience. Somewhat different to Randall’s artistic practice, Bagnall’s sociological practice has involved developing what C. Wright Mills called a ‘sociological imagination’.<sup>15</sup> This entails having a sociological vision or a way of looking at the world that has a clear awareness of the relationship between personal experience and wider society, and which ‘enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’<sup>16</sup>. In other words, engaging in sociological practice that connects the social, personal and historical dimensions of our lives.

Key to enacting this practice is the way in which different sociological methods are used to explore the relationship between the individual and society. Having a sociological imagination can provide an understanding of museum or gallery audiences that enables us to grasp both the importance of the individual agency of the visitor, the embodied character of the visit, and the influence of the broader social, historical and cultural context in which visitors are located. Museums and galleries are and have always been socio-cultural spaces. They are located in, emerge from, and are influenced by the social and cultural environment which frames them; they are also sites of social interaction and social encounter.

The focus for Bagnall<sup>17</sup>, then, is how and whether audiences are affected by what they experience in galleries and museums, what biographical and social resources they draw upon in their interpretation of artefacts and exhibitions, what types of context enable or provoke a response and what form these responses take. She is also concerned to try to understand the quality and intensity of encounters with that experience, and the ways in which it is mediated by different modes of representation in museums and galleries. Generally, she has used methods derived from sociology to try to investigate these issues at a range of museums in the UK. This is because researching audiences where the experiential and human agency is key, requires thinking about methods that enable us to get closer to the social world of the visitor. Approaches which allow access to visitor perspectives, experiences and understandings and insights into the ways in which these may be influenced by their social location. In previous museum and heritage site research undertaken by Bagnall, she employed both well-used and established qualitative and

quantitative methods from sociology, and more innovative approaches to get closer to the visitor's perspective and social world. For example, 'traditional' methods used include ethnographic observations, in-situ in-depth interviews and focus groups. While more innovative approaches have included accompanied museum 'walking interviews', textual analysis of digitally captured visitor interpretations of exhibitions and the use of focus groups at the 'digital interface', where people can experiment with, reflect on, and talk about digital technology as part of the process of interaction within a focus group<sup>18</sup>.

In this instance, Bagnall and Randall spent two intensive five-day periods together at Geevor in 2016, to explore what visitors thought about the art, their experience of the exhibition and its relation to industrial heritage. This involved collaboration and employing a combination of artist activities and sociological research methods, such as in-situ observation, walking interviews, face to face questionnaires, documentary analysis of the in-gallery visitor comments book, focus group creative engagement workshops, and 'meet the artist' events. They watched and discussed how visitors navigated the transition from the museum to the exhibition, how they moved around the gallery, and noted how long they spent in the exhibition. Observing in the gallery and listening-in on conversations that were generated by the artworks or through visitor interactions with the artist, enabled insights into the ways in which the art promoted an understanding of the heritage of Geevor. Through their observations they were able to note which pieces of art attracted the most attention, or provoked social interaction. They were then able to explore this further in the interviews and focus groups, to explore why this was the case, and to ask whether this attention and social interaction might lead to a greater understanding of the heritage of the

site. The interviews, questionnaires, creative focus groups and documentary analysis provided data that enabled investigation into various audiences' response to, and experience of the exhibition, and to see how the use of art had enhanced visitors' understanding of Geevor's heritage. For both, this collaboration offered the potential for fresh insights, exciting new perspectives and the chance to learn different methods of representation and of capturing empirical data.

Undertaking the research and spending time together in the museum and gallery also offered the chance for conversation and critical dialogue about the exhibition, including questions around artistic aims and its intended audience. It also provided an opportunity to examine exhibitionary aspirations alongside the reality of what and how an exhibition is able to communicate meaningful ideas to its audience. The question of what heritage is, how it can be represented and communicated, and the specifics of how this operates at Geevor also formed part of this dialogue. In sum, it provided a rare opportunity for both an artist and a sociologist to immerse themselves in the museum, gallery and exhibition together, and to be able to exchange views and access each other's perspectives on how visitors consumed and experienced the exhibition, and how they engaged with the concept of heritage through the medium of visual art.

For Randall, it was interesting and insightful to spend long periods of time in the gallery. The norm for many practising artists is an intense working period leading up to an exhibition, often requiring the production of new works in a limited time, an installation period, and a de-install, with few visits to the exhibition space in between, unless undertaking workshops or artists talks.

One outcome of the collaboration was Randall's realisation that as an artist one can make assumptions, for example that visitors will navigate the gallery in a particular way, such as beginning from an information board with the title of the show and an explanation of what they are seeing. For the sociologist, an immersion in the research setting, and the deployment of a range of research methods is part of trying to access and understand the social world under investigation. However, what was unique for Bagnall was to be able to access first-hand from the artists the meanings behind the works presented, and to be able to use this information to provide a context and a better understanding of the audience experience.

During their discussions, it also became evident that there were some shared interests and recurring themes in Bagnall and Randall's seemingly very different disciplinary practices, such as a focus on aspects of the visitor experience, the power of the imagination and emotions, the provocation of memory, and a connectedness to the past. They also both had an enduring interest in working class culture, perhaps informed by a nostalgia for their own working-class roots, growing up in the coalfields of Nottinghamshire and the industrial heartland of Manchester; their environments and smells. There was also a desire to mark, give voice to and celebrate forgotten working-class lives, but also to challenge the ways in which working class culture is often demeaned and devalued<sup>19</sup>. Randall and Bagnall also both have an enduring interest in the relationship of people to place, and the ways in which this is transformed by social and economic processes such as post-industrialisation and globalisation. This has led both of them to use this as a prism through which to explore contemporary ideas of identity and belonging. For Randall, this materialised through the creation of artworks that reveal the secretive, closed world of the

factory or mine, or the mystery and beauty of the post-industrial landscape, while for Bagnall this has manifested through written texts and the development of concepts such as ‘elective belonging’<sup>20</sup>, which tries to capture how belonging is influenced both by biography and social processes such as globalisation.

Above all, they discovered that they are both interested in intangible dimensions – the personal and potentially collective transformative experience visitors have when encountering exhibits in a museum or gallery. However, their disciplinary practices have led them to address these in very different ways. Bagnall attempts, to evidence these intangible aspects, such as emotional responses, by capturing the embodied talk and practices of visitors using sociological research methods, while Randall’s aim is to represent them through her art, and in so doing to create a deep connection at a personal and collective level with the viewer.

In the following sections, the thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered at Geevor is discussed, along with the insights they offered into the presentation of visual art in museum settings, and the value of the intersecting practices and methodologies in these environments. It underlines the significance of the ways in which the site, artist’s aims and visitor’s responses all work together in a complex relationship, facilitated by social and spatial context.

### **Impact of Art and intersection with Heritage**

Firstly, it is useful to note that the overall visitor response to the exhibition was positive, data from the questionnaires (n55) indicated that 96% of the visitors enjoyed the exhibition, and most (80%) stated they would recommend it to family and friends. Significantly, data from the questionnaires and interviews revealed that most of the visitors did not visit art galleries on a regular basis, so this intersection of art and heritage space provided a unique opportunity for them to encounter this form of art practice. As demonstrated below, some of the visitors to the exhibition were able to articulate well the ways in which they valued this different perspective on the industrial mining heritage presented at Geevor.

Qualitative data from the interviews, questionnaires and the visitor comments book revealed that visitors had enjoyed engaging with the artwork, with comments including, *‘lovely to see different perspectives through art’*, and, *‘surprised how interesting it was’*. Visitors identified how the textures, scale, colours and the different forms of art all contributed to the impact it had on them, stimulating their interest, enhancing their experience of the exhibition and providing a different view of the mines and mining landscape. As one participant put it, the work presented, *‘sketches of and for the great abyss’*.

Others, more explicitly recognised the value of the intersection of art and heritage, noting how having art in an industrial museum is a good idea because it changes the visitor experience, it *‘breaks it up’*. There was also an acknowledgement that the use of visual art had added to their understanding of the heritage of mining, and post-industrial landscapes by offering an alternative perspective to visiting an industrial museum like Geevor. Comments included, *‘[it] adds a*



*different dimension to the subject, and, 'it gives another angle to it'.* It was also suggested that the use of the '*visual*', as it was described by visitors, to provide more understanding might be widened to industrial heritage more generally, as '*art can give additional insight into industrial heritage by bringing a visual element*'. It was clear that the artist's intention to reveal the world of the mine had to some extent been achieved, as was the mystery and beauty of the landscape, as seen in the following comments: '*it shows how hectic and dispersed mines are*', and, '*the bland browns and greens reflect the mines*'.

A key theme that emerged from this feedback was the importance of context, and for many of the visitors it was the spatial context, precisely the location of the art at Geevor, a mining museum set in a post-industrial landscape, that was the most enjoyable and unique aspect of the exhibition. As one participant stated, the most enjoyable thing about the exhibition was, '*that it was related to the place itself*'. Without that context some of the meaning and message of the art would undoubtedly have been lost. Another participant articulated it by saying, the art needs to be '*relevant somehow*', as this enables visitors to connect to the art and be able to grasp its meaning and significance. There was an awareness amongst the visitors that it was unusual to see art in this context, that it was, '*not expected, different*', even '*very unique*', and '*enlightening*'.

In these comments we can, perhaps, see an acknowledgement of the auratic<sup>21</sup> quality of the work, which is further demonstrated in the feedback which stated:

*Your work really spoke to me. I am a descendent of Richard White, the Captain of Levant Mine, but the often twee and realist representations of Levant and Geevor didn't really connect with me. Your representations are really powerful and thought-provoking. I loved them.*

It is evident here that the artworks enabled this visitor to engage on an emotional level and had the power to provoke an emotional impact and response. This was clearly partly to do with the art itself, and the embodied reaction it had engendered, but it must also be related to the personal; that is, the specific social, historical and cultural context from which the visitor was viewing the work. In a climate where the experiential is valued and prioritised in museums, the fact that this type of exhibition enables visitors to respond to and engage with heritage on an emotional level is clearly significant, not only to Geevor but also more broadly across the museums sector.

It is, however, important to identify and be aware of the importance of the role of biography in this process, as it is the family connection and social context that clearly adds to the depth of engagement here and having the tools to identify this is where the intersection of methodologies and practice can prove fruitful. It was identified earlier how the artist strives for a deep connection with the viewer, but that this is difficult to capture or quantify. Here, the use of sociological methods and analysis can reveal this connection and show how it comes about through the joining of biography, social and spatial context and the art itself.

## **Audience Experience**

One of the benefits of being in-situ together over a sustained period was that it allowed us to observe the comings and goings at the gallery, and to notice whether museum visitors did or did not access the 'Aftermath' exhibition. We were also able to monitor how the gallery space was used and to see the extent to which visitors engaged with the exhibition. Doing this together allowed us to explore from our different perspectives various explanations for what we were seeing.

In conducting our observations we located ourselves both inside and outside the gallery, as it became apparent that having to negotiate an often-closed door to access the exhibition, and the lack of visible signage pointing to the gallery and the exhibition inside, was having a two-fold effect. Firstly, people would see the closed door, and turn away. Others would peer through the glass in the door, sometimes enter or sometimes turn back into the main museum (See Figure 3-Insert close to here). Secondly, people who did enter, would briefly scan the room from the doorway and then exit. A minority of visitors entered the gallery and then spent some time looking at the exhibition.

It was evident that more signage was needed to more clearly communicate to visitors what was in the gallery, and that having a closed door acted as a physical barrier, but more than that, it perhaps signalled to some visitors that this was something different, maybe something not for them. The boundary was thus symbolic as well as physical<sup>22</sup>, the exhibition and presentation

style being very different to the rest of the museum, and the more literal, easier to interpret and possibly easier to appreciate artworks that Geevor usually displayed in the gallery.

Our observations of the gallery, and of people's transition from the interactive, experiential, hands-on mode of representation in the Hard Rock Museum to the sparser white cube of the gallery revealed that some visitors seemed more at ease than others in the gallery space. The 'Aftermath' exhibition and its mode of representation is in complete contrast to the rest of the Hard Rock Museum. Figure 3 provides an illustration of this shift, as visitors move from a video about tinning pilchards, to abstract visual art. The exhibition draws on a different history and philosophy of display. One with much less interpretation, white walls, only very brief pieces of explanatory text and one which expects the visitor to do much more 'thinking' work. In line with white cube art galleries, visitors were expected to, indeed needed to, move into a much more contemplative register of consumption.

In observing the exhibition, we saw how some visitors spent only very brief moments scanning and glancing at the contents of the gallery before exiting, whilst others entered and seemed to immerse themselves in the experience for some time. Indeed, it appeared that some visitors were able to move into a different register of viewing from one space to the other. They seemed to have the skills to adopt a more contemplative, slower, less-directed form of viewing. Of course, it is difficult to know for sure if this indicated that these viewers had higher levels of cultural understanding or appreciation of the exhibition. Writers such as Bourdieu<sup>23</sup> have identified that being able to use and display the cultural capital needed in such contexts, in other words cultural

knowledge and understanding accumulated through upbringing and educational experience or socialisation, is linked to people's social origins, particularly their social class. This sociological explanation hints at the degree of privilege, and access to resources that are needed to be able to appreciate, or take ownership of this type of art. For the artist, this presented an irony, or even a dilemma, as part of the rationale for the work was the desire to represent and value working class effort and labour in the context of industrial heritage, and engender a deep connection with the viewer. And yet as indicated earlier, there is potential here for breaking down these barriers, as many of the visitors to the exhibition were not regular art gallery-goers.

Connected to this, an important finding was how the presence of, and interaction with the artist transformed the visitor experience and facilitated a more meaningful connection with the artwork. Data gathered from 'Meet the Artist' events, informal discussions with the artist in the gallery, and creative workshops illustrated how the presence of, and interaction with the artist transformed the creative engagement process and could help to break down some of the cultural and social barriers identified above. Randall's presence brought a sense of authenticity to the experience for the visitors who had an encounter with her in the gallery, either via the formal 'meet the artist' events, or more informally as they moved around the gallery. This was a surprise to the artist who was unaware of her influence and impact on visitors. However, it does reflect findings from previous museum research, which has pointed to the importance and value that visitors give to hearing the voice of the specialist<sup>24</sup>.

This suggests that changes to artistic practice, in terms of ‘being’ with the exhibition, and holding more engagement events might be a way forward in engaging a wider, more diverse audience, especially if, as is the case here, the exhibition is in a heritage space, where the audience is arguably more diverse than might be found in a traditional art gallery.

## **Conclusion**

Our collaboration and conversations revealed that both of us were keen to explore and understand how to achieve meaningful engagement with heritage and to understand the intangible dimension – the personal and potentially collective transformative experience that visitors have when encountering exhibits or art in a museum or gallery. We questioned why this means something fundamentally important to the viewer, how they might be reconnected with something lost or forgotten from their own cultural heritage through the encountering of artworks. We questioned whether encountering artworks in this context might enable visitors to tap into ideas around identity and belonging through their emotional and spiritual responses to the works.

Seeing and analysing this in action at Geevor allowed us to bring, and to encounter, alternative perspectives on the presentation and consumption of art. It allowed us to see the influence of different modes of engagement with the art, as well as the influence the artist had on the visitor

experience. The data we collected using a range of sociological methods enabled us to see the complex relationship between the site, the audience and the artist. We saw how this approach provided visitors with an unexpected but not unwanted encounter with challenging contemporary art in a heritage museum environment. This intersection and juxtaposition contributed to visitors' knowledge and understanding of art and heritage at Geevor. The data also revealed the significance of the social and spatial context in which the art was experienced, and how, for the visitors to Geevor, it was arguably this context where the real value of the art-heritage intersection could be found. Our approach showed that collaboration can allow for a more nuanced understanding of an experience. By drawing from our differing perspectives and practices, we have been able to highlight the complex processes and relationships at work at Geevor, from the artist's intention through to the audience's response. This experience has been developmental and insightful for both artist and sociologist.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, *World Heritage List: Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape* (2019), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1215> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019].

<sup>2</sup> National Trust, *A Cornish Mining Heritage* (2019), <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/godolphin/features/a-cornish-mining-heritage> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> October 2019].

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO, *World Heritage List: Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape*.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Kylie Message, (2006). The New Museum. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2–3), 603–606.

<sup>6</sup> Gaynor Bagnall, (2003). Performance and Performativity at Heritage Sites. *Museum & Society*, 1(2), 87-103.

<sup>7</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1976) pp.14-15.

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