

COVENTRY BIENNIAL 2023



EVALUATION

Jem Southam, *The Pig, the Goat and the Lamb*, C-Type Photograph, 1968 (2023).
Photo: Garry Jones. Courtesy: Arts Council Collection and The Artist.

Evaluation Supported by:



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MAKING TOOLS TOGETHER:
Exploring new ways to understand
arts social value (MORE)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This document presents a detailed evaluation of the fourth Coventry Biennial festival programme, titled *... like a short cut through the brambles*, the programme ran across Coventry and Warwickshire from the 6th October 2023 to the 14th January 2024.

This executive summary page presents significant headline data and testimonials gathered by the Coventry Biennial team as well as our evaluation partners:

Earthen Lamp

MORE

Coventry University

University of Amsterdam

Following this summary page, there is more in-depth analysis of our findings and impact as well as testimonials about, and documentation of our 2023 festival programme.

ARTIST AND SOCIAL IMPACT:

As an artist-led organisation, the impact that our programmes have for our participating artists continues to be a top priority for us.

Coventry Biennial 2023 included artworks and projects by **18** artists, collaborative duos and groups. Highlighting our commitment to producing social and accessible programmes, **33%** of these artists worked with community groups, specialist interest groups, researchers and interested individuals.

Learning from our past work we knew that capturing this social impact was a key priority for us and so we introduced new evaluation processes for 2023.

Reflecting on this socially engaged work, one artist commented:

“All participants enjoyed being involved and felt their input, which often goes unnoticed, was valued as part of this project. The artwork has shared many under-represented working class stories”

A participant in our *Mothers Who Make a Garden* project commented:

“As a single mum with a full time job I struggle for any creative or personal time. These workshops provided that, as well as a sense of solidarity with other women in that position.”

AUDIENCES AND REACH:

Given that our 2021 programme was delivered alongside the Turner Prize and as a part of UK City of Culture, we knew that there would be a reduction in overall footfall in our 2023 programmes.

Nonetheless, a significant number of people engaged with Coventry Biennial 2023 and this can be used to set a realistic baseline for future activity.

Coventry Biennial 2023 had a total audience of **308,269** people.

96,922 people visited Coventry Biennial 2023 exhibitions.

5,171 people attended our events and participatory sessions.

4,916 people engaged with our artworks online or in print.

201,260 people saw our artworks in a public location.

70% of survey respondents shared that they have attended our exhibitions or events before, highlighting that we have a loyal audience base, but that we are also still able to attract new visitors (**30%** first time visitors).

Our visitors told us that they were from:

Coventry: 12%
Rest of West Midlands: 26%
Nationally: 52%
Internationally: 10%

SECTOR IMPACT:

Coventry Biennial has fostered a supportive and developmental relationship with its workforce that is entirely made up of local freelancers and artists.

88% of our workforce shared that they have learnt new skills during Coventry Biennial 2023 and that this has positively impacted their practice or career path.

The whole team (**100%**) agreed that there have been improvements in our ways of working since 2021, but colleagues still highlighted that there is scope for improved communications internally.

The team also reflected on the difficulties of *“project funding”* and the impacts that this has on our programmes as well as the artists and communities that we work with.

Partner organisations found contributing to Coventry Biennial 2023 to be valuable for their organisations, the most common feedback being:

Coventry Biennial 2023 attracted new, diverse audiences.

Marketing support during the festival period is valuable.

Conversations are already underway with regards to renewing a number of local and national partnerships.



A History of Frogs, *Goblin City*, Installation, 2023.
Photo: Maria Polodeanu. Courtesy: The Artist.

REFLECTING ON THE BRAMBLES.

A NOTE BY SEVVEN KÜÇÜK:

As I reflect upon our evaluations and findings gathered from 2023's Coventry Biennial *...like a shortcut through the brambles*, I am truly impressed by the depth of connection and engagement that this festival has fostered over the years since its humble but very impressive beginnings in 2017.

As the Operations Director, it has been my privilege to oversee the intricate workings of the last two festivals and I feel humbled by the enthusiasm and dedication shown by our visitors, collaborators, and team.

This marks my second iteration of the Biennial, and it is clear that while we celebrate many successes, there is always room for growth.

The data speaks for itself: visitor numbers from Coventry (CV1-CV6) increased by **20%** and **80%** of our visitors felt 'increased pride in Coventry' a growth of **23.1%** since Coventry Biennial 2019.

This demonstrates the growing bond between the festival and Coventry's local community. Yet, beyond the numbers, it is the testimonials; the heartfelt expressions of pride, inspiration, and enjoyment - many of which are included in this report - that truly confirm the Biennial's impact.

I am especially pleased with how the Biennial is becoming a platform for diverse voices.

Our audiences spanned a wide age range and included individuals from a variety of ethnic and professional backgrounds, proving that art can and should bring people together.

However, there is more we can do. The feedback has highlighted areas where we can enhance inclusivity, representation, and accessibility, ensuring the Biennial remains a true reflection of those that we work with and for.

As we move forward, a key priority will be enhancing how we communicate what we do and how we do it.

We want our stakeholders, visitors, partners, and collaborators to have a clear understanding of our vision and mission, and the steps we are taking to achieve them. This means sharing not just the outcomes of our work but the processes, values, and aspirations that drive us.

By fostering transparency and dialogue, we aim to build stronger relationships rooted in mutual trust and shared purpose.

Whether through more detailed updates, or entirely new ways of working, our commitment is to ensure that everyone connected to the Biennial feels informed, valued, and inspired by the journey we are on together.

We are committed to deepening our engagement with our communities. This means listening more, innovating where needed, and embracing change that resonates our visitors and collaborators.

Whether it's elevating underrepresented artists, or creating more interactive activities, every suggestion is a step toward Coventry Biennial evolving with and for its audience.

To our team, I would like to say thank you for your tireless dedication.

To our partners, we thank you for your support and collaboration.

To our visitors, thank you for your trust, your presence, and your honest feedback.

We hope you all continue to support Coventry Biennial as we continue to grow and evolve into something even more extraordinary for Coventry and beyond.

Sevven Küçük is an artist and runs T Street Gallery in Birmingham.

She has worked for Coventry Biennial since 2021, initially as General Manager and more recently as Operations Director.

REFLECTING ON THE BRAMBLES.

A NOTE BY RYAN HUGHES:

I have tried to write this text, a number of times without mentioning Coventry's time as UK City of Culture. A title that Coventry won in 2017, a programme that the city delivered in 2021, and an idea that we at Coventry Biennial have worked with, against, for and through.

Coventry UK City of Culture is over. Delivering this programme from and across Coventry and Warwickshire in 2023 and 2024 has been a privilege.

We knew that without the glamour of having the Turner Prize exhibition next door, the support of London's artiest PR firms and the increased capacity of a national title, that our programme would feel different in 2023. But we didn't know how.

During our Grand Opening on the 5th October, it was apparent that the art scene was still with us - artists, curators, representatives of trusts and foundations, and gallerists from around the world were present.

It was also apparent that Coventry was still with us - students, mothers, homeless people, religious groups and librarians were all in attendance.

Many people had invited themselves along, feeling a sense of ownership over a local

exhibition programme through which they or their friends and family may have been working with an artist.

Watching an audience engage with an exhibition is the best way to understand the successes and failures in the curatorial approach.

Seeing people return numerous times over almost 4 months, seeing them attend events, and travel across the region to take in the whole programme and hearing them talk about (and with) the artists is delightful.

Having people stop me in the street and tell me how their friend or aunty has worked with one of our artists is powerful.

Having our front of house teams report (on numerous occasions) that people have wandered in to our venues looking for the short cut is hilarious. The title for Coventry Biennial 2023, *... like a short cut through the brambles* was intended as an open ended invitation. A provocation. A way in. And anecdotally and in terms of both qualitative and quantitative data - it seems to have worked.

All kinds of people engaged with Coventry Biennial 2023 for all kinds of reasons.

The theme for this fourth Coventry Biennial was dedicated to:

"interrogating humankind's relationship to the world around

us. Starting with the broad themes of place, the human condition and the intersection of these."

Throughout Coventry Biennial 2023 artists made unique, creative and powerful responses to this theme.

There were sculptures of brambles, videos about harvesting fuel, drawings of and about parenting. There was a garden.

There was an imagined timeline full of hope but that faced the realities and specificities.

Light sensitive photo paper floated in bodies of water and hand tufted rugs became geological formations.

Each of the artists that we worked with, and the communities or collaborators that were involved, brought unique insight, energy and expertise to these projects and I want to extend a huge thanks to everyone who was involved. This fourth Coventry Biennial wouldn't have been as rich, engaging, varied and enjoyable as it was with out you.

I also want to thank our audiences. You brought our 2023 programme to life.

Cycling to Jo's studio in Nuneaton with you, watching you sing karaoke or seeing you dance with a family member on Rene's installation really proved our vision of a social art biennial, where there are meaningful,

creative, everyday things made slightly more extraordinary by artists and by you.

And so, I return to those words that I tried to avoid. Coventry City of Culture.

During Coventry Biennial 2023, the city and regions galleries, museums, universities and historic buildings welcomed tens of thousands of people from Coventry, and across the UK as well as from Turkey, The Netherlands, the USA, Portugal, China and Korea.

We ate together. We talked. We made art.

Despite the title, despite everything that has gone before, we are a city of culture.

Ryan Hughes is an Artist-Curator and is Deputy Chair of Meadow Arts.

Since 2017 he has been the Artistic Director and Chief Executive Officer of Coventry Biennial.

WHAT IS COVENTRY BIENNIAL?

Coventry Biennial was founded in 2017 as an artist-led, strategic response to the city publishing a 10 year cultural strategy and the bid to become UK City of Culture.

Our vision and mission is to make:

Contemporary art exhibitions, initiatives and collaborations of social relevance

With Coventry, its neighbours and beyond

Activating spaces, exchanges and experiences

We work with artists to respond to the city's complex history, geography, built environment and relationships, retaining an outward-looking perspective, ensuring that our work has broader appeal, significance and impact. This unique context informs our commissioning of new works that are often co-created in response to themes that connect to the local area while also relating to broader developments and trends in contemporary art.

Our programmes occupy local museums, galleries and studios, but distinctively, also make innovative use of disused or non-art spaces as a way to reach new audiences and increase relevance.

Through our long-term partnerships with organisations including Arts Council Collection,

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry University and Underground Lights we are able to offer unique opportunities, connecting us with communities who have not been given the opportunity to engage with contemporary art, enabling us to make impactful projects.

We aim to:

CONNECT people, groups and places in unique and meaningful ways, increasing engagement with contemporary art and the unique context of the local area.

MAKE work with artists and communities that is ambitious, innovative and high quality, building on the city's craft and manufacturing heritage.

DEVELOP the local scene and sector to grow, becoming more diverse, dynamic and sustainable, learning from the city's art history while fostering new talent and initiatives.

To do this we support and present socially, politically and critically engaged art in Coventry and Warwickshire to local, national and international audiences.

Rene Matić (foreground) and Phoebe Boswell, Installation Shot, 2023. Photo: Garry Jones. Courtesy: The Artists.



ARTIST SATISFACTION AND TESTIMONIALS:

The following data and testimonials have been taken from surveys, interviews and focus groups conducted by:

Coventry Biennial

Earthen Lamp

Dr Francesco Chiaravalloti
(University of Amsterdam)

Dr Charlie Ingram (Coventry University)

We're aware that artists have different experiences and expectations of working with a curator, an organisation and with the public.

We're committed to ensuring that working with Coventry Biennial and within our partner venues is a safe, enjoyable and rewarding experience for all artists.

We understand that for one artist we didn't meet their expectations and following the exhibition we have worked closely with them to learn from their experiences.

Our approach to evaluation and data collection with artists has been designed to provide a wide range of opportunities and formats for artists to provide feedback either directly to us, to academics or to an independent evaluation organisation.

A VALUABLE EXPERIENCE:

From those that responded to our artists survey, **90%** reported that participating in Coventry Biennial 2023 was, overall, a positive experience.

This is a **1.2%** increase from 2021.

One artist described participating in Coventry Biennial 2023 as:

"a very powerful learning opportunity that I can count as a significant milestone in my journey as an artist, and one that can inform and lend perspective to future projects I'm involved in"

Another commented:

"Working with the Coventry Biennial team over a year and a half was one of the most valuable experience for me as an artist. Personally I find it really hard working in a fast paced environment where discussion, and conversations are rarely continued over a long period of time. It was great to have this continuity"

A third artist commented:

"I value Coventry Biennial's openness to let me experiment and supporting me to make a new work on a large scale. I also appreciate the ongoing conversation about the life [and legacy] of the work that has been commissioned"

EXCEPTIONALLY USEFUL:

90% of respondents to our artists survey said that participating in Coventry Biennial 2023 was useful for the development of their creative practice.

This is also a **1.2%** increase from 2021.

One artist commented:

"The exhibition enabled me to initiate and accelerate a project I have been considering for a long time. The process encouraged me to build on my existing research and develop it towards a whole new body of work"

70% of those that responded to our artist survey felt that Coventry Biennial 2023 had been useful in developing new networks. A further **20%** were unsure about this.

An outstanding **40%** of survey respondents shared that participating in Coventry Biennial 2023 had already led to new opportunities for them.

This is an **18.2%** increase from 2021 and one artist reported:

"I have been asked by a lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Warwick to take part in a presentation to their students using our artwork as a basis for discussion"

Another artist shared that their

Coventry Biennial 2023 work was:

"the first chapter in a new body of work. My participation unlocked a number of developmental stages in this project, including a collaboration with a University, a new sculptural work being exhibited in Istanbul, and a forthcoming exhibition that will expand further on the project"

Since completing this survey, this forthcoming exhibition has taken place with Arcade at Flat Time House as a part of London Gallery Weekend.

As in 2021, a significant number (**40%**) of artists felt that it was too early to confirm if Coventry Biennial 2023 had led to new opportunities for them.

- -

While reflecting on the artists that we worked with on Coventry Biennial 2023, we wanted to take a moment to remember Dinh Q.Lê who sadly passed away on the 6th April 2024, just a few months after we closed ... *like a short cut through the brambles.*



Dinh Q. Lê, *The Colony*, 4 Channel Moving Image Installation, 2016.
Photo: Maria Polodeanu. Courtesy: Artangel and The Artist.

SOCIAL IMPACT:

As a social biennial, many of our projects involve artists working directly with community groups, specialist interest groups, researchers and interested individuals in different ways.

During Coventry Biennial 2023, this included (but was not limited to) the following collaborators:

South Earlsdon Neighbourhood Association

Earlsdon Fountain Committee

Dr Modupe Jimoh and post-graduate students (University of Warwick)

Nuneaton Library Visitors

Escape Arts

Ikon Youth Programme

Weavers Workshop

Underground Lights

Post-graduate students (Coventry University)

One artist shared that the most satisfying part of working on Coventry Biennial 2023 was:

“Working in my local community with people I know, but with the support of the Biennial. This focus on the local is important”

In addition to these different collaborations with artists, local communities had the opportunity

to form around and co-design a pair of projects that were delivered by the Coventry Biennial team as a part of, and alongside the Coventry Biennial 2023 exhibition programme.

With the support of Earthen Lamp we were able to closely evaluate the social impact of these two projects. The following data and testimonials are taken from surveys and focus groups with participants of the Coventry Biennial Cycle Club and Mothers Who Make Garden projects.

COVENTRY BIENNIAL CYCLE CLUB:

Coventry Biennial Cycle Club is designed to connect people with artists and cultural institutions in Coventry and Warwickshire in a social way that benefits health, wellbeing and promotes mutual support.

As a part of Coventry Biennial 2023 we delivered **9** participatory sessions that were attended by **46** people. During these sessions we visited:

Jephsons Gardens

Mead Gallery

Coombe Country Park

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

Riversley Park

The Kenilworth Greenway / HS2

Nuneaton Library

We additionally delivered guided tours of the Coventry Biennial 2023 exhibitions by bike.

100% of participants reported that they enjoyed the event and **16.7%** of participants shared that they had never attended our exhibitions or events before evidencing that this unique programme was responsible for attracting new audiences.

Each session included a unique creative activity including printmaking and photography workshops, a film screening in partnership with Netherlands-based Shift Cycling Culture, a studio visit and a guided tour of an exhibition.

One participant commented:

“I cycle and go to galleries, but as a general rule don’t cycle to galleries outside of the city so I’m excited to learn new routes, and teach myself that cycling to galleries in the area is actually feasible”

Reflecting on the social aspect of the activity **41.6%** of participants attended with friends or family members and one participant commented:

“It’s a friendly group. The pace is leisurely and nobody is left behind. Nice to combine cycling with an arts activity”

Another shared:

“Enjoyable and great opportunity to mix with people”

31% of participants were from Coventry (CV1 - CV6), **12%** were from Warwickshire and somewhat surprisingly other participants travelled from locations including Birmingham and Leicester.

Participants reported that Coventry Biennial Cycle Club had improved their perception of the local area (**91.7%**) and one participant commented:

“I hope that the ‘club’ might also strategically help towards identifying how difficult it is to get to some places by bike, and contribute towards improving cycling infrastructure in the city”

Using Strava (an activity tracking app) we have calculated that together we cycled **165** kilometres, saved **82.4** litres of fuel and reduced our CO2 by **186,504** grams per kilometre during this programme.

Coventry Biennial Cycle Club has been developed through research carried out as part of Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic Exchange (SPACEX) a project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE).



Coventry Biennial Cycle Club Session, Participatory Activity, 2024.
Photo: Emily Gardner.

SOCIAL IMPACT CONTINUED:

MOTHERS WHO MAKE A GARDEN:

Adele Mary Reed (Mothers Who Make Coordinator of the Coventry Hub) explains:

“Mothers Who Make a Garden was conceived in the winter of 2022/2023 by myself, Alice Wood and Coventry Biennial colleagues in response to the themes of the upcoming Biennial programme, from the joy of flower gardens, and for a longing for more beauty in the city centre from the point of view of being both a mother and an artist”

As a part of Coventry Biennial 2023 we delivered **27** participatory sessions that were attended by **242** people.

This project included regular peer support and garden maintenance sessions, but also included co-designed activities ranging from planter making and embroidery workshops to site visits to other gardens and opportunities to meet mother-artists from across the Coventry Biennial 2025 programme.

The participants presented their garden as an installation at the Old Grammar School throughout the Coventry Biennial 2023 exhibition period.

100% of participants reported that they enjoyed the session that they attended and **30%** shared

that they had not attended Mothers Who Make sessions before 2023.

50% of participants hadn't attended Coventry Biennial's exhibitions or events before evidencing that this unique programme was responsible for attracting new audiences.

70% of participants brought their child to the sessions with them and many shared that this was important to them. Comments included:

“Really positive, nurturing and inclusive for mums and children. We love attending them :-)”

and

“I always feel welcome to come to any of the events with my child or by myself”

50% of participants were from Coventry (CV1 - CV6), **40%** were from Warwickshire and **10%** of participants were from Birmingham.

The sessions were deeply valued by the participants, one person said:

“It's fabulous. Such an important part of my life!”

and another commented:

“As a single mum with a full time job I struggle for any creative or 'personal' time. These workshops provided that, as well as a sense of solidarity with other women”



*Mothers Who Make Session, Participatory Activity, 2024.
Photo: Sinéad Patching*

During Coventry Biennial 2023:

96,922 people visited Coventry Biennial 2023 exhibitions.

5,171 people attended our events and participatory sessions.

4,916 people engaged with our artworks online or in print.

201,260 people saw our artworks in a public location.

Since 2017 we have closely monitored our audiences, ensuring that we know who is visiting our exhibitions, events and activities and that we understand why they are visiting, with the aim of developing programmes that are as relevant as possible.

The following data and feedback was gathered by visitor counting and comments books as well as through paper and online surveys and focus groups that were conducted by Earthen Lamp.

Visitors rated our exhibitions and events highly, survey respondents were asked to score the quality of our exhibitions from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent):

45.2% gave a 5 (excellent)
40% gave a 4 (very good)

Audiences also rated the diversity of artists and artworks included in Coventry Biennial 2023 highly, survey respondents were asked to score our programmes diversity using the same scale as above:

41.1% gave a 5 (excellent)
43.2% gave a 4 (very good)

Our audiences are highly engaged with contemporary art, when asked to describe their motivations for visiting Coventry Biennial 2023, the two most frequent given responses were:

Visual Arts is an important part of who I am (59.8%)

To be intellectually stimulated (55.7%)

Given that visitors described that they wanted to be intellectually stimulated, we are pleased that survey respondents rated information about Coventry Biennial 2023 highly:

45.4% gave a 5 (excellent)
36.1% (very good)

It is however worth noting that scoring on information about the event isn't as high as against the quality and diversity of Coventry Biennial 2023 and this represents an area where we can try and improve in the future.

Audiences were asked if they have visited Coventry Biennial's exhibitions or events before:

46.7% Yes
51.6% No

This evidences that we are still able to attract significant new audiences.

Interestingly, **1.6%** of survey respondents weren't sure if they had attended before, supporting the earlier point that more information about the event would be useful for visitors.

We are pleased that Coventry Biennial 2023 had a positive impact on peoples perception of the city. **59.3%** reported that after visiting our exhibitions or events their perceptions had improved.

The remaining survey respondents (**40.7%**) perceptions of Coventry hadn't changed.

As a social biennial, we value the health, safety and wellbeing of our team, visitors and the artists in our programme.

Although many people consider the Covid-19 pandemic to be over we felt it was important to understand if our visitors were still thinking about Covid-19 when deciding if they would visit Coventry Biennial 2023.

73.5% did not consider Covid-19 at all, significantly though, **10.6%** of survey respondents had given it a lot of thought and **15.9%** had given it some thought before visiting.

We are pleased that the vast majority of visitors felt safe at all times (**84.9%**) or felt safe most of the time (**10.9%**).

We recognise and understand that **5%** of visitors were worried about getting Covid-19 or felt that we could have made specific improvements and so we will continue to monitor the spread of Covid-19 in communities and will continue to include it as an item to mitigate in our relevant risk assessments and when planning any kind of activities.

Again, reinforcing our social ethos, only **27.3%** of visitors attended Coventry Biennial 2023 on their own, the vast majority of survey respondents attended:

In a group (**26.2%**)
With friends (**17.8%**)
With family (**21.1%**)
With colleagues (**7.6%**)

Length of visit varied quite significantly, survey respondents reported:

Less than 1 hour (**25.2%**)
1-2 Hours (**25.2%**)
2-3 Hours (**23.5%**)
More than 3 hours (**26.1%**)

The majority of our audiences were women (**65%**). Men made up **31.6%** of survey respondents and **0.9%** were Non-Binary. **2.6%** preferred not to answer this question.

The breakdown of ethnicity of visitors to Coventry Biennial 2023 was broadly aligned to the West Midlands' regional demographic data.

However, it is important to note that Coventry is significantly more ethnically diverse than the wider West Midlands and so there is a need and opportunity around inclusion and audience development locally. We will work on this while developing future activities, particularly in relation to reaching Coventry's Asian and Asian British community (**18.5%** of city population).

12.1% of survey respondents reported that they have a health problem or disability which has (or is expected to) lasted at least 12 months. **2.6%** of respondents preferred not to answer this question.

Visitors were offered the opportunity to comment on Coventry Biennial 2023, some are included on the next page:

“This event has been further evidence of the diverse program of the Biennial and the consistent high quality”

“Well curated, interesting work”

“I thought the theme was good, enlightening and poignant for this moment in time. Glad I got to see the medieval undercroft. I wouldn't have got to see the space otherwise. Having the invigilator talking about the artwork and space made a positive difference to my experience”

“Great location and work and ethos”

“Interesting. All tour guides were friendly, knowledgeable and easily approachable”

“I enjoyed the venues that the exhibitions were in. I hope the biennial continues to use spaces I wouldn't ordinarily have gone in and spaces I wouldn't normally see art in. Using old buildings made the art more interesting to me and I felt I got more of a sense of culture in Coventry”

“Great to see young people engaging in art and leaving inspired”

“Refreshing to see local artists celebrated”

“It was great to see work from local artists as well as international artists. I enjoyed the range of media used within the exhibition”



Janet Tryner, *Cabinets of Renegotiation (Detail)*, Sculpture, 2023.
Photo: Tegen Kimbley. Courtesy: The Artist.

“This Biennial recognises its responsibility to the environment, but wears it lightly, thankfully.

Without preaching, the curators of this absorbing 4th Coventry Biennial have successfully cultivated a show of creativity, while sharing nuanced messages of hope”

SECTOR AND WORKFORCE IMPACT:

Coventry Biennial 2023 presented exhibitions in 4 principle locations:

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

The Old Grammar School

Coventry University’s Delia Derbyshire Building

Compton Verney

Alongside these exhibitions, we supported a partnership show called *Phantom Sculpture*, curated by Thomas Ellmer and Sarah Shalgosky at:

The Mead Gallery

And earlier in the year we presented an exhibition at:

Nuneaton Library

In the case of our 4 principle locations, we worked with their in-house teams over a sustained period of time to develop and present exhibitions together.

We have found that partner organisations found contributing to Coventry Biennial 2023 to be valuable for their organisations, the most common feedback being:

Coventry Biennial 2023 attracted new, diverse audiences.

Marketing support during the festival period is valuable.

Coventry Biennial has fostered a supportive and developmental relationship with it’s workforce that is entirely made up of local freelancers and artists.

88% of our workforce shared that they have learnt new skills during Coventry Biennial 2023 and that this has positively impacted their practice or career path. One colleague explained:

“I have been able to gather so much in terms of knowledge, skills and insight”

Another individual simply listed that they had learned:

“Installation skills, problem solving, negotiation, budgeting, confidence in my ability as a curator”

The whole team (**100%**) agreed that there have been improvements in our ways of working since 2021, but colleagues still highlighted that there is scope for improved communications internally. Reflecting on workplace culture during 2023, one colleague said:

“Yes I think our events run very smoothly these days, I think because we have an established team and are used to working together, it makes it easier”

The team also reflected on the difficulties of *“project funding”* and the impacts that this has on our programmes as well as the artists and communities that we work with.

RESEARCH PROJECT CASE STUDY ONE:

As a part of and alongside our core programme evaluations, we were pleased to work closely with Coventry University on a research project called:

MAKING TOOLS TOGETHER: EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO UNDERSTAND ARTS SOCIAL VALUE (MORE)

The following is a case study of this research project.

WHAT IS MORE?:

MORE is a small research project initiated by Professor Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar, an artist and postgraduate Research student at Coventry University.

MORE was funded by Research England Development Fund (REDF) and was initially carried out from January 2023 – July 2023 and was extended to September 2023.

Learning from Mel Jordan's practice which develops methods of opinion formation, the aim of the MORE study was to identify opportunities for evaluation.

THE MORE OBJECTIVES AND PROCESS:

The objectives of this research project, in respect of the Coventry Biennial were:

To create a longer-term plan of how evaluation can be intertwined with cultural production, skills and audience development for small-scale cultural organisations.

To develop organisational confidence in articulating cultural value to policy makers and funders.

The aim of the MORE project, in general was to focus on evaluation planning and the report generated from this project attempts to suggest simple strategies or changes to improve evaluation processes.

In total we spent two days with the Coventry Biennial team, discussing the organisation and reflecting on our conversations.

THE MORE FINDINGS ON EXISTING PRACTICES:

We found that Coventry Biennial take audience and user feedback very seriously and it is embedded into all planning and development processes.

Results of evaluation and feedback is used by Coventry Biennial to inform decision-making within the organisation.

The current quantitative data collection is well articulated.

Coventry Biennial has some of the best reporting we experienced across the three organisations that we studied as part of the MORE project.

MORE OUTCOMES:

A direct need and actionable change which came out of the discussions with Coventry Biennial was the opportunity to explore the role of their volunteers as catalysts for impact and to provide further training in their role in capturing anecdotal insights from the public.

We applied for follow-on funding to design and deliver a workshop, through which the volunteers could be paid for their time. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful, but we offered our time and space in our building on an in-kind basis as producing this activity would contribute to Marley Treloar's PhD research.

The workshop took place on Thursday 28 September 2023, just before the Coventry Biennial 2023 opening weekend and was attended by a range of Coventry Biennial's team and volunteers.

RESEARCH PROJECT CASE STUDY TWO:

As a part of and alongside our core programme evaluations, we were pleased to work closely with Coventry University and University of Amsterdam on a research project called:

EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE

The following is a case study of this research project.

WHAT IS EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE?:

Evaluative performance is an arts-based method and approach of evaluation developed by Dr Charlie Ingram during his PhD studies.

This method has been created in response to the challenges associated with current policy making and associated evaluation practice, namely a lack of citizen voices in policy solutions, and difficulties for policymakers to speak with diverse groups of people.

To support the further testing of this method, Coventry Biennial has agreed to host researchers Dr Charlie Ingram (Coventry University) and Dr Francesco Chiaravalloti (University of Amsterdam) to undertake an Evaluative Performance process, reflecting upon Coventry Biennial as an organisation, the implementation of the 2023 programme, and its impact on selected commissioned artists.

THE EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE PROCESS:

Evaluative Performance is the bringing together of headphone verbatim arts practice and social science evaluation frameworks.

It is a method of data gathering that involves a performance created solely from the words spoken by interview participants, combined with a post-performance contextual discussion. Interview data is collected by the researcher and then edited into a performance based around a theme, subject matter, or event.

In the context of Coventry Biennial, the research data collected can be framed around the aims and objectives of evaluating impacts of commissioning art, and the process thereof, with questions being asked of the beneficiary and/or participant – such as a citizen or stakeholder.

Evaluative Performance offers an effective and compelling alternative to a written report, quotes, figures, or tables to further articulate and evidence the citizen experience in places where policymaking is currently seen to be falling short.

THE EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE FINDINGS:

As part of this project, 16 individuals (Staff, Stakeholders and Volunteers) were interviewed surrounding their association with Coventry Biennial, their perceptions on how the organisation operates, how they feel about particular artworks during the 2023 programme.

Below are some brief, and non-exhaustive reflections on those interviews:

Coventry Biennial is open to change and sees itself as a social and political organisation that commissions visual art to challenge its audiences. This purpose is shared by all staff and stakeholders.

Coventry Biennial staff define success by several factors:
i) by its continuance
ii) its reach (figures)
iii) its impact on individuals.
In this, when evaluating activity, storytelling seemed to be of interest to the Biennial team.

From the opinion of interviewees, the strength of Coventry Biennial appears to be the investment in artist opportunities, giving newer, less known artists a platform and support.

The funding of Coventry Biennial, and the nature of it being a project-funding organisation leaves the longevity of the organisation at risk.

THE EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES:

A major outcome of this research project was a verbatim theatre performance that took place on the 19th July 2024 at the Ellen Terry Studio at Coventry University and which was followed by a post-show discussion.

Local actors received training in verbatim theatre and completed developmental workshops ahead of presenting a performance that invited audiences to join us in reflecting on Coventry Biennial 2023. This show presented the voices of staff, volunteers, artists and members of the public who were telling the story of Coventry Biennial 2023 in their words.

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Dr Francesco Chiaravalloti's contribution to this research project was a part of Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic Exchange (SPACEEX) a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE).

This performance formed part of the research project *"Innovative Approaches to Evaluating Impact: Testing The 'Evaluative Performance' Method and Approach in Transdisciplinary Environments"* by Dr Charlie Ingram, Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE), Coventry University.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS:

The Coventry Biennial team have identified areas for improvement or development by reviewing the varied datasets that relate to Coventry Biennial 2023 and that have contributed to the production of this report.

Additionally, presented here are recommendations that have been made to Coventry Biennial as a part of the MORE research project by Professor Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar

It is particularly important for us to reflect on the fact that both our own team and the MORE researchers have identified communications as an area for development.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Both MORE and Coventry Biennial colleagues identified communications as a key area for development.

Our audiences have shared that they want more information on our activities.

There is also evidence of a level of confusion or misunderstanding about Coventry Biennial's purpose, model and approach to creative activity and our ethos.

Professor Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar have urged for more transparency in relation to:

How Coventry Biennial does what it does

Why this work is important to others

How it sets a new standard for socially and politically engaged organisations in the art sector

MORE highlighted that there is a need to communicate the artist-run and 'project' characteristics of Coventry Biennial more clearly and explicitly and to claim a key role in sustaining a local artist ecology.

Coventry Biennial will:

Develop a new and refreshed communications strategy as a part of it's next business plan and ahead of Coventry Biennial 2025

COMMUNITY RELEVANCE:

Coventry Biennial colleagues identified an opportunity and a need for increased levels of community engagement, especially with and among Asian and Asian British demographics.

Considering that 18.5% of Coventry's population is Asian or Asian British, we recognise that we have significant opportunity and responsibility to develop projects with artists of Asian heritage and to develop projects that are embedded in and relevant to our communities.

Coventry Biennial will:

Ensure inclusion and representation within our programmes and at all levels within the organisation

Design projects to connect directly and meaningfully with the local Asian community

Build relationships with arts organisations in Asia to develop relevant international projects and activities

QUALITATIVE EVALUATION:

MORE have recommended that Coventry Biennial should expand its evaluation practices to capture more qualitative, visitor focused experiences.

Professor Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar have highlighted that in formal reporting requirements for arts funders, qualitative data often feels overlooked. They believe it is however paramount for the reflexive framework within which Coventry Biennial work.

The MORE research project found that Coventry Biennial have a unique practice of utilising evaluation to shape and design programmes and activities and Professor Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar advise that this approach should be communicated clearly as part of the organisations ethos.

Coventry Biennial will:

Review its approach to data capture ahead of Coventry Biennial 2025

Develop a new and refreshed communications strategy as a part of it's next business plan

COVENTRY BIENNIAL 2023 TEAM, ARTISTS AND SUPPORTERS:

Delivering a project of this scale takes a huge amount of energy, expertise and generosity. Coventry Biennial 2021 wouldn't have been possible without the support of the following individuals and organisations.

TRUSTEES:

Co-Chairs: Paula Orrell and Lara Ratnaraja

Board: Mel Jordan, Evie Kissack, Shwetal Petal, Kate Stoddart, Aman Surey, Helen Wheatley

TEAM:

Joy Corcec, Anneka French, Emily Gardner, Kurt Hickson, Ryan Hughes, Verity Jackson, Tegen Kimbley, Sevven Kucuk, Adele Mary Reed, Ian Sergeant, Dion Ellis Taylor

BUILDING SUPERVISORS:

Mark Cook, Rachel Doughty, Emily Gardner

TECHNICAL SUPPORT:

Christopher Jackson, Tony McClure, Michael Piggott, Darren Withey

Thanks also go to the in-house technicians at our partner venues. We must make a special mention of Tom Walker at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum who went above and beyond.

DOCUMENTATION:

Emily Gardner, Garry Jones, Tegen Kimbley, Sinéad Patching, Luke Pickering, Maria Polodeanu, Adele Mary Reed

Again, a colleague from Herbert Art Gallery & Museum went above and beyond and we must make special mention of Jack Nelson.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT:

Azets Accountants, Earthen Lamp, Quicksilver Couriers

VOLUNTEERS, WORK PLACEMENTS AND FRIENDS:

In a project as sprawling as a region-wide Biennial there are a huge number of people that support us informally, who volunteer and who spend time with us as a part of their studies. We extend our deepest thanks to them all.

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PARTNERS:

University of Warwick, Coventry University, Artangel, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Compton Verney, Coventry Cathedral, Warwickshire County Council, Ikon Gallery, Mead Gallery, Arts Council Collection

ARTISTS:

A History of Frogs, Can Altay, Ania Bas, Phoebe Boswell, Alice Channer, Jo Gane, Clémence Lollia Hilaire, Seungwon Jung, Yva Jung, Dinh Q. Lê, Paul Lemmon and Graeme Macdonald, Rene Matić, Mothers Who Make Coventry, Djuna O'Neill, Jem Southam, Jol Thoms, Janet Tryner, Eilla Yolande

Thanks also go to the wide range of artists, curators, creative practitioners, researchers and academics that contributed to our programme of talks, workshops, screenings and symposiums.

COLLABORATORS, FABRICATORS AND COMMUNITIES:

The artists listed above each worked closely with a wide range of individuals and groups in different ways. We would like to extend our thanks, but recognise that the following list is incomplete:

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