

Director's Report, Peltz Gallery, Academic Year 2013-14
Professor Annie E. Coombes, Department of History of Art

This was the first academic year operating under the title Peltz Gallery. After discussion and ratification by the Arts Executive, it was recognized that 'Gallery' gave the space the visual and performative identity that 'Room' failed to conjure and that it was a more accurate representation of the kinds of creative activities promoted by the Peltz.

Mission

This has been a formative year for the Peltz which is fast establishing itself as :

- An effective showcase for the creative interdisciplinary and experimental research produced in the School of the Arts by both staff and students alike.
- An arena where those Schools outside the Humanities at Birkbeck can explore how visual culture can enhance the creative potential of their own disciplines and thus their ability to reach new audiences (Law, Social and hard sciences).
- A space to foreground the public funding attracted by the School through its research activities, together with the academic, arts and science, community and NGO partnerships we have built in the process.
- A professional training ground for postgraduates in the creative industries.
- An environment able to entice an audience beyond London and a far broader public than Birkbeck's already diverse student body.

Management Structure

The Director was voted into her position by the Arts Executive for five years, with a view to providing the continuity necessary for getting the Gallery up and running as a fully functioning arts space. After this time the post will rotate amongst members of the School for a period of up to three years.

The Director has overseen the setting up of the Peltz, its technical and managerial structure and the delivery of its programme of events and exhibitions. Decisions concerning programming and proposals for exhibitions in the space are made in close collaboration with the Arts Space Steering Committee comprised of representatives from the School of the Arts together with the College impact development officer and the Peltz part-time administrator.

This year we have created working protocols and procedures for writing, submitting and assessing exhibition and event proposals, for exhibiting and associated events programming, for liaising with estates and external relations and for the effective promotion and publicizing of events. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Nancy Campbell, our website is constantly being developed and updated and already has an impressive archive of past events and exhibitions to its credit. With the help of the Gallery's part-time administrator, Dan Whitfield, we are producing a regular events newsletter to help publicize the activities of the Gallery to a wider public.

Building

The ingenuity of the College carpenter, Gary McCarthy and his team, has meant that the Peltz is finally equipped with professional-standard clad walls. This enables us to comply with the regulations of most lending institutions and to attach artifacts securely to the walls without interfering with the Gallery's English Heritage status. In addition, to render it fit for collaborating with artists and other professional lending institutions, recorded CCTV has now been installed in the Peltz though this will need to be expanded the following year to ensure surveillance of the Gallery walls. Invigilation of the exhibitions is not always possible due to lack of personnel and insurance for temporary exhibitions that often include artwork from beyond the UK, has been a thorny and complex issue. We are on the way to solving this with the help of Neil Chamberlain-Keen the College Management Accountant .

There remain some teething problems in the Gallery but we are hoping that most of these will be resolved by the start of the 2014-15 academic year. A beam counter is essential if we are to demonstrate our expanding audience and the clear impact made by the exhibitions in the Peltz. Lack of flexible lighting increases the risk of damage to works from heat and glare and there is still no signage for the Peltz, a factor which significantly undermines its potential. Consequently a stand-alone banner was commissioned and acts as temporary signage in the Gordon Square Reception area.

Programming

This academic year started off with postdoctoral Fellow in English, Heather Tilley's wonderful exhibition, "Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People in the Nineteenth Century" charting the social history of Braille as a language for the blind and partially-sighted and the development of embossed literature. Achieved in collaboration with the Wellcome Foundation and with the participation of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, it also attracted funding from Arts Council England, the AHRC and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

In June 2014 'East and West: Visualising the Ottoman City' was an outcome from an AHRC research network grant, 'Ottoman Cosmopolitanism', involving Birkbeck (Dr. Gabriel Koureas) and the Universities of Leeds, Westminster and Portsmouth. Curated by the artist Leslie Hakim Dowek the exhibition was a historical and contemporary exploration of transcultural memories of Ottoman cities past and present through the lens-based explorations of artists Aikaterini Gegisia, Hakim-Dowek and Paris Petridis.

In July 2014 'Family Ties: Reframing Memory', presented six artists' installations exploring the nostalgic but often highly conflictual memories aroused by a variety of familial relationships, through the poignant use of photography, re-enactment, sound and video. The exhibiting artists, (all members of the 'Family Ties Network') together with other academics, participated in a stimulating and well-attended international conference co-ordinated by Birkbeck Research in the Aesthetics of Kinship and Community, 'Picturing the Family: Media, Narrative, Memory'.

The Peltz has also showcased our growing cohort of practice-based PhD students in the School of the Arts, and provides an environment for curatorial and professional training with a varied and critical audience for students' work in a venue open to a wide public. Emerging printmaker, Victoria Ahrens's postgraduate degree show, 'Print dialogues', ran for nine days in May 2014. Our first practice-based PhD was successfully awarded in September 2014 to Dr. Evanthia Tselika following her postgraduate exhibition and viva in the Peltz Gallery.

Often the events supporting Peltz exhibitions are as memorable as the exhibitions themselves. In May, the Peltz launched and exhibited Sally Heathcote's graphic novel, *Suffragette: Remembering Female Suffrage* and hosted a panel discussion in conjunction with Janet McCabe and Vicky Ball's exhibition commemorating the anniversary of the 1970's BBC TV drama on the Suffragette movement, 'Shoulder to Shoulder' with members of the original TV cast. Chaired by Birkbeck's new President, Baroness Joan Bakewell, the panel occasioned some candid reminiscence about the hard-won struggle for women's professional visibility within the BBC.

The Gallery has been instrumental in helping to cement Birkbeck's public commitment to human rights, equality and diversity and the right to academic freedom. 'The Space Between' was a moving exhibition initiated by Human Resources at Birkbeck profiling the work of the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA). To mark International Women's Day, the Peltz exhibited an artist's response to the oral testimonies of four women academics assisted by CARA in this way honouring their courage in defending their rights as women and their insistence on academic freedom.

Future Plans

The fact that the Peltz calendar is already almost full for the new academic year (2014-15) is testimony to its success as a thriving centre for creative practices and dialogue. We open this year with our contribution to Black History Month, 'Biography of an Archive: June Givanni's Pan African Cinema Archive' followed by 'Moving Pictures' an exhibition of image and testimony from survivors of the Holocaust and the genocides in Rwanda, Darfur, Bosnia co-curated with the Holocaust Memorial Trust. Our other plans for this year include working on major funding bids to consolidate a creative hub – Birkbeck Forum for the Arts - with collaborative programming at key points in the academic calendar across Birkbeck's arts spaces: the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck Cinema and the Theatre/Performance space. The Forum for the Arts is also intended to host practitioners. We believe that the experimental interdisciplinary nature of much of the research within the School, provides an ideal environment for hosting artists-in-residence and that the creation of residencies will stimulate a dynamic intellectual exchange that will be of mutual benefit to both academics and artists/performers.

Professor Annie E. Coombes,
Director Peltz Gallery
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