



The shape of artistic direction

Access and community arts

Inclusive arts projects can both promote the work of disabled artists and make their projects accessible, in all senses, to a wider audience; something in which the disability-led arts organisation Shape specialises. Here Geraldine McNamara, Shape's Programme Manager and artists Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch describe how collaboration on a community arts project resulted in valuable insights for both the artists and Shape

Visual artist Damien Robinson and musician Stuart Bowditch have been collaborating on art projects since 2006. They were drawn together by their mutual interest in sound and accessibility, as Deaf and hearing artists respectively, as well as in the use of new media. Thriving on creating works in unusual sites, such as a nature reserve, a farm, a music festival, an electronics shop, and a hotel / nightclub, their works draw audiences who might not consider themselves interested in art.

Their Signpost project, developed in 2010, was envisaged as a site-specific multi-sensory installation, where audiences could experience recordings from the town to which the signpost pointed. Intended as an alternative conception of journeying, the project was aimed at settings outside traditional arts infrastructures. While some access issues are integral to Damien and Stuart's working relationship, they were keen to incorporate wider concepts into the project from the outset, rather than creating 'bolt-on' solutions; hence they approached Shape for support.

Shape has been representing the work of disabled artists for over 30 years, using its experience with the wider arts and culture sector to tackle the barriers that exist around participation, creative dialogue, and interpretation. Shape provides a range of practical resources to recognise and support the careers of disabled artists, such

as critical debate, which is so often lacking for practising disabled artists, especially those who wish to develop and inform their own understanding of access issues. Shape's online resources provide guidance for arts workers, producers, administrators and art professionals, and we regularly get asked to comment, contribute to and support work by artists and participating venues.

From early on in the Signpost project, Shape's access team worked closely with both artists to explore potential access issues. While the artists had a clear vision, they were exploring new technical approaches and ideas around audience engagement, putting ideas into action as live research. It was an exercise in considering diverse audience participation while ensuring the creative concept and process remained open and unhindered from the very start. This exploratory approach extended to an exchange of knowledge as the project progressed, which, as in all effective collaborations, was fundamental to the process. Shape learned to appreciate the intricacies of developing outdoor artworks for challenging environments while sharing tips on working with particular materials and interactive elements.

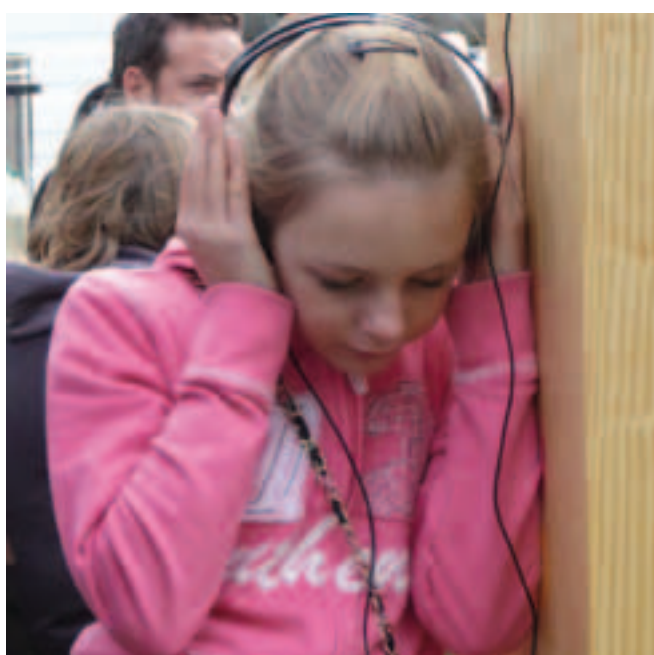
Launched at a 'Village Green' event in Southend-on-Sea held by arts organisation Metal in September 2010, Signpost drew an estimated

audience of over 800 within a ten-hour period. It functioned as an actual signpost, with different sensory interfaces for experiencing the sound playback. Multiple recordings, including artist field recordings, public donations and sound archive recordings from the distant location, Colchester, were arranged as virtual journeys, with audiences able to experience the sounds:

- aurally
- through touch, via tactile NXT sound exciters
- privately, by plugging their own headphones into jack sockets
- visually, via a screen interface

A visual text transcription of the soundscape was displayed on two split-height screens, providing both a transcript and additional contextual information about the sounds.

Signpost enabled the artists to reach out beyond traditional arts audiences and their new media comfort zone, with audience diversity enhanced by attention to accessibility. The placement of the screens, sockets, and touch panels accommodated a broad audience height range. The base, which had required a complete redesign after groundworks at the site were ruled out, was easily navigated by wheelchair users, with touch panels and screens drawing in hearing-impaired people. The audience age ranged from small children listening until dragged away by their



The interactive Signpost fascinated children



An audience of all ages and interests was drawn to the Signpost



parents to older people. Residents and ex-residents from Colchester gave the artists personal accounts of the town, along with suggestions of other places to which the Signpost could point for the development of both real and imaginary journey themes, such as dreams.

Shape's input also focused on marketing design, techniques and materials, leading to greater-than-predicted traffic to the project website and people following the near-daily updates on the project blog, and still visiting the site several months afterwards, with the knowledge investment still paying dividends. The artists aim to build on the momentum created to investigate funding and development opportunities which will allow them to develop the concept and related ideas while continuing to use access as a creative tool.

Key features throughout this collaboration were:

- the focus on the creative concept
- the desire for the installation to be shared with as many people as possible
- ensuring quality remained a priority

All information and learning was filtered through many levels, including joiners, technicians and events organisers. This reinforces the importance of raising access awareness throughout: rather than being an isolated issue, inclusion informs everything we want to achieve. ●

 www.signpostproject.co.uk
 www.shapearts.org.uk