

Visual Art Network – AGM 21 September 2023

Chair's Report (October 2022 – September 2023)

VAN Gallery

The last year has been one of consolidation and steady improvement following the lean years of the pandemic.

Most months have seen an increase in both footfall and gallery sales in comparison to the previous year. We had a particularly good December, with 2156 visitors to the gallery and £4392 taken in sales.

We have made improvements to the appearance of the gallery, creating a distinct exhibition area through a contrasting colour scheme and signage, and repainting the floor. As a result we have received many complimentary comments from members, visitors, Darwin Centre Management and even staff in Massarella's Coffee Shop opposite!

Other improvements include obtaining an additional card display unit, courtesy of Shropshire Art Society and switching our POS card reader system from Zettle to SumUp which, after some initial teething problems, seems to be working well now. SumUp has the advantage of not requiring the use of a mobile phone and has a lower transaction fee than Zettle.

Now that we no longer rent a unit in the Market Hall, our registered address has become the gallery.

Our lease came up for renewal recently and it was pleasing to hear that the management team at the shopping centre regard us as 'good' tenants because we maintain the unit well, carry out regular fire alarm tests and adhere to the service schedule for the fire alarm system and extinguishers. It is important for us to have a good working relationship with the Centre Management because we don't have the same rights as rent-paying tenants and could be asked to vacate the unit with only one month's notice.

Membership

We now have 120 members with 19 new members joining so far this year. In an attempt to attract more younger members, we have waived the membership fee for under 25s and to make the Friends membership category more attractive we have reduced that fee to just £1 per year.

The Members' Newsletter is now well established and our Membership Secretary, Julie Goldthorpe, has done a brilliant job in keeping that fresh, interesting and informative.

Exhibitions

We have had an interesting and varied exhibition schedule which was put together by Lena Jarl Churm when she was a Trustee. The schedule comprised eight different themed exhibitions which require a lot of work at changeover and we are extremely grateful to the volunteers who have helped out with those. One of the exhibitions tied in with the Arts Trail theme of 'Movement' and we were delighted to be able to offer exhibition space to some of the Ukrainian refugee artists that Pat Simon has been working with at the Refugee Hub.

Alongside the exhibitions, the Artist Board rental system has been working well and we recently introduced our Makers' Space scheme which allows makers to rent a dedicated area of the gallery to exhibit their work. Flyers, produced by Julie, are now a regular feature of the exhibitions to help promote them.

Jasmine Sara, who took over as Exhibitions Organiser from Lena, has put together the exhibition schedule for 2024 which we will send out with the minutes from this meeting and will be available on the website.

Shrewsbury Arts Trail

We were, once again, a major player in the Arts Trail this year. As well as helping organise it we were one of the main sponsors and our members had work around the main theme of 'Movement' exhibited at Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, The Parade Shopping Centre and the Market Hall as well as in local cafes and bars. Our members also curated and took part in various exhibitions at other venues as part of the trail.

Events

We had a pre-Christmas social event in the gallery in December and Julie organised a children's colouring competition with prizes for different age ranges.

Following on from a member's suggestion we held a Sell, Swap and Buy event at the English Bridge Workshops in June and we are having another one on October 21st.

Volunteering

As an organisation we rely on volunteers for all our operations and activities. Members volunteer in different ways and we are enormously thankful for that. For example, William Lee has been designing all our exhibition posters, Gisela Robinson has been creating the designs on the gallery window, Reg Lewis painted the gallery floor as part of the gallery refresh, Abigail Green looks after our Instagram account, Kat Preston was guest curator for that account and wrote a Blog during Women's History Month.

As ever we are also indebted to the members who regularly do shifts in the gallery. Unfortunately, there have been an increasing number of days recently when the gallery has had to be closed because there were no volunteers available. Due to a fall-off in volunteer numbers willing to steward in the gallery, particularly at weekends, the Trustees took the decision recently to not open on Sundays in September and October with a view to reinstating Sunday opening in November in time for the run up to Christmas.

The low volunteer numbers are a concern because, under the terms of our contract with the Darwin Centre, we are supposed to be open when the Centre is open. Centre Management have always made allowances for us recognising that we are a charity run by volunteers but if we are regularly closed when we should be open there may come a point when we are challenged on this. Added to which of course, being closed affects our sales, particularly when we are closed on a Saturday which is our best day for footfall and sales.

The Trustees have discussed this issue a number of times over the year and will continue to consider ways in which we can increase the number of members volunteering in the gallery.

Changes in Personnel

We've had a number of changes in personnel over the year Owen Carter resigned back in January but has continued to provide much needed technical support to the Trustees and Jackie Corfield who had done a great job for us as Treasurer had to resign at the end of June for personal reasons. To cover the Treasurer role Phil Langstaff assumed that position and Dave Thompson took over as Chairperson. Pat Simon was co-opted onto the Board of Trustees at the last meeting on 12 September.

We are losing two more Trustees following this AGM. Jancis Vaughan has been a Trustee since September 2017 and has played a very active role in the organisation, serving as Secretary as well as coordinating the students who have done work experience with us and overseeing the social media accounts. We will miss her ideas and enthusiasm. Thank you Jancis for all the work you have done over the years.

Jasmine Sara became a Trustee in September 2020 and quickly became a valued member of the team. Jasmine took over as Treasurer for a year when Hilary Tillyard resigned from the role and has been instrumental in creating and updating our policies and procedures. For the majority of this year Jasmine has taken the lead at exhibition changeovers and has worked tirelessly and conscientiously to ensure that they went smoothly and kept the gallery looking professional and inviting. Although Jasmine is standing down as a Trustee she has volunteered to carry on as Exhibitions Coordinator so thank you Jasmine for everything you have done and continue to do.

Looking Ahead to The Future

We will aim to open the gallery on Wednesday evenings in December again when the Darwin Centre is open for late night shopping. This has proved very worthwhile in previous years.

We would like to extend our support for Community Based Projects and would like to set up a fund to enable us to do that which is one of the items on the Agenda for this meeting.

I'm also keen to reintroduce the Private Views for Members at each exhibition changeover which is something that stopped during the pandemic.

We will continue to seek ways to develop the organisation throughout 2024 and of course we can't do that without the efforts of our volunteers so once again I'd like to conclude with a huge thank you to everyone who has volunteered in some capacity over the past year. VAN simply wouldn't exist without you.

Phil Langstaff

Chair – Visual Art Network