



A GUIDE TO THE

# Contemporary

# ARTS



**Our guide will help you understand and engage with the contemporary arts in a way that works for you.**

## **New to contemporary arts?**

Vibrant, culturally relevant, but sometimes confusing - contemporary art forms aren't always straightforward to understand. If you have been put off by this in the past, you're not alone! Our guide will help you understand and engage with the contemporary arts in a way that works for you.

## **What are the contemporary arts?**

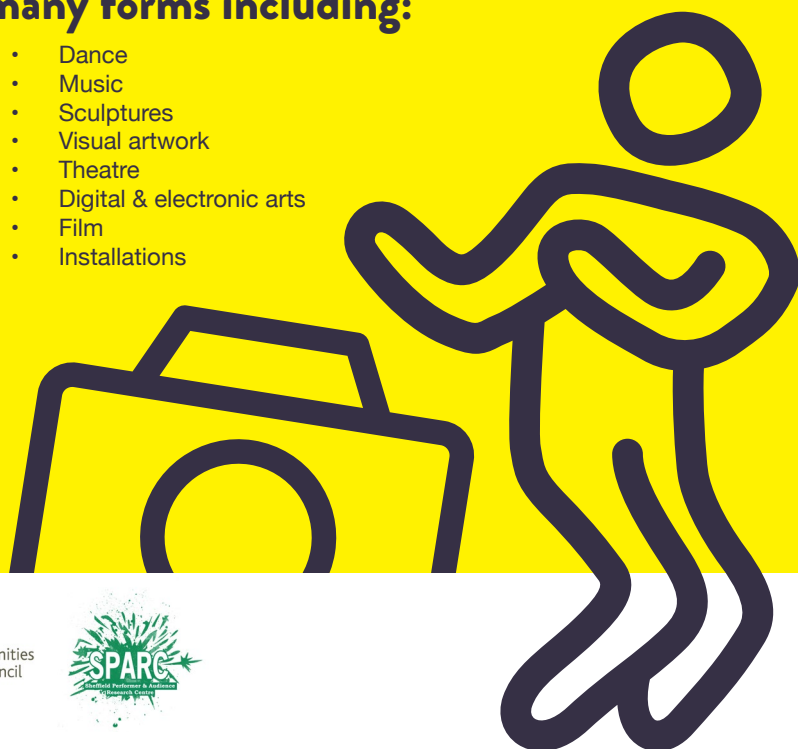
It's easy to dismiss new artwork as 'something my five-year old could have done' - and many people do. But they're missing out: contemporary artworks can reflect on society or issues in the world around us that we can easily identify with - like family, identity or community. The contemporary arts are best defined as artworks which are new and in some way innovative or challenging.

For new audiences, understanding these forms and enjoying them can be challenging because of

the language used, a lack of information around a particular piece of art, or the abstract nature of it. It can be easy to be left wondering "What was that supposed to mean?"

## **Contemporary arts can take many forms including:**

- Dance
- Music
- Sculptures
- Visual artwork
- Theatre
- Digital & electronic arts
- Film
- Installations



## Thoughts from you, the audience

We interviewed 187 audience members from across four UK cities to understand the experiences of attending contemporary arts events.

There are stereotypes for every artform:

- **Dance:** “a mixture of yoga and stretches”, “throwing bodies around the floor for the hell of it”
- **Music:** “plinky-plonky”, “screechy”, “complete cacophony”
- **Visual art:** Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst, “looks like something I did when I was pissed at 4.00am”
- **Theatre:** worried they may be forced to join in, “straight plays” are “depressing”

Some also describe them as “weird for the sake of being weird” and criticise inaccessible language. But once audiences find a way into the contemporary arts they love the experience...

- **Feeling part of an audience at a welcoming venue really helps:** “I think I have probably been drawn to those [contemporary arts venues] where the audience reaction I feel is a lot more authentic, because you are working with people who will go, ‘that’s really rubbish,’ rather than people who clap in their clothes and buy the programme”
- **Theatre can be easier to connect with:** “It feels like in theatre, there’s loads more to engage with, in terms of, well if I don’t like the script, I might like the acting, or I might like the visuals”
- **Supporting the artists matters:** “I like that people are trying different things, and thinking about different ways of putting things on [so] putting theatre in weird spaces is definitely a thing right now, but it is also fun”
- **Contemporary arts can be central to life and wellbeing:** “It’s a part of my life. Without me doing all those things I wouldn’t be who I am”

Arts engagement can be thought-provoking, life-enriching and full of aesthetic and expressive value. And of course, enjoyable!

## Engaging with contemporary arts

Go with others - you can learn from other people and discuss the work.

Don’t be intimidated by the descriptions of arts - don’t worry if you feel your experience is different to what it ‘should’ be. Your experience is whatever you want it to be.



In a gallery, you don’t have to spend equal time on every exhibit - be empowered to take charge of how you view and experience what’s there.

The more you attend the better you’ll get at reading the publicity and deciding whether or not it’s something you might like.

**It’s okay not to like it!**



**Take a look at our handbook here:**

[www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/research/uaca/handbook/](http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/research/uaca/handbook/)

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