



Kate Sweeney is a visual artist who has been working in participatory settings for several years.

She graduated from Northumbria University with a BA in Fine Art in 1999 and went on to complete her MA at the same university in 2009, achieving a distinction.

Her studio practice is based in the Star and Shadow Cinema in Ouseburn, Newcastle.

“Although my degree was in Fine Art, I’ve been using video techniques in a lot of the projects I’ve been working on recently. This has been particularly useful while I’ve been working in care homes on a storytelling project. I find that working in participatory settings, you use all sorts of art forms. You need technical and artistic skills, so video comes in very useful. I also use photography on the project as photographs can help me with the starting point – I’m working with people suffering from dementia and the pictures can produce a response. They can just be abstract pictures, not family pictures.

There is, of course, a relationship between my work in participatory settings and my studio work. What I do on some of my participatory projects can sometimes help inform or shape my studio work, and some of the work I do in my own practice can help me in the project settings.

I suppose my motivation for becoming involved in this area of work started when I became involved in political activism. I was 19 and was going down to a big political demonstration on my own. I was nervous and excited and saw some graffiti based on a Derek Jarman quote written on a wall. It was a real awakening and I felt really empowered by it. It was a piece of artwork in a setting accessible by ordinary people. That became something that really interested me – art reaching people outside of galleries, which I suppose is what participatory arts is about.

While I was art school I was trained in a skill, but when I finished there, I didn't necessarily know how I was going to use Fine Art in a career. But I did know I wanted to work in communities, I knew I wanted to work in participatory practice.

Initially I kept the two separate: my studio work and my participatory project work. Then I thought I really don't want to work like this any longer so now I don't separate them.

I suppose I've been fortunate enough to work in several different sorts of settings. I like the variety – I arranged a residency in San Francisco which wasn't difficult to do. If you're going to live frugally, it's worth doing a residency abroad for six months. I worked in the student support system and the work I did led me on to working on the city's Day of the Dead festival, which was a great experience.

One of my projects that I'm particularly proud of is the work I'm doing with Equal Arts in Gateshead. This involves using images and storytelling to work with dementia sufferers in care homes. I'm learning a lot as well as relying on past experiences to help me with the work. Equal Arts are a great partner, really dedicated to what they're doing and who they are working with. The project is passionate about the care of elderly people and we're really improving the lives of people we're working with.

I feel like I know what participatory arts is about now. I keep things simple.

Most projects I've undertaken have had some sort of challenge, it's about how you react to that challenge, how you deal with it. You also learn how to get support should you need it.

My route into participatory arts was unusual – my degree work was so conceptual that I did a BTEC in computer-aided design. Through this course I applied to do a residency at the Green Festival and I and a colleague did a piece of public work for the festival, and things led from there.

I've since worked with a wide variety of organisations – councils, universities, galleries, charities and arts organisations.

There was no formal training for working in participatory settings, I and others just found our own way. What I would say is that you have to have experienced being a participant to really 'get' participatory arts.

I've been inspired on the way by artists like Lindsay Duncanson. I've also learnt a lot from other artistic disciplines, particularly theatre and drama work. They really know how to set up a workshop. So going on day-long conferences or seminars can be really useful even if sometimes it doesn't feel like it at the time. Things do stick in your head without you realising it.

I'd need to understand why someone was thinking of doing this work before sitting down and discussing it with them. They'd need to be really intrigued by the subject, have a personal response to it.

But if someone asked for advice, I'd say it's a really interesting art form, one that you can do with a music degree or an art degree and one in which an interest in cross arts can really help you. Any peer-to-peer opportunities can also help you, as can shadowing others already working in participatory settings.

One good thing about it is that there isn't a clear pathway. It's not like a business with a clear career pathway."