

The value and impact of Wales' presence at the Venice Biennale for the visual arts sector in Wales: Executive Summary

Introduction

Arad Research was commissioned by Arts Council of Wales to produce a research report and evaluative study measuring the value and impact of Wales' presence at the Venice Biennale for the visual arts sector in Wales.

The Venice Biennale, the leading international event for the visual arts, was established in 1895. It is the largest visual arts exhibition in the world. The scale of the event can be illustrated by attendances recorded of over 500,000 visitors for the 2015 Biennale exhibition and some 24,000 international curators, critics, collectors and artists during the three day preview period.

*Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice*¹ is commissioned and managed through a partnership between Arts Council of Wales and Wales Arts International, with support from the Welsh Government and British Council. Since 2003 the level of investment in *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* has increased from around £285,000 to £400,000 core budget across the two year project.

Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice enables Wales to celebrate the best of its emerging and established artists on an international stage. The current aims for presenting in Venice are as follows:

- Present the most exciting and creative artists associated with Wales.
- Focus international and national attention on the diverse range of critically valued work in, from and to do with Wales.
- Create international experiences and connections for galleries, curators and artists that will develop the visual arts in Wales.
- Celebrate Wales in the World as dynamic, culturally engaged and forward-looking.

Methodology

The methodology for this research comprised desk research of existing Arts Council of Wales monitoring documents, interviews with stakeholders and an electronic survey of the wider visual arts sector in Wales. The desk research examined the background and rationale behind *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* and informed the development of the electronic surveys and interview guides.

Arad disseminated an electronic survey to collect qualitative data from key stakeholders from the visual arts sector in Wales/the UK. These stakeholders included artists, curators, gallery directors, critics, collectors, funders, journalists and opinion formers. A total of 121 survey responses were received, although not every respondent answered every question.

Arad also undertook 17 interviews with stakeholders and participants to obtain their views on the wider strategic impact of the project. Arad interviewed a selection of the curators and

¹ <http://www.arts.wales/arts-in-wales/venice>

artists involved in each iteration of *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* and attended an evaluation event to gather feedback shared by participants of 2015 Invigilator Plus programme.

Profile

There is strong consensus from stakeholders and survey respondents that the profile of *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* has grown and developed over the last four iterations since 2009 and that it has had a significant impact on Wales' international profile. Around three quarter of survey respondents agreed that the show presents exciting and creative artists associated with Wales. Stakeholders reported that the artists, curators and invigilators involved have successfully showcased the quality of the visual arts sector.

For stakeholders *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* is delivering against its main strategic goals in terms of focusing international attention on visual arts from Wales and celebrating Wales as a dynamic, culturally engaged and forward-looking nation. Wales' growing profile is seen as an integral, and complementary, part of the UK's wider visual arts offer at the Venice Biennale. Wales' presence there provides valuable networking and partnership benefits for artists, curators and galleries / organisations and these are contributing to the sharing of creative ideas and development of commercial opportunities.

In terms of media coverage the show is considered to be generally well promoted at a national and international level although broadsheet and social media coverage was reported by some stakeholders and survey respondents to require further focus. For the 2013 and 2015 iterations a press agency was commissioned for national and international media work and this resulted in a substantial increase in media coverage compared to 2011.

Survey respondents and stakeholders nonetheless considered that more could be done to ensure awareness and coverage of the show's profile within Wales, especially amongst the general public. It was proposed that this should be linked to a longer-term, more consistent strategy for promoting Wales' visual arts sector as a whole.

Selection

Some concerns were expressed relating to the perceived 'closed-off' nature of the selection process and there were views that decision-making could be made more transparent for the visual arts sector in Wales. This was linked to the choice of artists to represent Wales with around a quarter of survey respondents expressing views that the choices made have not sufficiently represented the diversity and creativity of the sector.

Impact of *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice*

The greater level of resources and support provided for the commissioned artists through *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* has made a big difference to their work, aspirations, creative ideas and career development opportunities. It was generally recognised that it is currently difficult to develop and sustain careers in the visual arts in Wales and therefore the international focus provided by the Biennale can deliver further opportunities for the selected artists. Several of the selected artists have subsequently shown their work produced for Venice at other prestigious UK and international galleries. For some survey respondents it is important that selected artists are creating work in Wales and working with Welsh galleries.

Participating curators reported a strong impact on their aspirations and networks and their participation had allowed them to make the case for further projects with Welsh connections, leading to further international partnership and opportunities. The Invigilator Plus programme

is highly regarded by the sector and is succeeding in its aims of providing early career artists with an experience of the international art world and the quality and networks required to succeed. Galleries in Wales have embraced new partnerships and new funding opportunities and developed their team's professional experience, their international profile and the networks in which they operate.

All stakeholders considered that participation in the Venice Biennale provides a clear sign to the visual arts sector in Wales that there is a budget investment and aspiration to work internationally. It was reported that this ambition and confidence is feeding into the development of the visual arts sector in Wales, contributing to higher levels of activity, the creation of a critical mass and a Wales-wide infrastructure. For all stakeholders *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* is delivering against its strategic goal of creating international experiences and connections for galleries, curators and artists that will develop the visual arts in Wales.

The majority of survey respondents agreed with this view and that Wales' presence at the Venice Biennale was delivering valuable international networking benefits and partnerships for the visual arts sector as a whole. However, others considered that the benefits of the *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* are more confined to those directly involved and called for wider opportunities for the sector to engage. It was noted by some stakeholders that artists, curators and galleries in Wales should take a leading role in building on the partnerships being created. There were also calls for a more proactive role for Welsh Government and relevant ministers in promoting the visual arts as part of Wales' wider cultural offer, maximising the opportunities which the Biennale facilitates.

Value, sustainability and future strategies

Stakeholders and survey respondents considered that a presence at the Venice Biennale plays a key role in Welsh Government's ambition that Wales should promote itself as a culturally dynamic and self-confident nation. *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* is seen as a valuable creative and cultural investment for Wales by almost all survey respondents and stakeholders. It offers the opportunity to make sustainable and important connections for artists, curators, and galleries and others in the visual arts sector and acts as a platform to demonstrate Wales' cultural excellence. The Venice Biennale remains one of the key opportunities for Wales to succeed internationally, allowing artists, curators and invigilators to act as advocates for the visual arts and wider cultural sector in Wales.

Stakeholders and survey respondents pointed to successive iterations building on the investment delivered so far, and the further momentum and profile created by Wales' presence at Venice since 2009 (and since Wales first attended in 2003). For all stakeholders and most survey respondents sustaining a presence at Venice is considered a worthwhile investment in terms of the impact and profile for Wales, providing there is a strong accompanying infrastructure in Wales to build on this impact. The visual arts sector in Wales is now regarded as more confident and ambitious and there are higher expectations and goal setting regarding quality and opportunities.

All stakeholders and most survey respondents (around three quarters) considered that the *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* should continue to be funded at the same level to build further on the impact delivered. While current funding restraints were recognised stakeholders noted the value of the investment and the range of benefits it was delivering for the visual arts sector in Wales and Wales' wider international profile. There were some suggestions to source additional funding through partnerships with universities or through

corporate sponsorship however strong competition for cultural funding and a lack of natural private sector partners was noted.

The impact and momentum generated by *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* is seen as an opportunity to broaden the appeal of the visual arts and improve the audience base in Wales through promoting wider engagement. Suggested ways of enhancing its impact include a more open selection process to encourage a greater diversity in the range of artists and curators involved; ensuring continued partnerships with other high profile events such as Artes Mundi; developing an improved touring infrastructure to bring back the work to Wales and delivering a strategy to tour the work at a wider UK and international level. There were additional calls for further investment in the visual arts infrastructure in Wales to maintain the profile and momentum of the sector and further capitalise on the impact delivered.

Recommendations

1. Funding should be continued at current levels to build on the impact and momentum delivered by *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice*.
2. The continued funding of *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* should be linked to other support for the creative and commercial development of the visual arts sector in Wales.
3. Future media strategies should focus on enhancing social media and UK broadsheet coverage while also linking to the development of a longer-term, more consistent strategy to promote visual arts from Wales.
4. Arts Council of Wales should ensure that sufficient information about *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* selection process is disseminated to the wider visual arts sector in Wales.
5. Arts Council of Wales should consider widening the selection process to ensure that the diversity and quality of visual arts associated with Wales is reflected in the artists, curators and galleries selected.
6. Arts Council of Wales should aim to build on the international networks and partnerships developed and ensure that these are linked to Welsh Government strategies promoting Wales' wider cultural offer.
7. Arts Council of Wales should work with relevant Welsh Government Ministers to maximise the opportunities for strategic relationship building which the Venice Biennale facilitates. This could take the form of a planned programme of engagements during the opening week.
8. Further work to build on the successful education and digital programme of 2015 should be considered to engage the general public with *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* and provide a wider benefit for Wales
9. This process should be linked to an improved touring infrastructure and partnerships with galleries in Wales to ensure work created for *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* is shown in Wales.