

# Art and War: Responses to Iraq

## Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the public engagement project Art and War. The project builds upon research undertaken by Dr Alan Ingram at UCL Department of Geography on the responses of artists and art institutions in the UK to the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Three workshops and an exhibition were organised in February-March 2013 to work with communities in London to explore art produced in response to the Iraq invasion. This project was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit Beacon Bursary funding scheme.

This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.

### The project need:

The need for this project was identified from research on the responses of artists and art institutions to the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Even among artists and art institutions there is little awareness of the range and diversity of responses to the war or how they reflect the diversity of experiences and perspectives associated with it. The project aimed to stimulate discussion through using the body of art to come out of the Iraq war, including work made by artists from Iraq and the UK to encourage a broader process of reflection on the meaning and consequences of the war.

### Based on this need, three aims were developed:

1. to raise awareness of the range and diversity of responses to the war, and how they reflect the diversity of experiences and perspectives associated with it;
2. to inform a broader process of reflection on the meaning and consequences of the war; and
3. to highlight geographical themes, thinking and conversations about the war.

### What happened?

During February-March 2013, three workshops took place:

- a small group discussion (10 people) hosted by Ark Space, involving Iraqi artists, writers and poets to consider themes to be explored in subsequent events.
- Art, War and Peace: Responses to the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq which took place at the Mosaic Rooms in Kensington, and involved talks by Iraqi artists and writers and open discussion (64 people).
- a workshop at UCL (Beyond the Geographies of War: Exploring Art and Peace; 25 people) to discuss issues raised by the exhibition

Geographies of War: Iraq Revisited the exhibition was held at UCL and the exhibition was attended by c. 200 people.



## Facts and Figures

**3** public workshops were held on the topic of Art and War

Art and War workshops were attended by **99** people

Approx **200** people came to the exhibition held at UCL

The project involved **3** key partners: Ark Space, The Mosaic Rooms and Reel Iraq 2013

The project was lead by Dr Alan Ingram, UCL Department of Geography, with support from **5** UCL students

## Emerging themes from the evaluation

Art and War was a public engagement project grounded in and informed by a research project, which was highlighted in the course of public engagement activities.

Through the workshops and the exhibition the project raised awareness of the diversity of responses and perspectives to the war; and informed a broader process of reflection about the war. However, in the early stages of planning it became clear that it would not be possible to engage all groups equally and so the project focused on people with ties to Iraq; people engaged in peace work; and people with broader interests in art, war and peace.

The project lead felt that the most successful aspect of the project was the public engagement workshop at The Mosaic Rooms. This involved a large number of people from the core target audience and generated a great deal of lively and heated discussion, which was recognised by participants as being particularly valuable in highlighting the diversity of experiences of the war and artistic responses to it, and placing these in the context of Iraq's turbulent political past and history of external intervention.

The breadth and depth of engagement, through workshops and the exhibition, enabled the facilitation of deep conversations on this topic.

At the exhibition, research assistants observed visitors and where possible engaged them in conversation, which were then recorded in a log book. The log book shows that visitors responded to the exhibition in quite a wide range of ways, with many engaging with the themes identified.

The project was able to involve five graduate (PhD and MSc) students as research assistants, who were trained and gained experience in the practice of undertaking and evaluating public engagement.

A key influencing factor to the success of the project was the partners involved. Their participation enabled the project lead to engage a wider range of people. It was felt that hosting the event at a high-profile institution recognised for its work in the field helped a lot in attracting people in my target groups. Furthermore, research and public engagement activities have generated new links with partner organisations as well as a wider range of institutions and organisations working on Iraq, art, war and peace related issues.

Art and War provides an excellent example of how key relationships and networks can be built through such public engagement projects.

Further information about these events is available at:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/iraq-war-geographies>

<http://www.mosaicrooms.org/art-war-and-peace-responses-to-the-invasion-and-occupation-of-iraq/>

## Learning from the Process

### What worked well?

- spending time mapping the relevant issues and people well in advance of the project starting, based on research and networking.

- the partners were ideal for facilitating the discussions at the workshops. The selected partners were interested in the project and could see how it connected with their goals.

- the timing. The project and the research in which it was based were linked to a key anniversary; this may have meant that people were more willing to be involved than they might otherwise have been.

- programming. The complexities of the issue were factors into the structure and content of the workshops enabling key issues to elicit.

### What could be done differently?

-gaining approval for the exhibition at UCL took longer than anticipated.

- fixing arrangements for the workshops also took a long time and impacted upon the planned timing and links between the workshops and the exhibition.

- fulfilling multiple roles. During the project the project lead was researcher, curator, organiser, facilitator, chair, speaker, fixer, evaluator, IT person, financial controller etc. This was an intensive, time consuming project.

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