

Manchester Museum Podcast
Season 3: Episode 3

What is Creative Ageing?

Dr Virginia Tandy in conversation with Emma Horridge

00:00:01 Dr Virginia Tandy, OBE, Director of CADA

There's a real need to, if you like, enable older people to understand the cultural context that they're working in, but also to have some agency around the cultural activity that they want to be involved, in ensuring that older people actually have a voice and a place within the cultural sector.

00:00:50 Lowell Walbank, Manchester Museum

Today we are joined on the Manchester Museum podcast by Dr Virginia Tandy, OBE, the director of a new national agency for ageing creativity hosted by the Manchester Museum and funded by the Baring Foundation. CADA, or the Creative Ageing Development Agency, aims to reshape people views of ageing and overcome barriers to creative activity and opportunity. The organisation works to investigate the profound shifts needed to tackle ageism and support systemic change, as well as championing the cultural contribution of older people and the value of creativity, curiosity and imagination. CADA connects with individuals and organisations in communities across England and beyond who are developing and delivering arts and heritage programmes with, by and for older people, ensuring their views and voices are heard.

Virginia is joined in conversation today by Emma Horridge, a freelancer in creative, ageing and cultural engagement, who has led on work for the expansion of the Age Friendly Culture Champion programme across Greater Manchester.

00:02:05 Emma Horridge

Virginia, for those who are listening and who might not be familiar with the terms, 'age friendly culture', or in fact 'creative ageing', could you tell us a little bit about what they are?

00:02:16 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, I think they're both aimed at raising the profile of older people in the cultural world, really. I think we'd spend a lot of time thinking about the needs of younger people when it comes to culture, and we have invested money and effort into this. At the other end of the spectrum, if you like, you have another group of people who have the time and potentially the opportunity to make a creative life for themselves as they get older. And the whole idea of age friendly culture is really endeavouring to make that more possible. In some ways, age friendly culture embraces everybody, and it's always said that if you make adjustments for different kinds of people, you usually make everyone's lives easier. So, there's a lot to recommend thinking through ways of making culture more age friendly.

In terms of creative ageing, I think that embraces a slightly broader term, which for me brings in the whole idea of activism. So, one end of the spectrum you've got everyday creativity that might be things you do at home, on the kitchen table, and at the other you've got those pieces of work that are actively exploring the ageing process and trying to communicate the changes, the differences, that getting older brings to your life; the way you think, your values, and the way you feel about how you are seen in society.

00:04:29 Emma Horridge

Brilliant, thank you. That's brilliant. Now, you you've kind of been working in this field for a while and you're currently the director of CADA which is the Creative Ageing Development Agency. Could you tell us a little bit about CADA, and how it kind of began?

00:04:46 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, the Creative Ageing Development Agency, CADA, grew out of a programme of investment that the Baring Foundation made over a decade during the 2010s, when it actively encouraged creative ageing projects by giving money to a huge range of different organisations and ideas and really sought to bring together the practitioners in the field, and the older people who were benefiting from the work that was being done - or were actually producing it themselves. And at the end of all of that, while there were creative ageing organisations in Wales and Scotland, there was no real creative ageing agency, in the Baring Foundation's view, in England. And so, they put up some money as a seed fund for the beginnings of a new initiative that would give England a similar kind of organisation that would act as a catalyst, a critical friend, a convener, and would provoke debate and create resources around creative ageing. And Manchester - a consortium of organisations in Manchester - bid for the money, amongst a lot of

others, and secured that funding and that's how CADA came into being, really. And it has money to run for the next few years and hopefully it will then be in a position to continue its work.

00:06:47 Emma Horridge

Okay, thank you for that. You touched a little bit on, kind of, the consortium in Greater Manchester. Could you tell us why do you think Greater Manchester is a home to CADA and a little bit of kind of the history around age friendly culture in Greater Manchester?

00:07:07 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, Greater Manchester is viewed as one of the pioneers of age friendly everything really, and the cultural dimension actually sits within a much bigger initiative, which is part of the Combined Authorities' approach to their way of working. And that pioneering approach, which embraced cultural organisations and activity as much as it related to housing and transport, and health, was very much embedded in the city and the city region, and so it was a natural applicant for this money from the Baring Foundation. And the consortium is an interesting collaboration. In Wales and Scotland, the creative ageing organisations there both sit within Age UK or Age Scotland and Cymru contexts, whereas CADA sits in a local authority and a university context in that the Manchester Museum led on the application, and the Director of the Manchester Museum, Esme Ward, is the cultural lead in the age friendly Greater Manchester hub. So, that was how that rather interesting collaboration was made, because of course, Manchester Museum is part of the University, and the third member of the consortium is the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research into Ageing. So, if you, like, you've got a cultural organisation, a local government administration and a university research institute all coming together behind an organisation that's dedicated to creative ageing, which offers lots of opportunity and credibility.

00:09:32 Emma Horridge

It's a very unique position to be in then. And what, I guess what attracted to you on a personal level to this work?

00:09:42 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, yes, that's an interesting one, because I've always worked in cultural institutions and with cultural funders. But I suppose what interested me was, as I got older, I noticed things started to change in terms of how society saw me and my contemporaries, and I

had some fascinating conversations, particularly with women who were in quite powerful positions and had had very successful lives, who were extremely confused, concerned, unsettled by the prospect of getting older, leaving their jobs and what they would do in the future, finding themselves quite isolated when they finished work, in comparison to the kinds of environments they worked in before. And it made me think, well, if it's that complex and challenging for the people who you would expect to sail into retirement, what must it be like for others? And I ran a conference at the University in 2018 called 'Changing the Narrative', which was all about older women in the cultural sector and got to know quite a few people who were working in the field, and thought, this is a really fascinating area of work that isn't really being explored, particularly. And putting that together with my previous experience of working in cultural policy and strategy, I thought, when I sold a job I thought, oh maybe that would be a really interesting opportunity to see if I could make a difference and make some progress in what still seems to be quite a nascent field of activity

00:11:57 Emma Horridge

It does seem that, yeah, it's still quite an untouched sector, and it does feel like Manchester, Greater Manchester, is a bit of a trailblazer, but, yeah, I'm personally really pleased that this work is happening, but also, like, frustrated that it seems to be in isolated pockets, and I suppose that's what CADA is doing, trying to kind of push that conversation and that topic further, on more of a broader kind of geographical area.

Just thinking of, kind of like, interesting or good examples of creative ageing or age friendly culture, do you have anything that kind of has really struck you over your career, or stuff that you're interested in that's coming up?

00:12:45 Dr Virginia Tandy

I think there are some really great examples of work that are going on, and as with any innovative practice, the work is often found in smaller organisations who have decided to take on this agenda and work with it. So, organisations like Entelechy Arts down in London, who have regular - in normal times - activity for older people and also get lots of referrals through social prescribing, have created a really impressive programme of work that also, is artistically strong and explores ideas of ageing in ways that are not that commonplace.

I've also recently discovered some fascinating examples of dance companies that are dedicated to older people; Moving Memory, down I think in Kent, and there's another dance company in Brighton called Three Score Dance Company, again dedicated to older people and really exploring what it means to be an older dancer, and I think that is really fascinating, fascinating work.

Having said that, I think there are also some bigger arts organisations that are taking this agenda seriously. And if you look at the big theatres like the Royal Exchange in Manchester, they've actually got a production coming up next week, I think, an intergenerational production between their elders' company and their young company. And also, the kind of Heydays programme at Leeds Playhouse, I mean what you see there, in normal times, is older people - two or three hundred of them every week - taking over the theatre during the day and running lots of different activities. But also, through the ensemble of older performers at Leeds, constructing really ambitious projects such as the Bus Pass Project that they're hoping to present in 2023 for Leeds City of Culture.

00:15:49 Emma Horridge

Brilliant, that's fantastic. I'm based in Manchester and I'm looking forward to seeing the Suzanne Lacy, Uncertain Futures, at Manchester Art Gallery, because that looks really interesting, where she has worked with - Suzanne Lacy, an international female artist, who happens to be over the age of 50, which is the World Health Organisation definition of an older person. And I know a lot of people over 50 sometimes raise an eyebrow when I say that, but whatever, that's the term, but that looks really interesting. That's where Suzanne has worked with groups of women over 50 in different communities and wards across Greater Manchester to talk about, I guess it's their economic future, and their vulnerability when it comes to kind of economics and the uncertainty of their future. So, I haven't seen it, but yeah, I'm looking forward to having a look at that, because that looks really interesting.

Just kind of bringing us back, maybe, to CADA, what changes would you like to see or what changes would CADA as an organisation like to see in the cultural sector?

00:17:03 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, I think there's a handful of things that we're working on at the moment that are the beginnings of our agenda, really. I mean, the first is this idea of ensuring that older people actually have a voice and a place within the cultural sector. And we've done some work understanding, which you know about Emma because you were involved, about understanding the impact of the Culture Champions programme that Manchester put together, and that's, in places, been running for a decade, where older people had the opportunity to act as ambassadors in their communities. I think there's a real need to, if you like, enable older people to understand the cultural context that they're working in, but also to have some agency around the cultural activity that they want to be involved in. And I think Culture Champions offers a great example of that and

I'm starting now to see other potential examples too coming out of the Celebrating Age programme which the Baring Foundation and the Arts Council co-funded, and which is now coming to an end. So, I'm looking forward to having some conversations with older people who've been involved in those programmes too, to sort of compare and contrast experiences and see what possibilities exist, to maybe bring older people together and have a national conversation about this creative ageing idea, in all its diverse forms.

Secondly, I'm very aware that there is very low visibility of creative ageing work in ethnically diverse communities. And so, to begin some understanding of that, we've just commissioned a piece of work that's looking at creative ageing, initially in the South Asian community, to try to understand what work is going on but also to try and bring some new voices into the creative ageing conversation; some new ideas, some new perspectives, and to celebrate the work that's already happening.

The third thing that I'm looking at, at the moment, is the whole issue of data. I can't answer the question, 'where has the highest proportions of older people in the country in terms of percentages of their populations?' Nor can I accurately answer questions around cultural participation of older people, particularly in terms of the impact of the pandemic and their willingness to return to participatory activity in person. And so, we've also commissioned a piece of work with the Audience Agency, who collect all the data from the arts organisations that are funded by the Arts Council, to look at their data from older people's perspective, to give us that insight as a starting point, as a baseline, to see where things are up to at the moment, so that we can track our progress, but also, we can speak more authoritatively about where we feel there is room for improvement and where we feel there are significant insights that could help cultural organisations do more to attract older people back into their organisations. You know, people over 65 were some of the most loyal and frequent attendance at arts organisations prior to the disruption of the pandemic, and I'm not sure until I see the results of the research, I'm not sure how they are, or whether they're finding their way back. If you talk to a lot of older people, they say they are still quite nervous. And so, we will have to see how things do change, and which older people decide they're going to go back to their previous way of life, and who might actually want to work differently. And of course, the whole digital acceleration of online working has made such a difference to those people who are digitally connected in terms of the range of things they can participate in and what they can access. And that's a whole other thing to be looking at as we move forward, how we actually capitalise on that, but also how we recognise that for many older people that still isn't their preferred way of working.

I think the other changes, as I said before, going back to Culture Champions, I think it is that issue of when I've spoken to older people, what I hear is they want purpose, they want agency, they want status, and I think it's finding those opportunities that offer them that way of connecting to culture. And then I think the other interesting discovery is that discovery of talent that maybe was there when they were children, but they

didn't have the opportunity to explore it and they now have perhaps time and possibility. And we can see people, really good examples, particularly coming out of the Celebrating Age programme and other work that other organisations are doing. where we see people rediscovering interests and talents that they had as children, but put to one side when their working lives or their raising of children became a dominant part of their life, and they're now going back to that and finding something which really does enrich them and makes their later life a time of opportunity.

00:24:43 Emma Horridge

Some of it, just from listening to you, has just reminded me from some of the older people I've spoken to have definitely said that and expressed that want to kind of develop a skill that they may have had when they were younger or even start something new. But what I always find is interesting, and I think, Virginia, we spoke to the same person about this, an older person said to me that they wanted, they didn't want to just make things and put them on a shelf somewhere. They didn't want to have their house filled with like a bit of arts and craft that was just gonna take up space or end up going in the recycling bin. They wanted to learn a really interesting skill or they wanted to be able to access even, you know, equipment that they couldn't have at home, so printing photography, that kind of thing. And yeah, I just thought that was interesting, it's hearing from older people what they want rather than us running a workshop that they might, you know, that we think - that I think - they might like, when the truth is, you know, it just doesn't interest them.

You kind of touched on this already, but I was going to kind of ask you what you thought, from the older people that you've spoken to, what they really value about kind of arts and culture, and beyond maybe kind of that learning or developing a skill, is there anything else that has come out that's been quite a strong trend or quite a strong feeling from people that you've spoken to?

00:26:19 Dr Virginia Tandy

That's a really interesting question. I'm just thinking back to something I was doing yesterday relating to the Celebrating Age programme where we were reading testimony from different people who had been involved in that programme. And the kinds of things they were pointing to were, on the one hand, how opportunities around creative writing had actually enabled them to feel more comfortable about their later lives and enabled them to explore their feelings about getting older. So, you could say that is contributing to their mental health as well as their creative ability. I think the other thing, which it has been sustained actually, often virtually, through the last 15 months, is the kind of togetherness and companionship that people have found through pursuing creative activities with others, sharing ideas, talking about work

between a group of people, maybe even visiting something together, where possible. I think there has been, that togetherness is such an important aspect of creative ageing. And I don't think we should underestimate the levels of loneliness and isolation that can occur, as a consequence of getting older, maybe not having any volunteering or paid employment. And so, you know, how do you continue to connect with the outside world?

I think the other the other dimension is the whole issue of intergenerational work. There are some really fascinating statistics which I can't quote completely, but you'll know yourself if you think about it, that people tend as they get older to have fewer people who are friends who are younger than they are, and I think intergenerational work is so important in keeping people connected to the whole of society and to the thoughts and ideas and energy of younger people as well as those of older people, and putting that together. And there are lots of intergenerational projects now, whether that's nurseries going into care homes, or the example I was talking about before, the Royal Exchange's young company and elders company coming together to do work. And I think that is also, the really valuable element of creative practice that can be encouraged.

00:29:48 Emma Horridge

I would agree with that, and it's just reminded me of something that I read when I was doing some of the research for CADA on the Culture Champion programme, someone that said to me that they find that the older adults that they were working with expressed an interest in being with people with similar interests and similar kind of tastes around art and culture, it didn't necessarily have to be people of their age, they didn't always want to be categorised just by their age. They wanted to feel the place was for them, they wanted to feel that the place was accessible for their age group and such, but it didn't have to just be, 'you're over a certain age so you can be in this gang.' And I guess you touched on it too, with creativity, you know you need fresh ideas, you need to bounce ideas off each other, and be open to hearing kind of different perspectives. And I guess having a diverse group of people in everything from age to background, you know that is probably where the most kind of fertile will come from.

That's really interesting what you've been talking about, Virginia, and it sounds like you've got your hands full with CADA. You've got a lot to do in the next couple of years. I hope you're enjoying the work and I hope, even though we're living through these strange times, that you're able to kind of connect with people across the country and to hear these great ideas and work together.

If anyone wants to know a little bit more about CADA, what's the best way to do that? How do they find out?

00:31:27 Dr Virginia Tandy

Well, they're welcome to contact me and my email address is on the museum's website at the moment, and we are also, I hope, launching our own website very soon, so you'll certainly be able to find out more about where we are trying to get to who we're working with and what we're doing to make that a reality.

00:31:53 Emma Horridge

Brilliant, thank you so much. So, thank you very much, Dr Virginia Tandy, Director of CADA, and thank you for listening to the Manchester Museum Podcast.

00:32:02 Dr Virginia Tandy

Thanks, Emma.