

# Enabling Innovation

## 'Darwin: Colour & Memory' – An Interactive Installation

### Overview

Penny Grist, a graduate of Bath Spa University and now also employed by the University as a Technician (Etching & Lithography), won innovation funding in 2008 to develop an installation that would provide a new and exciting way for viewers to engage with an exhibition.

### About the Project

The increased use of digital technology in museums and the Internet over recent years is gradually replacing the need to actively seek out and experience 'the real thing'. Penny Grist wanted to explore how interactive digital work could point us back to the real world and stimulate a desire to go and see things for ourselves.

Penny used as inspiration Werner's 'Nomenclature of Colour', taken by Darwin on the voyage of the Beagle for accurately describing the colour of specimens for subsequent classification and illustration. Penny developed a prototype installation that would explore the idea of visual memory and image/word association. This interactive experience could provide images and sound. By active engagement, these images can be revealed momentarily and encourage the viewer to search further.

The installation takes place in a darkened room with the background noise of birdsong. Pools of coloured light are projected onto the floor, which is covered by an area of artificial grass. Under this covering are pressure pads, which set off keyboard commands in the Flash computer programme. The participant interacts with the piece by stepping into the pools of coloured light. This triggers images relating to the colour to appear along with a related sound. More than one image can be projected at once, allowing several people to be involved at the same time. 'Tools' are provided to help catch and hold these fleeting images: white gloves, bowl, a wooden bat in the shape of a magnifying glass. For example, a butterfly can be held in the hands with the accompanying noise of its wings flapping.

The installation is immersive. The participants have to engage with it for it to work. Onlookers can see the images and interact with the participants. There is no computer screen or interface that separates the work from the visitor, and no visible technology. It works 'as if by magic', giving the viewer a real sense of discovery. The images projected will direct attention back to the exhibits rather than replace them.



Penny Grist

### Fast Facts

- Technology used to direct attention back to museum exhibits rather than replace them
- Dynamic and approachable way for museums and institutions to create interest and involvement in their collections
- Installation trialled at the Darwin exhibition staged by the Bath Royal Literary & Scientific Institution (BRLSI)

## Benefits

The installation provides a new and exciting way for viewers to engage with an exhibition. It can be adapted to work with different materials and in different venues. For example, as well as museum and exhibition space, it could also be taken into schools.

There is scope for follow-up learning experiences, such as workshops and activities in personal colour charts, colour treasure hunts, nature watch diaries, etc. These would all lead children and adults back to recognising and studying the exhibits in the exhibition and in the natural world around them.

The installation is ideally suited to museums and institutions that want to create interest and involvement in their collections in a dynamic and approachable way. It can be used to display rare and fragile items that cannot be shown conventionally. It is also compact, portable and can be adapted to suit individual needs.



'Butterfly' in viewers hands

## Outcomes

The innovation award enabled Penny to take an idea she had developed in her Masters degree out into the real world. She was able to work with a local museum and its collection, adapt the installation piece for the specific environment and show it in situ for public viewing. The award funded the following activities:

- Development and prototyping of equipment needed to exhibit the work in public
- Showcasing the work in a public space, as part of the Darwin exhibition
- Producing documentation in the form of a small book, which was a useful tool for explaining and publicising the concept and its future uses in different contexts.

The project covered research, writing a digital programme especially for the exhibition, designing and installing the equipment, publicising the event and the concept, and documenting it for future use.

A comments box at the exhibition received a great response with over 70 comments about the installation – overwhelmingly positive.

Marketing and PR support was volunteered by an external contact and the publicity resulted in the press release being published in The Guardian exhibition listings, Bath Life magazine, the Bath Chronicle and other local magazines – both in exhibition listings and in activities for families. Publicity was also generated through the BRLSI's website, which is an extremely active institution with a wide range of members.

The installation ran for four weeks through May and June 2009.

## Perspective

“I have achieved much of what I set out to do and there is scope to work on this in the future. The award enabled me to develop the idea and exhibit the piece in public alongside the museum collection it was derived from. It brought a new, younger audience to the Institution.”

**Penny Grist**

Innovation Award Winner 2008

“Just a note to say that I and two of my grandchildren loved Penny Grist's artistic display. We all played at catching the flowers, butterflies and birds and only left because we had a bus to catch. It was a great success with the Bateman family!”

[Feedback response from visitor comments box](#)

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