

The storm of progress

Provocative, experimental and slightly mad with a fine bookshop: Arnolfini is 50. By *Stephen Morris*

‘Our mission,’ said co-founder Jeremy Rees, ‘is to seek out challenging, often controversial and sometimes relatively unknown performers and to provide a vital showcase for their work.’ And should that have sounded dour or serious He added: ‘there should be a sign above the door: “enjoy yourself!”’

Had Rees’s words been carved in stone or branded on the founders’ foreheads, half a century later they could not be closer to the beating heart of the baby. Bristol’s great art-house provocateur, Arnolfini – home to art, dance, film, theatre and other things – may be fifty but youthful vivacity, and weirdness, still pours through the old veins.

It began on 3 March 1961, above Roberts’ Bookshop at 42 Triangle West, with paintings of Welsh miners by Warsaw-born Josef Herman and mother and child portraits by Bristol-based Peter Swan. Two hundred people packed the little white space, once a joiner’s workshop, to toast the founders of Arnolfini: Annabel Lawson, a textile artist; her (soon-to-be) husband Jeremy Rees, a printer and publisher; and the painter John Orsborn, who each put in £100 to buy the lease.

Jazz, poetry and play-readings made it more than a gallery. Laurie Lee and Liverpoolian *Z-Cars* dramatist John McGrath came along to read; Bertold Brecht’s translator Michael Hamburger read his own poetry; John Furnival won the first open painting competition with *Monument to Benny Peret*.

For the gallery’s fifth birthday, Furnival collaborated with the Benedictine monk and ex-spy Dom Sylvester Houedard to create random poetry on a typewriter

and chop it up. Houedard was author of the ‘celebrated’ ‘Frog-Pond-Plop’ haiku. As Peter Sellers knew, sometimes there is a fine line between experimental art and absurdity.

In 1968, when Arnolfini took to the streets of Bristol with ‘New British Sculpture’ public exposure to radical art provoked applause, outrage and mystified indifference. *The Times* – in a back-handed compliment – thought the sculptures fine but the context wrong.

‘Francis Morland used his sculptures for smuggling hash’



Self-Portrait Arnolfini
by Neil Cummings
Arnolfini
(ISBN: 978-0-956888617)

below:
Opening night. Annabel and Jeremy Rees and John Orsborn

In a quintessentially 60s touch after the show Francis Morland used his sculptures for smuggling hash out of Morocco.

With Peter Barker-Mill as chair Arnolfini moved to Queen Square and then W-Shed where it began a programme of ‘critical cinema’ and, in February 1973, staged the first ever festival of British independent film. In 1975 it moved to Bush House. Pope’s 1830 Bristol Byzantine warehouse had survived the Blitz and the planners (who wanted to punch a road through it) but was suffering from severe neglect when urban renewal specialists JT Group and Arnolfini took the plunge, to create a gallery, theatre and bar.

Could *art* be an agent of urban renewal? Twenty-two years before Bilbao’s Guggenheim Arnolfini proved it could, and was the first and crucial step in reimagining Bristol docks as Harbourside. A 2005 refurbishment doubled the exhibition space which reopened with ‘This Storm Is What We Call Progress’. Tom Trevor replaced Caroline Collier as director. ■

‘we were treated with suspicion and even at Narrow Quay called Arnolphony.’
Annabel Rees



Self-portrait Arnolfini

To celebrate Arnolfini's birthday *Neil Cummings* created *Self-Portrait*, a history, finishing in 2061 with synthetic beings and buildings that measure occupants' emotions. Currently showing at Arnolfini. Here are a few highlights...

1961 Arnolfini opens at 42 Triangle West
Yuri Gagarin first man in space
Paul Stephenson leads boycott of Bristol
Bus Company for their refusing to hire
black workers

1968 New British Sculpture on streets of
Bristol

After heavy rain flood-damaged tobacco
is taken from Wills to the tip, where it's
recovered by locals who create a busy
black market

1970 Peter Maxwell-Davies performs
music on harpsichord and stone
gargoyles. As usual some Arnolfini
audience are seated on cushions on the
gallery floor

1973 House prices crash, unemployment
over 1 million. In New York a taxi-cab
heiress sells her collection of
contemporary art and makes over \$2
million. Andy Warhol's *Flowers* sells for
\$135,000

At W Shed Arnolfini Film opens with *La
Salamandre* and homemade food
The first dance event with Strider and
music by 'pre-punk' Sinfonia including
players 'who don't know which end of a
violin to blow'

1975 First festival of independent film
Richard Long's first show at Arnolfini
Three-day week, pay freezes, 50mph
speed limit

Arnolfini moves to Bush House with
£250,000 donation from Peter Barker-
Mill

1981 First HIV AIDS viral pandemic
identified in USA

Arnolfini opens a videotape lending
library, 25p to £1.00

1985 'Graffiti Art in Bristol' and music by
The Wild Bunch

1986 Jeremy Rees resigns as director

1989 Tim Berners-Lee creates the first
web server and web page

2000 Paul McCartney launches his book
and exhibition of paintings at Arnolfini
Liam Gillick's *Lie of the Land*: 'art as

provisional constructions that project a
space where ideas can be reassessed'
Tate Modern opens

2001 Wikipedia launches

Arnolfini buys freehold and prepares
ambitious expansion and revamp with
Robin Snell, to cost £12 million

Inbetween Time festival -experiment in
the 'chemistry, mystery and pure anarchy
of live art' including *The Ball Show* in
which hundreds of mirror balls turn
home movies and CCTV into giant
projections.

War on Terror begins

2005 Arnolfini reopens after refurb with
The Storm is what we call progress in
which ghosts, angels and spectres explore
our past

2007 UK's stem cell bank opens

2008 Damien Hirst's diamond-set skull
sells for \$50 million
Lehman's collapses

*'An unauthorised
exhibition about Carol
Vorderman at M Shed
causes a scandal.
M Shed closes'*

2011 Arnolfini's 50th birthday with Neil
Cummings's *Self-Portrait* and *Museum
Show* parts I and II

2012 *In Absentia* at Arnolfini -an
exhibition about Damien Hirst without
any of his works

2014 Arnolfini becomes foundation node
in fledgling iCommons meshwork

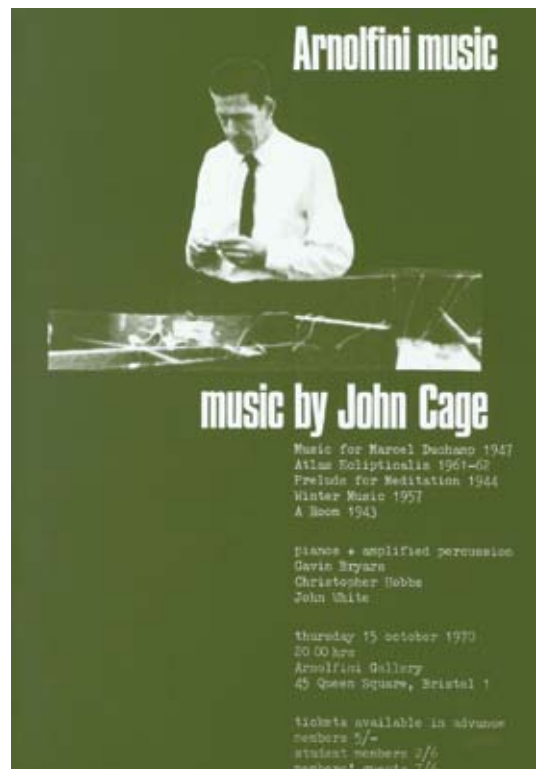
2015 An unauthorised exhibition about
Carol Vorderman at M Shed causes a
scandal. M Shed closes, Tesco are
interested in acquiring the site

2026 Arnolfini merges with sites in
China, India and Brazil to create the
'Bristol Cluster'



above: Sorry, you can't park it there. *Babar* by Garth Evans

below: October 1970 and Arnolfini is in Queen Square.
John Cage plays (amongst other pieces) 'Music for Marcel DuChamp' - a
convergence of east and west



Shows of Passion

Curator Kath Cockshaw on getting new and younger audiences excited by art

Arnolfini, the art which it shows and its relationship with local audiences have always been points of discussion and debate in Bristol. Arnolfini's identity has undergone something of a change over the last few years in its public programming and facilities and, as they find more relevance in programming, local audiences seem to be warming to the gallery again after a period of relative indifference.

Since its re-opening in 2005, after a period of capital development and major expansion, Arnolfini has been working at developing its public profile, following changes in its remit and developments in programming work across different media. The gallery is focusing further on audience development in target areas, following recent cultural developments on Bristol's waterfront.

My first professional encounter with Arnolfini was in 1998, when I worked with the gallery as a participating venue in a touring exhibition called 'Accelerator', devised and funded by the Arts Council as an exercise in youth audience development for Southampton City Art Gallery, Arnolfini and Oldham Art Gallery. The exhibition started at Southampton City Gallery, where I worked at the time and featured work which crossed boundaries between art and sport by Hilary Lloyd and between art and DJ'ing by British artist Jeremy Deller. Related events were well attended by young people and new audiences at each participating venue. The exhibition sparked my interest in developing new audiences for art exhibitions in museums.

Ten years later in 2008, following

audience development work with other UK museums and international venues, the Royal West of England Academy commissioned me as a freelance curator to produce and fundraise for a large urban art audience development

KATHARINE COCKSHAW
Kath is a freelance arts curator and fundraiser

“Arnolfini should consider more deeply the value of past projects conceived for young audiences”

exhibition project, 'Crimes of Passion: Street Art in Bristol' (March – May 2009). Through discussions with the artists I learned that Arnolfini had hosted Bristol's last public urban art exhibition twenty four years previously in 1985, called 'Graffiti in Britain', featuring work by Bristol street artists and musicians, The Wild Bunch (members of the group went on to become Massive Attack) and the show and associated events had been a runaway success with young audiences.

below:
Jyll Bradley's *Landscape with Flowers* at the 2005 reopening

Photo: Adam Faraway



After the unprecedented success of 'Crimes of Passion' at the RWA and 'Banksy vs Bristol Museum' in terms of audience figures in 2009, I can't help feeling that the Arnolfini could consider more deeply the value of past projects conceived for young audiences, which tapped directly in to their interests, in order to build new local and regional audiences specifically and help strengthen its public position.

In recent years, Arnolfini has hosted a diverse range of projects and events, many which people continue to talk about. In particular, Bristol audiences remember Jyll Bradley's *Landscape with Flowers* of 2005, a socially orientated project, which people remember for their own personal involvement with the piece, the Mark Titchner exhibition 'It is You' which was popular with Bristol designers and creatives and Austrian artist Otto Zitko's blue wall drawings, which were shown alongside work by the late American artist, Louise Bourgeois in 2010. Also in 2010, the Arnolfini hosted a public debate by political party leaders during the election campaign, which seems to have somehow helped the gallery's reputation with young Bristol audiences in terms of its relevance to their lives.

Arnolfini demonstrates its commitment to its principal funder, the Arts Council, by showing high quality challenging work by national contemporary artists in exhibitions such as the 'British Art Show V' in 2006 and regularly programming exhibitions by emerging international artists. Projects and exhibitions working with artists of national and international importance bring in sizeable audiences and art tourists. Recent programming demonstrates the organisation's understanding of the importance of hosting socially interactive projects, based on past success in terms of audience figures. This is all very encouraging. I look forward to a time when Arnolfini will be further congratulated for its engagement with a broader spectrum of local people, especially young people who aren't art students and diverse ethnic audiences, who make up a large part of Bristol's community.

Keep up the good work, Arnolfini at 50! ■