



## **Volunteer**

### **Verity Sidgwick**

After completing a BTEC Art Foundation at Falmouth College of Arts I studied English Literature at Cardiff University and began a Master's in Museum Studies at the end of September 2004. I have undertaken work placements at galleries and museums since 1996. I have had very different experiences as a volunteer ranging from a structured placement at Tate St Ives to a three-month internship with a commercial gallery in Cardiff's city centre.

During a four-month placement at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff, I managed a project to produce the archive for material on the Davies Collection. The success of this project prompted a successful bid for funding to provide materials for another archive to house the Sutherland letters kept at the museum. Whilst in Wales, I also trained at Cardiff Institute for the Blind, and worked at the 'Art Club' acting as a guide on gallery trips. On returning to live in Cornwall I was keen to continue volunteering with the intention to expand my experience in education and exhibitions. My attention was especially drawn to the exciting education programme at Falmouth Art Gallery after reading an article in the Museums Journal. I was really excited to be accepted as a volunteer. Whilst working at Falmouth, the 'Fish Heads and Tales' project was awarded 'Best Educational Initiative' at the Museum and Heritage Excellence Awards. Being at this event and the Museums and Heritage Show was a great experience and as part of my placement I attended one of the seminars on Visitor Studies. This helped my general understanding of this field, but also provided me with techniques to evaluate projects throughout my placement.

As a volunteer in larger museums you tend to experience one area of expertise or one department, you don't get a sense of the 'whole'. My placement at Falmouth Art Gallery helped my understanding of how a museum 'works' – and what it means to the people involved. Within my first month at the gallery I had helped with workshops including Baby Painting Sessions, felt making, shadow puppet workshops, collage and monoprinting and contributed to the draft of the Family Learning Network website. I took on an independent project and instigated my first grant aid application. I learnt new skills in cataloguing and conserving a portion of the photographic collection and had my first introduction to MODES. My placement also incorporated formal training sessions outside the gallery, including a day of seminars on social inclusion run by SWMLAC. I was encouraged to become involved with lots of different projects, manage my own time and prioritise. Practical experience was one element, but I also consider the time I spent talking to staff and visitors an invaluable and formative learning experience.

Looking back at the time I have spent at the gallery I realise how much my understanding about the process of preparing an exhibition has increased. For 'The Surrealists on Holiday' exhibition, I took on a supervisory capacity and produced an 'Object Handling' training pack to be included in future inductions and training sessions. I was quite nervous about taking on responsibility; it was a privilege to be included on all the exhibition teams, watching an exhibition finally come together on the walls is a thrilling experience. I have gained a whole range of new skills, but also developed and expanded my existing interests. I became involved in every aspect - from hanging exhibitions to helping with workshops, from designing visitor studies to applying for grant aid. Learning opportunities at Falmouth have been countless and have spanned every aspect of gallery work – some slightly more bizarre than others – standing at the top of a ladder sewing a plastic lobster onto a tuxedo for The Surrealists on Holiday exhibition was certainly a strangely surreal moment!

It was really lovely to find out about the success of the application to the Clore Duffield Foundation for £500 of grant aid to pay for a day of workshops to celebrate Children's Art Day. I initiated the application process with Claire, the Education Officer and completed by evaluating the project myself. This has given me the confidence and experience to involve myself in other independent evaluation projects at Falmouth and RCM.

Volunteering at Falmouth has certainly increased my confidence and confirmed my desire to pursue a career in museums. The curator, Brian Stewart, supervised and constantly reviewed the progression of my placement. I really appreciated his diligent explanations of every aspect of museum practice and I feel that I have gained a more rounded perspective on my role and responsibilities as a museum professional. I have acquired so many new skills, so much knowledge, but most of all it has been so exciting, I have had so much fun, met so many wonderful people and have had the opportunity to be a part of a really special place.

However, undoubtedly the most impressive skill I will take with me is the ability to eat my own body weight in doughnuts.