

**Paper for Hi Arts Conference
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When is the artist a creative leader? A provisional framework.

Who are we?

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INTRODUCTION

ANNE

I am Anne Douglas, Reader and Director of On the Edge research.

Chris Fremantle is a research associate of OTE and the consultant researcher on the Artist as Leader research.

We have developed the paper together and first presented this work at the Creative Rural Economy Conference in Lancaster in September

CHRIS

AND BACKGROUND

Let's start by discussing an example of how we might think about the artist leading through their practice – or the artist as leader. When Rob Fairley developed Room 13 at Caol Primary School near Fort William, he evolved an entirely new model of how an artist might work within a school environment – one that placed responsibility in the hands of the young people within processes that set a new benchmark for quality of production and critical thinking. The school changed as a consequence of the artist's specific approach.

In this presentation we want to pick up on two interrelated issues –

- the artist working in the sphere of social, cultural and environmental change
and
- the artist as leader

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Within our current research, we are specifically concerned with exploring the issues of artists working directly with other sectors in society. This particular focus has emerged from our own work within On the Edge and from observations of the field of visual arts. Although the Artist as Leader research is working with all art forms, the visual arts are where Chris and I have been positioned for some time and therefore form a starting point.

We might summarise our understanding at this point as follows:

- Artists are increasingly interested in creating the conditions for revealing changing social, environmental and cultural circumstances.
- By immersing ourselves in or inhabiting these 'created' conditions for a while (within

artistic processes and projects as discrete experiences), we have the means as individuals to gain a heightened awareness of the circumstances of our particular lives.

- In leading, the artist does not set out in the first instance to solve problems.

PARTNERSHIP

We are working in a national strategic partnership between On The Edge in Aberdeen, the Cultural Enterprise Office in Glasgow, and Performing Arts Labs in London. This area of work has recently received an award from the Creativity call funded by the AHRC, ESRC and the DTI.

All three partner organisations within the Artist as Leader programme work with different remits. We have come together with a shared desire to understand the implications for those remits for the development of artistic practice in the public sphere.

The **Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO)** is Scotland's only specialist business development support service for Creative Micro Businesses, Individual Artists and Industry Freelancers. It has four Offices across Scotland and is looking to open a fifth in the Highlands. It is charged with providing a high quality Advisory Service, up to the minute Industry Information and a Professional Development programme of seminars and networking events to support the growth and development of the sector in Scotland. The service also provides training in core business skills such as Negotiation, Getting Started, Managing Finances and Portfolio Presentation.

The artist as leader began with CEO and its desire to add leadership skills to its current portfolio and remit. They recognised that leadership skills provide arts practitioners with the tools they need to sustain and grow their practice to make a significant contribution to the wider community.

PAL (Performing Arts Labs) is London based and provides development laboratories for the creation of radical thinking and collaborative development increasingly in interdisciplinary creative practice. This small not-for-profit company has designed and produced international residential Lab programmes, over 16 years, with talented practitioners across the creative industries, in the arts and architecture, in education, in science, in film, media and new technologies. The aim of the labs is to encourage individuals to extend the limits of their individual practice and to challenge the status quo. As of August this year, PAL has produced 110 residential Labs held across the UK and abroad, with a growing talent pool of over 3,700 people.

On The Edge Research was launched by a major AHRB award in 2001.

OTE frames and develops a space between the field of practice and the academic to support shared learning and public pedagogy. We acknowledge that cultural landscapes are constantly changing. Learning and articulating the relevance of the artist's role through ongoing practice and research is therefore a constant, unfolding and dynamic dialogue.

The OTE research programme is increasingly drawing in and on a national and international network of artists, theorists and policy researchers while working with Scottish based issues and practices. We'll come back to some of our other projects and partners as we go along.

This research is one of two elements in the Artist as Leader development. The second is a laboratory that will take the thinking forward into practice shaped by the PAL methodology.

So that is the background.

The Leadership Discussion

We are aware that within management, leadership is considered to be a key to organisational success. Models of leadership tend to draw on the business world and are assumed to have universal

application. We are also aware that this kind of organisational leadership is an issue in arts organisations particularly when we know that currently the arts represent 5% of the national economy.

We take a critical view of received leadership models. Our hunch is that certain kinds of artists are manifesting the skills and competencies of leadership in ways that are different to business culture. In unpacking the qualities and attributes of the Artist as Leader, we are testing the idea that artists are **uniquely placed** to inform and creatively develop public life.

In our research we are working both with academic colleagues such as Professor Dennis Tourish of Aberdeen Business School at Robert Gordon University and also with Zoe Van Zwanenberg of the Scottish Leadership Foundation, who are experts on the leadership discussion internationally.

Within the Cultural Industries the major recent development has been the Clore Leadership Programme initiated by the Clore Duffield Foundation and subsequently supported by the Chancellor in response to the Cox Report.

The Clore Leadership Programme is precisely aimed at the development of leader-managers for major cultural institutions. This is a mirroring of the focus on leadership in the business and industrial context.

Our work might contribute to widening and deepening the leadership discussion by presenting a different understanding of leadership, but our primary objective is to understand artists' practice in the public realm – the specific attributes and their value.

Though it is interesting to note that Chris Smith, who now heads up the Clore Leadership Programme, commenting on our development, said: “You can never underestimate the contribution that artists can make to the leadership discussion”.

ANNE

Gathering the Complexity of the Artist as Leader

Contextual Examples

The basis of our work on the Artist as Leader has been the observation and investigation of artists who work in relation to other social/cultural sectors. We are focusing on where artists lead processes with the aim of creating change.

Let us look first of all outside of our own practice.

The Artists Placement Group

One of our formative examples for the Artist as Leader is the Artists' Placement Group (APG) established by John Latham and Barbara Steveni.

Key points about APG are that it was a radical social experiment engaging artists in non-art situations. APG placed artists within British Steel, the Scottish Office, the Department of Health in London, and Department of the Environment in Birmingham. It moved the art towards a different power base where artists were not just embellishing but their value as artists was palpable within the day to day business of an organisation. Of course this was the rhetoric and I am not sure that each artists placement lived up to the ambition of the programme.

An analysis of this description suggests that APG marks out a territory in which the artist was given maximum freedom to engender creativity at all levels of non-artistic organisations, often investing creativity where it was least expected.

Grant Kester's analysis of APG places emphasis on the durational aspects of this work. John Latham explained the value of the artist in organisational contexts as lying precisely in their capacity to think through the long term implications of actions within timescales that were far greater and more complex than the short term expedient problem solving of the market. He also understood the value of artists working across hierarchical structures within organisations.

Suzanne Lacy

Another example key to the development of our thinking about the Artist as Leader is the work of Suzanne Lacy. Lacy is Chair of the Department of Art at Otis College in California and has recently joined Gray's School of Art as Visiting Professor. Suzanne's Visiting Professorship is part of a parallel initiative within OTE looking at the ethics and aesthetics of artists work in the public sphere.

In Oakland, California, Suzanne Lacy and cultural worker, Unique Holland have developed, over ten years, significant projects resulting major performance works as conversation pieces between young people and the Civic authorities. These projects frame the tensions between the police and predominantly black youth culture. Over time these artistic interventions have enabled the young people to have a voice and to represent their views and experiences within mainstream media. In so doing, they simultaneously adjust public perception and, to a degree, their relationship to authority.

CHRIS

Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison

The US based ecological artists, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, have been working on projects addressing climate change and environmental restoration for forty years. As artists, the Harrisons work with scientists to evolve interpretative thinking tools based on the visual and the poetic. Maps, storytelling and poetry play an important role in their work. They reframe the ecology of a region as visual and poetic narrative.

Sometimes these proposals lead to concrete changes. For example, their work *Breathing Space for the Sava River*, undertaken in the late 80s, proposed strategies to reduce water pollution and has been implemented with European Union funding in the watershed of the Sava River in Croatia since the end of the Balkan conflict.

OTE is a partner in the project GREENHOUSE BRITAIN being developed by Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) with funding from DEFRA¹.

The Qualities of the Artist as Leader

Reflection on these examples and OTE's initial raft of projects has led to the observation that artists are involved in developing new approaches to social, cultural and environmental issues, drawing together cross disciplinary partnerships, setting agendas and informing policy in the long term. The artists are effectively operating as leaders.

Looking at these examples of APG, Suzanne Lacy and Helen & Newton Harrison, we can observe a set of characteristics.

We would highlight **working from a small and flexible base at a very ambitious level**. These artists demonstrate working **within a locality whilst simultaneously grasping a big picture**. All demonstrate **duration**: a long term attention to a set of issues, if not also a long term commitment

to a particular place or community grouping. They work iteratively, at each stage offering up learning that is built into the next stage. These artists **create space for the work within hierarchies and social groupings**. Their work **transcends categories – people frequently comment “I was expecting more art”**..

These artists manifest **particular skills** – communication, imagination, conceptualisation. It goes without saying that they are working creatively, but they are also **adopting critical perspectives**. They have a complex relationship with **autonomy**, which we will come back to.

These characteristics are not limited to 'The Artist as Leader', or even to the artist. They are familiar in the creative industries, and in other social, cultural and environmental contexts.

ANALYSIS

Let's try to push this idea of artists leading through practice a bit further...

It is interesting to note that one of the current gripes regularly rolled out by artists is the instrumentalisation of the arts within the current political context. But, in our understanding, this is also, perhaps, the opportunity. For it is when the instrumental relationship of the arts to social and environmental challenges is flipped over that the artists, particularly exemplified above, are able to **set and drive the agenda** and in fact demonstrate leadership.

There are two aspects of the training that contemporary artists undertake that seem to have a bearing on this – one is around **“looking for a second time”**ⁱⁱ or 'lateral thinking'. The second aspect is the **critical thinking**.

If the distinctive characteristic of the artist is the **ability to see and shape the world** differently, then it is when the artist is able to persuade others, particularly outside the arts, to take this seriously, that the artist has the opportunity to provide leadership.

Lets see if we can unpack this idea of 'flipping' and 'persuasion'. One of the key characteristics of leading that all the artists we have referred to demonstrated is **challenging existing assumptions** and **re-orienting the discourse**.

We might argue that these artists are precisely rejecting the normal assumptions embedded in communication around social, environmental and cultural issues. In each of these cases **the artist not only challenges, they also offer an alternative perspective, driving a discourse based on this new perspective**.

Let's briefly test this with one of our examples.

We might observe for instance that Suzanne Lacy, in becoming involved in work in a local High School in Oakland, observed that the relations between the young people and the authorities were characterised by confrontation along very well defined and hierarchical lines. Lacy set out to create a 'level playing field' for dialogue between the young people and the authorities. As an artist she could create and construct space that was different from the conventional spaces available to the authorities. Quite literally Suzanne put young people and police officers in cars to talk to each other! Moreover she assumed that she was not in a position of authority. Her work over 10 years won the confidence of the law enforcement services and the school authorities and influences the development of youth strategy and policy, as well as law enforcement training, within Oakland.

This in turn raises another issue that we said we would come back to – autonomy.

The traditional conception of the artist, particularly evident in Modernism, is of the creative and autonomous individual. In our cases the artist is operating with autonomy, but is also operating within groups, teams, and social contexts. In these cases autonomy is not also isolation. Rather one

might argue that a key aspect of the work of these artists is to encourage those they work with to develop their own autonomous thinking outside the framework of the hierarchies. That is evident in Room 13.

Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison's approach to ecological challenges is rooted in an understanding of the need to create space for reflection on the personal dimension of bio-regional problems. They frame their work in terms of changing the beliefs of people about their relationship with the environment around them, looking not at control, but rather at co-existence. What they promote through their work is not the traditional artists' autonomy, but the ability for every individual touched by the work to think about their environment in new, perhaps autonomous, ways.

Not all artists who work in the public sphere are leaders in this sense. Our emerging understanding of leadership is not setting out to be normative i.e. that it becomes a new criteria of quality and therefore a new hoop to jump through in the context of funding. There are many artists who deliver exceptional quality of practice e.g. Mark Neville or Y Dance (expand). A defining quality of leadership is perhaps that by leading, the artists also evolve the particular area of practice that they are in a significant way that changes perceptions of that practice in the public sphere.....? So APG changed our understanding generally of what to expect of the artist's role in culture while also articulating the nature of that change in a nuanced way.

ANNE

Playful, Improvisational Approaches

In offering up these examples of the Artist as Leader we are conscious that they are characterised by large scale and long term work focused on social, environmental and cultural issues. The work of these artists has influenced policy. But we don't wish to offer up a definition of the Artist as Leader which is one dimensional in the sense of being dependent **upon a long term commitment to a particular issue such as the environment or to a particular social sector such as youth**. Certain artists gravitate towards this kind of engagement. Others demonstrate different characteristics such as playfulness and improvisation within one to one relationships and shorter interventions.

Within the first phase of the On The Edge Research programme we developed a number of live projects within the rural North of Scotland. The 'we' here refers to a core group of artists researchers at Gray's School of Art as well as a small group of external partners responsible for the development of arts in culture in Northern Scotland. Most of us were 'incomers' and so there were personal challenges in bridging different cultures, and expectations. It probably took us all a number of years to adjust our sensibilities.

The projects we developed were not overtly concerned with regeneration. They did not start from an assumption of deficiency or social need/tension. Rather in inhabiting remote rural places in Scotland as artists, arts administrators and researchers we began to ask questions in relation to our role and the idea of relevance of contemporary art to different sectors and community groupings. In what sense could we function meaningfully in places that had little dedicated arts infrastructure, or curiosity, or knowledge of contemporary visual arts? These places were also culturally rich in their own right.

In other words, we asked a fundamental question – Why contemporary art?

Working within a funded research programme, we were supported in 'suspending belief', of not working under the normal pressure to develop projects on the basis of first instinctive responses and within the constraints of available funding. We started with developing partnerships and raising

questions.

Over time and through a painstaking process of developing conversation, we started to uncover the deeper tensions of organisational remits in their specific contexts, and simultaneously the rich, and highly personal visions of individuals in positions of responsibility.

The 'edge' became a space of creative possibility.

In NE Scotland there is a deep sense of vernacular tradition related to agriculture, fishing and the heritage of the built environment. Without setting out to target these traditions, they became reference points on which to build the sharing of concerns and of very individual and specific experiences of change. Can a museum of **lighthouses engage young people** through communication? How might we re-value traditional **knitting on Shetland**? What should we do with a **field in rural Aberdeenshire**? How should we replace the **loss of a significant 16th century painted ceiling** in Cullen?

Different partners including artists were drawn into the process as the shape of projects emerged. These came from the rest of Scotland, Nottingham and London, and as far afield as Switzerland and Portugal. Each offered their own specific character and approach in response to a framework that the research developed through the specificity of place and people.

ANNE

Constructing a Space for Pedagogy

We developed a shared space across all five projects - a series of workshops that acted as a spine to support the individual issues and ideas that were emerging within each place. These workshops were facilitated by Francois Matarasso, cultural policy researcher and writer, another continuing partner in OTE.

John Dewey, the American Pragmatist, noted:

“Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas”ⁱⁱⁱ

The process we undertook was by no means consensual.

Tensions arose between expectations of both art and of research. Where partners wanted to deliver within established assumptions of what art or pedagogy was, we failed to develop new work and also failed in the partnership. Where individuals were engaged together with the progressive, reflexive development of a fuller, richer more organised form of exploration, we succeeded in managing to hold the energy of the programme long enough for growth to take place. By growth we mean the uncovering of new issues, meanings and understanding.

New issues have arisen that touch on wider debates and experiences of artistic practice, in particular questions such as

- What is the new aesthetic involved in artists working in the public sphere?
- What ethical issues arise and how do these shape a different aesthetic?
- What policy needs to be put in place that supports the development of this area of work appropriately?

CHRIS and ANNE

Conclusions

Now, we have described a number of examples and some characteristics of the Artist as Leader. We are early on in this research and are listening carefully to different perceptions, often discomfort with this term. We have indicated that thinking about the artist as leader is about authoring processes and spaces of encounter that make us think differently. The artists own practice evolves through this dynamic journey. The examples we have explored demonstrate tactics and approaches that result when the artists drive the process. We have suggested that this might involve the artist challenging normative working assumptions. We have suggested that this might be achieved by inhabiting not just the context, but also the issues.

The research will take the form of a programme of interviews and gatherings over the next two years. We are looking to build up examples and case studies as well as views and reflections and would welcome your input into this process.

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- i Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) including the Harrisons, David Haley of Manchester Metropolitan University and Chris Fremantle
 - ii Newton Harrison uses this terminology
 - iii Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*, Allen & Unwin, 1934