New Model Arts Institutions and Public Engagement, Research Study

Emergent Headline Findings for Feedback and Discussion

Socially Engaged Arts Practice and
New Model Visual Arts Organisations

May 23rd, FACT, Liverpool

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Introduction

In simple terms the initial remit of this research as articulated by the Arts Council England, North West and Northern Rock Foundation was to investigate how the visual arts practices emerging from four leading New Model Arts Organisations could change the lives of individuals and communities. The involvement of the Gulbenkian Foundation at a later stage offered the opportunity to include a focus on the ways in which these arts practices and change processes might be researched. In the process of conducting the research we realised that the focus was 'socially engaged arts practice', that this was a field still in formation, and that to some extent practitioners, their partners, funders, and policy makers lacked a common language for talking about it.

The purpose of this symposium is to engage the arts sector in discussion about the emergent findings of our study and, as far as possible, to refine (or define) a common language. We have chosen to base this document on practice examples of socially engaged arts practices rather than providing an Executive Summary of findings. We hope that this format will help us to use this event for a wider discussion of emergent themes and issues with those present. The discussion can then be used to inform the way in which we present the final report.

The following paragraphs summarise the key findings of the study, which for the purposes of clarity, and especially for people who are unfamiliar with the organisations, are illustrated with examples from each of the four organisations that took part. Much of our research was ethnographic and made use of thick description and reflexive interpretation. In this document, by contrast, we have tried to keep examples brief and explanatory, hence they are illustrative rather than comprehensive.

The first few lines of each section are in bold. For those who don't wish to read the whole document, or who are primarily interested in particular sections, they provide the headline findings.

Socially engaged arts practice, experiment and diversity

The New Model Arts Institutions in this study have all commissioned and produced visual and performative arts projects which are breaking new ground and are positioning social engagement at the centre of their practices. There is considerable range and diversity in the practices and the work produced is aimed at a wide variety of audiences. Some projects commissioned by the organisations in this study are highly tailored and targeted at specific participant groups. Examples are Smother (Artangel, Sarah Cole) which worked with young mothers from the Thomas Coram Young Parents Project; Rehearsal of Memory (FACT, Graham Harwood) which worked with patients and staff at Ashworth Special Hospital; CCA's Allotment Projects which have worked with groups which include Mental Health Service Users in Glasgow; Grizedale's work with Portuguese speaking children which included a drawing class by Jeremy Deller. Other projects and events reach out to a general arts-aware public, families, the idly curious, tourists, passers by, virtual arts communities and web-browsers. At times socially engaged arts practice is strategically set alongside popular art-forms as when Grizedale tried to model an alternative to commercial tourism by re-inventing the Coniston Water Festival. Alternatively, socially engaged practice takes up popular activities like gardening, infuses them with new ideas and turns them to a social purpose, as CCA has done with gardening in primary schools. In other examples, FACT has commissioned projects to develop spaces that offer interest and distraction to people waiting for health appointments. Between them the four organisations, representing different approaches to socially engaged practice, are demonstrating its huge potential and diversity and producing audacious, experimental work, characterised by attentiveness to process and informed by a social agenda.

Modes of Engagement

Most socially engaged practice in this study has developed hybrid methods and art-forms, makes use of new and old technologies and skills and is exploring new forms of participation in the creative process as well as new ways of addressing audiences. However it also borrows liberally from other modes of individual or collective engagement. These include education, which arts institutions have long seen as part of their remit: CCA has established an ambitious partnership programme with the University of West of Scotland, FACT has an extensive schools programme and Grizedale has an ongoing partnership with Coniston Institute. However, there have also been cross-influences with community development, political activism, entertainment and leisure, cultural tourism, regeneration, environmentalism, psychotherapy, the health sector and social care. Arts institutions are sometimes reticent about acknowledging these influences. However, many of the projects considered in the course of this study have clearly learnt from these other fields and aim to influence social institutions outside of the arts sector with the distinctive contribution of artists and curators. They do this through collaboration, participation, dialogue, immersive experiences and provocation. These processes involve partner organisations or other institutions as with Artangel's long and intensive co-production of Sarah Cole's *Smother*, hosted by Thomas Coram's Young Parent's Project, or FACT's diverse network of civic partnerships through which it has embedded itself in the institutional fabric of Liverpool. Sometimes the work directly addresses the publics that it seeks to involve – through festivals and exhibitions, but also through enactments, performances and propositions as in the protracted evolution of the concept of *The Museum of Non-Participation in Karachi and London* (Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, Artangel Interaction Programme). The arts organisations, artists, interns and curators are in turn learning from what partner organisations and different audiences bring to the artistic process with the

result that the methods used are becoming ever more dialogical, relationally aware, and responsive to context. Above all they are receptive to the distinctive contribution of the temporary or permanent communities who become engaged by these artworks.

Although socially engaged arts practice is invariably facilitated through concentrating on the *process* of researching, developing and producing artwork, this does not mean that the artistic outcome or product is neglected or displaced. Rather, responsiveness to the needs and desires of participants means that the outcome becomes one point in the matrix of inquiry, discussions, relationships, events and practical activity that comprise the work as a whole. In supporting artists with this kind of practice there is a question as to how far the work should be artist-led. In Artangel's commissions and Grizedale's residency programme the expectations as to what the artist should produce are very open-ended. The principle is one of emergence (or working without knowing what the outcome will be). CCA is prepared in some of its outreach work with disadvantaged communities - in the allotment projects in particular - to slowly nurture the conditions in which in which things can be 'grown' (literally and metaphorically) in the knowledge that this might become art. There are precedents: Ceri Buck's Invisible Food (Artangel Interaction) started with meandering walks with neighbours on the Loughborough Housing Estate in Tower Hamlets, looking at local plant life. Three years later it has become something of a sustainable low carbon living movement, with support from the local authority and a legacy of poetry, wild flora maps, conviviality and wild food fusion cuisine. In work like this the curator/producer makes judicious decisions about whether and how to push for an artistic outcome. In Graham Harwood's *Rehearsal of Memory* (FACT) which sought to produce an art work which would communicate the life experiences of patients and staff at Ashworth Secure Hospital, the artist describes

himself as the Director, crediting the patients and staff as the authors of the work. This example demonstrates how the work emerges collaboratively with participants, according to its own rhythms and responding to localities, contexts and psycho-social spaces and situations.

Socially Engaged Practice & Personalisation

Socially engaged arts practice can support a personalisation agenda insofar as personalisation is understood in terms of social values. However, personalisation in a commodified art market can mean the tailoring of personal consumption to individual preference though the choices of atomised consumers (much as we may buy a selection of music to load onto an ipod for personal use). Socially Engaged Arts Practice is decisively at odds with forms of personalisation aimed at the production of cultural commodities for *individualised* consumers. On the other hand, it can also imply a relationship to a community which also offers opportunities for *individuated experiences.* In other words personalisation can accommodate the differences between people's preferences within situations which also give rise to a collective experience of art. An example would be Grizedale's work with the Coniston Institute, or Egremont Regeneration Partnerships, where there are coherent programmes of events, discussions, exhibitions and performances which cater for a variety of needs – including those of people who value local crafts and traditions and others with more contemporary cultural reference points. The aim of the programmes is not merely to offer diversity, but to make that diversity available within a context where individuals and communities can explore the relationship between traditional cultural forms and international developments in contemporary art.

The organisations in this study are to a greater or lesser extent actively using the techniques and technologies which support interactivity and participation, and enable individuals to access the arts with discrimination to achieve personally satisfying use of artistic media. However, in line with their socially critical stance they are also producing work which surprises, challenges, unsettles and pre-figures new ways of doing things, and to this extent they may confound personal preference.

The Aesthetics of Engagement

Identifiable aesthetics of social engagement are revealed in artistic process. The organisations in this study imprint something of their own idiom on the art they commission and help to develop, by virtue of the choices they make in what to commission, the ways in which they support the process of the work, and not least by their use of their own cultural capital and social interests to mediate relationships between artists and their environment. Many found it difficult to describe a distinctive aesthetic that characterises the kind of work they produce but some contributory elements can be identified: the art is inserted into everyday situations and practices through open-ended dialogue, improvisation, humour and emotional exchanges – sometimes unarticulated - between artists and participants. There are differences in how they make use of the everyday. Grizedale is committed to 'forceful' art that is 'useful' to the communities it involves. It will sometimes put on highly crafted events such as *The Re-Coefficient's Dining Club*, a five course soup dinner in Sheffield which commemorated Ruskin's founding of the club. However ceding control of the creative process to participant groups is part of embedding its activities in the local and can produce an aesthetic of the amateur. It's *Late at Tate* honoured this dimension by including a 'guess the weight of the cake' competition and a barn dance in the main

hall. There are strains of this aesthetic of the amateur at the CCA too. The organisation is conscious that its premises can be intimidatingly 'nice'. It has made efforts to populate the pristine white entrance with craft stalls and a book-shop, which keeps its books behind chicken wire when not open. The CCA uses exhibition plinths, but these can be turned to different purposes and exhibits can spill out and travel round the building into spaces like the cafe. FACT is aware that its present building is too sleek and self-referential and its *Capital Programme* will open out its boundaries, making the institution more permeable, physically and psychically. Everyday contexts also account for the distinctiveness of each organisation in that the work it commissions and co-produces is infused with specific environmental and relational factors that depend on location, networks, history and curatorial commitment. Hence FACT's programmes express something of the cultural and civic life of Liverpool filtered through new media and expressed in programmes such as the community TV channel *Tenantspin*, or by contrast, in the *Media Facades* festival which linked seven European cities through digital displays which playfully worked with notions of local identities and characteristics. Grizedale's work has to be apprehended in relation to its location in rural Cumbria, even as it interacts with a world where global influences exert themselves over the key industries of tourism and agriculture – themes that are constantly profiled in its regional artistic presence. CCA is embedding socially engaged practice within multi-cultural notions of Glasgow and 'Scottishness' reflecting many of the city's tensions as well as its opportunities: positioned uncomfortably between a seasoned exhibition going public, a multiplicity of fragmented sub-cultures, and some of the UK's most culturally excluded urban populations. Artangel, the one organisation without a gallery space or physical base (other than a functional office building), has used the freedom offered by its 'without walls' status to pursue the logic of inserting art into unusual situations as far as it can go. Through its Interaction Programme in particular, it produces art whose aesthetic character is necessarily formed in intensive engagement with particular communities the work involves. Hence *Smother* emerged from a prolonged interaction between artist, producer, partner agency and participants but is saturated with the everyday idiomatic sayings and doings of the teenage mothers at its centre.

The Local & the Global

For the organisations in this study socially engaged arts practice is the basis of an internationalism that allows cultural exchange, hybridity, cross-fertilisation and cultural translation, and where artistic process and outcomes enable the material realities of different cultures to confront one another. Since such practices draws their integrity from the ways in which they embeds itself in the conditions of people's lives: localities, communities and personal interactions, they has a *distinctive* part to play in forming the international reputation of the arts in the UK. In contrast to the commercial arts sector, the internationalism of these organisations aims to re-configure relationships between local and global by establishing contexts for interaction and influence. The mutual exchanges that result are evident within artworks and throughout their production accounting for much of their aesthetic character and social impact. To take just a couple of examples:

The Abraham Cruzvillegas residency at the CCA drew on the experience of his family of migrant builders in constructing their own house in Mexico from anything they could find. He toured Glasgow on a five wheeled bicycle with 18 songs composed in memory of the place he came from, broadcasting them through the city with a mobile sound system. For the CCA it was about embedding him in the city, helping him to become a well known figure with a Glaswegian imprint. The project developed its own momentum - some Glasgow artists have moved to Mexico which has suddenly become

an important place for Glasgow and vice versa.

Museum of Non-Participation (Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, Artangel Interaction) began to emerge in 2008 in the wake of the lawyers political protests in Pakistan with the aim of addressing the commodification of 'participation' in a globalised neo-liberal order. The body of work has evolved in Karachi and London through workshops, language classes, salons, text-banners, poetry, newspapers, film, installation and a month long programme of lectures, events and discussions in the back of Yaseen's East End barber's shop in Bethnal Green. Crossing boundaries or exploring liminality between artforms became a key thread which has been extended to practices of linguistic and cultural translation and in encounters that have taken place between the broad cross-section of publics invoked by the project's central disorganising concept.

Philosophy, Civic Mission & Politics

Successful strategies of social engagement are driven by a strong social or civic mission and are built on coherent and robust philosophies of engagement. While the emergent nature of much of the work, involves protracted timescales and uncertain outcomes, underlying principles can still be discerned in the social relations through which artworks are produced. The socially engaged arts have a key role to play in placing the arts at the centre of civil society.

FACT which has many partnerships in relation to agendas of regeneration and community development has sought to embed itself in Liverpool's complex civic mix of institutions. It has engaged with a variety of political stakeholders including the Local Authority and grassroots organisations. It has also become a commissioner of arts inputs into health settings. The CCA, is increasingly moving in a similar way in Glasgow, using open source as a means to give substance to the principle of 'intellectual commons', attracting a myriad of

sectional groups to its resources, and gaining support from outside of the cultural sector for its outreach activities. Grizedale has sought to re-articulate and re-interpret the intellectual legacy of John Ruskin in developing a socially useful role for artists and in establishing art as a force for social change. They are regeneration partners in Egremont and have consistently sought to promote alternative models of cultural tourism. Adam Sutherland, its Director, has stood (unsuccessfully) for election on the parish council. Artangel, from its inception has been concerned with nurturing socially critical art, from Micheal's Landy's *Break Down* – a flamboyant protest against consumerism in which he systematically destroyed all his own possessions, to the low impact politics of sustainable living suggested by Ceri Buck's *Invisible Food*, or engagement with global geo-politics of Mirza and Butler's *Museum of Non-Participation*.

Intensity & Duration

Good socially engaged practice can involve singular events but the most effective projects are emergent and involve duration, depth, and sustained engagement. They are intensive in relation to artist involvement and curatorial support. They also tend to be relationally complex, not infrequently requiring negotiating skills, emotional intelligence and a willingness to work through contradictions to see them through to a successful conclusion.

All of the organisations in this study have commissioned projects involving lengthy research and development processes and open-ended timescales which are essential to their eventual realisation. Beyond specific commissions the organisations themselves take a long-term view, creating around themselves communities of interest among artists, publics and funders, managing their on-going presence in order to sustain relationships conducive to socially engaged practice and actively seeking to generate new forms of artistic receptivity demanded by the artworks.

To evaluate the impact of projects like this by virtue of the numbers of people they attract in the first person is to miss the point that they produce reverberations in participants, partner organisations and the environment which continue to be felt long after the projects have finished. They also function for a time as 'laboratories' in which new forms of engagement are explored. Sarah Cole's *Smother* is a case in point: it was in every sense a nine month 'gestation', passing through several precarious formative phrases, of uncertain recruitment and halting progress and consolidation, until the core group of young mothers transmit their experience of teenage motherhood to a group of professional actors, and then jointly oversaw the emergence of the installation and performances. Conducting the creative process involved the weekly presence of artist and producer (Rachel Anderson), at the Young Parent's drop-in. Their co-presence was as necessary to support one another as it was to carry through the work. The play workers from Thomas Coram who hosted the sessions were intimately and reflectively involved in the work which was regularly reviewed by their manager and senior staff. This is a huge input of professional resources, requiring adaptability, a sense of common purpose, and a willingness to work through the tensions that inevitably arise in cross-professional situations.

Partnerships & Collaboration

Socially Engaged arts strategies frequently involve complex partnerships with other agencies most often with the public and voluntary sectors, and social enterprises. Some of the strongest work emerges from the reciprocal influences of partners. Sustaining these partnerships is often painstaking and challenging on all sides, involving collisions of organisational culture and frequently gaps in expectations and understanding which require patience and skilled diplomacy. Nevertheless socially engaged arts practice can impact on partner organisations who come to recognise

the benefits of arts-based practice. Thomas Coram's partnership with Artangel described above is a case in point. As a result of the partnership Coram have recovered something of their own prior history of using the arts in their work with vulnerable parents and are in the process of re-embed them securely within their practice. Institutional change of this nature is likely to have longer and more far-reaching effects within the sectors affected than high impact events aimed at mass audiences, and since organisations like Thomas Coram work within a range of partnerships, especially with health and social services, such effects are likely to ripple outwards.

Conversely, partner organisations offer artists and arts institutions access to new audiences and a wealth of experience in engaging culturally excluded and marginalised groups, but partnerships can be programmatic as well as project-based. For FACT and Grizedale they have been particularly vibrant in the area of regeneration where both organisations have maintained a strong local or regional presence. Unusually for a socially engaged practice FACT's Tenantspin is now over 10 years old and has had several lives or phases. It originated in an effort to ensure that older people subject to regeneration and at risk of displacement could find a voice through learning to use the *media tools* of a TV station. Over time these tools have been used in different contexts and with different populations. Grizedale's input into the Egremont Regeneration Partnership has sought to build on valued local traditions such as the Crab Fair, while combining and re-interpreting them in the context of critical international currents in contemporary arts.

Innovation & Ethical Practice

When compared with partner organisations subject to formalised and procedural ethical governance (as in health and social care) arts organisations enjoy and benefit from a degree of licence. The organisations in this study were

acutely aware of their ethical responsibilities and vigorous in articulating them. This is critically important in ensuring that innovation and experimentation can continue. Some socially engaged practice poses sharp ethical and political dilemmas, particularly around participation and benefit, voice, and the question of who artists are authorised to speak for.

A further issue is that projects that make an impact can generate friction. Friction has both 'productive' and 'irritant' potential (although these are not mutually exclusive) and commands attention. Work that makes a sustained impact needs to *hold within itself the tensions it reveals* and maintain or hold together an environment receptive to the work.

It was striking that while the organisation's projects reflected (and reproduced) different fields of tensions, they did so in most instances with an exceptional spirit of generosity, measurable in terms of time and rewards, and manifest in terms of an open curiosity and reflective self-questioning. There is something inherently 'reparative' in such a stance in the sense that it tends to repair or heal. Its suggestion of concern in allowing others to reveal themselves, rather than imposing views of how they should be, can go a long way to offset the friction involved in any confrontation.

Authoring & Participation

Collaborative social engagement projects open up spaces in which boundaries between artist, curators and publics are transgressed and in which the locus of artistic control may shift between any of those involved. This typically involves *subverting or playing* with boundaries rather than *erasing* them. Many of the most purposeful projects are also strongly authored – or directed - by the artist or organisation. The organisations' ethos is assertively present in many of the local

or regional interventions already cited and is essential to preserve a sense of purpose amid the often competing agendas of partner organisations. Residency programmes such as Grizedale's, and internship programmes such as CCA's, also open pathways in which the organisations' influence is disseminated even though few explicit demands are made of artists in terms of what they develop. A notion of directed selection emerges in the case of individually commissioned artists because there is a bias towards selecting those who will work interactively and collaboratively with participants. Authorship may be distributed but most projects benefit from an artist-led desire for a strong aesthetic outcome. The art in many of these projects is partly in holding the tensions thus generated.

Research Implications

Much Socially Engaged Arts Practice aims at making an intervention in long-term change processes and complex webs of social relations. Although attendances or internet-presence can be measured numerically, it is difficult to quantify such influence but it can be evidenced empirically with research which is interpretive, reflexive, ethnographic, narrative, biographical and longitudinal. Theoretically rigorous and generalisable conclusions *can* be drawn from rigorous qualitative and case based research. This has implications for the kind of research commissioned: measuring impact via footfall will continue to be important for gauging audience numbers and widening participation, but the question of who engages, how they engage, in what circumstances, and to what end, needs sophisticated qualitative analysis and theoretical generalisation.

Research and evaluation in this sector should look two ways: on the one hand heightening among artists awareness of the ways in which their work affects individuals and communities, and on the other, informing funders and policy-

makers who are concerned to reposition the arts in relation to other cultural fields such as sports, education, tourism and health. This cannot be done exclusively through impact studies. As the idea of the transformative potential of art is central to socially engaged practice, empirically grounded and well theorised explanations of how transformation occurs is becoming vital. Such explanations demand cross-disciplinary approaches which position the socially engaged arts in relation to individuals, institutions, communities and wider societal structures.

Transformative Practice

Insofar as socially engaged arts practice aims to facilitate personal or social change it raises the possibility of the transformative potential of art, yet understanding of *how* transformational processes operate is surprisingly elusive. The study offered some insights that are presented here in summary form and will be expanded in the course of discussion

1. Psyche meets society

As art-forms which speak to collective dimensions of experience, socially engaged projects also have a key role in providing the bridge or point of articulation where the imaginations of individuals meet shared cultural forms. In this sense they are also a means whereby individuals insert themselves into the social and whereby the social can be creatively internalised by individuals

2. Visual and performative languages

Individuals and communities who participate in socially engaged art acquire new languages of social awareness – thereby expanding the possibilities of experiencing and representing the world differently. The transformative potential of socially engaged art may elicit a wide variety of responses: shock, bemusement, pleasure, scepticism, humour, joy but it is realised when it generates a cultural form for experiences that need the visual or performative register for their fullest expression.

3. The Aesthetic Third

Artistic outcome and aesthetic (whether conceived as aesthetic of process or of product) is not *subordinate* to other social agendas. The artwork remains as an essential third object or point of dialogue between the arts organisation and members of the public who are not arts professionals. However, it may also act as a third between the provisional community involved in its production and appreciation (artists, curators, participating publics) and the social domain that it aspires in some measure to change. To 'work' as third point of attention which activates new interpretations, it must retain aesthetic integrity - this enables it to endure as a third 'object' that opens up ways of seeing things differently. Where it 'collapses' as a third there may still be pleasurable experiential immediacy but it is unlikely to generate new relational forms or critical dialogue.

4. Presence, Emergence and Attentiveness

In simple terms socially engaged practice aspires to create the spaces and opportunities for new things to happen – things that have not yet been conceived. Creating without pre-conceptions means fostering conditions rather than producing the object or situation, and tolerating uncertainty and indeterminacy. In this sense socially engaged practice is profoundly counter-cultural demanding a quality of attention attuned to emergence rather than the logic of production, and complexity rather than reductionism. Out of emergence and complexity it must nevertheless produce. Participants in such processes acquire new ways of producing things which involve taking time, being present in the space and attending to process.

5. The Power of Illusion

Socially engaged practice facilitates change process in individuals and communities by nourishing the capacity for creative illusion – that is, the ability to think and act 'as if' things were different. Importantly creative *illusion* rather than *delusion* is issue here since illusion involves imagining alternative realities whilst delusion involves denial of reality. The four organisations in this study are, or aspire to be, thoroughly embedded in local contexts, and it is this that enables them to respond to the illusional capacity of the people who become engaged with their work, while reckoning with the constraints and opportunities of everyday life and local conditions.

6. Inside-out/outside-in presence

At the level of communities there is a tension between embeddness and critical distance which needs to be sustained if arts organisations are to be effective agents of cultural change. The organisations can best be understood as an element in a social ecology where they occupy fluctuating states between harmony and friction. Their status veers between that of insiders within the communities of interest in which they operate, and outsiders who are able to reflect back in modified artistic form some of those communities' conflicts and divisions. There is a parallel here to the ways in which socially engaged art implicates individuals by playing with an alternation between (emotional) absorption or immersion and (cognitive) analytic appraisal.

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