

TOWARDS ECOLOGIES OF LEARNING: ENHANCING RELATIONS BETWEEN ARTS AND ACADEMIA

Introduction

This essay seeks to contribute to discussions generated by the recent LCACE series **Working with Higher Education to develop digital strategy in the Visual Arts** commissioned by Arts Council London. The focus of the series was primarily on arts organisations funded on a regular basis and the subject of this essay is a reflection on the different ways in which arts organisations within the visual sector (which includes in this instance digital arts and interdisciplinary/live art practices) interface with higher education asking how and where value may emerge in these relationships. It suggests that acknowledging the challenges inherent in building links between these fields is a crucial step towards enhancing the possibilities of success and it advocates for enhanced documentation and dissemination of case studies of projects which have taken place (successfully and otherwise) in the spaces between. It has been written to complement and to add to the excellent report – **Developing Digital Priorities: Visual Arts Organisations and Higher Education Collaboration** <http://www.lcace.org.uk/home.php?id=6:25:291:382:0> by Dr Michael McKinnie and Louisa Pearson (Drama Department at Queen Mary, University of London).

To do this, I have been looking at relationships which currently exist involving artists and arts organisations within or in close association with this portfolio and considering, in consultation with these groups, how far their relationships with higher education represent models which might be further documented and described in order to inform or influence other agencies both within their sectors and beyond.

The design of the essay is partly a reflection on these current relations and partly a step back to look more broadly at why such relations might be desirable, how they exist within a broader context both historically and conceptually and also to seek to consider some questions which tend to regularly occur when discussing the topic of exchange across professional borders.

Zones of Relation and Zones of Contestation

Two of the projects I ‘inherited’ in my previous job at Arts Council England from my predecessor Joanna Scanlan (who now plays Terri Coverley in the political satire ‘The Thick of It’ – and who reflects on how her time as Combined Arts Officer there inspired her character - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/comedy/2009/11/the-thick-of-its-joanna-scanla.shtml>) were directly related to higher education and live art. The first was called the Live Art in Higher Education scheme which allowed academic departments to apply to ACE for small grants to engage with artists working in performance and live art. There had to be public benefit (e.g. an open lecture, publication or performance) but beyond this options were wide open and indeed some excellent seed projects resulted.

The learning from this programme subsequently informed my work in setting up many larger collaborative projects with academia some years later. As Director of the Interdisciplinary Arts department at ACE I helped set up the Art and Science Research Fellowships programme jointly with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, allocating half a million pounds together over the course of two pilot programmes. This investment resulted in some excellent results not least supporting the seminal work of leading choreographer Wayne McGregor with Cambridge scientists which

subsequently led to major offshoots including ongoing collaborative research with the University of San Diego and well-received performances at Sadlers Wells and elsewhere.

As part of the initiative we invited a social anthropologist to be attached observer drawing together all awardees into a knowledge network which formed the basis for a special issue of the Leonardo Journal of Art and Science with essays written by participants reflecting on the process and the outcomes, guest edited by James Leach the anthropologist, Tony White my ACE colleague and myself. Leach's essay addressed the critical question of how value emerges in the intersection between disciplines. This question remains deeply relevant in terms of understanding the topic of this essay today. The special issue of Leonardo, still accessible at <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/leon.2006.39.5.441> is a rewarding read for anyone interested in ways of building structural collaborations at funding agency level in order to best respond to artistic work which crosses between research and practice borders.

The second project I inherited was responsibility for agreeing in retrospect the terms of transfer of an Arts Council archive to a University where it was being digitised in order to become fully accessible online for researchers both within that institution and beyond. This had seemed to my predecessor to be a rather grand ideal and one that certainly went beyond the usual boundaries of ACE's approach to archives and indeed to digitisation (then a very new field). What had not been thought through and subsequently took time and money to resolve were the legal aspects of what had started as a fairly loose agreement (i.e. trusted discourse between former colleagues) and what ended up particularly when the University's legal advisors became involved as a situation where Arts Council had to recognise that there were numerous claims to ownership involved e.g. with the designers of software based processes used in order to digitise the collection. Issues of ownership in the context of collaboration and tensions between different agencies working at different ends of a common spectrum - the publicly funded arena - remain of some fascination to me many years later. Despite ensuring investment in numerous initiatives reflecting on this area whilst still at ACE, for e.g. the CODE (Collaboration and Ownership in the Digital Economy conference held in 2001 which demonstrated how open knowledge sharing systems can contribute significantly to innovation (www.cl.cam.ac.uk/CODE) - and despite ACE itself ensuring it developed appropriate contracts in future, I feel the arts funded sector (with some exceptions) is still deeply naive in terms of such areas of negotiation. When working with higher education, it is critical that arts organisations operate from a position of informed strength in order to best exploit and capitalise on potential partnerships with higher education which may become mutually beneficial rather than exploitative.

As research for this essay has revealed, some arts organisations have worked through terms of agreement which they will willingly share with others. What often seems missing is the advocacy and, articulation of mutual and reciprocal benefit as well as practical solutions which will help build trust in cooperation. If arts organisations and higher education institutions are to work together on occasion then it is vital to acknowledge that they exist in a common ecology – where their various roles can be complementary and mutually beneficial. As higher education organisations come under increasing pressure to provide value to the public as part of their delivery of the policy imperative, arts organisations which specialise in this work can offer curatorial, educational and distribution opportunities which can greatly expand and enhance the potential audience for research based work. It can also offer new contexts for interpretation, interaction and response.

Zones of Shift and Transformation

If we scroll forward from recent past to present, it is possible to see the period between 1996 and now as a zone of transformation and shift with respect to many aspects of visual and interdisciplinary practice. The emergence of new media tools as driving agents within these areas of practice led over time to a close association of artists working in this field with notions of innovation and engagement with what might best be described as research. Funding programmes at ACE and elsewhere were revised and devised in order to respond to emergent practices – with guidelines being adapted in order to incorporate some of the limitations which were seen to apply (for example in the mid to late 1990s despite the best guess projections it was often impossible for applicants to ACE funds for collaborative arts or new media to predict how and when they might actually realise the results of their investigations in the form of projects or even DVDs). One project supported, called Permanent Revolution (Derek Richards and Hyper-Jam) hit the nail on the head with its title, reflecting a period of adaptation and transition where shifting media displaced normative notions of research development and production. Small grants for new media were often given to spread risk, test capacity and generate experiments with emerging tools and to encourage crossover between and across sectors. ACE became associated, at least in part, with a willingness to invest in risk and to encourage experimentation. Its officers also became involved in policy initiatives e.g. the Practice to Policy framework which emerged linked to the Council of Europe in 1998-99 drawing together practitioners working in organisations like Artec in London and the Virtueel Platform in the Netherlands to advise policy-makers about the potential social, educational and economic effects of these then ‘new technologies’. The New Media Culture in Europe source-book produced by Virtueel Platform in 1999 conveyed through various short narratives the evolution and direction of trends in media culture in various countries. Senior academics such as Ernest Edmonds at Loughborough University who had watched the emergence of computers as creative tools since the 1960s and who were now active in research funding and policy fora in the UK began to argue for inclusion of artists in various funding programmes in order to test out the capabilities of technologies from both access and creative perspectives.

Organisations which had emerged from dance, theatre, mixed media and performance backgrounds such as Active Ingredient in Nottingham and Blast Theory and Shoe Vegas (now Igloo) in London started to apply to ‘combined arts and live art’ funding programmes to experiment with media tools and as the decade progressed, links began to evolve between higher education bases and these organisations laying the ground for some of today’s most successful examples of higher education/artistic collaborations. Blast Theory’s relationship with the Mixed Reality Lab within the Computer Science Department of Nottingham University which has been acclaimed internationally as a model of knowledge transfer and artistic/academic collaboration on performance based/augmented reality games - leading also to commercial spin offs - was forged on the anvil of this period. Around then also the Arts Catalyst organisation emerged from an undergraduate chrysalis at Imperial College to become a small-scale but dynamic organisation specialising in work at the intersection between arts and science whilst the Proboscis organisation led by Giles Lane began to develop into the unique organisation which is now an Independent Research Organisation with its exceptional mix of research, publishing, critical discourse, commissioning, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, archiving and public events.

These organisations, and others such as Mute and Forma, within the current ACE London visual arts

portfolio, then survived on a diet of small project grants from various different departments at ACE for many years during the 1990s prior to becoming fully fledged annually (then regularly) funded clients several years later. Occasional forays into academia (for e.g. through visiting lecturer and tutor roles) balanced the level of investment from these organisations in their own independent research and development which has helped to position London and the UK more generally as a foundry of talent, imagination and a commitment to the public domain which has received substantial international recognition.

In many ways it is easy to understand why these organisations mentioned above – which have sought autonomy as artist-led research and production initiatives - can also be among the most successful in terms of working now with partners in higher education. As is well documented in reports written by Sarah Thelwall for Proboscis as part of their membership of the CREATOR network, supported by the EPSRC, which can be read at <http://www.creatorproject.org/active-docs.html>; and (most relevantly for this essay) at <http://proboscis.org.uk/1245/cultural-snapshot-16/> collaborative processes have been honed and tested, and relationships of trust arrived at through trial and error, through spreading risk and often through associations built initially on one to one scale before achieving rather grander level of attainment. Proboscis's achievement of IRO (Independent Research Organisation) status awarded by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council - the only contemporary arts organisation to receive this status – is not only highly significant but deeply symbolic and they are actively working to help other organisations to acquire a similar status. This is a demarcation of a stage of maturity and a level of accomplishment which one suggests really deserves understanding and appreciation from ACE as a primary funder as well as other bodies. As with Electra over the last few years also, Proboscis have succeeded in raising funding from academic partnerships at a level which far exceeds their income from ACE hence offering scope for multiplying the arts investment and generating outputs which go well beyond the conventional expectations of either academic support or arts funding alone. The organisation is more than aware that in many ways they represent the potential of a whole sector with respect to engagement at this level. They clearly show how their role as an agency working between academia and the public sphere can offer extraordinary value for money with respect to using research grants charging much lower overheads than any university would do as they are much smaller and much cheaper to run. Whilst this is by no means the sole value of arts organisations to academia it is nevertheless an important point and one that deserves further amplification.

What is apparent also in background work for this piece is that the most successful collaborations which take place between and across academic and London arts organisational boundaries are built on deep foundations laid down over time based on personal trust and on establishment of frameworks and protocols (soft codes as well as formal agreements) that require respect which works in both directions. When this happens, the most important output can be mutual validation – showing the value of work within and to other professional sectors. In taking stock of why time can be well spent on development of effective collaborations and partnerships between the arts and academia, the benefits of mutual validation appears to an extremely important theme.

Zones of Expansion and Professional Development

Crucial also to understanding the various ways in which the arts can and do interface with academia is the position of the individual researcher – where a member of an arts organisation which may be

regularly or project funded opts for spending time within academia, either as a paid or visiting researcher or as a part-time member of staff. Examples of this happening have been explored within the recent LCACE series which has offered good insights into how the AHRC's 3 year Creative and Performing Arts Fellowship awards have been extraordinary valuable gateways for cross-fertilisation between arts practice and practice-based research. Recipients who are leading practitioners who have benefited from these awards include Jo Joelson of London Fieldworks and Tapio Makela, a leading Finnish media researcher and curator. Collaborative Doctoral Awards also can provide scope for such connections and enable arts organisations also to act as hosts in partnership with academic partners. Achieving these opportunities tends to be extraordinary valuable for the individuals concerned as well as their wider networks and can lead to a very high level of professional development with the potential for further funding routes also opening up where university contracts exist. Jo Joelson for example raised an AHRC Small Projects award alongside her fellowship whilst at South Bank University to enable the production of the extremely well-reviewed Super-Kingdom installation in Kings Wood Kent last year with her partner Bruce Gilchrist and other collaborators including the ACE South East RFO Stour Valley Arts showing once again how well academic and arts funding can be combined in specific circumstances.

If rumours are true that the CPA Fellowship programme is ending, then this must be regrettable. It will cut off one of the best routes to encourage practice-based research at the exact moment when artist-practitioners have begun to understand how to best use these opportunities both for individual research **and** to achieve public impact. One wonders - did the AHRC and the Arts Council meet to discuss this decision? Has the value of these awards been assessed from the point of view of impact?

As the whole area of practice- based/practice-led research grows and develops – and the number of related PhDs and MAs/Phil's increases – other opportunities are growing for inclusion of practitioners (especially those with substantial knowledge and expertise gained from working in highly competitive sectors) into the frameworks of institutions. The Queen Mary, University of London, Doctoral Training Centre in Media and Arts Technology, sited within the Computer Science department, funded by the EPSRC Digital Economy programme, is providing exemplary opportunities for practitioners (including the former curator of New Media at Watermans Arts Centre in London) to go on a paid journey into academia, to reflect on their work in a formal academic environment and to explore possibilities for the future which ideally will combine their deep experience within practice with a new set of skills gleaned from the university context and from working closely with others who may bring new insights and challenge established ways of working. The growing appeal of academia to many experienced practitioners who have worked for at least a decade in the arts in London is very noticeable at present - not only within the sphere of the digital - though this is a particularly interesting trend which may relate to the intensive phase of transition, development and emergence from the mid 1990s as noted above.

The academic context clearly offers a plane of continuity and opportunity for new growth for these practitioners through exposure to new forms and new modes of reflective and critical thinking.

Happily this appeal works both ways. Going into academia with mature careers behind them not only offers opportunities for shift in relation to personal and professional development, but can also

be of great benefit to academics who welcome practitioners who have worked outside institutions, running small organisations, working in adaptive and publicly orientated ways. These skills are highly valuable and transferable. As universities including those in the arts and humanities faculties are now under increased pressure to demonstrate the impact of their work, they can draw on the skills of practice-based researchers who know how to communicate and describe their work with a view to public appreciation from the outset. Developing and sustaining collaborative modes which encourage and sustain these models of interaction should be a primary task for all support agencies engaging with contemporary research based practice. Finding ways of making doctoral awards appropriate to individuals who have emerged from networked media culture bases over the past 20 years (where the work has been collaborative and interdisciplinary at heart) is an important step. The master/apprentice model which has often dominated the doctorate is perhaps out of keeping with these shifts and moves for e.g. at the University of the Arts in London to evolve team-based supervision models are most welcome

These areas of crossover and expansion – which can work for individuals as well as organisations – seem symptomatic and indicative of a situation where migration of practitioners from the field to the academy seems an ever-increasing trend. One of these practitioners is Graham Harwood one of the founders of the acclaimed group Mongrel, which won the Transmediale Prize for Media Art earlier this year. Alongside maintaining work of exemplary quality linked to socio-political concerns - including surveillance and privacy - Harwood now works two days a week within the Cultural Studies department at Goldsmiths, University of London alongside Matthew Fuller and others like Professor Scott Lash who are leading theorists of media, communication and society. Harwood's view is 'I see no difference between what I teach and what I produce' and his notion of an 'ecology of learning' connects his practice within and outside academia. He points out that both systems involve processes of sharing information and learning together, despite differences of 'knowledge hierarchies'. He feels that the value of his contribution to the college is often 'in the grey areas' which may be difficult on one level to describe or evaluate or academically under the radar, informal and part of the day to day peer exchange which happens within art colleges bridging professionally active artists and their students. He also recognises that his professional work as part of Mongrel can offer students a valuable link with action in the world outside academia. Being part of a research centre which offers conceptual challenges at Goldsmiths for him balances working with communities 'at relative margins' which can lead 'occasionally to professional isolation'. An 'ecology of learning' between research and practice is an excellent way of describing how important it is that such systems of flow, integration and interaction exist between and across these processes and discourses. No doubt Goldsmiths actively welcomes and values having Harwood and other artist-tutors on board who often work part-time and make strong links in both directions. I also discovered recently from Andrew Wheatley of the Cabinet Gallery in London that he is preparing to set up a new MA course relating to the art market which will also involve Goldsmiths which seems once again to offer a timely opportunity for this co-operation across academic and practitioner spheres as mentioned above.

In through the Value-Gates

At the Royal College of Art (where over 60% of the MPhil and PhDs are practice-based) a Senior Fine Art research tutor described recently how she sees artists working within research contributing to 'invention of a methodology itself'. She says 'research in fine art is essentially an inventive fiction

where fiction is transferred into a kind of truth that can be followed by others’.

This good description of how art and research can fuse together into something useful (often by indirect rather than necessarily direct means) echoes Harwood’s point about the grey areas where value breathes across and through systems of interaction rather than being prescribed. This effect can also be achieved by time spent together without the pressure of grant bids and form filling. Nicola Triscott Director of the Arts Catalyst recently said their academic connections have worked best when they find someone within the ‘value gates’ of the university with the capacity to roam and who can engage with their work without having to make time-consuming bids to HE programmes which are often not designed or reviewed by people familiar with the innovative edges of art and science practice.

Other practitioners who are part of the London Arts Council portfolio are making their own opportunities to build links within academia aware that these contexts can offer access to different kinds of audiences receptive to their work. A case in point is Furtherfield, an innovative media arts organisation led by Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett. Catlow is currently leading the development of a new MA in Art and Environment which will launch in Chelmsford next year building on her existing contribution to the diploma course. Her motivation, she says, is to engage more closely with a specific community. Her colleague Garrett has decided to do a Masters in Work Based Learning which can draw substantially on his ACE supported work. Another good example in 2009 of effective crossover was the exhibition Sound Escapes, a partnership between Electra (a funded RFO) and London College of Communication supported by the EPSRC manifesting in an exhibition at Space Studios in London which brought together Electra’s curatorial skills in sound art with acousticians, artists, scientists and engineers curated by Angus Carlyle of LLC jointly with Irene Revell of Electra see <http://london.tlktlk.com/tag/sound/> and <http://www.electra-productions.com/projects/2009/soundescapes/overview.shtml>. Space Studios is a London visual arts RFO venue which shows exhibitions of critically challenging work with exploratory workshops. It is run by Anna Harding, who previously ran the Curators Course at Goldsmiths, who has maintained academic links, recently setting up a Collaborative Doctoral award relating to the Space archives in partnership with Birkbeck College, University of London.

Other arts organisations including the Live Art Development Agency and Lux have also engaged with higher education in archiving and collection management areas whilst others with critically important archives such as B3 Media express enthusiasm for building such relations. Even such experienced arts organisations can express uncertainty though about how best to negotiate terms of engagement in relation to allowing academics privileged access what are very valuable archives of contemporary arts history without guidelines as to how best to do this to mutually rewarding ends.

If a shared ecology of learning across these fields exists then the complexity of sustaining this could be more formally acknowledged and opportunities taken to find best mechanisms to share and diffuse knowledge from practice back into academia and the same in return. Whilst knowledge transfer initiatives now go some way towards doing this - especially when those involved have experience of being researchers, funders and practitioners- often significant developments need time ‘under the radar ‘ to germinate, network and grow. It is important to ensure adequate systems, zones and occasions are designed to allow for the slow development and maturation of relationships which are necessary to provide the basis for deeper and ongoing engagement between

research and practice fields.

Inventing an Era

Connections between the visual arts and academia are certainly not new. Some of the venues within the current London Arts Council's RFO portfolio have played very specific and significant roles in stimulating some of the most important movements in British art history in the past 50 years. The cross-fertilisation between academia and the Independent Group, in the 1950s, then based at the ICA and progenitors of the highly influential This is Tomorrow show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, has been well documented. A key figure was Richard Hamilton who worked within the Art Department at Newcastle University (then called King's College) in design and who played a direct role in encouraging the career of Bryan Ferry among many others. This narrative is documented by Michael Bracewell in his book 'Roxy- The band that invented an era' published by Faber in 2007. In this entertaining text, Bracewell also describes how figures like Roy Ascott (veritable grandfather of many subsequent developments in British digital art) studied briefly at Newcastle before teaching at Ipswich with Stephen Willats and with Brian Eno among his 'students'. Laboratories of experimentation which helped forge a whole generation of pop and rock pioneers were not the result of any knowledge transfer or even knowledge engagement initiatives – but developed as a consequence of pioneering figures who drew, almost as a form of magnetism, others with them into provincial contexts where there was (probably briefly) an opportunity to do new things, test things out and build new systems which over time became part of the general curve of culture and fully integrated into everyday life. Hamilton became well known for designing the cover for the Beatles' White Album. He was also responsible – Bracewell reminds us - for spotting David Hockney's talent at the RCA one day. Hockney had been failing to produce thesis and reports for his degree but Hamilton – who had also an unusual career path involving dropping out of education and military service before attending the Slade and becoming one of Britain's preeminent pop artists – had the vision to recognise the quality and originality of his work. This is only example of where cross-fertilisation and collision on the borders of these areas have shown not just the co-dependencies but also the inextricable mesh within which contemporary cultural research and practice are sited.

The arts as research and development

So where does this leave us now? As we enter 2010, there is an inescapable focus on austerity, and the threat of imminent funding cut backs which will affect the arts in academia and elsewhere. According to Waldemar Januschek on Radio 4 recently, with respect to this year's Turner Prize, we are witnessing a new mode of quietness, perhaps a solemnity – perhaps a turning away from the market which had been the primary magnet for artists after Damien Hirst and his friends launched themselves on the world readymade with Freeze in 1988 leaving their Goldsmiths College incubation speedily behind. As Hirst said on the same programme his motto was –'your art is not working if it is in the corner of the room. You have got to get it out into people's faces.' More about Freeze 20 years on at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/jun/01/art>.

At the same time a new report from MMM this month makes the argument for wider arts R&D: <http://www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/page.php?id=48>. This report argues that artistic innovation can be re-categorised as R&D as long as the right arguments can be made by the right agencies. It ends with the proposal that the Arts Council should invest in a series of digital arts projects and over time to track these to see how far they bear up as valid indicators and deliverers of the R&D label. It is

interesting to see this suggestion – not because of its timeliness, but because one can easily respond by reminding the Arts Council and others that the funding agency did in fact invest in such projects which have led in many cases to arts organisations which now sit within the visual arts portfolio in London and that if they have a mind to do so, they could track now the benefit of this investment and extract the elements which could fit within the revised notion of R&D. It would also have been beneficial if the report had taken note of earlier evaluations in similar vein for e.g. Sarah Thelwall's report for the EPSRC as mentioned above. However I essentially agree with the argument, which was the one we made at ACE on many occasions – that its investment is extremely important in providing space and time for pre-commercial activities which may then provide the essential basis for further developments that feed into non subsidised areas – and then back into the subsoil eventually to form the seeds of new concepts or desires for the next generation. Of course, if this activity is to be called R&D there is a major challenge in measuring and accounting for it.

One would add however to the argument: most of the agencies which I have referenced here within this essay have a notion of value which goes beyond the financial and profit making agenda which is often a prerequisite for cultural policy discussions. As the report on the MMM site itself says, we need to rethink our notion of value to take into account the development of networked economies or ecologies as is elucidated well by John Howkins in his latest book 'The Creative Ecology' (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0702236993/ref=nosim?tag=creativitatwork&linkCode=sb1&camp=212353&creative=380549>). The questions we need to address and explore are too important to let established mechanisms stand in the way of encouraging ways of working together and enabling value-transfer across and between contexts and centres. A term I tend to use often is 'the currency of exchange' which seems to fit perfectly the nature of the best interactions between and across arts and academic boundaries. Whose responsibility it is to foster the environment and conditions to enable this exchange is perhaps the most critical question one might raise here. If arts organisations and academic bodies co-exist within an ecology of learning – then how best to offer scope for interaction? Where do the soft networks exist to provide scope for development of trust relationships and future collaborations? What might be learnt from success stories from the past which may lead the way into the future? Whose role is to share information and knowledge – e.g. contracts which can enable the building of trust across disciplinary sectors? Who will gather and share these narratives? There is much work to be done.

Bronac Ferran is a writer and researcher in areas of interdisciplinary practice.