

Presentation: **Let's Work Together conference**  
Sharing and Shaping Collaboration in the Arts

21<sup>st</sup> June 2011, Royal Society for the Arts, London  
Developed by Liverpool Arts Regeneration Consortium and  
supported by Arts Council England.



**11.15am-1pm, Workshop 2: Art Leading the Way**

Artist-led and programme-led collaboration is not new; but much of the focus on collaboration in recent years has concentrated on operations and business models. Despite this, collective and partnership working is part of individual and organisational creative practice for many artists and programmers. This workshop will explore art and artist-led examples of collaborative practice; it will consider the role of creative practice in collaboration, and some of the challenges and potential opportunities which are emerging for practitioners, directors, producers, curators and programmers.

Chair:

Lewis Biggs, Director, Liverpool Biennial, and LARC member

Speakers:

Robert Laycock, visual artist, artist collective founder/member, consultant, trustee and former Chief Executive of Helix Arts

Piali Ray, Director, sampad South Asian Arts

Mike Stubbs, Director, FACT, and LARC member

Ella Ritchie, Intoart

Robert Laycock – Presentation - Part 1:

I was asked to provide some examples of art and artist-led collaborative practice, to describe what I felt worked well, what didn't work so well, and to identify anything that was particularly hard – or even impossible - to achieve.

So I have two recent examples to share – both in the context of Helix Arts, and both funded as part of the company's Thrive! Programme.

In the first example the company had consulted with artists to identify their needs - and wants - in relation to raising the quality and ambition of contemporary practice in participatory arts. One of the key recommendations to emerge was the need for an artist-led network in the North East – in order to create a platform for critique and debate, and to develop a stronger collective voice within the arts sector for the artists involved.

Recognising that such a network would need to be independent - of any organisation or institution - Helix Arts decided to create the conditions for the network to develop led by the artists themselves.

This involved – over a fifteen-month period - providing fees, administration support, access to office and meeting room space, resources to cover travel and event costs, and time for Helix Arts' staff team to actively participate in the process.

Led by artist Kate Sweeney, the artists undertook research, visited other organisations, attended key events, led events in the North East, and curated a group exhibition of recent work.

Now the outcomes were very interesting... Contrary to our own research, the artists decided that rather than a new network, what they really wanted was more active involvement in the development of projects from the point of inception, coupled with a truly collaborative relationship with the companies that develop and support the work; companies like Helix Arts.

This was, in their view, the route to raising quality and ambition.

My second example is quite different – perhaps an example of ‘art-led’ collaboration.

In 2008 I had the opportunity to initiate a collaboration between Helix Arts, artist Heath Bunting and two national charities tackling homelessness – Crisis and Cyrenians. At the time Heath was four years into the development of the **Status Project** and was just beginning to produce **Maps of Influence** that started to provide a visual representation of complex human statuses. If you don't know the project - I would encourage you to visit it at [status.irational.org/](http://status.irational.org/)

So there was a unique moment where Heath's art and our partnership work came together to create the opportunity to do something quite special.

With modest resources – around £5,000 – Heath collaborated with artists, service-users and staff to produce the Map of Homelessness – now permanently sited at the Crisis Skylight Centre in Newcastle, and online. He also supported a service user to produce their own **Status Portrait** which was subsequently exhibited as part of an exhibition of portraiture at the Laing Art Gallery.

This is perhaps a good example of how - when the conditions are right, and relationships are strong – collaboration centred on the creation of art can exceed everyone's expectations.

### **So, what worked...**

Well, in terms of the artist network development – an artist-led, collaborative approach led to a better solution. Had we stuck to our guns and done it on our own, we would have wasted a lot of time, energy and resources pursuing the wrong thing for the right reasons.

Working with Heath was amazing – for me personally, and for the company. Spotting the moment, taking a chance and keeping our nerve, empowered us to think bigger, to think internationally, to have confidence in the artistic quality of our work, to build new networks and to imagine new programming possibilities.

### **What didn't work...**

Well in a way, it's a little early to tell. Will the company be able to integrate these new ways of working? Or will they get lost in translation from old Chief Executive to new?

I am confident these experiences have changed the company forever, but only time – and perhaps some longitudinal evaluation - will really tell...

### **And what was hard, or even impossible...**

I think managing expectations is key, REALLY managing expectations – and that's all about **people** and **relationships** and **power** and **communication**. In my experience it seems people sometimes find it hard to understand - let alone clearly articulate - their expectations of a collaborative process. I think this is the beginning of where things can go badly wrong.

Finally, to sum up, my six characteristics of collaborative individuals and organisations are as follows...

1. The ability to truly share **ownership** of an issue or an initiative.
2. **Openness** – to new ideas and approaches.
3. Willingness to take **risks**.
4. The ability to build high levels of **trust** – in relationships, in order that risk taking is shared.
5. The ability to spot **moments in time** – where something unique could happen.
6. The ability to **articulate expectations** clearly and to encourage others to be equally unequivocal.

### Robert Laycock – Presentation - Part 2:

For this segment I was asked to address four questions related to collaboration.

#### **Firstly – “what roles can different partners play within these collaborative models?”**

Thinking back to the examples I offered earlier – one artist-led, one art-led - I would summarise the roles different collaborators played as follows:

**The agency** – creates the conditions for the collaboration to take place – by exploiting assets, for example; people, buildings, reputation, networks - and by building capacity and infrastructure to deliver the work.

**Artists** provide specific expertise and knowledge, an independent outsider perspective, creative processes of communication, and artistic ideas and content of high quality.

**Partners** provide a rich real-world context for the work - challenging and stretching the theory and application of arts practice by providing access to diverse, complex and exciting new public realms.

**Participants** co-produce the work – bringing their own world-views, ideas and perspectives to the development of the work.

And **funders** provide the resources needed to make the work happen, where the outcomes of the activity contribute to their strategic objectives.

#### **The second question was “what changes and new approaches are required to move forward in this area?”**

I think we need to develop a culture of **greater openness** in the sector...

I think we need to better understand the difference between **collaboration and competition** – and where necessary be able to challenge and find solutions to situations where notions of competition are misplaced, unhelpful and detrimental...

I think organisations need to articulate, differentiate and communicate their **mission** passionately and effectively – in order to seek out and attract the right partners and collaborators...

I think organisations should be supported to develop realistic, empowering and **sustainable business models** - in order to move away from a culture of making do, of getting by, of surviving...

Organisations need to understand, plan for and embrace **risk taking**, at all levels...

And there should be more **collaborative working** in areas of obvious shared interest.

Overall, I think these are **leadership challenges** – at individual, executive and board levels.

***“What practical or shared solutions might be developed, to support this?”***

I have three suggestions:

1. Continued investment in **leadership development** – including for artists and board members – with a focus on collaborative working.
2. That Arts Council England considers undertaking a process of analysing **vision and mission statements of NPOs** - in order to better understand similarities, differences, strengths and therefore opportunities for collaboration between funded organisations.
3. That funders develop programmes that **stimulate and support collaborative working** in areas of obvious shared interest.

***And finally, “what might be difficult to achieve...”***

Well I think overcoming the barriers presented by personalities, egos and organisational histories is extremely hard – which is why I think this is primarily a leadership challenge.

And the negative dynamics of competing for increasingly scarce resources is hugely problematic too – and, of course, this is unlikely to get any better, anytime soon.

It is in exactly these circumstances that we need to - indeed must strive to - collaborate more effectively.