

cultural
leadership
programme

Artist Practitioner Placements

Into the unknown

Helen Carnac

Development Priorities

Leadership Works
Excellence in Leadership

Artist Practitioner Placements: Into the unknown...

Helen Carnac

Take a large piece of paper, cut concentric circles, almost round but still joined together, and pull the centre of the circle up. What happens?

The Cultural Leadership Programme (CLP) has done much work in determining how leadership in the arts can develop. The Artist Leadership development placements and the Method and Independents development programmes were set up in the words of CLP 'as action research to better understand how we support artists to lead in the current climate'. Piloting models that are more specifically about artist -practitioner leadership, offering bespoke leadership development such as mentoring, coaching and action learning sets, placements or other models of leadership delivery. The outcomes are used reflectively to develop more provision.

The artist leadership development placements were set up with the aim of 'supporting the leadership development of artists/ practitioners who have aspirations to lead through practice, and wish to gain experience through working within organisations on creative projects' and where 'artists can proceed from a shadowing to leadership position'.ⁱ

Three artists were chosen through an application and interview process to take on these six month opportunities: Helen Carnac, Nina Edge and Kate Fox were placed with three organisations: Craftspace; FACT and New Writing North respectively. Although the placements were originally advertised as six months in length, each artist negotiated a longer period of a year. In reality the placements may have lasted even longer than this and reflection on the whole process may take considerably longer.

This essay is a short reflection on the placements, which began in March 2009, written by Helen Carnac, it draws on conversations between the three artists and a panel discussion that they took part in July 2010 with David Jubb, Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre and Nicola Turner, Assistant Director of CLP.

Artist as leader in the cultural context

Information and research that comes from independent sites of practice is a necessary and relevant addition to institutional and organisational models that currently exist in developing leadership in today's changing economy and working landscape.

Good research has taken place previously on this subject, for example by the Artists Information Company, in the research paper *Leading Through Practice*, edited by Anne Douglas and Chris Fremantle in 2007ⁱⁱ. It was this research that helped me to formulate my initial thinking about my placement and action research models such as those developed by CLP offer a tangible way to test and develop new models.

It has been evident from the placements and from reading around the subject, that many who think about leadership from the position of artist, have a discomfort and seeming ambivalence with the words that have been used to construct and form today's leadership models. In particular, terms such as 'leader' can imply position or power, which can feel alien. Is this because these words do not or cannot fully describe what an artist does or are they just wrong, having too many already fixed meanings?

Can leading through practice be more transient, can it offer the ability to ask open questions from different sites, which in turn open up more questions, whilst not trying to fix or make things immovable? Not necessarily assuming a front position and not one where the positioning comes before the action.

'Artists are great at ringing alarm bells when it comes to jargon, rhetoric and dogma. We could all learn that skill'ⁱⁱⁱ

It is often this questioning and enquiry that is so important. How many times have I been in a room where there seem to be important questions missing? And when they are not raised, are they left unanswered? Perhaps then, these difficult questions may offer insight into why I find this a challenging subject to write on, and although I have thought about it thoroughly, back and forward in my mind trying to understand what this leadership thing looks like, I still have many more questions to ask.

One important aspect that I have recognised through this experience and by talking to Nina and Kate about the placements is that we all took them on in some shape or form of our current practice. I am a visual artist and my practice is principally concerned with process, and understanding the traces of making and material in a back and forward process of exploration. Nina examines power values and through direct action or by making interventions or commentary about situations, both big and small, elicits change. Whilst Kate's practice is about writing and finding a way to speak up and out through her comedy and poetry. So the way we approach our day-to-day practices formulated our individual approaches to the challenge of taking on the placement.

With their support we can lead?

As professional artists we have our own working methodologies and experiences of working in 'non organisational' ways and yet in 'shadowing' leaders of organisations perhaps the idea was that we the artists would learn from the leaders. Were we to learn about leading as an artist or as an organisation and how would they learn about leading from us and how could that be beneficial in the longer term?

Our initial experiences seemed to elicit fear and we ranged from being alarmed that we may have to 'join the world of arts administration', to disliking the notion of 'host and placement' which could be seen to be 'setting up a power duality'.

'Being connected to the organisation but not entirely of it'^{iv} seemed to be a clearer way forward and certainly one that Kate, Nina and I seemed to adopt. However whether we worked from the organisations' offices or away, shared a desk or worked alone at our own desks the placements provided an intriguing way to learn something unknown and

to react to territory that we were clearly uncomfortable in. In conversations between Nina, Kate and myself some of the words and phrases we discussed may directly acknowledge this discomfort: equity and control; differencing; status and power; in and out; them and us; professionalising and monetising; style and content; value and trust.

It is this discomfort that I think is important to acknowledge. In places the discomfort led to more discomfort and in my case it was sometimes difficult to address. At times I felt I was kept out, as if I may cause trouble if I was let in to really have a look around, but I was also reticent and did not want to get drawn in. I did not necessarily want to follow organisational models, but I was curious and whilst not wanting to act as though I was the 'leader' of something, I was discovering something about leading through this process. It is here that CLP were able to help me and through coaching I was able to reappraise, have a look at things from a slightly different direction and think about what this might look like from an organisation's point of view.

How can we work in relationships where the objective or methodologies are so different and not lose the essence or importance of what we all have to offer in a more conversational, two-way process?

Artists who accept the relevance of leading through practice seem to have an ambivalent relationship with power^v

Not wanting to lead or to be led

It's opened up a lot of questions for me about how things could be done differently^{vi}

Whilst thinking about these issues over the last year or so the political landscape has changed radically and we are more aware than ever of the huge impact that the UK's budget deficit will have on all public funding, including the Arts. At recent meetings I have attended about the future of arts funding there has been a real fear of the unknown emanating from arts organisations, but is there a way to develop with these 'unknowns' as a positive driving factor?

As an artist working with a process driven practice, I begin somewhere, but I do not necessarily know where I am going, in fact I do not want to know where I am going. It is the process of going into the unknown that actually elicits learning and future projects. Within this I may not know how I am going to fund the work that I do and I have to find a way through by negotiating, making alliances and thinking on my feet. I am actually unlikely to think 'ah I'll apply for some Arts Council funding' but I do have to find the resources to work and mostly I do. Some of the reticence in applying for funding is that it can assume a position of reliance and it is often linked to discernable outputs, which can be difficult to acknowledge at the beginning of a process that you are working through and certainly in the case where the work's importance is primarily qualitative and not necessarily quantitative.

If you're applying for funding - sometimes you have to tick the boxes before you've done the job and sometimes this strips out the creativity from the process^{vii}

Open and closed

In hindsight I do question whether the idea of shadowing small arts organisations could achieve a progressive understanding of artist leadership. Did we learn more about how we didn't want to do things in the process? Was this too much about managing and making strategic alliances and not about thinking creatively? Would the learning have been greater if the placements had been in contiguous fields, in the private sector or if the organisations had been placed with the artists? If we had started on an open playing field and discussed what we all brought to the process, could it have been more interesting and therefore would the learning have been greater?

Engaging in the placement, which has been refreshingly open in places and disappointingly closed in others, the learning for me has come from questioning perceptions and experiences in projects that I have been involved in over the last year through a leadership lens. The opportunity to have this period of focus and being able to assess, relate and be reflective in my experiences through this time, may have developed and changed the way that I think, which I acknowledge as being something really exceptional. Although I don't have the answers, there have been tangible benefits and developments to my thinking by being part of a longitudinal research project.

Finally I would like to come to a question that I keep asking. Although we often talk about how 'creative' the Arts are, are they always so?

Lots of cultural organisations are run in a very industrial, top down way...too many layers of management for example and we need to address that^{viii}

There may be a perception that flat management structures and systems exist in the Arts and in particular in smaller organisations, I would like to question this and ask others to do so too. The reality of this can be that a small, creative organisation can also construct inner hierarchies and can pass these working relationships to others that work with them, indeed sometimes assuming that their way of doing is better than any other way or perhaps putting a need to position themselves ahead of more collaborative working practices.

Arguably, the cultural sector has pioneered the leadership practices needed in the wider knowledge economy. Practices like creativity, collaboration, reflection and sharing ideas underpin the work of the cultural sector. The best leaders in the cultural sector know that people cannot create inspiring work in silo organisations^{ix}

So how do we test whether we really are creative, collaborative, reflective and sharing and do independent artists do this better?

One of the compelling things about artists working together is the joy of being equal but different, the working situation never seems to assume that a power structure or level of command needs constructing beyond the practicalities of ascribing tasks that need to be done. It is about an exchange – giving and taking and learning from others^x

CLP programmes in artist development such as The Independents led by Battersea Arts Centre have started to explore new territory, creating bespoke programmes for groups of artists who want to test out their leadership through their artistic practice. Using peer support, building on networks, connecting groups and exchanging ideas, they utilise flat systems of exchange where subjects can be explored in a cross-disciplinary context. It is this 'hybridity – trying to find areas of work for artists that are completely unfamiliar to their practices, maybe where they feel uncomfortable...seeing your world from a completely different perspective'^{xi} that has so much to offer for the future.

Recent thinking on leadership has talked at considerable length about hierarchal systems needing to change, that a top down approach does not work and that flat systems of thinking from the centre may be more appropriate – ***but what happens when you pull the centre upwards?*** Are you back in a hierarchy, at the centre but now at the top, centre or bottom of the heap?

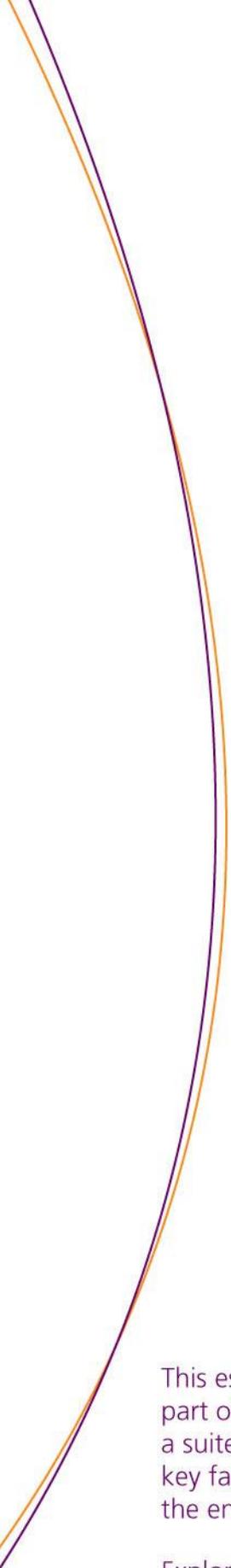
Imagining another kind of leadership may be useful: at the outer edge, with a long view, contiguous, embracing the unknown, the unimaginable or the seemingly unachievable. Perhaps asking difficult questions and acknowledging them also, listening and not shouting, not jostling for position, but actually going through the process in a thoughtful, concise and reflective way, trying to reach into other areas and thinking about the barriers that have been installed melting away. Giving space for things to happen and real time for thinking.

Being able to visualise these thoughts may be something that an artist can bring to a process with another or alternate view and curiosity, making unknown links and certainly opening wider contexts for this type of thinking and doing. Kicking out old habits and assumptions and trying to see things in another way is something that we all need to do.

After all 'what do you get more leadership out of: cultural leadership or cultural collaboration?'^{xii}

Though I am not asserting that we should all work in the same way, understanding each others' working processes and differences may go some way to bringing much needed change, whilst giving the time and space to think this through and put things into action. Then perhaps instead of ticking boxes we might begin to unpack them.

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- i Turner, N. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- ii Douglas, A and Fremantle, C. 2007. Leading Through Practice, **an** publications.
- iii Jubb, D. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- iv Fox, K. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- v Douglas, A and Fremantle, C. 2007. Leading Through Practice, **an** publications, p.4.
- vi Carnac, H. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- vii Carnac, H. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- viii Jubb, D. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- ix Pyke, L. 2010. New models for emotionally intelligent leadership. A cultural leadership reader @ Creative Choices
- x Gates, D. 2010. Intelligent Trouble in conversation, London.
- xi Jubb, D. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.
- xii Edge, N. 2010. Artist Practitioner panel discussion at CLP re:freshers, Wellcome Trust, London.



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