

What is the leadership role in driving user-led and open innovation in the sector?

“Originally art was made by a minority for a minority. Then it became art by a minority for the majority, and now we are at the beginning of a new era where art is intended by the majority for the majority.”

– Dr. Jose Antonio Abreu, founder of El Sistema, Venezuela

“It is the move from...being about something to being for somebody.”

– Tristram Hunt, The Observer

“If all the world is a stage, where is the audience sitting?”

– George Carlin

What is the leadership role in driving user-led and open innovation in the sector?¹

In an echo of the internet's recent evolution from an information source to the facilitative, interactive concept that is Web 2.0, an increasingly noticeable change is afoot in the arts sector as it begins to reflect this cultural shift. Many of the attributes of the 2.0 philosophy - rich user experience, dynamic content, openness, freedom, capacity for self-actualisation - have also begun to emerge as characteristics of an increasingly participative arts sector. This paper will argue that supporting this evolution is synonymous with maintaining the sector's relevance to and compatibility with contemporary instincts, and in so doing will examine areas of resistance to this (r)evolution and offer a response to some of that resistance.

What this paper *isn't* is a hymn to technology, nor an apology for it; rather, it is a tribute to some of the newly dominant ideologies and principles underpinning much significant new work within the sector, to which forms of technology are, on occasion, lending weight and giving voice. The terminology of 'user-led and open innovation' may be new, ambiguous, and presumably transient, especially in relation to work within the cultural sector, but many of the concepts, attitudes and behavioural patterns this terminology describes can claim historic origins². Technologically-enabled activity is revealing clear urges to connect and to co-create which have always been there and which can now transcend the professionalised boundaries of the sector, in pursuit of acknowledgement and accommodation within our creative and operational practices.

In referring to a cultural organisation's 'user group', this paper refers not just to its public audience: it uses the term to encompass anyone that encounters an organisation's work, from artists and funders to detractors and advocates. This paper is primarily interested in exploring whether, and if so how, our sector can continue to evolve in a way that prioritises harnessing its users' collective intelligence and creativity for mutual and sustained benefit. This understanding of users and their potential impact derives from Tim O'Reilly's famous definition: *A true Web 2.0 application is one that gets better the more people use it*³. In the same way that Nina Simon has been inspired by this definition in her work on participatory museum design⁴, I would like to ask: what would our sector and the arts organisations within it look like if they got better with each person's encounter with them, and how might our sector leaders go about encouraging this new ecology? How do we give abundant and thriving life to the Arts & Culture 2.0 concept?

¹ This paper's case studies are drawn largely from the performing arts sector, although it hopes that its relevance is to the broader cultural sector also. Quotes on the title page are taken from: *El Sistema, Music Changes Life*, a film by Paul Smaczny and Maria Stodtmeier http://www.el-sistema-film.com/el_Sistema_The_Project.html; The Observer 27th December 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2009/dec/27/galleries-museums-gloomy-future>; and George Carlin (1937-2008), US comedian, <http://georgecarlin.tv/george-carlin-quotes/>.

² See Lawrence Lessig's account of 'Read Only' and 'Read / Write' cultures, to which Andrew Potter refers in his blog *The Rise of Culture 2.0*: <http://www.mediaite.com/online/the-rise-of-culture-2-0/>.

³ <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/05/my-commencement-speech-at-sims.html>

⁴ <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2010/02/responsiveness-is-most-important-part.html>

“The essence of liveness is responsivity.”

- Tassos Stevens, Director, Coney⁵

The phenomenon of user-led innovation in the technological and manufacturing sectors has dispensed with the traditionally linear model of product development that sited design firms at one end and users at the other (the term ‘end user’ in itself speaks volumes about the finality with which this one-dimensional process was previously understood). Now product development environments trace out a much more circular or helical path, incorporating user-led innovation, trend-spotting, open source improvements, user consultation, etc. The language of some of the performing arts organisations who are most wholeheartedly embracing and modelling these same principles also tells of a shift in approach: playful, responsive directors, producers and artists are increasingly speaking of ‘creating a framework’, ‘authoring an event / situation / intervention’, ‘building an architecture’, or ‘cultivating an environment’, rather than of ‘making a production’. Our sector’s own linear model in which an artistic organisation develops a product in the privacy of a rehearsal studio and then delivers it wholesale to an expectant, passively receptive audience no longer feels consistent with the dominant ethos of contemporary society. Makers within the sector are turning their creative attention towards habitats, environments, frameworks and architectures for engagement, and a crucial leadership role lies in ensuring the visible and effective responsivity of these environments.

Alex Fleetwood, Director of pervasive games company Hide & Seek, talks about the self-perpetuating link between a responsive environment and user-led contribution to that environment in reference to the regular weekend festivals of play and social experiences – Sandpit events - his company runs:

“Many Sandpit designers do not self-identify as artists or digital creatives or creative professionals of any kind; they are players who chose to step up and become designers because they saw an environment or model where people do that all the time; where all are welcome and all ideas can be made to happen.”⁶

Understanding how a cultural organisation might be truly responsive – in the way that the data displayed by an internet search engine can be, for example – without feeling that the artistic autonomy of that organisation is in any way under threat seems to be a key challenge for many in the sector. Those organisations who appear best placed to take up that challenge are those whose ethos doesn’t recognise the segregation of practitioners - or users - into ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ silos, or at least those whose ethos doesn’t assign value judgements to those divisions⁷. Indeed, there remains a clear role for the professional within these new frameworks; arguably it is an increasingly stronger role, in ever greater need of articulation. Given the scale and variety of content that is now available, the role of the professional who helps users navigate their own journey through that content becomes ever more important, ever more invested with responsibility, and yet ever more complicated by the tension between the interrelated variants of responsibility, authority and accountability.

⁵ <http://allplayall.blogspot.com/2009/12/forest-and-field.html>, 29th December 2009

⁶ Interview, 15/02/10

⁷ The National Theatre of Wales’ commitment to the primacy of its community sets an interesting precedent in this regard; it is worth listening to Artistic Director John McGrath’s keynote talk from a recent Get Ambition conference about the establishment and cultivation of this community: <http://www.video3uk.com/static/ambition/broadcast2.html>

“The opposite of a free culture is a “permission culture” – a culture in which creators get to create only with the permission of the powerful or of creators from the past.”

– Lawrence Lessig, Free Culture⁸

Conversations around the most fitting styles of creative leadership for best encouraging user-led and open innovation in the sector⁹ centre pretty quickly around the notion of permission; the creative professional increasingly needs to embody a form of skilfully permissive leadership. As a sector, we need to prize the leadership ability to give permission without reinforcing the hierarchy of the permission-granter over the permission-seeker, something that depends upon permission-giving in spirit and by implication rather than by grandiose condescension - this latter being exactly what I believe Lawrence Lessig is railing against in his protest against ‘the permission of the powerful’.

The California-based design company IDEO model an innovation process that relies on a mantra of ‘act first, seek forgiveness later’¹⁰, a mantra towards which the cultural sector might aspire, at least in spirit. That spirit depends upon users being able to deviate and transgress from the original parameters of whatever unwritten contract they entered into. Of course the self-selected element of most user-led activity means the stated parameters and principles of that activity are generally complied with, but arguably this is precisely why space for subversion and deviance should be included in that reciprocal contract of co-participation. The importance of getting those parameters for user-led innovation right is paramount: like Goldilocks’ fastidiousness about porridge temperature, the most suitable sets of parameters around calls for open innovation need to be just right - neither too open so as to be vague and unproductive, nor too closed so as to exclude potential offerings that fall just outside overly specific criteria¹¹.

While there is much our sector can learn from commerce and industry in this arena, something we should seek to avoid replicating is the corporate sector’s dichotomous relationship with the innovation of its user groups. On the one hand, the corporate sector actively encourages user-led innovation that can be monetised – exemplar case studies from the likes of Proctor & Gamble, Goldcorp and Eli Lilly are well known and celebrated¹² – and yet on the other hand, for-profit

⁸ <http://www.free-culture.cc/freecontent/>

⁹ A useful definition of innovation in regard to the arts and cultural sector comes from founder and president of EMC Arts, Richard Evans, who describes it as “instances of organizational change that: 1. result from a shift in underlying assumptions, 2. are discontinuous from previous practices, 3. provide new pathways to fulfilling the mission.” <http://www.emcarts.org/>

¹⁰ IDEO’s innovation process is called Deep Dive Technology, and is dependent on non-hierarchical, playful principles and constructive chaos. This video showcases their approach: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PClCM&feature=Playlist&p=C016AB6A2DEBA040&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=7

¹¹ Roland Harwood’s gloss on Rob Poynton’s book *Everything’s An Offer* nicely summarises a variety of innovation invitations and their respective effectiveness: http://blogs.nesta.org.uk/connect/2009/12/everythings-an-offer.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+nesta%2Fconnect+%28Connect%29&utm_content=Google+Reader

¹² A high profile example of the commercial sector capitalising on the trend of user-led innovation is Microsoft’s recent series of adverts (2009) which promote its Windows 7 software with a campaign based on the concept of consumer

businesses can tend to resist the perceived threat of user-led innovation when it innovates along an unanticipated or unsanctioned trajectory – the Digital Economy Bill being a recent case in point.

“Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony.”

- Heraclitus of Ephesus

Although we can perhaps understand the (commercially exploitative) reasoning behind this inconsistency and resistance, it is a resistance which has little place in our creative sector. Stephen Flowers, Principal Lecturer at the Centre for Research in Innovation Management, argues the point:

“When users define the products and the trajectory of where innovation goes, your business and activity and how you make money can end up in very different places. If you look at the cultural industries, a lot of this stuff goes back to the avant-garde movement in Paris: a lot of ‘that thing that creates a new thing’ is often in opposition or underground, and it’s the same thing as drives innovation.”¹³

Given that “the users of our cultural sector are in general leading us somewhere fundamentally different to the direction we’re currently travelling”¹⁴, we each need to understand what it means for our organisations, our artistic practice, or our own creative leadership when a permissiveness of user-led innovation leads us somewhere inconvenient, unexpected, or objectionable. Part of our role, of course, must be in accepting and honouring the outcome: the producers of the audience-programmed My Fierce Festival (May 2008) had to accept the possibility of their users making difficult artistic choices whilst still maintaining confidence in the fact that the users would programme mindfully, with the same view to balance, appropriateness, and artistic challenge as Fierce! itself had always done. Similarly, Theatre Royal Stratford East has accepted that if their community wants “six months of non-stop *High School Musical*, then that is what the staff will make”¹⁵ for their audience-programmed 2012 Open Stage season. What these examples are hinting at is the requirement of a more nuanced selflessness in contemporary cultural leadership, selfless in that while *authority* can be given away, accountability still remains with the institution and, by extension, its leader.

However, if we recognise – as Flowers identifies above - the shared stimulus that links creativity and innovation, we will also be wary of accommodating and legislating for oppositional activity to the point of sterility or blanket institutionalisation. Space needs to be left so innovation can fill the gap better than the institution might have done; some characteristics of hierarchies cleverly provide something for creativity to kick against. For example, without wanting to suggest that the unsuitability of Birmingham City Council’s redesigned website was the deliberate result of an effort to cultivate creative innovation, nonetheless the success and influence of <http://www.bccdiy.com/> (a

influence: ‘I’m a PC and Windows 7 was my idea’. However, this corporate claim quickly spawned a truer example of user-led innovation in the ‘Windows 7 was NOT my idea’ backlash from bloggers and T-shirt designers.

¹³ Interview, 18/03/2010

¹⁴ Alex Fleetwood, Director, Hide & Seek, interview 15/02/10

¹⁵ Case Study on Theatre Royal Stratford East in Dr. Louise Govier’s research paper: *Leaders in co-creation? Why and how museums could develop their co-creative practice with the public, building on ideas from the performing arts and other non-museum organisations* http://www.cloreleadership.org/library.php?cat=fellowship_research_projects

community-generated version of the same website) originated with users' frustration at the clumsy and obstructive nature of the official site.

While this paper directs much of its focus towards the evolution of traditional leadership roles, in truth, driving user-led and open innovation in the sector depends on leadership being located in a variety of contexts, be it at government level, within funding bodies, on boards, with inspiring individuals, or in the form of unofficial leaders – the passionate, the pioneers and the pirates who lead through being radical, who lead unintentionally without official authority to do so. Recognising that leadership isn't always located at the front means preserving this range of leadership roles and enabling all voices to be heard. The sector's collective leadership ecology needs to replicate on a macroscopic scale the spread of team roles championed by the Meredith Belbin model¹⁶: it needs to find homes for its 'shapers', 'plants', 'specialists' and 'investigators' as well as its 'implementers', 'monitors' and 'coordinators'. The sector would do well to heed the proposition that in times of rapid disruption – although I would readily extend these terms of reference to 'at all times' – the best way to distribute new knowledge is to connect with people from diverse and unfamiliar perspectives¹⁷.

Pirates, of course, may well choose to operate from the edges of the sector, their radicalism setting a pace that propels them beyond the capability of the core, but though they may make their home on the margins, their voices must never become marginalised, for it is in their wake that we all progress. As Chris Unitt (Director, Meshed Media) suggests, 'there are ways of formatting for and encouraging pirates: someone is...creating circumstances for their confrontational activity'¹⁸. What we need to consider is, as forward-looking ideas and developments become incorporated into the mainstream, how do we prevent, to use Lawrence Lessig's metaphor, "last generation's pirates [from joining] this generation's country club"¹⁹; how do we continually reinvigorate the dynamism of innovation in the sector? Unitt suggests identifying the motivational factors for each user group and ensuring that we trigger these factors often enough, which might include triggering a desire to make a difference, to get involved, "to route around bureaucracy/systemic inefficiencies/barriers to entry", or even more simple factors such as mischief, spite or accident:

"Each of those motivational factors can be triggered in different ways. Many will be indirect, many will be difficult or unpalatable:

- have an opinion (that someone else can disagree with)
- do a good job badly
- do a bad job well
- communicate poorly
- accept criticism (and consider yourself fortunate that someone cares enough to criticise)
- relish competition/being held to account
- ask to be shown a better way of doing things
- don't take ownership of everything - outsiders will often work better as outsiders

¹⁶ See <http://www.belbin.com/> for an explanation of the origins and research behind the Team Roles theory.

¹⁷ *Creation Nets: Harnessing the Potential of Open Innovation*, John Seely Brown and John Hagel III

¹⁸ Chris Unitt, Director, Meshed Media & Created in Birmingham. Comment at a focus group conversation held on 11/02/10.

¹⁹ *Free Culture*, *ibid.*

- accept other approaches and find a middle ground
- plan for the unplannable (parallel with wilderness gardens or town planning)
- engage with people on their terms
- make it look like change/improvement is possible.”²⁰

‘Enlightened trial and error succeeds over the planning of the lone genius.’

– Peter Skillman, Designer and Project Manager, IDEO²¹

Any campaign to convince the sector of the benefits of open innovation needs of course to acknowledge and address the attendant fears. Processes of change are typically resisted, denied as irrelevant or ignored through lack of familiarity and understanding. Innovation necessitates failure, messiness, risk, and space for play, and the outcomes of innovation in our sector may stimulate artistic, organisational or infrastructural change, all of which may appear to carry frightening implications for many organisations. Innovation, almost by definition, is not the handmaiden of best practice, given that best practice can only be achieved through an iterative journey of trial, error and improvement:

“True innovators adopt best practice rarely because best practice is an outcome but not the substantive journey you need to go through.” – Ben Cameron, Program Director of Arts, Doris Duke Foundation

“Best practice is for when you have a static set of assumptions that you can make.”- Clara Miller, President & CEO, Non-Profit Finance Fund²²

Of course, given these intrinsic elements of chaos and failure, there will be times in the life cycle of an organisation when it is not appropriate to embark on a process of radical open innovation, or when the associated risks might prove more detrimental than beneficial, but we can go some distance towards breaking down these fears and barriers if we counter the supposition that we consider the concept of innovation in the binary framework of polar opposites. This is not an ‘either / or’ proposition of opposite and absolute alternatives. The campaign to drive open innovation in the sector must beware of giving the message that *all* organisations must work *entirely* in this way *all* of the time. Just as the theatre of the 1960s can be retrospectively summarised as a decade which witnessed the “burgeoning of an alternative theatrical culture” characterised by “a sharp sense of...political scepticism” even though not all dramatists felt “a duty to scrutinise and question the political status quo” nor classified themselves as “disturbers of the peace”²³, similarly, not all creative output of the first decade or so of the 21st Century needs to be forever filed under ‘user-led’. Charles Leadbeater astutely cites Jimmy Wales, the founder of the ultimate user-led innovation - Wikipedia - who reveals that even this iconic open framework functions only in part through non-hierarchical democracy:

“When Jimmy Wales is asked to describe how Wikipedia makes decisions he likes to say it’s one part anarchy (anyone can do whatever they like); one part democracy (disputes are settled by votes); one part meritocracy

²⁰ Additional comments submitted via e-mail, 12th April 2010

²¹ IDEO, *ibid.*

²² Joint blog entry on Mission Models Money TV, January 11th 2010 <http://ow.ly/V1ol>

²³ Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945*, Chapter V, 1964 – 70 *Theatre of Opposition*

(the best ideas win out); one part aristocracy (people who have standing in the community have more clout); one part monarchy (that is him and he uses that power rarely.)”²⁴

“Institutions are going to be pivotal points that need to protect and make space for the artists and enable the audience.”

– Clare Reddington, Director, iShed and The Pervasive Media Studio²⁵

An extreme response to all of this might be to jettison the entire cultural sector and to start again from a viewpoint that recognises all users as potential co-creators or co-producers instead of from the perspective around which the existing funding system grew up that reinforces the ethic of the professional artist. Such a proposition would be neither helpful nor valuable; we must, as ever, proceed from where we are now, rather than from some utopian blank canvas. A realistic way forward might be to concentrate on how the role of institutions (to include funding bodies) and producers develops: it is they who need both to protect the safe spaces for artistic experiment and to make creative work porous for users to access and contribute to. They need to create permeable architectures of participation around creative product²⁶ and to develop the means of creating secondary content around product that isn't less than the core artistic primary experience, but becomes part of the way users encounter that primary artistic experience. The sector needs to train producers, not to create micro-genres of technology-driven work, but to understand better the commercial metrics of commissioning and the logistical and philosophical challenges of undertaking work in public spaces - whether online or offline. If institutions are important, so too are the modus operandi they employ, making the transformation of the infrastructures and processes by which the sector operates as important as, or arguably more important than, the transformation of the creative work produced²⁷.

“It's about the incumbents and the outsiders...It's about seeing the world differently.”

– Stephen Flowers²⁸

Given that the drivers for change in any scenario reside either in aversion from something or motivation towards something, perhaps the most significant leadership role is in championing the positive values underlying user-led and open innovation. The cultural sector occupies a privileged and fruitful position as the habitual home of opposition and the voice of the outsider; it is part of our sector's identity. Counter-culture has always been as much part of the cultural sector as the culture it polemicises. It is time to reverse the precedent of the outsider reacting against the incumbents to one

²⁴ Charles Leadbeater, *Forget Jack Welch: Jimmy Wales is the future*, <http://www.charlesleadbeater.net/cms/site/docs/Forget%20Jack%20Welch%20copy.pdf>

²⁵ Interview, 09/03/10

²⁶ Why, for instance, in the field of museum curation and interpretation, could New York's Museum Of Modern Art not find space to include the irreverent, subversive, unofficial audio guides to their collection, generated by self-described 'hackers' such as Art Mobs (http://mod.blogs.com/art_mobs/), alongside the Modern Voices Audio Program's official podcasts from selected gatekeepers?

²⁷ Examples of revolutionary participatory processes include Museum 2.0's 'unconference' format and Open Space Technology, pioneered by the likes of Improbable and Theatre Bristol.

²⁸ Interview, 18/03/10

of the incumbent responding to the activity of outsiders. If, as John Holden maintains, the sector needs to abandon the idea that the arts are something provided *by some to others* and instead consider that they are something we all produce together²⁹, the most expedient way of effecting this transition must be through endorsing loudly the values of freedom, self-authorship, and advocacy for the outsider against the incumbents that this activity has at its heart.

Michelle Knight, 12th April 2010
2009/10 West Midlands' Fellow on the Clore Leadership Programme

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