

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

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Changing the Conversation: A Provocation

There is a story told by the nineteenth century social reformer Henrietta Barnett about an art exhibition she organised in Whitechapel in 1881. This was the first in a series of exhibitions she described as 'Pictures for the People', that were intended to introduce 'great art' to the poor of the East End of London. In the book *Practicable Socialism*, she recounts a conversation overheard in the gallery between two 'hatless girls' whom she suspected were living 'the worst life' (183). The young women remarked on the ideal of eternal love portrayed in the pre-Raphaelite painting *Forever* by Herbert Gustave Schmalz, saying that was 'real beautiful'. Barnett interprets this as an epiphany, in which they recognised that higher or more 'noble' forms of love might replace the emotional poverty and social degradation of their everyday lives. 'In the spirit of her times, Henrietta Barnett believed in the redemptive power of the arts and her chosen stories confirmed her conviction. The book was written to persuade, and she and her husband the Reverend Samuel Barnett were remarkably successful in convincing other social reformers of their East End mission, founding The Whitechapel Gallery in 1901 and Toynbee Hall in 1884 where young intellectuals lived and worked with the poor to provide a cultural education inspired by Matthew Arnold. Yet although the story of young prostitutes and their art gallery conversations sounds patronising today, what has endured is a practical politics in which the arts are regarded as central to urban regeneration, allied to participant democracy, social justice and community cohesion. Although the language has changed, and participation has replaced contemplation as the new virtue, public access to the arts remains an important indicator of social capital and civic participation. As I write, the newly revived People's Palace, originally founded in 1885 to bring culture to the East End of London (with Samuel Barnett as trustee) and now part of Queen Mary University of London, echoes Barnett's sentiments by promising a series of 'public events for the refreshment of body and soul'.ⁱⁱ

So which part of this conversation has changed? This timely question, prompted by The Paul Hamlyn Foundation Special Initiative *ArtWorks*, invites a robust twenty-first century debate about the value of socially engaged arts practices. The short-hand 'participatory arts' describes both people and places; it usually refers to creative activities undertaken with people in community or institutional settings, and often with those deemed 'marginalised' in some way. Yet the social turn in contemporary arts practices, eloquently analysed by Shannon Jacksonⁱⁱⁱ is blurring the boundaries between artist and audience, producer and creator. Twenty-first

century artists have embraced innovative forms of cultural practice in new community settings; companies are developing 'local' programmes that interrogate the interactivity of place and audience. There is neat reciprocity between contemporary artists' interest in creating interactive art or immersive theatre found-spaces— disused factories, empty swimming pools, vacated shops and so on – and the institutional spaces such as prisons, schools and hospitals that are often the settings for participatory arts. Participation is no longer confined to 'marginalised' communities or institutional settings; contemporary arts practices are re-defining the 'participant', breaking down distinctions between art forms and opening new forms of interactivity and engagement with different audiences, publics and communities. There are questions, of course, about whether some projects are they simply taking existing metropolitan audiences to performance spaces they consider 'edgy' or whether disadvantaged or local people are being used by artists to further to their own aesthetic ambitions. In response to this question, *ArtWorks* London's innovative programme *Shift* is focussing attention on a new kind of 'portfolio' artist, who is both socially aware and artistically innovative. The programme is inspired by the history of twentieth century artistic movements, such as the Bauhaus Movement, whose idealistic vision conceptualised new integrations of craft, life and art. Twenty-first century 'portfolio' artists continue to work in this spirit, developing professional practice that re-imagines outmoded distinctions between 'out-reach' and work exhibited or performed in cultural venues. Within the context of this social turn in the arts and its relational aesthetics, The PHF's *ArtWorks* programme prompts us to think through how artists learn to negotiate the complex dynamic between place, cultural participation and social engagement and how quality might be defined in ways that matches the charitable ambitions of its funders. In times of economic change and squeezed funding, there is an even greater need for artists who are informed, creative practitioners.

The phrase 'informed practitioners' brings me to the main focus of this provocation. I am interested in teasing out the contribution universities might (and do) make to developing and sustaining high quality arts practices in participatory settings. This is not, of course, to suggest that universities are the only place to learn, but universities have a key role in the professionalisation of artists working in participatory settings, and it is important to understand what that role involves. This is urgent; the cultural and charitable sectors and the artists themselves are looking more and more to universities to provide high quality professional development. New graduates are increasingly expected to work as unpaid interns or to be ready for employment without the costly need for further mentoring or professional support. As artists develop their careers in participatory settings, reduced funding and changing employment patterns means their contracts are often short-term and employers have little money to invest in their professional development, leaving them isolated. At the same time, the conversation in universities is changing as an increasingly market-led economy and rising student fees has placed the purpose of university education under critical scrutiny. Beyond the arts and the academy, there is increasing youth unemployment and social deprivation. This twenty-first century climate suggests that there is an even great importance for multi-agency and cross-sector collaboration to ensure that practitioners are informed by the knowledge, skills and understanding required to develop high quality artistic interventions with people living in complex settings.

It is often language-use that defines the terms of the debate and sets (or obscures) the parameters for collaboration, so I would like to reflect – somewhat polemically - on how the labour of universities is variously described. I consider myself to be an academic who teaches students in a university. I am not a knowledge worker employed by an HE provider who trains knowledge customers. I would like to share my research rather than exploit its marketability. As a teacher I aim to challenge students to act critically and think creatively as practitioners rather than ‘deliver’ a ‘skill-set’. This vocabulary indicates the value I place on university education to challenge and inspire, but it is also important not to mistake this idealism for remote ivory-tower-ism. On the contrary, along with many colleagues I welcome a changing landscape in which doctoral students are funded to work collaboratively with cultural organisations, where practice-as-research recognises that academics might well be professional sculptors, composers, playwrights, directors and, indeed, artists working in participatory settings. The emphasis on the impact of research and knowledge exchange, furthered by the AHRC, has introduced positive new ways of conceptualising the social and cultural significance of research in the arts and humanities. Academics are also writing for different audiences and publics, valuing new forms of dissemination (as exhibitions, performances and so on) and using the social media to encourage public engagement in their research. The tradition of research-led teaching in the arts means that it is particularly well placed to encourage students to learn alongside academics who are working in collaboration with people outside universities, developing new conceptual paradigms, investigating new artistic practices and exploring how new perspectives on the past might illuminate the present. Students may always not find this learning easy or instantly appealing; Mary Beard is surely right when she points out that many students find that courses they disliked at university become the most influential later in their lives and careers^{iv}. There is a balance to be struck between greater accountability for academic teaching and the climate of consumerism, increasingly evident in universities, which risks sacrificing depth for short-term satisfaction. Sustainability, in the participatory arts as elsewhere, takes the long view and this ability to think long-term is one of the roles of universities in society.

Students do, however, need jobs and their expectation that an expensive university degree will enhance their prospects is entirely reasonable. As I have already said, the idea that universities provide the theoretical knowledge and that practice is undertaken elsewhere is an outdated stereotype, and academics are increasingly alert to issues of student employability in planning their curricula. Increased awareness of the student experience as a whole and their potential employability has led to greater value being placed on co-curricular activities and volunteering. University careers services are increasingly arranging internships that complement students’ studies; new modes of certification ensure that students are able to articulate the transferrable skills they have acquired at university. This integrated approach to employability aims to give students structured opportunities to learn about careers, some of which they may not have previously considered. Outside universities, however, there is widespread misunderstanding about the relationship between students’ degree courses and their employability. Take, for example, this statement about the relationship between training and first degrees made in a report commissioned by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for *ArtWorks*:

Initial Training: The preparation of people with skills and/or competencies to gain entry into a specific occupation/sector (e.g. first degree)^v

Given the wide range of careers that graduates pursue from first degrees in the arts, it is hard to know how one degree course would meet the expectation to prepare people with this level of specificity. For example, recent graduates from degrees in drama and theatre at my own university have found work as museum educators, events managers, fight directors, teachers, stand-up comedians, librarians, hoteliers, lawyers, playwrights, archivists, publishers, actors, radio presenters, venue managers, producers, theatre directors and many more – including artists in participatory settings. We are not alone in seeing the range of graduate employment as a strength, suggesting that graduates have more than one 'specific occupation/ sector' open to them. Furthermore, as I have already suggested, participatory settings particularly benefit from 'portfolio artists' who can move between different settings and sectors with integrity. What this does suggest, however, is that universities are not communicating sufficiently clearly what their multiple roles are, and where it is appropriate to expect vocational training for a specific occupation or targeted professional development, and where the learning is are likely to be more broad-based. There is no one size-fits all, and courses at different levels and institutions have different degrees of specialisation; practice-based PhDs enable professional artists to deepen their understanding of their practice, for example, and courses at masters' level are increasingly seen by arts graduates as the place to specialise. It is, of course, also fair to say that not all academics are equally enthusiastic about the employability agenda, arguing that it limits intellectual inquiry in favour of equipping students for today's job market. This can restrict students too, if they become dominated by results, asking 'what do I need to do to get a first?' rather than taking the kind of creative and intellectual risks that will extend their learning. There is something to be said for failing better, and universities are very good places to foster an environment in which artists feel safe enough to experiment. And although no-one would wish to discourage students from hard work and success, I would contend that the learning gained as a result of a rich and varied university experience is just as important as a paper qualification, perhaps more so.

It is important that my last statement is seen in context. I am not suggesting that the university curriculum should ignore the students' potential employability, and it is also important that emergent artists working in participatory settings learn the skills and practical techniques that ensure high quality work on a day-to-day level. But I am also suggesting that good practice is built on a deeper, conceptual understanding of the arts and participatory practices, and that it is this depth of learning that will continue to inform artists' work over time. Ken Robinson is fond of saying that the world is changing at such a rapid rate that it is impossible to imagine what it will be like when young people reach middle-age, with the consequence that we are educating them for a world we can't imagine. We need to design degree courses that are sufficiently flexible to allow conversations to change and change again, and enabling students to address conceptual questions about space, time, participation, community, learning and creativity (amongst others) that are both integral to understanding artistic practice and raised by working in participatory settings. They will benefit from learning about different artistic movements and practices, and then having the courage to break from tradition. The challenge for universities is, therefore, to design curriculum structures that are flexible enough to be responsive to change and yet provide depth of learning that endures beyond graduates' first job. Universities

can be lumbering institutions, and degree programmes newly validated in 2013 may well be expected to last until 2020 and beyond. So what skills will new graduates need to work as artists in participatory settings in 2023? What further challenges will they have faced by 2035, when today's first year undergraduates turn 40? The challenge for the cultural sector is to work with universities to address these questions and, in turn, be clear about what they can bring to this process. This requires cross-sector collaboration; emergent practitioners undoubtedly benefit from working alongside experienced artists, witnessing how they negotiate the specifics of context and setting, how they might adapt to work creatively with multiple agencies, how cultural policy is translated into practice. This takes time, and time costs.

Funding has affected a paradigm shift in universities about the impact of research. The AHRC has funded knowledge exchange programmes between different sectors, and all grant applications are now expected to demonstrate pathways to impact. This spirit of collaboration and cross-sector dialogue has not been similarly driven by funders in respect of university teaching. Some charitable trusts will fund placement programmes in universities for artists working in participatory settings, but only in HE institutions that were once primarily conservatoires, with the iniquitous consequence that students studying for a similar degree at the same university, with comparable student fees, are eligible to different levels of financial support. Universities can and do fund courses with a level of placement involved; I am not alone in teaching courses where undergraduate students work alongside me in participatory settings, leading arts projects in schools, hospitals, care settings for the elderly and so on. But as students progress, those with a particular interest in participatory arts also benefit from working more intensively with experienced practitioners in the cultural sector and developing networks that will help them to get work. Yet in these times of austerity and cuts in the arts, it is entirely understandable that time spent with students needs to be accounted, and it is testament to the generosity and far-sightedness of many practitioners and cultural organisations that there are some excellent examples of good practice where students are supported and valued on placements. But times are tough, and I have also heard senior staff in leading theatres say that if MA students on placement can lead workshops in participatory settings they will no longer need to pay artists. Shocking though this sounds, there is rarely an obligation for subsidised or charitably funded creative learning programmes to support or mentor emergent artists. My suggestion is that sustaining high quality arts practice over the long term requires a change in thinking from funders as well as universities and arts organisations, recognising that small amounts of money can make a big difference to the quality of student experience in participatory settings. We need a clear understanding of what different partners across the educational, cultural and charitable sectors might bring to this process economically, conceptually and practically, and this is another reason why *ArtWorks* has such powerful potential.

I began this provocation by invoking a redemption narrative about the power of the arts to affect social change, recounted by Henrietta Barnett over 130 years ago. But research has moved on, and we can improve on her partisan observations. There is a difference between cutting-edge research and successful advocacy, and although advocacy has an important place in persuading funders and the wider public that money has been well spent, robust research will question assumptions, analyse narratives and interrogate established

perceptions. It is interesting in this context that Barnett's stories of transformation are recycled in reports of participatory arts projects today, sometimes told as testimony from grateful participants, invoked in decontextualised quotations or depicted in glossy photographs. As centres of research, universities can assist by bringing rigour to this process, observing practice from multiple points of view, asking tough questions, bringing new conceptual paradigms to interpret practice. Participatory arts have a long and radical history, where visions of utopia are balanced with a practical and pragmatic understanding of how to work successfully in complex environments. I would hope that all artists working in participatory settings – whether university educated or not – are motivated by making a difference to the world. My suggestion is that cross-sector collaboration is needed to support a new generation of artists who follow this tradition, who are developing new aesthetic vocabularies and new forms of participation that are responsive to twenty-first century circumstances. As such, any suggestion that artists should simply acquire a measurable 'skill-set' that will service the demands of today's market-place not only profoundly misunderstands the history and value of participatory arts, but it is an approach that will also radically reduce its quality. Artists working in participatory settings have always sought change, interrogated artistic convention, questioned social orthodoxies and challenged injustice. If this important aspect of our cultural landscape is to survive and flourish, it will be sustained by artists who not only understand the knowledge and skills they bring to each setting, but use their creativity to re-imagine and re-shape the world as they would like it to be.

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ⁱ Barnett, Samuel and Barnett, Henrietta (1915)*Practicable Socialism* London: Longmans

ⁱⁱ www.airproject.qmul.ac.uk accessed 28.1.2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Jackson, Shannon. (2011) *Social Works: performing art, supporting publics* London: Routledge

^{iv} Mary Beard, *Are Students' Getting their Money's Worth?* A Point of View, BBC Radio 4. 30.11.2012.
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01p0vw6. accessed 29.12.12

^v Consilium Research & Consultancy (2012) *Mapping the Terrain: Higher Education and Further Education: Supporting Artists to work in Participatory Settings* (unpublished report)