
Critical Conversations

Artists' reflections on quality in participatory arts practice

Toby Lowe, Helix Arts for ArtWorks
North East – September 2014

Contents

1. Summary	4
2. Background: ArtWorks North East	7
3. Introduction	7
4. Format of Critical Conversations	8
5. What did the Critical Conversations reveal?	8
5.1 What principles and values underpin artists' practice?	9
5.1.1 Responding to context	9
5.1.2 Relationships with people	9
5.1.3 Dialogic practice.....	10
5.1.4 Responding to 'Universal Themes'	10
5.1.5 Social change?.....	10
5.1.6 Changing the world of the arts	11
5.2 Creating the space for participatory art: The context which supports the making of good participatory art work.....	12
5.2.1 Role of commissioners	12
5.2.2 The Role of intermediary organisations	13
5.3 The conditions that make good participatory art possible	13
5.3.1 Understanding the detail of the context in which the work is taking place.....	13
5.3.2 Participant 'ownership' vs artist 'ownership'	13
5.3.3 Time to develop meaningful relationships with participants.....	14
5.3.4 Access to good materials and equipment	14
5.3.5 Having the right artists	15
5.3.6 Participants having the right technical skills	15
5.3.7 Provide Progression routes	15
5.4 Relationships with participants	15
4.4.1 Who are participants? What does it mean to be a participant? What roles are expected of them?	15
5.4.2 Ethics of relationship with participants.....	16
5.5 Working with different types of participant	17
5.6 Group dynamics.....	17
5.7 The role(s) of the artist	18
5.7.1 Directorial vs co-production approaches	19

5.7.2 The visibility of the artist.....	21
5.7.3 Authorship, ownership and consent	22
5.7.4 Conceptual clarity and drive for rigour	23
5.7.5 What the role of the artist isn't	24
5.8 Relationship to audience.....	24
5.8.1 Have you thought about audience from the beginning? What do they want/need?	24
5.8.2 The importance of dialogue with audiences	24
5.8.3 Challenge audiences.....	25
5.9 Process/product	25
5.10 Markers of quality.....	26
5.10.1 Markers displayed by artists.....	26
5.10.2 Markers in the group dynamics	28
5.10.3 Markers in work that is shown	29
5.10.4 Markers displayed by audiences.....	29
5.11 Artists' practice: What has worked well?.....	30
5.11.1 The process of relationship building	30
5.11.2 You Don't Have to Know Everything – The Group Has Collective Knowledge.....	34
5.11.3 Expose participants to work that you think is good:.....	34
5.11.4 Provide critical feedback and encourage critical reflection on work made	35
5.11.5 Everyone takes part	36
5.11.6 Failure is Good, and Persistence is Crucial	36
5.11.7 Make a Plan – Then Abandon It.....	36
5.11.8 Enable people to create new identities for themselves.....	37
5.11.9 Don't assume you know the context or group because you have done similar work previously – every group is different	37
5.11.10 Use the same equipment as participants.....	37
5.11.11 Celebrate your achievements, but watch your ego	37
5.11.12 Personalise the space you're working in.....	38
5.11.13 Responding to cultural sensitivities	38
5.11.14 Don't go with the first good idea	38
5.11.15 How much do participants need to know about the whole project/big idea?.....	38
5.12 Practice questions:.....	39
5.12.1 When should an artist let go? When should they intervene?	39
5.12.2 How much push is too much push?	39

5.12.3 What do audiences expect of participatory work?	39
5.12.4 Consent and censorship:	39
6. Discussion.....	41
6.1 Creating the Conditions for Quality in Participatory Art.....	41
6.2 Expertise, Professionalism and Not Knowing.....	41
6.3 Process and Product	42
6.4 Structure, Fluidity and Contradiction.....	42
6.5 A Spectrum of Participatory Practice: Roles, Authorship/Ownership & Ethics.....	42
6.6 Challenge and Intervention	44
7. What Next?	45
Appendix 1: Timeline of Critical Conversations	46
Appendix 2: Critical Conversation Artist Brief.....	47

1. Summary

What do artists who work in the field of participatory arts (and those with whom they work) say when given the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice? What questions are important to them? What answers do people find to the questions that are raised?

For the first time, the organisations who make up the Artworks North East programme have undertaken a series of sessions for artists which attempt to answer these questions and enable artists to reflect on the detail of their participatory practice. This report highlights aspects of those reflections, and attempts to bring them together into themes which draw out those aspects of participatory practice which artists feel are important.

The Conversations explore:

- The theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of participatory practice, which link to relational and dialogical aesthetics.
- The relationship between participatory art and social change – particularly the sense that it can help to achieve social change, but not if it is used as a sticking plaster. It has to be done authentically, and with rigour.
- The conditions required for good participatory work: dialogue with (and challenge to) commissioners, understanding context, time to develop meaningful relationships, access to quality materials and equipment.
- What it means to have relationships with participants:
 - Exploring the distinction between artists and participants inherent in participatory art, others saw the artist's role as helping participants to imagine alternative identities for themselves, others still saw participants as material for artists' work.
 - There was strong agreement about the values which underpin relationships with participants: equality, respect, the importance of not making assumptions, and protecting the vulnerable.
- The roles which artists play when working on participatory projects – from directorial approaches to facilitating the creativity of others. This also exposed different questions which related to the different roles, including questions about the 'ownership' of the work, and how consent is negotiated.
- The importance for artists to understand group dynamics: knowing the 'stage' at which the group is at, understanding when to limit membership, and when to open it up.
- The importance of professionalism and rigour. There was a strong consensus that the artist's role was about bringing rigour, discipline, and professionalism to participatory work.

- The relationship of participatory work to audiences – when is it appropriate to think about audience needs in participatory work, challenging audience expectations of participatory work, and of relationships between artists, participant, and audiences, and between different types of audience.
- Process and product – exploring the idea that all this work is process, even the ‘products’ that are shown to audiences.
- Markers of quality:
 - in artists’ practice: professionalism, radical listening, change in the artist
 - change in group dynamics, and the technical skill-level of participants
 - in the work: in the aesthetic of work produced. In particular, the value of subtlety, nuance, originality and the avoidance of cliché was a strong, common theme.
- What artists feel has worked well in their practice, in terms of:
 - Relationship building: artists reflected on a range of techniques they used to build relationships with people. A key feature of many of these artists’ practice was that they started by listening, understanding and responding to context, rather than by pushing their perspective, and that this starts the relationship on a pathway which enables the artist to convey their passion for their practice.
 - The role of ‘not knowing’: the starting point for many artists was a questioning, non-expert position, which treated the participants themselves (and their wider context) as the source of expertise in the work.
 - Exposing participants to excellence, and engaging them in critical reflection. There was a strong sense from artists that involving participants in a process of critical reflection about the work was a key factor in producing strong work.
 - Planning, and responding to failure and change. Participatory practice is both highly structured (with both individual workshop plans and plans for a whole programme of workshops) and highly fluid – requiring artists to respond creatively to ‘failure’ (which often brings exciting new possibilities) and to other forms of change. This is just one of a number of contradictions which the artist is required to hold, and deal with.
 - Enabling people to escape previously defined identities.
 - A number of tips and tricks which kept artists’ creativity-levels, and that of the participants, high. These included: personalising space, managing egos, and celebrating small achievements.
 - Artists discussed how to recognise the ‘ignition point’ of participatory projects, that moment when the core idea of the work appears.
 - When to involve participants in the planning of projects

- The unresolved challenges that artists face: when, and how much to push participants, when to intervene, and questions of the relationship between consent and censorship.

The report concludes by discussing a small number of the issues and ideas raised in further detail, exploring what these mean for further critical reflection on this work, and how further critical reflection can be taken forward in the future.

2. Background: ArtWorks North East

Artworks North East is the pathfinder project in North East England for the Artworks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings programme. This Paul Hamlyn Special Initiative, with additional funding and support from the Arts & Humanities Research Council, Creativity Culture and Education (supported by Arts Council England), and the Cultural Leadership Programme, is a workforce development scheme that seeks to meet the needs of artists at different stages of their careers – from the aspiring young artist embarking on training, to experienced practitioners who wish to progress their output. It is seeking to build on good practice to enhance the existing development infrastructure.

The Artworks North East partnership comprised: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Equal Arts, Helix Arts, Live Theatre, National Glass Centre, New Writing North, Regional Youth Work Unit, The Sage Gateshead, and Tyneside Cinema.

3. Introduction

What do artists who work in the field of participatory arts¹ (and those with whom they work) say when given the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice? What questions are important to them? What answers do people find to the questions that are raised?

The purpose of the Critical Conversations series of discussion events was to give artists in this field the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice (a list of the Critical Conversation events is given at Appendix 1). And by recording each of these sessions, we hoped to create learning materials for other artists, and the ability to analyse what common themes, issues and ideas emerged from those discussions.

The purpose of this report is to attempt that analysis. Looked at from one perspective, it is a poor way to attempt to find the meaning and sense in the Critical Conversations. Attending the events, and watching and listening to each of the recordings, reveals the incredible depth and richness of those conversations. From this perspective, the only true way to appreciate and make sense of them is to immerse oneself in that detail – to watch and listen to them all. They are an incredible resource.

However, given that most people will not have the time to engage with all the footage – it adds up to over 24 hours of material, this report attempts to give a flavour of the themes and ideas which emerged.

¹ Participatory arts is defined as follows: Participatory Art involves an artist working with at least one other person to take part in a process that the artist facilitates. This definition comes from a two-day workshop convened by the artist Jane Dudman as part of her PhD research on participatory practice at Newcastle University in 2011.

4. Format of Critical Conversations

The Critical Conversation format was designed to help artists who work in the field of participatory arts to dig into the detail of their practice (and the decisions that they make) and reveal that to others, in order to make it the subject of critical reflection.

The idea was to provide a structure for discussion which enables artists to move beyond the presentation of projects which many of us will be familiar: 'this happened, and then this happened, and we ended up producing this'.

The Critical Conversations were structured as follows:

- One or more artists were selected by the host organisation to present their practice. Organisations were free to select whichever artists they wished. Some organisations chose to have a single artist present. Others chose to have two or three artists present, in order to contrast different practices.
- The artist was given a set of provocation questions (see Appendix 2) and asked to prepare a presentation which responded to those they found interesting.
- The artist could use any materials that they chose to illustrate the points that they wanted to make
- An audience was invited to take part in a discussion with the artist. Audiences were primarily made up of other artists, and arts professionals, but also included other people whose practice connected with participatory arts (e.g. staff from organisations who have hosted participatory projects) and people with a general interest in arts practice.
- Following the presentation, there was a Chaired discussion with the audience. Some of the Chairs encouraged the audience to respond to the provocation questions, others encouraged the audience to explore whatever issues arose for them from the presentation.

5. What did the Critical Conversations reveal?

The following represents the content of both the presentations given artists, and the discussion with the audience that resulted.

This report attempts to categorise the responses under a number of themes. This represents one reading of those conversations. Others would undoubtedly categorise the material differently.

Some of the quotes are used under more than one heading, as the fluid nature of Conversations meant that they were referencing more than one idea.

Each quote is referenced to a particular Critical Conversation (e.g. CC1, CC2 etc). The list of these Conversations, together with a key identifying the artists and organisations who presented at, and hosted, each Conversation, is given in Appendix 1. However, quotes are taken from audience discussion, as well as each artist's presentation and discussion, and so the quotes are not necessarily the voice of each of the artists listed there.

5.1 What principles and values underpin artists' practice?

This section covers a range of discussion about why artists do this work, and the values that they feel underpin their different approaches.

5.1.1 Responding to context

"We have to be site oriented" (CC2)

"All of our work grows out of a response to context. Spending time in a particular place. Ideas are drawn from that environment." (CC6)

"Different spaces are still something that thrills, inspires and delights me. The opportunity to work in different spaces, and places, whether that is on the beautiful spaces of Northern Stage, or another space entirely, internationally, or a small community space, or a large scale theatre." (CC11)

This value was expressed by several artists who felt that their work was intrinsically bound up with the context in which it was made. It expresses the idea that participatory work is necessarily relational – it responds to "the human geography" (CC6) of where it is made.

5.1.2 Relationships with people

More than simply responding to places, all of the artists highlighted that their participatory arts approach responds to the people who take part.

"We need members of the public - we can't make our work without the public. We need that interaction. There's a danger in our work that it's just for us. And we need to look hard at what the intention and meaning is for those taking part" (CC2)

"whatever the length of engagement with someone, you have to be able to build relationships." (CC2).

"I like to work with people. It's inherent in the way I like to work." (CC4)

In some respects, many of the artists' conversations were exemplars of Bourriaud's idea of Relational Aesthetics²:

"Now when those young people go back to that supermarket, I hope they have a different relationship with those people." (CC4)

"It's all about those relationships and where they take us." (CC6)

"I like connecting directly with people. I like being able to draw people into things I believe in. Drawing on hopeful histories and rekindling them in the present. Can people join in with that,

² Bourriaud, Nicolas (1998), *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presse Du Reel

and make it better? Make that piece of work better with their energy. I've always naturally drawn people into projects. I'm not very good at making things on my own." (CC6)

5.1.3 Dialogic practice

Alongside the idea that relationships with people are fundamental to their practice, many of the artists expressed the idea that creating opportunities for new forms of dialogue between people, is also crucial.

"I'm trying to create a dialogue between participants, performers and audience. I'm trying to expose the different roles. To get people to speak in their own voices, and for audiences to hear that. The aim is continuing dialogue." (CC2)

"The work rests on dialogue and mutual learning – the artist putting themselves in the position of co-learner. Let's try this together." (CC8)

"This comes from a dialogical perspective - starting from where people are is the starting point for dialogue." (CC8)

Many artists also spoke of the desire to build dialogue between different people who experience work in different ways: participants, performers and audiences:

"Partly the project is a reaction to traditional models of touring theatre - where you spend a couple of nights in each place, but never get to dialogue with that place and those people." (CC6)

As a consequence, Grant Kester's dialogical aesthetics is also a useful starting point for understanding this work.³

5.1.4 Responding to 'Universal Themes'

One artist highlighted that the content of the dialogue that she was particularly interested in was that which related to themes that are common to all people.

"We use universal themes - themes that are meaningful to life. What does loss mean? What does isolation mean? Kissing?" (CC2).

5.1.5 Social change?

The relationship between participatory arts practice and achieving social change was much discussed across the Conversations.

"The artist is a protagonist creating dialogue between people, and this is relevant to social cohesion." (CC2)

³ Kester, Grant (2004), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press.

“Work needn’t resolve [social] questions: it can ask questions, create unresolved dissonances.” (CC2)

“Is participatory arts about solving social issues? No, but yes. It’s about giving people a voice, it’s about fun, it’s all of those things. It can’t be sold as a ‘sticking plaster’. It can solve social issues, but it can’t do that in six weeks, and not for every participant. It’s to go in and do creative things with creative young minds. By doing that, certain social issues will disappear.” (CC7).

“How did you feel about being asked to increase the literacy of the children? Artists shouldn’t be used as a sticking plaster for solving problems. But you can view these kind of requests as a creative challenge as an artist. So, I thought about my own experience of hating writing at school. Arts projects give people space to learn in different ways.” (CC9)

In some conversations, ideas about social change were expressed in different ways:

“There are underlying human principles that are core: for example it’s about collaboration, rather than competition. Not everything is about winning. Humans supporting one another, working together for a greater cause. Group achievement is key.” (CC8)

The idea that artists were helping people to find their voice in society was another powerful driver for many of the artists:

“Giving people a voice is important. This film gives young people a voice for their lives.” (CC7)

“There are a couple of things that guide my work and my practice. One is Article 19 - that relates to the Bill of Human Rights - We have the right to express ourselves freely. The second is Article 27 - which is about the right to make, create work and to own that work.” (CC11)

For some artists, the purpose of their work was to ask questions about the relationship between art and society: can art be ‘useful’?

“We made a work – a sci-fi hot tub, for Kielder forest. So, we got people to use the hot tub and then use medical research techniques to see if it had curative powers. We wanted to ask, ‘can we use participatory practice to interrogate the ‘usefulness’ of the artwork?’” (CC6)

5.1.6 Changing the world of the arts

Rather than solve what are commonly thought of as ‘social issues’, some artists were explicitly seeking to change the artworld:

“The show is an intervention to a theatre. Can a theatre building be porous? How can different people take ownership of those spaces?” (CC6)

5.2 Creating the space for participatory art: The context which supports the making of good participatory art work

Many of the artists talked about the importance of creating the right context in which they could work well. This is not surprising, given the situated, relational and dialogical nature of the practice described above. The Conversations explored different roles that could be played to create that context:

5.2.1 Role of commissioners

The importance of having good commissioners was raised in some of the conversations. Conversations highlighted that commissioners needed to walk a fine line between knowing what they wanted from a commission, and letting go enough so that they do not try to specify particular outcomes.

“Working with vague parameters can be quite stressful - but not knowing the answer was great. It resulted in creative problem solving: taking a participatory approach to teasing out what is special about a place.” (CC9)

One of the discussions suggested that a way to successfully manage this balancing act for commissioners was to produce an interesting theme for the project, which the artist could then interpret and run with. This conversation highlighted that having an interesting theme was a crucial success factor for producing good work:

“I was amazed that people were prepared to do it. But it was because the subject was amazing. An expansive, exciting theme.” (CC5)

Another way which was highlighted as a mechanism by which commissioners could ensure that there was sufficient freedom for artists to operate and produce good work was use of open briefs:

“We were working to an open brief. That was the joy of this work.” (CC2)

The discussions also highlighted that artists can negotiate with, and if necessary, challenge commissioners about the brief:

“Make sure you challenge the brief as an artist - use your experience to challenge the brief.” (CC9)

“Artists need to flag up the things they are interested in - negotiate with host/commissioners/space makers. They need to balance (manage) the different outcomes/expectations that people want.” (CC2)

“Have the courage to challenge the ideas you don’t think will work - from a commissioner. People are hiring you for your expertise.” (CC9)

5.2.2 The Role of intermediary organisations

Some of the Conversations highlighted that intermediary organisations were helpful in creating effective space for participatory art, because they were able to manage relationships and expectations between funder and artists:

“Intermediary organisations - like public art people - are important in brokering relationships and on-going conversation with other commissioners.” (CC9)

“You need to be able to find the right people within those [host] organisations. Who is willing to go the extra mile for those participants? You need to continue that communication and collaboration throughout and beyond the project. It’s about relationship development and the important point of contact.” (CC7)

5.3 The conditions that make good participatory art possible

The artists in many of the conversations also began to drill down into the particular features of the space for participatory arts that made good work possible:

5.3.1 Understanding the detail of the context in which the work is taking place

Artists talked about the value of preparation and research in to understand the context of the work, and the particular strengths and needs of the particular group of participants:

“That person [the link worker in the host organisation] gives us a knowledge of the group, and that group dynamic. They’ll arrange for workshops to be held. We’re piggy-backing on the trust they have within that organisation. They will tell us about the problems of engagement that those young people will face: e.g. travel, finance, language.” (CC7)

“It is very important to understand the people you’re working with – their support needs, attention spans, group dynamic” (CC10)

5.3.2 Participant ‘ownership’ vs artist ‘ownership’

One feature of the space which some artists found extremely important, but which didn’t fit with other practice at all, was the degree of participant ownership and control of that space. ‘Ownership’, in this context seemed to mean how participants could exercise choice about creative activities.

“The young people decided on the theme and content for the film - the script development workshops generated five different ideas. The young people voted on them and chose. It was their film...It’s what any artist should do - facilitate the creativity of the participants, particularly when working with young people - so they have a real investment and ownership of their product.” (CC7)

This issue is explored further in section 4.7.

5.3.3 Time to develop meaningful relationships with participants

One key feature of the context for artists to work within was the potential for them to form meaningful relationships with participants. And the key factor in determining that was length of time that artists had to undertake the work:

“Length of time to build relationships is crucial. Longer term relationships are more meaningful. Shorter ones are more arbitrary.” (CC2)

“I sometimes have a dilemma about working with someone very quickly. But where I do it, I have to be honest about that. I need you to...” (CC2)

“Normally, it takes me between one month and six weeks to “break a group”: to establish a relationship with the young people, and help them to establish ownership of the project. To help them get over the boundaries that they put up to forming new relationships.” (CC10)

“As artists we go in and give our time and make a connection. It has to be regular, and it has to be over a long term period. Particularly, if you’re working with hard to reach groups, if you leave after 6-8 weeks, it’s almost like abandonment.” (CC7)

“Are short term projects invalid? No.... But there has to be an awareness and realism that real change needs long term processes. Short-term projects can go some way to developing skills, empowering young people, self-esteem etc.” (CC7)

“Theatre is not a quick hit. With lots of participants with a range of abilities, you can’t go in and have them being brilliant in an hour. You can, but can they bring that back, when they need it?” (CC11)

5.3.4 Access to good materials and equipment

Alongside, time for artists to think and reflect, access to decent equipment and materials was also seen to be an important feature of the space required to produce good work:

“Working in a participatory way can produce really good results - if there is space to develop, if you’re working with nice materials, if there’s time to think. This is what enables you to come up with amazing work, and enable people to produce things they didn’t think they could achieve.” (CC9)

“I had to check that people had access to broadcast quality equipment. They had to do it properly. Otherwise it just sounds rubbish. It has to be professional.” (CC5)

“It was important that the project had professional development element planned in for me. I explored how people can have a professional photography experience without a darkroom, using cheap equipment. I was exploring use of space – for example, how do you have a darkroom in places with emergency lighting?” (CC10)

5.3.5 Having the right artists

Some Conversations highlighted the importance of having experienced artists who can make good “on the spot” decisions, and who have the courage to be flexible in relation to the plans that they have made. (CC7).

This issue also brought up discussion of payment for artists: if projects need experienced practitioners, they need to pay proper rates to attract those artists, and pay them to be involved for the whole duration of the work:

“How does a long-term relationship match up to funding reality? Does this mean artists should work for free? No. Artists need to be paid. At the moment, I’m in a privileged position because I’m able to be paid for that time. At the planning stage – people need to apply for 3 or 4 years funding. You need to plan for long term relationship at the outset.” (CC7)

5.3.6 Participants having the right technical skills

For some types of participatory practice and work, it is important that the participants who are recruited have a certain level of technical skill:

“I didn’t have to advise [participants] that much on technical aspects, because a lot of people do radio now. I only asked people who I thought would deliver in a professional manner.” (CC5)

5.3.7 Provide Progression routes

“You need to think about progression from the start – particularly with short term work. Make sure you’re not making work, and then just leaving. You can provide potential progression pathways through collaboration. But you need to make that real for people: with handholding, bus fares etc.” (CC7)

5.4 Relationships with participants

As can be imagined, the Conversations explored the relationship between artist and participants, and the relationship between participants, in great depth. One of the key points which emerged across the range of conversations was the variety in how artists conceived of their relationship with participants.

4.4.1 Who are participants? What does it mean to be a participant? What roles are expected of them?

One key area of exploration was challenging simple notions of who the participants in a project are, and what expectations are made of them.

“Skimstone doesn’t call them participants, we call them ‘young artists’. They see us working alongside them. We’re sharing working together in a professional working studio. We’re not working in community settings; they’re working in Skimstone’s artist studio. They are expected

to make work with the same professionalism as others. Don't label people as 'someone with a mental health problem' - they're artists - and the challenge to them is 'you're expected to make a piece of work in the same way we are'." (CC2)

"We challenge the way that society labels people. We create a studio practice about equality." (CC2)

"Often the people taking part in the project don't particularly want to be the people they are when they come into the room. The young people don't want to be thought of as young people in care. It might be a group of very elderly people who don't want to be thought of as a resident of a care home. It's about creating individuality again. And a way of finding a way to something else." (CC4)

"The young people performed in public spaces. And invited people from the street to their performances. Suddenly they were participating in the street. And so was everyone else who was involved too. Now the participants weren't just 20 young people, they were also the street cleaner, the supermarket workers etc." (CC4)

"Treat the participants as the experts in that field. Don't say: I know how to create some good art, and I'm going to show you. Instead ask: 'how can you help me to make something interesting?'" (CC9)

"Our practice comes out of sculpture and performance. It tries to change the co-ordinates of a space. It asks them [participants] to imagine a different world, then interact with that different world." (CC6)

"When the artist performs the work, it means you can engage with people who can't spend much time with the project. The artist can write something with people in a short amount of time, and they can still 'take part'." (CC6)

5.4.2 Ethics of relationship with participants

In addition to strategies for engagement and relationship building, artists also talked about the ethics which underpin that relationship:

Respect the courage of participants for sharing their stories with you:

"The stories they [participants] tell have often been untold. They have been fragile and needed courage to express. The moments they have shared with people have been joyful, moving, difficult, unimagined and unexpected." (CC4)

Don't prejudge participants:

"You can never tell who is going to be interested in what. We need to be open, and to make as few pre-judgements as possible. We partly do this by being in a place a while, so people can take their time to work out if they want to be involved" (CC6)

Protect the vulnerable, but enable their creativity:

“How do you handle dilemma of externalising life stories - this isn't always positive for people? Fictionalising helps. Young people didn't want to talk about their life stories, they wanted to be creative. We want to be recognised for our creativity, not for our harrowing stories. The process of 'revealing' can be dangerous for a young person. That's why it's important to do follow up work with people – for example, making a follow up film. It was screened just for that group. Young People involved in the film said they only wanted the film to be shown to themselves and their community.” (CC7)

Equality:

“If you're facilitating a workshop, you're learning from the group you're facilitating. That's a crucial difference between teaching and facilitating in participatory practice. And learning from others means there's level of equality between participant and artist.” (CC8)

5.5 Working with different types of participant

Artists in the Conversations explored the differences between different types of participants, and the different motivations for engagement that different participants bring to projects.

“What's the difference between working with young people and adults? Often adults have got themselves out of the idea of learning and not knowing. For an adult to learn they must admit not knowing, and being prepared to make mistakes.” (CC8)

“How do you get adults into a situation where they can feel like they have fun? There is often a reluctance for adults to engage with 'ice-breaker' exercises - because people are often intimidated by that. I find that pieces of minimalist music help as ice breakers for adults.” (CC8)

“Playfulness - children instinctively do this. It's often trained out of adults.” (CC8)

“Adults often need to establish hierarchy, and their position within a workshop and within a space.” (CC8)

“How do you balance people's different desire/motivations to engage? i.e. some come for the social aspect of being in a group, some want to make something that is of quality in that artform. How can you help people to put the time in that is needed to address the technical aspects of quality? It should be ok for people to drop out of a group because the group wants to move onto more difficult work. Because there will be other groups for the people who want to do something different?” (CC8)

“But people also drop out of projects because they're not being pushed, as well as because it's too difficult.” (CC8)

5.6 Group dynamics

Many of the artist Conversations highlighted the importance of artists understanding both the theory and practice of group dynamics – how groups function and evolve.

“It helped me to be trained in ‘transactional analyses’ and Tuckman’s model of group dynamics - storming, norming, performing etc. Every group goes through a storming process.” (CC8)

“You need to know who gets on with who in the group.” (CC10)

Some of the conversations explored the question of when it is appropriate to close down a group to new participants:

“At some point, you have to shut down accessibility - you have to close a project down - because that’s what’s needed for that group to succeed - because that’s the journey that the group have gone on.” (CC8)

“The addition of new young people [half way through the project] further disrupted and changed the group dynamic.” (CC10)

However, other artists felt that it was important to keep groups open:

“As the process moves forward you end up with a nucleus, and a wider circle of people. You need to keep the group open, so that people can dip in and out.” (CC7)

Some artists discussed the conditions under which it was appropriate to exclude people from sessions or groups:

“The Dynamix sessions initially went well, but then they were disrupted - and it meant that some young people had to be excluded from the project - because they were exhibiting behaviour that was dangerous to themselves and others. Some young people had to be excluded because of racist behaviour to Dynamix staff. This was challenging for me because I’ve never before had to exclude a young person from any project in 8 years of practice.” (CC10)

Artists also referenced the idea that experience enabled them to make judgements about the levels of participation and engagement in the group that participants displayed:

“It’s all to do with attendance - but you can’t prejudge that. Sometimes people couldn’t come because they’d been out all night. Sometimes it was for other reasons – like, “I need to go to London to see my solicitor about my asylum appeal.” As a practitioner you need to make a judgement on that. You need to create a structure that works for all the participants, so that people are able to engage as best as they are able. (CC7)

5.7 The role(s) of the artist

There was significant discussion concerning the roles that artists play in participatory work. Again, the difference of views that artists expressed was significant. It may be helpful to understand this difference by using the spectrum of participatory practice outlined in the discussion in Section 5.

5.7.1 Directorial vs co-production approaches

One of the most striking practice differences between artists that emerged from the Conversations was the difference between artists who took a strong authorial or directorial role in the production of work, and those who viewed their role as either the co-production of work with participants, or the facilitation of their creative activity. This issue also goes to the heart of questions of ownership and control. Whose work is it? And who gets to make the ultimate choices about it?

The artist as director

"I see the artist as a benevolent dictator. But you need to make that transparent to people." (CC6)

"We keep a strong directorial hand on the reins. We like to create a space." (CC6)

"We approach making work with a clear visual aesthetic, but then ask a question within that. The question is the invitation to engage - participants are exploring that question with us." (CC6).

"The Bank of Reason project is less controllable. The work is formed by the people who are there. I found that terrifying and stressful. I just don't know what this is going to be like. I've invited these people to talk - it could be really bad! The work was formed by the content other people brought. The walks... what did they bring to the conversation? It felt like a research project that didn't have an end - it didn't look really polished." (CC6)

"I wanted to keep some control - because I wanted to be able to reject ideas that weren't interesting." (CC5)

"Whose work is it? This work is theirs. They own the essence of what they did. A collaborator and a participant, in this sense, is the same thing. They're collaborating to make a whole - individual participation in a collective effort. I sew it together. Are you artist or curator? I think an artist is a curator. An artist makes decisions of curation all the time. I made the project." (CC5)

"If you just show up and meet people and try to make work from that, you have to be more of a dictator to make something happen. Because you're quite restricted by who shows up, what they're able to do, what time they can give." (CC6)

"We have a predatory form of participatory practice. People are material for our work." (CC2)

Artists who work in this way tended to see their role as engaging people in a process of making work that would be interesting and exciting to audiences. Their role, in this sense, seems to be to mould people's stories into work for audiences.

"We say we never go into a school, college or university with a script. We always try to find that script from the participants in the room. That may change, and perhaps it needs to change at some point. But I think if you can engage people at a level of their own understanding, I think it enriches the work a whole lot more. And then you can theatricalise that out of it and turn it into something different, something more immediate and more exciting for an audience to come

and see. We do tend to work in a way that is about unearthing stories from different people, and finding a way for those stories to speak to each other and putting them on one of our stages.” (CC11)

Artists facilitating the creativity of others

At the other end of this spectrum are artists who see their role as facilitating the creativity of others:

“My role is to create environment of experimentation. To inspire enthuse, facilitate – in both creative and technical issues. I create an atmosphere where risks can be taken.” (CC10)

“Young people were the creators and audiences for the work. We were the facilitators, rather than imposing a practice on young people.” (CC7)

“It’s what any artist should do - facilitate the creativity of the participants” (CC7)

“The participants became artists in their own right. We worked with digital cameras, and with sound. At the end of each session we would analyse what images worked, and what didn’t. We discussed and analysed about where the fish came from, and the types of fish. We placed fish on plates, to think about the fact that we’re consumers of fish.

Each work the participants would say what they wanted to explore. We began to capture their thoughts.” (CC2)

These perspectives strongly connect with the idea that some artists treat participants as experts, which we saw raised in an earlier section.

Artist as educator

Some artists used the language of education and learning to describe their role.

“In my practice, working with participants, it’s about process. I, as well as being a director and an artist, I also feel I have to be an educator. And where I educate from, is from the notion of myself as an artist. The notion of what I believe to be my core values and my ethos as an artist. And they’re pretty basic: be honest, be imaginative, be on time.” (CC11)

“I don’t play brass, but I can teach it really well to beginners, because I can deconstruct the learning, because it’s happening straight away, and happening for me. There’s a skill in being able to play an instrument really well, and still being able to remember what it was like to be a beginner” (CC8)

The discussions about participatory practice as ‘education’ also questioned the didactic understanding of education that is prevalent:

“Why doesn’t this happen more in schools? Why isn’t this standard practice across education?” (CC8)

“Arts learning is a collaborative process - everybody is learning. Link back to Paulo Friere: remove boundaries between students and teachers. Letting go of the leadership role so that you can learn - as a participatory artist... Links to idea of arts process as a process of asking questions - artist saying, ‘Why not? Let’s try your idea. I don’t know where it will take us!’ (CC8)

“People can learn without being ‘taught’.” (CC8)

Co-design

There is interesting space between these roles, in which artists take a co-design position. This means that artists either strongly set the parameters for the creative input of participants, or restrict that creative input to a particular phase of the project:

“I take the principles of computer co-design. I ask participants what they want, then I make it.” (CC4)

“Having tight control of some aspects - e.g. lighting design, set - means you can let go with others: we can go into a shopping centre and just see who we meet, and see where that takes us. In Glorious we have a structure and an aesthetic that we impose, but that somehow allows us to have people do what they want, because it’s very clear what’s available for that to happen.” (CC6)

“What role do participants play in designing the creative vision for projects? Is this different for music, because of the need for technical skills?: A conflict for me has been between maintaining the traditions of an instrument, and developing new practice. Sometimes, I’ll teach people a particular rhythm pattern. Sometimes, I’ll say let’s explore the instrument. Take steel pans - there’s one correct way to play a steel pan - otherwise you’ll damage them. But other times it’s possible to experiment more.” (CC8)

“It was interesting to ask other artists to be involved in the work. I wanted to both shape, but be hands off. But I also wanted to input with the way I’d been thinking about things, because I’d been immersed in it for two or three months. It was interesting to see how other people were with me when I was asking them to be involved: I didn’t want to manipulate people, but I also wanted to engage with them.” (CC5)

5.7.2 The visibility of the artist

In some respects, the conversations about the role of the artist were mirrored about how visible the artist should be in the performance of the work, and how their choices are represented in that work. Those artists who tended to have more of an authorial or directorial role were concerned to make that role, and their choices, visible:

“With this kind of work, there is always an artist making decisions. But how much do you hide that? If people go on stage to present what they’ve made, it still comes from a process that I’ve made. If you hide that, is it any more honest?” (CC6)

“What do we demand of work that we see as participatory? Is the main purpose for us to feel good about the process of people telling their stories on stage? Or is there something more complicated happening? Yes... One of those things is that people are performing on stage for the first time. Should we be hiding things? i.e. the knottiness of participation. How much of the participatory experience should we show? That is a crucial artistic decision.” (CC6)

"I stand on stage throughout - my body is a continuous presence. A body as a constant within shifting landscape of stage." (CC6)

Those artists who take a co-production approach had a different set of concerns. They were worried that their choices may be too much in the foreground, or that they will manipulate the creativity of others:

"In performance, I'm trying to disappear, so that the audience doesn't know I'm leading this group – I'm trying to show that the group is leading the group." (CC8)

"How much do you put your creative judgement in? I know of instances where the artist has said something in order to get a particular response from a participant, because the artist thinks that that response will work well in the work. But is that manipulative? Is the answer to involve people in all aspects of decision-making, so that they understand what's going on? Is that manipulation a legitimate intervention for an artist? Yes, it is. Because sometimes the focus on democratic participation ignores the specialist skills that the artist is bringing to that space - and that's a lie too." (CC4)

These discussions also led to conversations about censorship, and the role of the artist in hiding or presenting material made by participants that the artists found to be problematic:

"When I was working on one school, I wouldn't use the Gangnam Style pop song, because it contained lyrics about sexy ladies. And if I use that, I'm saying I condone those lyrics. But, when I was talking to a dancer, she was saying that the young people were able to do an amazing dance piece because they got into that song." (CC8)

"The LMD film troubles me a little bit. It left a slightly bitter taste - how far should we censor their work? If a process is youth-led, what if what they make is offensive or inappropriate? How do you manage that?

If that is their reality - then that's important. They need to have a voice to express their reality. As an artist you can discuss the issues that come up with the group. You need to make that part of the process. Look at reasons behind things. 'Explode' the issues that come up. Provide information to counter myths. But you can only do this with long-term engagement that can begin to break down historical divides. If people only commission short-term work, then they get what they get." (CC7)

5.7.3 Authorship, ownership and consent

This set of ideas also has strong links to the questions raised in Conversations about ownership of the work, both in terms of acknowledging authorship and payment for the work. In particular, those artists who take a more directorial approach ask sets of questions about authorship, payment and consent.

Acknowledging authorship and ownership, and paying people

There were extensive discussions of the responsibilities and duties that exist between artists and participants. In particular, it was felt that it important to acknowledge authorship and

co-authorship, and consequently to think about payment for people's involvement in the process of creative labour:

"As an example, the piece we made last year, for Spring touring, was called Flock... As part of that we worked with a visual artist called Yvette Hawkins. We went out into the region and we connected with young people who had found themselves in the North East, whether through forced migration, or by choice. We worked with women's groups. We worked in refuges. We worked with adults who were recovering from mental health problems. And by bringing Yvette into the mix, by bringing another artform into the mix, and by engaging people in crafting the story of Flock, we couldn't help but acknowledge what we were doing was co-authoring. And there is a responsibility within that....when we start to think about: at what point does that craft become professional? At what point has it tipped into a situation where ought we be contracting and paying? Where is that blur-line? There are times where you can identify it more specifically. We go back to the Rules of Enchantment. We go 'Ok, you're in the room because you want to explore your creativity in a way that is about process'. Fine, I can understand that. There is a mutuality there. But a responsibility backstop is still there with me, or the other artists I'm working with. There's another point where the blur-line becomes tricky. Where you come across a participant, an individual, that perhaps delivers that simple line in a way that is so exquisite, is so charged, that you almost just want to take them and bring them into your rehearsal room and say 'let's make a moment of this, let's progress this'." (CC11)

"If I'm inviting you into a room and paying you, you have the right to a tea-break etc - all the things that come under employment law. But it also means I own what you produce. I have the right to take it and reshape it as I want.

What happens when you invite a group of participants into a room, and you're not paying them? What rights and responsibilities do you have then? How does that matrix shift? It does matter that you're having a good time, that the value that you're being given is in your experience, in the time you're giving up in attendance, and equally, in the material that you generate. I don't own it. Or that I have a completely different moral relationship to how I may edit it or present that material. I personally have a real difficulty with verbatim work... I see some work that hasn't admitted that it's taken words and recontextualised them, and is playing them, and subverting the ownership and political context of them in a different way. Those spaces between how you've been brought into the room, and what is being done with you in the room, and what is the responsibility that is being taken with you in the room... What are your rights? What are your responsibilities? What do you give up?" (CC11)

Consent

"I think consent is interesting. When we are at in particular looking at a point in our process where we're looking at text, language, words; stories that people tell us and how we tell them back. And what they consent for us to share? At what point do we set up that contract? It's a shifting line." (CC11)

5.7.4 Conceptual clarity and drive for rigour

Artists also spoke of their role as being the person responsible for ensuring rigour and conceptual clarity on a project, the person who wrestles with the contradictions of the work, and makes sense of them (CC5):

“As artists, we’ve all gone through the rigour discipline of learning particular skills and techniques? How can we bring others into that world of rigour?” (CC2)

“Although people deviate from the mainstream in so many ways, they have to do it in a ‘straight’ way as well. No sloppiness.” (CC5)

5.7.5 What the role of the artist isn’t

Finally, artists also spoke of their concerns about what their role should not be:

“Be aware of falling into expected behaviour. As artists, sometimes we find ourselves falling into becoming teachers or social workers or counsellors. We shouldn’t be.” (CC4)

5.8 Relationship to audience

Artists talked about the different relationships that participatory work has to the viewing audiences that experience the work.

“Audience is important - because it’s relevant to equality. Can you mix audiences to create dialogue between audiences? The artist is a protagonist to creating dialogue between people, and this is relevant to social cohesion.” (CC2)

5.8.1 Have you thought about audience from the beginning? What do they want/need?

“If you’ve set up the project properly, if everyone understands what they’re doing, then you can be relaxed about the experience of participants. It’s about who has been involved in thinking and deciding about the work - if audiences haven’t been involved - and if the artist hasn’t thought about them, then presenting work to those audiences is risky.” (CC2)

“How to make engaging listening for a radio audience, that’s about the idea of ‘slow as possible’. Something that was listenable and unlistenable. Had to make it engaging but surprising. And measured. It was one contradictory task after another in putting this together” (CC5)

“Thinking about audience: I rotated certain themes when I thought there would be certain types of listeners. So in the morning I had Buddhist texts. Then I went onto ‘straight’ radio. Then I repeated them over various time-zones: where is it most likely that people will be listening? Also – I themed things around the work environment - because a ton of people listen to the radio in cubicles. Night time radio, I tried to make it more ambient. Because people might have had a glass of wine! I tried to make things complement each other. But also I tried to make sure that people had to listen to things that would challenge them. I was trying to programme emotions!” (CC5)

5.8.2 The importance of dialogue with audiences

“At each performance, the audience gave feedback: what they felt, what the themes are, how well was it executed - performance, composition and image.” (CC2)

“When you’re creating a piece of performance, you need time for it to grow. It changes every time. The piece got better through feedback from audiences. Do we allow ourselves this iteration in participatory pieces?” (CC2)

“I want spaces in which my audience is really near. I want to be in and around them. I want to talk to them and touch them.” (CC2)

“We’ve changed the way we present the show to audiences. At the start, we didn’t have any kind of introduction to the show. Now we (all the performers) all go into the foyer before the show to meet the audience. I talk and introduce people, and then everyone goes into the theatre together. That’s something that we’ve learnt as we went along.” (CC6)

“How do you bring a secondary audience into a specific participatory/intersubjective experience?

You have to be honest. I’m trying to create a dialogue between participants/performers and audience. I’m trying to expose the different roles. To get people to speak in their own voices, and for audiences to hear that. The aim is continuing dialogue.” (CC2)

5.8.3 Challenge audiences

“Who is the audience? For Glorious, it’s a musical audience, but I want to challenge them. Challenging the hierarchy of expectations of audiences.” (CC2)

“The audience are experiencing a representation of democracy. When we experience such work, we expect it to be limited. Are we looking for the work to represent an ideal of democracy? Can it represent something else and still be successful?” (CC6)

“Is it ok to put people/audiences in a position of discomfort? How do you take responsibility for that? Isn’t that part of creating change? That’s part of Lawnmowers’ work - audiences know that they’re going to be challenged. Particularly forum theatre.” (CC2)

“I think the idea of value within participatory work is quite a big question. Why is it not valued as much as the professional work is valued? I argue that some of the work that you will see in a participatory element or project is as imaginative, and skilful, and in some senses as groundbreaking as work you may see on a number of stages, performed by a number of different professional companies. It’s about how we as an audience value that project, that show.” (CC11)

5.9 Process/product

Whenever people talk about participatory arts, a discussion about process and product inevitably follows. Artists within the Critical Conversations explored the following aspects of that discussion:

“All you’ve got is process. Even the product is the process.” (CC5)

“The most important thing about art is the process. The product is important, but you don’t have to have a product. The interesting thing is how people do stuff.” (CC5)

“What’s more important: process or product? Process is important. But every young person wants to look good. Therefore, if you make a product, make sure it’s as good as it can be. And push the young people to make a high standard of product. If you create something they’re not proud of, you negate the process. If you get the process right, you’ll get the right product. The key is listening to what young people are saying to you.” (CC7)

“Work has to reach a certain standard before it goes out. That’s an editorial decision that participants make themselves. You have to be able to articulate your work. Which means you must have intellectualised your work.” (CC2)

“I will always include some type of performance in my workshop plan. Let’s celebrate our learning in some way - sometimes this is just a party. But I try to keep it open - I don’t have a scheme of work.” (CC8)

“Performance can be a great motivator. But it can be a limiter too - because you have to stop the learning and make sure people are ready to perform. Performance also changes the way in which people engage with a group. It increases apprehension, and self-criticality.” (CC8)

“Documentation is so often inaccurate or poor. Or no documentation at all. People actually need to experience the process in real time.” (CC5)

5.10 Markers of quality

In some respects, the entire content of all the Conversations was concerned with critical reflections on the quality of practice. In addition, many of the Conversations explicitly explored what people felt the markers of quality are for the projects that they undertake. What do they look for in the work that they do to make it feel like good work?

“How do you make judgements about the quality of your work? There is quality in twenty different areas within a project.... such as: how people become engaged, how people are supported, how the artist knows their role, the satisfaction with the output as a product.” (CC2)

“Quality: are we talking about quality of technique? Feeling? Engagement? There are different perspectives on quality - are you a maker or an audience member? Can you be both a person who let’s go, and be focussed on technique? Quality is all of those things: technique, feeling, engagement.” (CC8)

5.10.1 Markers displayed by artists

Almost all of the Conversations explored the markers of quality that an artist displays in their practice whilst making the work:

Professionalism/rigour

“Quality - it’s the thing I struggle with sometimes. If we’re working with the community, where’s the level? Where’s the rigour: the quality of what I want to realise in my artform, in my relationship, in my portrayal?” (CC2)

“There has to be rigour in the work as a professional practising artist... In the quality of ideas, concepts, intellectualisation, in the quality of relationships, artform skill, in engagement and audience experience.” (CC2)

“You have to bring the same standard of professionalism to participatory work as if you were making a show of your own work.” (CC1)

“It [the sound recording] has to be professional.” (CC5)

“At every level of that participatory offer within Northern Stage people, I, when I’m working with people, want it to feel professional.

My professional might be different to your professional. When I walk into a room I want the participants to be surprised. At the end of it, I want the audience who comes to see it, to be surprised. When I walk of a theatre space, I don’t want to hear ‘didn’t they do well’.” (CC11)

“We also feel that it’s important here that, we... for it to be professional, that they come and perform here. It’s not to say that any other building outside here is non-professional. It’s just to say ‘We have it. So why not use it?’ So why not use it for every single participant that comes through this building has a chance to play on one of our stages. To have a level of a production value that one of our main shows in one of our houses, would have. It enriches our offer. It also enriches the engagement of the participants within the project. When they come to one of our spaces, they are automatically in a different world. They engage in a different way. Once you put the extra layer on - of some lights, of some sound, and some haze - then suddenly that offer feels more valued.” (CC11)

This professionalism and rigour also extended to the conceptual aspects of the work:

“There has to be an intelligence in conceptual thinking - whoever you’re working with, there has to be a concept that you’re working with, and you’re deepening your understanding of what it’s going to be.” (CC2)

Listening

Many of the Conversations focussed on the responsiveness of the artist – and the quality of their listening and observation, as a marker of quality for the work:

“You can’t do enough listening. I didn’t listen on Sunday. It was a project that culminated in a performance - after 5 days of working with vulnerable young people. We shouldn’t have been doing a performance after that short length of time, but we had to. One young woman refused to wear her costume for the performance. It was simply a green tshirt. So, because it was the last minute, and I was stressed, I said, well I’m sorry you can’t perform. I shouldn’t have said that, but I did. It was the last minute. So she ran off. And then she came back one minute before the performance was about to start. And she had her green tshirt on. And plasters all the way down both arms. I hadn’t listened. I hadn’t bothered to ask why she hadn’t wanted to wear her costume.” (CC4)

Change in the artist

Some of the Conversations also explored the relationship between the piece of work and the artist. In particular, whether the making of the work was creating change for the artist:

“Partly, it’s about the effect the work has on me. What questions is it asking of me, and where I’m at? Is Glorious a success? No, but it is significant. It’s also doing things I didn’t expect it to do. So, dangerous to view success only in relation to prior expectations. (CC6)

“The impact on your practice is what can be measured [in terms of quality] for you as an artist.” (CC2)

5.10.2 Markers in the group dynamics

The Conversations explored markers of quality in how the group dynamics (including all its members, artists and participants, in their broadest sense) operate:

“Arts learning is a collaborative process - everybody is learning. This links back to Paulo Friere. Remove the boundaries between students and teachers. Let go of the leadership role so that you can learn - as a participatory artist.” (CC8)

“Workers are expected to take part too - and use the same equipment that the young people are using...Where the workers don’t take part, the project is less successful.” (CC10)

“No-one in workshops just watches. Means that staff and young people are helping each other which makes it a collective activity.” (CC10)

There was some discussion of “group imago” [meaning, the group’s idealised image of itself, and/or it reaching a mature stage of development] as marker of quality. (CC8)

The length of time that a group had together with an artist was also seen to be a marker of quality:

“Length of time to build relationships is crucial. Longer term relationships are more meaningful. Shorter ones are more arbitrary.” (CC2)

Other Conversations also explored the idea that participant choice, ownership or leadership was a specific marker of quality for a piece of work:

“It’s partly about top down vs bottom up projects.... People thinking it’s a good idea, vs having young people who wish to participate.” (CC7)

“It was led by them [young people] all the way through. I think that’s important.” (CC7)

Within this category of markers of quality in relation to group dynamics, there are specific sets of markers which are displayed by participants. These covered: voluntary attendance, changes in concentration levels, taking pride in their work, supporting one another, and not destroying the work that they make:

“A number of young people volunteered to come in during their holidays to facilitate the project happening. Voluntary attendance is a huge thing for these young people. Concentration levels – there was a massive increase during the project, from 15-30 min concentration spans to 1.5 hours. The young people learnt to support one another. This was change in observed behaviour by the artist and YMCA staff. The young people took pride in their work. At the start of the project, many young people destroyed their own work, or disrupted the work of others. They went from there to supporting other young people to achieve, and taking pride in their work for exhibition.” (CC10)

There was also significant discussion about the idea of change in skill levels amongst participants as a marker of quality:

“I could say that quality in a particular project is just about accessibility, but then am I being fair and honest to those young people, if I could get all of those young people to be professional musicians at the same time? Is it possible to do both? What sort of pedagogy would I need to make that happen? (If they can do it in Brazil, why not here?)” (CC8)

5.10.3 Markers in work that is shown

There was much discussion about the aesthetics of the work produced as a marker of quality, and its technical quality:

“Where do those standards [that you’re trying to get participants to reflect on] come from?: The aesthetic internal to the particular artform. This aesthetic shouldn’t be compromised.” (CC2)

“Is quality a choice between technical and ethical approaches? There is no reason to think they are mutually exclusive. Rob - you demonstrate this in your practice. They’re not mutually exclusive - how many young people have dropped out of music tuition at grade 2 because their tutors have solely focussed on technical issues? They haven’t sought to engage those young people. Similarly, if you don’t teach technical aspects, then people are going to drop out because they’ll feel isolated from those people who have those skills.” (CC8)

Part of this aesthetic was a sense of subtlety, and the avoidance of clichés.

“I made people respond to the broad theme of ‘as slow as possible’ - I wouldn’t let people respond to the narrow theme. I wanted ‘subtle’.” (CC5)

“I needed way more than a month’s material because I knew I was going to need way more than a month. Otherwise I knew it wouldn’t be good enough. I wanted to avoid the cliché of ‘slowed down’ - stretched, drones, slowed down material. Then you think about it, and think I don’t want to listen to that!” (CC5)

5.10.4 Markers displayed by audiences

The Conversations also explored the markers of quality that are displayed by audiences:

“How much are people enjoying the work? I get this from conversation with people... I think, that’s great, they’ve really got that, or enjoyed it. or they’ve thought something they’ve not thought before - about the place. It’s shifted them into a different place in the world, or in their lives. It’s shifted them into a different kind of reality...for a moment. Out of their ordinary lives. It’s how the work works for me. We become a little bit like a travelling circus. It’s a magical experience, you get swept along with a different kind of experience.” (CC6)

“At each performance, the audience gave feedback: what they felt, what the themes are, how well was it executed - performance, composition and image.” (CC2)

5.11 Artists’ practice: What has worked well?

Within all the Conversations, artists and audiences highlighted details of artists’ participatory practice that they had found to work well. It is important to note that these elements of practice are not necessarily ‘good practice’ per se, as they may only work well within the particular contexts in which they were deployed. However, we may find what has been highlighted to be useful in reflecting on practice more broadly.

5.11.1 The process of relationship building

There was significant discussion concerning how to go about building effective relationships with participants. This had many aspects:

“As an artist, you need strategies to create dialogue and build relationships with participants.” (CC9)

The following were highlighted as strategies for engagement and relationship building which artists felt to be important:

Listening and observation

“One key thing: listening. I’m good at listening to people.” (CC9)

“I took them [participants] to the Laing Art gallery, and I really listened to what they were saying, and what they were looking at. Even though they were saying ‘everything’s shit’, I was observing what they actually stopped and paid attention to. What they stopped and looked at were the oil paintings and the 3D artwork. This led me to focus on the ideas of form and creating something tactile.” (CC10)

“My approach is about listening. You can’t do enough listening.” (CC4)

“Body language and tone of voice are so crucial to listening. Listen to the unsaid.” (CC4)

“Does your role blur when working in participatory/community settings? Yes - the listening is a key skill to open up other people’s creativity. You get different skills from being an artist - and then you find these skills take you to different places.” (CC9)

You don't have to start with 'making art'

"What is the best way to deal with resistance in initial workshops with vulnerable young people? Allow them to do what they want to do, for a while - e.g. playing basketball. Can we turn that into a drama game?" (CC7)

You start by building trust...

"Once you've got a relationship of trust with young people, then you can move into a creative process." (CC7)

Agree groundrules:

"There is a game I play called 'The Rules of Enchantment' - whichever group I work with, whether actors or non-actors, we come together and I ask the question 'If you were to give me some rules for us to achieve the best creativity, what would they be? Is it that we must laugh together? Is it that we must be on time? Is it that we must understand that we are here to sharpen our craft? I then ask them for some rules of destruction. What would destroy that? And there's been a little amendment of late: I ask for a piece of advice from them. Because the people we come into contact with are an extraordinary resource. Whether from the seven year olds I was working with yesterday, through to actors that have been practising their craft for 50-60 years. That governs the time we spend together, whether it will two hours, or a process of six weeks, or an associate joining the company for a period of a year. Those rules become unique. They are a contract. They are an agreement. We are all responsible for upholding them." (CC11)

Empathy helps

"How important is it to be part of a participatory group to learn how to facilitate participatory music? I would have said it was very important, but then my experience of our leaders group challenges that. The important thing is that everyone in the space must understand the role they're playing in the group."

"As an artist, it's good to experience being a participant, in order to help analyse your participatory practice." (CC2)

Provide an easy way in to your artform

"At the start, you need to find an activity that people are going to feel they can do. So, if you want people to write the story of their day, ask them first to write about what they're touching now. Then ask them to write about what they can see in the room. Then about how they entered the building today. Then about how they got here. Then about what they did when they got up. And, all of a sudden, they've written a story." (CC1)

Finding an easy way in was often coupled with artists sharing their passion and enthusiasm for their chosen medium or practice, particularly where artists can get people hands-on with the medium and materials which interest them (CC9).

"I love glass. I love melting things. I find it easy to get people excited about that." (CC1)

Respond to people's context – and give participants choice about what they want to do

"It's dark when they [the young people] meet. So how do they respond to that context?"

“We’ll go out and have a right laugh” - writing with light. That was shared decision with young people: they couldn’t be bothered to work with tripods. That was fine it was their decision.” (CC3)

“We asked the young people what they wanted to look at in Northumberland. One said: ‘I knock around in the park in Blyth’. And we’d go, ‘Fine. Today we’re going to the park in Blyth.’ And off we went.” (CC3)

“Take inspiration from the young people. Give people choice about what they want to do.” (CC7)

“Initially the young people involved didn’t have any frame of reference for theatre. So those young people voted with their feet. Numbers depleted very quickly. They were working with a brilliant drama worker. But our conversation was - the young people didn’t want to do this. Has anyone talked to them about it? No, the idea [of doing theatre] had been imposed on youth workers, who then imposed it on the young people. So we asked the young people: ‘What are you interested in doing?’ They told us ‘Music, mcing, and film’. So we decided we weren’t doing a theatre project anymore.” (CC7)

“The clip that you saw of young people in Brazil working with a particular rhythm - that’s their equivalent of New Monkey music [a form of dance music associated with young people in the North East]. When we heard it, we thought that’s amazing, let’s use that for a workshop. And it sounded great. But their tutors were saying, ‘you can’t use that - it’s music about drugs from the favellas - we’re trying to get them away from that.’ But I think - you have to start from where people are.” (CC8)

However, artists also highlighted that the process of enabling genuine choice for participants, particularly those who have been previously marginalised, can be complex and difficult:

“We enabled the young people to choose the artist they wanted to work with, but then those young people had a transient relationship with the host project, so by the time came for the artist to start work, many of those young people had left.” (CC10)

We tried all sorts of tactics to give these young people a say. We responded to their interest in outdoor activities, giving them cameras they could go ‘tubing’ with, and took them out and about to different areas of local interest. None of this worked.” (CC10)

Part of this strategy is simply going to the places where participants are already:

“We tried all sorts of mechanism to engage young people - wandering around desolate parks late at night, chatting to young people.” (CC7)

“Use street-based activity to meet participants, and start to gather stories.” (CC6)

“Spend time in public space. Do a ‘public intervention’ – I often work in a shopping centre. Have sofas and cups of tea. We invite people to write a letter to a stranger. Write a letter. And take someone else’s letter.” (CC6)

"We used walks as a means of gathering ideas. We put notes from the walkers into a bank of ideas." (CC6)

Gifts are a good opening to conversation

"I am interested in the idea of gift as an opening to conversation. 'Give what you can, take what you need'. We offered passers-by an envelope with a pound in it, as a conversation starter. With your pound, get something to bring back as a conversation starter." (CC6)

Absurdity and playfulness

"We use these absurd strategies – including dressing up and firing balloons from big pink cannons - to involve participants. We use the absurd to open up serious questions - about our hopes for the world." (CC6)

"We try to create a space in which people can be playful, but with clear and simple direction. Hold this flower. Follow this canon. It's almost like you're in a ceremony - people follow and join in. Because people are in a space where everyone has agreed to join in (with that ritual). It's sort of consensual." (CC6)

"Instead of trying to force young people back into the room after a break, the artists started to play. And the young people wanted to find out what they were doing, and joined in." (CC4)

"By providing a framework you're offering a safer environment in which to be playful and experiment." (CC6)

Interview people

"We involve people all the way through. e.g. we do a lot of interviews with people - drawing out different ideas." (CC6)

Build a community of participants

"Participant experience is very much about relationships, and growing a community... The writer meets everyone involved - creates a storybook which is given to everyone. We put on social events for everyone. We have a website where everyone involved in the project shares videos, pictures etc. These things are a crucial part of making the work." (CC6)

"How do you build a community from scratch for a project? [If they're not attached to a building, or an organisation] We started by each artist involved in the project bringing along two people: someone started by bringing their postman and their grandma. Someone brought two neighbours. And it worked because each artist felt responsible for the two people they brought." (CC4)

"It helped [with participant recruitment] that I was able to mention that other people were involved - so people were excited about the others, and being part of something together." (CC5)

"When the young people were trying to invite older people to their performance, they weren't getting a good response. So, one of the young people worked out that they needed to take

their granny with them when they went to invite older people. Then it worked. Those young people worked that out for themselves, and brought in more participants.” (CC4)

5.11.2 You Don't Have to Know Everything – The Group Has Collective Knowledge

Many of the artists emphasised that one of the key attributes an artist could bring to a piece of work was an outsider's perspective – a person who is starting without expert knowledge, and who adopts an open-minded, questioning attitude.

“We started from a non-expert, questioning position - we don't know.” (CC9)

“Working with vague parameters can be quite stressful - but not knowing the answer was great.” (CC9)

“Not knowing about some aspects of a place can be important - a particular area of Nottingham in which I worked was known locally for its gun crime. But when I was doing research, I found out about its allotments. So I didn't have the gun-crime prejudicial view of the place.” (CC9)

“It's really important not to know the answer sometimes. Having the courage to say this.” (CC9)

“It links to idea of arts process as a process of asking questions – the artist saying, ‘why not, let's try your idea. I don't know where it will take us!’” (CC8)

“Start with what you don't know. So - if you don't know the people in the room, that's exciting. How will you find out?” (CC4)

The corollary of this is that, often, it is the participants who have expert knowledge. And so tapping into, and releasing that knowledge, was seen by many artists as important:

“Treat the participants as the experts in that field. Don't say: I know how to create some good art, and I'm going to show you. Instead: how can you help me to make something interesting?” (CC9)

“Everyone has better ideas than you have. You will have better ideas together. Your participants are your resource.” (CC4)

“You need to be aware that people are going to construct their own learning - their own scaffold - in their own way. You might not know how they're going to do that. Can you use other people to help you find that out: One way to resolve this - use other people - use some members of the group to understand and articulate the way in which people are learning.” (CC8)

5.11.3 Expose participants to work that you think is good:

“Take examples of other photographers, books and magazines and examples of own work.” (CC10)

“Bring in examples of design that you think is good. Take people to exhibitions of work you think is good.” (CC1)

"If artists expose determinants of quality to participants, then quality will naturally happen. It's an artist giving away of their power to make decisions." (CC2)

5.11.4 Provide critical feedback and encourage critical reflection on work made

"At the end of each session we would analyse what images worked, and what didn't. We discussed and analysed about where the fish came from, and the types of fish. We placed fish on plates, to think about the fact that we're consumers of fish." (CC2)

"We reviewed the images every week. Discussed what was successful and what wasn't." (CC3)

"Did you encourage the young people to critically reflect on their work to make the quality of the work high? To a certain extent... Particularly within editing and writing processes, and use of camera. Not as much as we wanted to - because the project needed to be more regular, and more long term." (CC7)

"I encourage young people to talk about and reflect on their work by demonstrating this in the way I talk about my own work." (CC3)

"Work has to reach a certain standard before it goes out. That's an editorial decision that participants make themselves....Our responsibility is "to manage an appropriateness of pushing" - the work, ideas, raising expectations. (CC2)

The idea that the artist's role was to manage the ways in which participants were pushed and challenged was also strongly taken up by other conversations (CC1).

"In last project, I wanted a final edit, but the participants didn't. We had a long discussion about it, but they insisted. I still think it needs a re-edit, that's a tension that hasn't been resolved." (CC2)

And make sure you get critical feedback on your work from others:

"Reflective practice is important: how do we care for participants? Audience? We need to talk together as a community of practice about this." (CC2)

"When you're creating a piece of performance, you need time for it to grow. It changes every time. The piece got better through feedback from audiences. Do we allow ourselves this iteration in participatory pieces?" (CC2)

Think about how you will evaluate the work, for yourself, from the start:

"Evaluation - is it built in? Yes, of course. You evaluate before you even start! Evaluation is part of the process." (CC5)

And be honest in your own engagement with reflection and evaluation:

"Evaluation: it's not validation. It's not self-defence. It's not justification. It's an adult relationship between you and others. If it's a disaster, say it's a disaster." (CC4)

"Is documentation misrepresentation? I think it represents it. But it's only one representation. It's like a box of chocolates - but you don't go to the factory to see how they were made. The experience of now can only be lived now. Documentation is the past." (CC5)

5.11.5 Everyone takes part

"Workers are expected to take part too - and use the same equipment that the young people are using. It's up to the young people whether the work produced by the staff is allowed in the final exhibition. Where the workers don't take part, the project is less successful." (CC3)

5.11.6 Failure is Good, and Persistence is Crucial

"Often it doesn't work, but something more exciting will come out of it not working. Because when you were sitting at home writing the application, you didn't know that there was going to be this amazing 14 year old, or amazing 93 year old." (CC4)

"Thought process: the first hurdle stuff, you realise you can't stop there - you have to go round the pitch a few times before you even begin to listen to what your ideas are about how the process should work." (CC5)

"Persistence is important." (CC5)

5.11.7 Make a Plan – Then Abandon It

"We started with researching the context. We did research about the background and history of the school - e.g. looking at punishment books from the school from Victorian times." (CC9)

"Have a structure but be prepared to abandon it." (CC4)

And each plan has to be bespoke to the group and the context in which you're working:

"What are the three main skills/qualities you bring to a project? Flexibility, structure and creativity. How did you go about the planning process? The project had to be planned in such a way to accommodate variable attendance. We had to compartmentalise each workshop into particular skills blocks." (CC7)

"I couldn't have a generic approach to challenge - challenge for each group had to be different. I had to think about it on a group-by-group basis. What am I going to do for this group so that they can go as far as they can? I had to design a bespoke activity for each group that would push them as far as they can." (CC4)

"How did you move young people in the Pupil Referral Unit from running around the room [and not engaging] to making work? Observing, listening. Realising that I was only going to get 15 minutes focussed time from those young people and restructuring the activity to fit into that time. So, rather than saying 'what do you want to write a play about?' say, 'this is what we're going to write a play about. It's about two boxers. Let's make their characters.' Also, responding to their desire to draw. So, I made them draw the story, rather than write it." (CC4)

5.11.8 Enable people to create new identities for themselves

In one of the Conversations, one of the artists asked the audience to undertake an exercise about identity, as a way of exploring one of the ideas she wanted to reflect on. She set the audience the following exercise: Create the identity you'd like to have in this room. Write it on a luggage label.

She also gave the following help and advice for the exercise:

"Sometimes the easiest way is to ask yourself a few questions:
Who were your best friends at primary, secondary and nursery school?
What was your most treasured possession as an eight year old?" (CC4)

Following the exercise, she explained the ideas that she was trying to explore:

"Often the people taking part in the project don't particularly want to be the people they are when they come into the room. The young people don't want to be thought of as young people in care. It might be a group of very elderly people who don't want to be thought of as a resident of a care home. It's about creating individuality again. And a way of finding a way to something else." (CC4)

5.11.9 Don't assume you know the context or group because you have done similar work previously – every group is different

"Start with the philosophy: never assume" (CC4)

"The extreme needs and sensitivities of the young people at the YMCA were different to anything I had encountered previously. I had worked at Pupil Referral Units, and on many youth offending projects. I naturally thought I had transferable skills that came from those experiences, and they weren't as transferrable as I thought." (CC10)

"Look at the specific needs of each group of young people. Young people have written plays. They have created a new writing magazine that has become established as the new place for new writing. Letting go, letting the participants say what they need and what they want has resulted in this very fruitful situation." (CC4)

5.11.10 Use the same equipment as participants

"Use the same cameras that the young people use. I don't take my professional SLR cameras. I use the same disposable cameras as the young people." (CC3)

5.11.11 Celebrate your achievements, but watch your ego

"Small steps - little successes mean a lot. If just one lad takes part next week, who hadn't done previously. Someone making eye contact in an exercise when they haven't done before. Celebrate tiny things. It's important not to be defeated by difficult workshops." (CC7)

“Look for moments of fulfilment. Do it because you’re privileged to do it. As a story-gatherer, you’re privileged. You’re asking so much from people. Sometimes you’re not giving so much back. You’re being given to. Appreciate it.” (CC4)

“Put your ego to one side” (CC4)

5.11.12 Personalise the space you’re working in

“Feel comfortable in the space you’re working in. Personalise space. Get other people to invest in their space - it becomes their space.” (CC4)

5.11.13 Responding to cultural sensitivities

“How do you respond to cultural sensitivities? Start with what you don’t know. Listen to what people say is important. Be honest.” (CC4)

5.11.14 Don’t go with the first good idea

“What is the ignition point of different projects? What triggers off the democratic co-authoring? This is very difficult. You need to suspend judgement a little bit - someone has given you an amazing story, or done an amazing back flip. But think to yourself - is this the moment to start? Or do I need to get 5 or 6 more possibilities?” (CC4)

5.11.15 How much do participants need to know about the whole project/big idea?

Different artists had different ideas about how much participants needed to know about the overall project, and when they needed to know it. Some of the artists felt that, at first, artists only needed to tell part of the story of the overall project, and that full engagement could come later.

“When we first meet people, we don’t tell them about the whole project - we invite them to write a letter, and then come to a workshop. If they come to the workshop, then we tell them about the whole project. “It’s part of my responsibility to work out how to tell people about the project”. Here are the ideas behind it, here’s what you’ll be doing. You can’t tell people about the whole project at the start, because there’s lots of it that I don’t know at the start. There’s things that none of us understand until we do the show. In that show we discover things, in that moment.” (CC6)

“How do you explain your decision making to participants? We’ll tell part of the story. You can’t explain all of the ideas behind the work when they first meet you. For example, when we met participants in Berwick, we talked about turning military movements into dance, and about changing the psychology of Berwick. But then it depends on who turns up to the project, and whether they take those ideas on, or not.” (CC6)

Others thought differently:

“I told them how they fitted into overall idea up front.” (CC5)

“Share from the concept phase, not half way through the project. If you have to get a project ready in 10 days, tell people, and work it out together.” (CC4)

5.12 Practice questions:

The Conversations raised a number of questions about practice that artists and audiences were keen to explore further:

5.12.1 When should an artist let go? When should they intervene?

"This is the hardest judgement to make - when do you let go? When do you go in?" (CC4)

"For me it's been a process of letting go. Increasingly, I find myself standing further back. (I don't get dressed up. I leave that to others). I used to screech a lot behind cameras, now I try not to do that. I get excited by seeing people's responses to situations." (CC6)

5.12.2 How much push is too much push?

When seeking to challenge participants, particularly those who are vulnerable, how can an artist know what the 'appropriate' amount of push and challenge is? (CC1)

"Our responsibility is to manage an appropriateness of pushing - the work, ideas, raising expectations." (CC2)

"The trip [to Brazil] made me think: how can you have an inclusive project that aspires to that type of musical quality? If I work in a challenging school in Newcastle, what do I have to get every child to a grade 3 musical theory level, if that's what I decide quality is for that project?" (CC8)

5.12.3 What do audiences expect of participatory work?

"The audience is experiencing a representation of democracy. When we experience such work, we expect it to be limited. Are we looking for the work to represent an ideal of democracy? Can it represent something else and still be successful?" (CC6)

5.12.4 Consent and censorship:

For those artists who view themselves as directors, the idea of getting consent to use people's stories can also be connected to issues of censorship and self-censorship:

"Some of the themes of 'Heart' prompted me to question ideas of censorship and self-censorship. We hope to be working with a poet and a drama therapist. At what point do we talk about censorship? When am I as a practitioner censoring my own stories? When is that about responsible practice? When is that about holding back on creativity? Where are the permissions? At what can we allow us, the theatre company - because that is what we are, we're not a participatory company by our absolute mission - at what point do I say 'please may I have that? This is what I'm going to do with that. Are you ok with that?' And is there a point further down the line, 10 years on, when the individual may turn round and say, 'Actually, I want

that back.' It hasn't happened yet, but it might. How would we deal with that? I guess it's about a legacy of trust, and how that grows and develops." (CC11)

6. Discussion

There is so much contained within the ideas and questions that were raised across the Conversations that picking out a few topics for further discussion and exploration is necessarily a partial and subjective process. This is a brief selection of ideas and questions which arose from engaging with these Conversations.

6.1 Creating the Conditions for Quality in Participatory Art

It was interesting to hear from an artist's perspective the conditions which they feel are required for them to undertake work which is of quality. Because context is so vital for participatory art, participatory practice is not just about what an artist does when face-to-face with participants. This means that participatory practice also encompasses expertise in relationship building, planning and effective project management. A key point of learning from this is that for participatory work to be of quality, it must be someone's job to create the space in which that work happens, and that they should have these kinds of skills.

6.2 Expertise, Professionalism and Not Knowing

The discussion on expertise and professionalism is interestingly juxtaposed with the roles and practice of 'not knowing' which is described by artists across a number of the Conversations. In this context, the idea of 'expertise' becomes complex and nuanced. Artists seemed to feel that it was their role to bring the expertise of their artistic discipline into participatory situations, but that this often manifested as a form of naivety – of being the person who starts by not knowing, and whose role it is to ask questions about the context, culture and practices in which they find themselves.

This seems to fit well with Pablo Helguera's ideas about the role of the artist in socially-engaged practice is to be 'between disciplines'.⁴ He suggests that:

"Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines."

This raises interesting further questions about what 'expertise' (which the artist brings) means in dialogical practice. It begins to look like an artist's expertise is partly the practice of exploring (what is to them) unknown, and enabling others (participants) to unlock their own expertise and knowledge which then forms the material for that work. A different form of expertise is then (sometimes) required from the artist, which seems to be more strongly related to traditional artform disciplines – translating that unlocked content into a work that will engage audiences.

⁴ Helguera, Pablo (2011), *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Technique Handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books Inc.

6.3 Process and Product

The Conversations contained the obligatory discussion of process and product which comes with all discussion of participatory practice. In some respects, the Conversations produced the usual conclusion that both are important (which seems obvious). However, there were some interesting additions to the usual conclusion, particularly the idea that all participatory work is process-based, even the ‘products’ that are shown to audiences. This manifests in the Conversations in the way that artists described work shown to audiences in terms of an on-going dialogue. It also lends support to the previously-expressed notion that it is easy to think of the exhibitions, films, performances, recordings, books (etc) that are produced by participatory arts activity as “the artwork”. However, it has been suggested that these things are not the artwork, but are simply the trace left by the artwork.⁵

6.4 Structure, Fluidity and Contradiction

Artists throughout the Conversations highlighted two very different aspects to successful practice which both seem to be required to make projects work. It seems that participatory practice is required to be both highly structured (with both individual workshop plans and plans for a whole programme of workshops) and highly fluid – requiring artists to respond creatively to ‘failure’ (which often brings exciting new possibilities) and to other forms of change.

This seems to be just one example of a powerful point made by one of the artists: that it was the artist’s role to hold the ‘contradictions’ of a project – to be the point at which different (and potentially) competing ideas, pressures, agendas, and practices converge, and to find a way through those apparent contradictions using the creative processes they are facilitating.

6.5 A Spectrum of Participatory Practice: Roles, Authorship/Ownership & Ethics

The Conversations highlighted some crucial differences in the way that different artists saw their primary role in a participatory project: Are they there to realise their own vision, or facilitate the creativity of others? Another aspect to this question can be seen from parallel discussions about ‘ownership’ (in this context, meaning ‘authorship’) of the work.

So much of what people conceive of as ‘quality practice’ seems to depend on how artists (and those commissioning or otherwise creating the space for the work) answer these questions. The different answers that are given to those questions help to place pieces of participatory work on a spectrum of practice.⁶

⁵ This idea emerged from discussions with the artist Kate Sweeney, in conversations on quality in participatory art in 2011.

⁶ This spectrum emerged from a two-day workshop convened by the artist Jane Dudman as part of her PhD research on participatory practice at Newcastle University in 2011.

Kester			Bishop
Role of participants	Participants in a process of creative enquiry, which they help to shape	Material for an artist's work	Role of participants
Authorship of the work	Co-authored, between artist and participants	Single-authored	Authorship of the work
Ethics of participation	Informed consent, plus on-going negotiation about the content and direction of the process	Informed consent	Ethics of participation

By placing a piece of work on this spectrum, it helps to make sense of the different types of follow on question that arise from the role/authorship questions. In the Conversations, those who saw their role as “benevolent dictators” were also the most keen to make the role of the artist, and their judgements, visible to audiences – they were keen to assert their authorship of the work. Whereas those who saw their role more as facilitating the creativity of others tended to want to have a less visible presence in the presentation of the work, and were concerned that their choices manipulated the creativity of participants.

Similarly, those artists who view the work as ‘theirs’, and for whom the role of participants is to ‘enrich’ the work, have a set of issues about how they acknowledge (and potentially pay for) participants role in the co-creation of the work. It is interesting that these artists, who wrestle with authorship and ownership in the literal sense, tend not to be the ones who talk about ‘participant ownership’ of spaces, and of projects themselves (which in this sense seems to mean ‘leadership of’ or ‘having a strong voice within’). The artists who talk in this latter way (those on the left-hand end of the spectrum) did not explicitly talk about the practicalities of ownership within their relationship with participants. Does the ‘leadership’ role that these artists are ascribing to participants mean that they feel less need to discuss the practical considerations of ownership?

Similarly, there was a strong sense in the Conversations featuring artists who may describe their work as more towards the left side of this spectrum, that participant leadership and choice was a crucial marker of quality. The ethics of participation are different for those who are more towards the right of this spectrum; such considerations were not of concern to their practice.

This highlights the importance of both commissioners (and others who frame the space for participatory work) and artists knowing what is expected of a particular piece of work, and agreeing this in advance. Is participant co-authorship important? What is the role of the artist on this project? If commissioners and artists can place a piece of work on this spectrum in advance, then many aspects of what constitutes quality in that work become clearer.

6.6 Challenge and Intervention

Artists on the left side of the spectrum identified a key area of further exploration that is central to their practice – how can they push and challenge participants to produce the most interesting work? When should they intervene? When should they hang back? Such questions could form part of the provocations offered to artists presenting future Critical Conversations, in order to help build a critical mass of reflections in this area.

7. What Next?

From engaging with the Critical Conversations material, it is clear that this practice has generated a hugely rich set of content for those interested in learning about, and developing, participatory arts practice.

The following would seem to be sensible ways to continue to make use of, and create more of, this valuable learning material:

- For the Artworks North East legacy group to review the Critical Conversations provocation questions and format, in light of the content of existing ones, and to publish a revised Critical Conversation format
- For artists and arts organisations to use the Critical Conversations format, and to record the content of the Conversations, and make that content available to others
- For there to be a central registry (and links to) all the Critical Conversations material
- For there to be a periodic re-analysis of the growing Critical Conversations material

Appendix 1: Timeline of Critical Conversations

Conversation Number	Date	Information	Notes
CC1	12/07/2011	Helix Arts. Presenters: Kate Roebuck, Bob Beagrie, Dan Civico, Sarah Blood	Partially analysed for this research
CC2	04/11/2011	Helix Arts/Wunderbar Festival. Presenters: Claire Webster-Saaremetts, Rajni Shah, Theatre Replacement	Fully analysed
CC3	09/02/2012	National Glass Centre and North East Photography Network - Presenter: Nicola Maxwell	Partially analysed – only a very abridged recording of the presentation/discussion exists
	21/03/2012	Gateshead Library and Equal Arts	Not analysed for this research – no recording exists
CC4	04/07/2012	Live Theatre and New Writing North - presenters Stevie Ronnie and Penny Rae	Fully analysed
CC5	09/08/2012	Tyneside Cinema - presenter Vicki Bennett	Fully analysed
CC6	10/10/2012	BALTIC and Gem Arts - presenters Rajni Shah, Neil Bromwich and Zoe Walker	Fully analysed
CC7	06/11/2012	Live Theatre - presenter Philip Hoffman	Fully analysed
CC8	05/12/2012	Sage Gateshead, Presenter: Rob Kitchen	Fully analysed
CC9	21/02/2013	National Glass Centre - presenter Effie Burns	Fully analysed
CC10	01/05/2013	Helix Arts – Presenter Nicola Maxwell	Fully analysed
CC11	13/06/2013	Northern Stage - presenters Matt Hargrave, Mark Calvert, Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh	Fully analysed

Appendix 2: Critical Conversation Artist Brief

Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Artworks North East: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings

Critical Conversations – Artist Brief

Background Cultural organisations in the North East of England have a strong record of working with artists to develop participatory arts projects in different settings. As part of a national arts research project funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and designed to facilitate new dialogues around and understandings of participatory arts practice, the University of Sunderland is working with a consortium of regional partners (ArtWorks North East)* to develop a clearer understanding of what makes for good participatory practice.

Critical Conversations: dialogues around the practice of arts in participatory settings

As part of this, ArtWorks North East is together hosting a series of ‘critical conversations’ involving artists, participants, host groups and other collaborators. We are inviting different people responsible for creating and delivering participatory work to reflect on their practice, and to open that practice up to discussion by others. Each conversation will take place in an open learning atmosphere in which artists/presenters feel confident to share their practice with others and where people feel able to ask challenging questions about that practice in appropriate ways.

Through these conversations, we will explore what constitutes quality work in participatory settings? We aim to identify and share models of good practice across art forms, and from this to develop appropriate training and professional development opportunities for artists.

Artist’s Presentation Brief

We would like you to present your participatory arts practice – work in progress or work already completed. Aim for a presentation of no more than 30 minutes in which you consider **some** of the key questions outlined below. Feel free to make your presentation in any way that you feel is appropriate. You might want to draw on: sketch-books or diaries, photo- documentation of the process, images or other recordings of final work.

Key questions

Research and working processes

- what was or is the nature of your research into relevant contexts/environment/histories?
- what strategies do you use to develop dialogue and relationships with participants and how do you help participants to talk and think about the project/s?
- what roles do you play in developing the creative vision for the project ?
- what roles do participants play in developing the creative vision for the project and how do you enable these roles?
- how much do you challenge participants and yourself?
- How are decisions made about what is made/performed?

Artwork

- what specific support – creative and technical - do you give to participants in making the work (if any)?
- do you address issues of art-form quality with participants and if so how ?
- is specific art-form quality relevant?
- whose work is it and what strategies can be used to ensure ownership?
- how are audiences for the work addressed?

Critical Reflections

- how do you evaluate the success (or not) of the project/s?
- has your participatory practice been enhanced by specific training or professional development opportunities?
- how important is experiential learning and/or peer support for your practice?

NB. The Northern Stage Critical Conversation (CC11) had an additional provocation question: “Participation is practice. What does professional mean in the context of performance? And what are the political, and moral implications of putting the real into an unreal context?”