

ArtWorks Alliance – Dear Powers That Be Session Summary

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1 Introduction

On Thursday 4th July 2024, ArtWorks Alliance held a member’s gathering to think through and identify the key message that the Alliance wants to communicate to the new team of ministers in the new UK government. The general discussion revolved around participatory arts, particularly focusing on how participatory arts are defined, their impact, and their significance. The participants introduced themselves and shared their perspectives and experiences related to community arts, co-creation, and participatory activities. The conversation touched on the challenges of defining participatory arts in accessible language, the role of art in social change, and the impact of engaging in creative activities on communities and individuals. The session was an attempt at articulating the value and methods of participatory arts, culminating in the creation of a collective letter to advocate for the recognition and funding and support of such arts.

The participants were asked to consider several key questions during the discussion. These include:

1.1 Introduction and Definition

- Introduce yourself and describe your role and organisation.
- What does participatory arts mean to you?

1.2 Impact and Significance

- How does connecting, participating, and engaging with the arts impact the people you work with?
- What stories can you share that demonstrate the impact of your work?

1.3 Advocacy and Representation

- What words or phrases would you use to define who we are as a collective advocating for participatory arts?
- How can we articulate the value and methods of participatory arts in a way that is accessible and understandable to those unfamiliar with the field?

1.4 Challenges and Language

- What terms and concepts might be misunderstood by those outside our field?
- How can we better communicate our work to those who may not understand the importance and impact of participatory arts?

1.5 Reflection and Creation

- Reflect on the terminology and language used in participatory arts and consider alternative phrases that might better capture the essence of your work.
- Participate in creative exercises, such as writing a didactic poem, to help articulate and brainstorm ideas about participatory arts and its impact.

2 How would you define participatory arts?

Participants offered varied and insightful responses to the question of how they would define participatory arts. The general responses highlighted several key themes:

2.1 Community and Collaboration

Many participants emphasised the collaborative nature of participatory arts. They described it as a process where artists work alongside community members to create art together. This collaboration ensures that the creative process is inclusive and democratic.

2.2 Co-Creation

Co-creation was a frequently mentioned concept. Participants noted that participatory arts involve creating art with communities rather than for them. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and relevance among participants.

2.3 Empowerment and Voice

Participatory arts were often described as a means of empowering individuals and communities. Participants highlighted how these arts provide a platform for marginalised or underrepresented voices, allowing people to express their stories, experiences, and perspectives.

2.4 Social Change and Justice

Many participants viewed participatory arts as a tool for social change and justice. They believed that engaging in these arts could challenge power structures, promote equity, and address social issues by bringing diverse voices to the forefront.

2.5 Inclusivity and Accessibility

The inclusive and accessible nature of participatory arts was another common theme. Participants stressed the importance of making the arts available to everyone, regardless of background or ability, and breaking down barriers to participation.

2.6 Process Over Product

Some participants highlighted the importance of the creative process itself rather than the final product. They emphasised that the journey of creating art together can be as valuable, if not more so, than the finished artwork.

2.7 Personal and Community Development

Participatory arts were also considered a means of fostering personal growth and community development. Participants noted how engaging in creative activities can build confidence, skills, and a sense of community.

2.8 Terminology and Language

There was also a discussion about the terminology used to describe participatory arts. Some participants preferred terms like 'community arts' or 'co-creation', while others pointed out that the language used should be accessible and understandable to those outside the field.

Overall, the general response highlighted the multifaceted nature of participatory arts, with a strong emphasis on collaboration, inclusivity, empowerment, and social change.

3 What does participatory arts do for people?

When asked what participatory arts does for people, participants provided a range of responses that highlighted the transformative impact of these activities on individuals and communities. The general responses can be summarised as follows:

3.1 Empowerment and Voice

Participatory arts empower individuals by giving them a platform to express their stories, experiences, and perspectives. This process helps people feel heard and valued, especially those from marginalised communities.

3.2 Community Building and Social Cohesion

Engaging in participatory arts fosters a sense of community and strengthens social bonds. Participants noted that these activities bring people together, creating inclusive spaces where diverse individuals can connect and collaborate.

3.3 Personal Development

Many participants highlighted the role of participatory arts in personal growth. Engaging in creative activities helps individuals develop new skills, build confidence, and discover their potential. This process can be particularly beneficial for young people and those facing social or economic challenges.

3.4 Mental and Emotional Well-being

Participatory arts contribute significantly to mental and emotional well-being. Participants described how involvement in creative activities can be therapeutic, reducing stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. The act of creating art provides a positive outlet for emotions and enhances overall well-being.

3.5 Educational Benefits

The educational value of participatory arts was another common theme. Participants noted that these activities can complement formal education by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. They also provide opportunities for experiential learning and cultural education.

3.6 Social Change and Advocacy

Participatory arts can be a powerful tool for social change and advocacy. Participants shared how these activities raise awareness about social issues, challenge stereotypes, and inspire action. By engaging communities in dialogue and creative expression, participatory arts can drive positive social change.

3.7 Cultural Enrichment

Engaging in participatory arts enriches cultural life by promoting diverse forms of artistic expression. Participants highlighted how these activities celebrate cultural diversity and help preserve and share cultural heritage.

3.8 Inclusivity and Accessibility

Participatory arts are inherently inclusive and accessible. Participants emphasised the importance of making arts activities available to everyone, regardless of their background or ability. This inclusivity ensures that all voices are represented and valued in the creative process.

Overall, the general response highlighted the multifaceted benefits of participatory arts, emphasising their role in empowering individuals, building communities, enhancing well-being, and driving social change.

4 Why do we do what we do?

When participants were asked why they engage in participatory arts, their responses revealed a deep commitment to social and personal values. The general responses can be summarised as follows:

4.1 Passion for Social Change

Many participants expressed a strong desire to contribute to social change and justice. They believe that participatory arts have the power to address social inequalities, give a voice to the marginalised, and promote equity and inclusion.

4.2 Empowering Communities

Participants highlighted their commitment to empowering communities through the arts. They are motivated by the impact that participatory arts can have on individuals and communities, fostering a sense of belonging, agency, and self-determination.

4.3 Facilitating Personal Growth

A common theme was the role of participatory arts in personal development. Participants are driven by the positive changes they see in individuals who engage in these activities, such as increased confidence, self-expression, and resilience.

4.4 Building Connections

The desire to build social connections and strengthen community bonds was another key motivator. Participants value the way participatory arts bring people together, creating spaces for collaboration, mutual understanding, and collective action.

4.5 Promoting Well-being

Participants are motivated by the mental and emotional well-being benefits that participatory arts provide. They see the arts as a means of supporting holistic health, offering therapeutic benefits, and enhancing overall quality of life.

4.6 Love for the Arts

A passion for the arts itself was a driving force for many participants. They are inspired by the creative process, the beauty of artistic expression, and the joy that creating and sharing art brings to people.

4.7 Advocacy and Representation

Participants are committed to advocating for the recognition and support of participatory arts. They believe in the importance of ensuring that all voices are heard and that the arts are valued as a critical component of a vibrant, democratic society.

4.8 Cultural Preservation and Enrichment

The role of participatory arts in preserving and enriching cultural heritage was another motivator. Participants are dedicated to celebrating cultural diversity, preserving traditions, and promoting cultural understanding through the arts.

4.9 Professional Fulfilment

Many participants find personal and professional fulfilment in their work. They are motivated by the meaningful and impactful nature of participatory arts, finding satisfaction in seeing the tangible benefits of their efforts.

Overall, the general response highlighted a deep commitment to using participatory arts as a tool for social good, personal empowerment, community building, and cultural enrichment. Participants are driven by a combination of personal passion, professional fulfilment, and a desire to make a positive impact on society.

5 What do we want to say to the powers that be?

When participants were asked what they wanted to say to the powers that be, their responses conveyed a clear and urgent message about the importance and impact of participatory arts. The general responses can be summarised as follows:

5.1 Recognise the Value of Participatory Arts

Participants urged decision-makers to recognise the significant social, educational, and economic value of participatory arts. They emphasised that these arts are not just an 'extra' but are essential for vibrant, healthy communities.

5.2 Provide Sustainable Funding

A recurring theme was the need for sustainable and equitable funding. Participants called for long-term investment in participatory arts projects, highlighting that consistent funding is crucial for creating lasting impact and stability in the sector.

5.3 Support Professional Development

Participants stressed the importance of supporting the professional development of participatory arts practitioners. They called for resources and training to help practitioners develop their skills and ensure the highest quality of work.

5.4 Promote Inclusivity and Accessibility

Decision-makers were urged to prioritise inclusivity and accessibility in the arts. Participants highlighted the need to break down barriers to participation and ensure that everyone, regardless of background or ability, can engage in and benefit from participatory arts.

5.5 Acknowledge the Impact on Well-being

Participants wanted the powers that be to understand and acknowledge the profound impact of participatory arts on mental and emotional well-being. They emphasised that arts activities contribute significantly to holistic health and should be integrated into public health strategies.

5.6 Champion Cultural Democracy

There was a strong call to champion cultural democracy, ensuring that cultural expression is a right for all individuals and communities. Participants urged decision-makers to promote policies that support cultural equity and celebrate diversity.

5.7 Enhance Public Engagement

Participants called for increased efforts to engage the public with participatory arts. They suggested that decision-makers support public campaigns, events, and initiatives that raise awareness about the benefits and importance of these arts.

5.8 Facilitate Cross-Sector Collaboration

Decision-makers were encouraged to facilitate collaboration between the arts and other sectors such as education, health, and social services. Participants highlighted that such collaborations could amplify the impact of participatory arts and address broader societal issues.

5.9 Advocate for Policy Support

Participants urged the powers that be to advocate for policies that support participatory arts at local, regional, and national levels. They called for a supportive policy environment that recognises and promotes the arts as integral to social and community development.

5.10 Listen to Practitioners and Communities

A key message was the importance of listening to the voices of practitioners and the communities they serve. Participants urged decision-makers to engage with those on the ground to understand their needs, challenges, and successes.

Overall, the general response conveyed a passionate plea for recognition, support, and investment in participatory arts. Participants emphasised that these arts play a critical role in fostering inclusive, resilient, and vibrant communities and that their benefits extend far beyond the arts sector alone.

6 Standard Letter — Introduction to the New Ministerial Team on Participatory Arts

Dear [Minister's Name],

Congratulations on your new appointment. As you take on this significant role, we wish to share with you the collective sentiment of participatory arts practitioners and advocates across the UK. The insights below reflect the passion, dedication, and concerns of those deeply engaged in this impactful field, and we hope they will guide and inform your policy decisions.

Recognising the Value of Participatory Arts

Participatory arts are a cornerstone of vibrant, healthy communities. They empower individuals, foster social cohesion, and drive positive social change. Through collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes, participatory arts provide platforms for underrepresented voices, promote personal and community development, and contribute significantly to mental and emotional well-being. These arts are not ancillary but essential for fostering a culturally rich, equitable society.

The Need for Sustainable Funding

Sustainable and equitable funding is critical to the success and stability of participatory arts initiatives. Consistent investment allows for long-term planning and development, ensuring that projects can create lasting impacts. We urge you to advocate for funding models that recognise the unique value of participatory arts and provide the necessary resources to support their growth and sustainability.

Supporting Professional Development

To maintain and enhance the quality of participatory arts, it is vital to support the professional development of practitioners. Resources for training and continuous learning are necessary to build skills and ensure the delivery of high-quality, impactful projects. By investing in the professionalisation of this sector, we can ensure that practitioners are well-equipped to engage and empower communities effectively.

Promoting Inclusivity and Accessibility

Inclusivity and accessibility must be at the forefront of arts policy. Participatory arts break down barriers and ensure that everyone, regardless of background or ability, has the opportunity to engage in creative activities. Policies should prioritise making the arts accessible to all, fostering an environment where diverse voices and experiences are represented and valued.

Acknowledging Well-being Benefits

Participatory arts significantly enhance mental and emotional well-being. The therapeutic benefits of creative engagement are well-documented and should be integrated into public health strategies. Recognising and promoting the health benefits of the arts can lead to more holistic approaches to community health and well-being.

Championing Cultural Democracy

Cultural democracy ensures that cultural expression is a right for all individuals and communities. We advocate for policies that support cultural equity, celebrate diversity, and challenge traditional hierarchies in the arts. By championing cultural democracy, we can create a more inclusive and representative cultural landscape.

Enhancing Public Engagement

Raising public awareness about the benefits and importance of participatory arts is crucial. Support for public campaigns, events, and initiatives can help engage a wider audience and foster a deeper appreciation for the role of the arts in society. Enhancing public engagement can also help build stronger, more connected communities.

Facilitating Cross-Sector Collaboration

Collaborations between the arts and other sectors such as education, health, and social services can amplify the impact of participatory arts. Facilitating these partnerships can address broader societal issues and create more comprehensive solutions. We encourage policies that promote and support cross-sector collaborations.

Advocating for Policy Support

Supportive policies at local, regional, and national levels are essential for the thriving of participatory arts. We urge you to advocate for a policy environment that recognises the arts as integral to social and community development. Listening to the voices of practitioners and the communities they serve is crucial for informed and effective policymaking.

In conclusion, participatory arts play a pivotal role in empowering individuals, building communities, and fostering a culturally rich and equitable society. We hope you will champion these values and support policies that recognise and invest in the transformative power of participatory arts.

Yours sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Position]

[Your Organisation]

7 Resources

Reflective Piece on Socially Engaged / Community-Based Projects:

URL: https://issuu.com/openeyegallery/docs/reflecting_on_creative_neighbourhoods_open_eye_g

The 2020 Rome Charter:

URL: <https://www.2020romecharter.org/pagine/charter>

Creative Health Quality Framework:

URL: <https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/creative-health-quality-framework>

Europeana Impact Playbook:

URL: <https://pro.europeana.eu/page/europeana-impact-playbook>

Article by Eleanor Belfiore on the 'Hidden Costs of Labour' in SEAP:

URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1367549420982863>