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Learning arts organisations: innovation through a poetics of relation.

GULARI, M.N. and FREMANTLE, C.

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Article

Learning Arts Organisations: Innovation through a Poetics of Relation

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Abstract: Arts organisations have had to reimagine their ways of working, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has severely challenged the venue-based sectors and exposed the fragility of the existing business model of the 'receiving house'. We use a specific example to address the following question: In what sense can artists lead organisational innovation, learning and change? We analyse *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* by MARIE ANTOINETTE (MA), an artist duo from Portugal, and their collaboration with the Barn, a multi-art centre in Banchory, Scotland, during the coronavirus pandemic in 2021. Édouard Glissant, a Martinique-born poet and philosopher, underpins both MA's practice and our analysis. We draw on the key concepts of his relational philosophy, including archipelago, opacity, and disaffiliation, to clarify how MA work, what they have offered the Barn and what they can offer to other art organisations seeking innovation and organisational learning. MA's nuanced approach, informed by Glissant, reconfigures the relationship between the artists and the art organisation and challenges existing assumptions through discontinuous and new thinking, while building a non-confrontational relationship with the Barn. It contributes to both organisational studies and arts research by highlighting the significance of MA's approach to organisational innovation.

Keywords: artist-led innovation; Édouard Glissant; relational philosophy; organisational change; organisational learning; practice-led research; COVID-19; adaptation



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1. Introduction

In the war, things were in terrible turmoil. What I had learned at the academy was of no use to me and the useful new ideas were still unready.... Everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments; and this is Merz. It was like a revolution within me, not as it was, but as it should have been. (Kurt Schwitters quoted in [Dietrich 1993](#))

The majority of the world has spent parts of 2020 and 2021 in some form of lockdown and isolation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This cataclysmic/catalytic event, like others in the past and possibly in the future, has affected the creative arts, both the artists and the organisations. The venue-based sectors, along with tourism, have been the hardest hit by COVID-19 measures ([OECD 2020](#)). Museums and galleries were unable to open to the public. The immediate response for many of them was to offer virtual tours and digital exhibitions. Yet the audience perhaps were not fully engaged or reassured by these virtual tours. Many voiced the feeling that something was missing, a need for an outlet and new ways of thinking to feel connected when intimacy was needed most. Artists and curators have been reimagining art, including the role of artists and art organisations, to sustain creativity and build a different relationship with audiences. Engaging with communities has become a new priority in a time of physical distancing. Innovating is imperative when the cultural and economic value of art experiences, impacted by the physical distancing

and isolation, has been diminished. Kurt Schwitters, (1887–1948, Germany) writing about the motivation for Dada and his use of Merz as a programmatic idea, captures an important experience as true now in the face of the pandemic as it was during the First World War. We can draw three parallels between two traumatic events. First, the turmoil of war is similar to the turbulence of the pandemic; disorientation, shock and fear. Second, that the existing knowledge and practices were of no use then and now in the face of this global pandemic is another commonality. Finally, like in the past, we are again forced to make sense of the broken fragments and make new pathways to action and innovate while facing constantly shifting physical and social realities.

As countries around the world search for leadership in turbulent times, exploring the possibilities of adaptation, many art organisations, artists and researchers create works that respond to the emergency of the situation¹. New York-based curators Pollack and Anne Verhallen initiated a not-for-profit project, *Art at a Time Like This* in 2020, launched several exhibitions addressing adversity in times of crisis². Similarly in 2020, Making Art Work, drawing from the politicised language of our current crisis, asked 40 artists to create new works responding to the provocations posed by four curatorial pillars; Unprecedented Times, Industrial Actions, Permanent Revolution, and Relief Measures³. In the North East of Scotland, Deveron Projects, an art organisation, has turned to food to engage with the rural community (Creative Scotland 2021). Similarly, the Barn, in another part of the North East of Scotland, created the *Becoming Earthly* 'learning space'⁴ to support artists to respond to societal changes and to explore the implications of new thinking at the intersection of art and ecology⁵. The Barn, the largest rural multi-arts centre in Scotland was established in 1992 following the production of a community play. As an arts organisation in a rural setting, it has 'an audience' but it also has 'a community' in the geographical sense. Working as a 'receiving house', it is a venue for professional touring productions, but it also works with artists (professional, amateur, emerging and established) to develop new bodies of work. It supports and presents arts ranging from dance and visual art installation through folk music and community singing to gardening through the coordination of allotments. This complex mix inevitably has associated tensions; being a receiving house or becoming a learning space. The pandemic meant that the normal process and assumptions of programming were "no use" (in Schwitters' terms) and equally "Useful new ideas were still unready". The *Becoming Earthly* 'learning space' sought to open up a dialogue involving staff, board members, key associate artists and a new cohort of artists.

Conceptually, *Becoming Earthly* drew on the Critical Zones exhibition (2020) curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel and responded to Latour's urgent appeal to the arts to 'metabolise the Anthropocene' (Douglas 2021)⁶. It focused on exploring new thoughts on ecology with artists, and Latour's (2020) notion of intrusion, taken from 'Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth' (Latour's introductory essay to the Critical Zones catalogue (Latour 2020, pp. 12–19)), run as a thread throughout the *Becoming Earthly* programme (Douglas 2021, personal email exchange). It focused on exploring new thoughts on ecology with artists. It sets out to support artists to "listen, reflect, connect with one and other and recover" (The Barn 2021, min 9.52). The Call for Participants went on to describe the opportunity in terms of:

The Barn is inviting applications from artists working across all media who wish to participate in an experimental learning space which aims to create the conditions to open up new innovative forms of practice that respond imaginatively to the challenges we now face. This is a chance to connect with a host of brilliant ecological artists and thinkers, to reflect and imagine new ways of working. (Original call, taken from *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* project by MA, Release #2)

COVID-19 has forced most of the arts and cultural organisations to pause and rethink their organisational structure, purpose and relationship with their audience. The current

crisis has dramatically exposed the fragility of the sector (OECD 2020), as well as indicated the problems of a business model focused on the economic value of arts. Creative and cultural producers in publicly and charitably funded organisations have already been operating in a complex business environment of low incomes and limited access to government funding (OECD 2020). These unprecedented changes have magnified the importance of rethinking the value proposition of their business models. The creative arts lie at the core of the creative industries⁷ and feed the wider creative sector and other industries in the economy at large (KEA European Affairs 2006; The Work Foundation 2007; Throsby 2010). One of the key reorientations has been to shift focus, at least temporarily, onto community support and outreach⁸, attention to key workers⁹, and to well-being¹⁰. This has required experimentation and adaptation. These priorities have, for the time being, replaced economic impact as a priority for the arts, if not for the whole of creative industries.

In the last few decades, we have witnessed the emergence of collaborating with artists to trigger organisational change, learning and innovation (Boyle and Ottensmeyer 2005; Taylor and Ladkin 2009; Anderson et al. 2011; Berthoin Antal et al. 2019; Skoldberg et al. 2018). Darsø (2009) and Taylor and Ladkin (2009) are amongst scholars encouraging top managers to work with the arts for managerial development in response to issues in their organisations and society, as well as economic pressures. They highlighted the visible support from top managers as a key factor to ensure success and organisational learning. While recognising every artistic intervention in an organisation is unique, Berthoin Antal (2015) outlines three core phases of artistic interventions as follows:

- Firstly, “artistic research of the context”, where artists immerse themselves in organisational issues.
- Secondly, “exploration and experimentation with members of the organisations to push the boundaries of thinking and doing”. This involves artist-driven collaborative work, dependent on the context and artist background and interest.
- The final stage is “follow up”.

A few studies focused on evaluating the effects of artistic interventions on organisations. Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2013, pp. 12–13), in their review of the literature, examined 47 of these studies, compiling a database of 205 organisations of various sizes and in several sectors. They categorised these effects into eight categories of interrelated impacts. According to their analysis, the strongest three categories are:

- “seeing more and differently” (reflection, widened perspectives and awareness of present conditions),
- “collaborative ways of working together” (quality and quantity of collaboration and communication)
- “activation” (positive experience, stimulation, emotions and energy).

Their research suggests that the artistic interventions open up spaces for new and different ways of seeing, doing and thinking and personal development in an organisation. The features or qualities of artistic work are characterised, (Berthoin Antal 2015, p. 18), but the process of artistic work rarely unfolded in a theoretical framework.

Artistic practices since the 1960s, for example, Allan Kaprow (1927–2006), Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945), and Artist Placement Group (1966–1989) have informed artists and arts researchers working with organisations. Key principles include, as noted above, support from senior management, an ‘open’ brief and the ability to work across different aspects of the organisation (in larger organisations, across Departments) (Stevani and Pringle 2008). APG’s work has been discussed from an artist’s perspective, the artist’s position as an ‘incidental person,’ or ‘someone who gains access through an art idiom to the omnipresent universe’ (Latham 1984), which is also matching Berthoin Antal’s (2015) research, which defines the artist(s) as someone outside who can challenge assumptions within the organisation to facilitate insiders’ learning.

The Barn has hosted an artist-researcher undertaking a PhD (2011–15) that focused on this challenge. Helen Smith’s PhD (2015) sets out to understand organisational change

through art, informed by Kaprow's method of transition or 'blurring' between art and life, as well as Dewey and principles of pragmatism. She proposed a methodology for art as a social practice to address how the experience of art generates value. She tested her methodology in two projects: *Fold* (2012) and *Lavender* (2012–2014), in collaboration with the leadership of the Barn and with the organisation's community. *Fold*, inspired by the great care given in paper folding, aimed "to know how an organization works by first making a precise impression into its surface. It was a way of preparing the underlying fibres or structures of the organization for a future permanent fold" (Smith 2015, pp. 71–72). Drawing on Kaprow, *Fold*, the artwork, situates art in everyday life, inviting participation and joy in everyday activities. The *Lavender* project aimed at "organizational and wider sustainability of the Barn" (Smith 2015, p. 85). The artwork engaged with the local community through building on the specific history and living memories of a small local lavender factory (Ingasetter Lavender Company) in Banchory, where the Barn is located (Deeside Piper and Herald 2013). Smith's research created enabling conditions for art to sustain itself as part of everyday life, not as a commodity object or event (Figure 1).

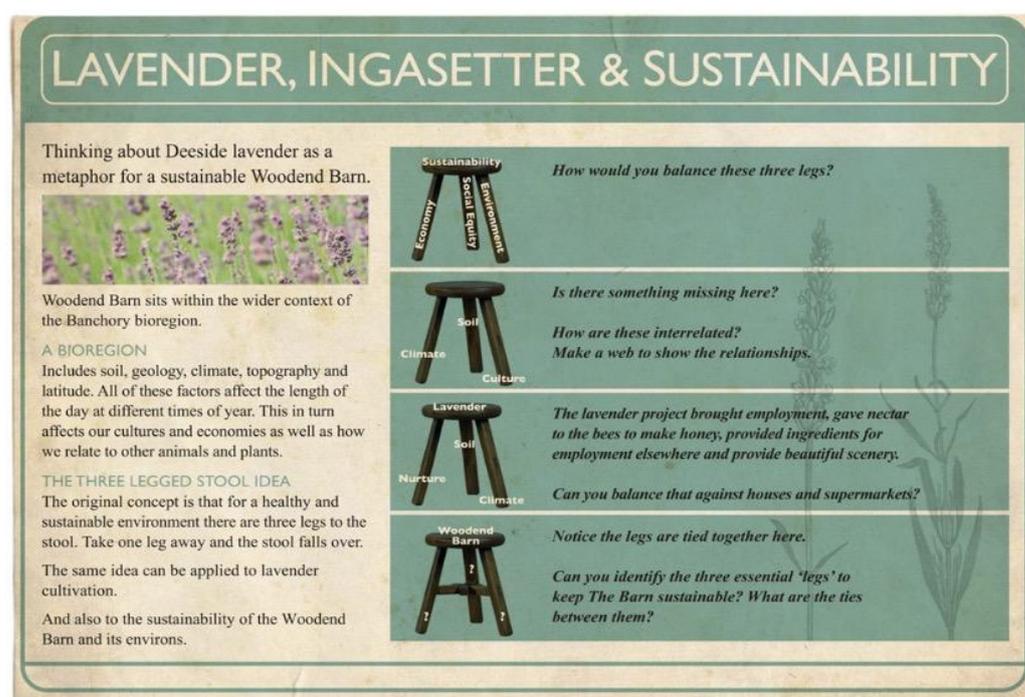


Figure 1. One of Helen Smith's Lavender Posters (Smith 2015, p. 115).

More recently, MARIE ANTOINETTE¹¹ (MA), an artist duo from Portugal (Mariana Dias Coutinho and António Guimarães Ferreira), participated in the Barn's *Becoming Earthly* 'learning space' (September–November 2020). Following *Becoming Earthly*, participants in the 'learning space' were invited to submit proposals for projects. MA's proposal for *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* was commissioned. *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* offers an example of artist-led innovation in the context of an organisation. Whilst it was a 'commissioned project', it engaged the organisation in ways that go beyond conventional programming and invites examination from the perspective of the innovation literature noted above, as well as from the perspective of critical theory, in particular the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant's relational philosophy.

Drawing on the artworks, MA's communications, authors' interviews with MA, and Simone Stewart's¹² reflection interview with MA, we will unpack this project first through the lens of Glissant's relational philosophy to identify what it offers. Glissant has particular relevance to this paper, as MA also draws on Glissant to inform their practice (The authors' interview with MA). We will then position the project within a wider framework of artistic

intervention in organisational studies and the innovation literature. We will conclude with some insights highlighting innovative contributions that this approach may make into the field of organisational studies alongside reflecting upon its value as artwork and as learning.

2. Setting Up: The Project, the Artists and the Organisation

Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation, a project by MA, consists of 14 ‘releases’, a term used by the artists¹³. Over a 3-month period in 2021, MA wrote two separate letters for each release with different nature and objectives: the *in-house letters* (see an example Figure 2), circulated internally to the Barn employees and the *releases* (See an example Figure 3) to the Barn’s audience¹⁴. The in-house letters communicate the process with the team with the aim of involving them in the process by providing more information about the whole MA/the Barn collaboration and inviting them into MA’s artistic process of making art.

The other, and perhaps most important, is to share with all of you the collective exploration (with different configurations) that we have been doing and how this process is also yours, to do with it what you, as a living-breathing organisation, feel more useful. (MA in-house letter #1)

Each release for the audience involves an intimate letter and unique artworks (visual, text, sound, and video specifically created to be sent to the Barn’s existing newsletter subscribers and email list). These letters carry certain visual qualities of blurring digital and tangible; the aesthetics of a traditional typewriter font used in communications are overlaid digital aesthetics of screens (Figures 1 and 2). In addition, the Barn’s and MA’s Instagram accounts were used to channel the audience to subscribe for receiving the releases. From the outset, the project required a considerable amount of time and investment from both the Barn and MA. MA met regularly, every Monday, with Simone Stewart, the head of programme, and board members Anne Douglas and Mark Hope during the 6 months of the project.

Over time strong bonds of respect and friendship were established with Simone Stewart, Anne Douglas and Mark Hope with whom we meet every Monday via Zoom. (MA 2021 Release #8)

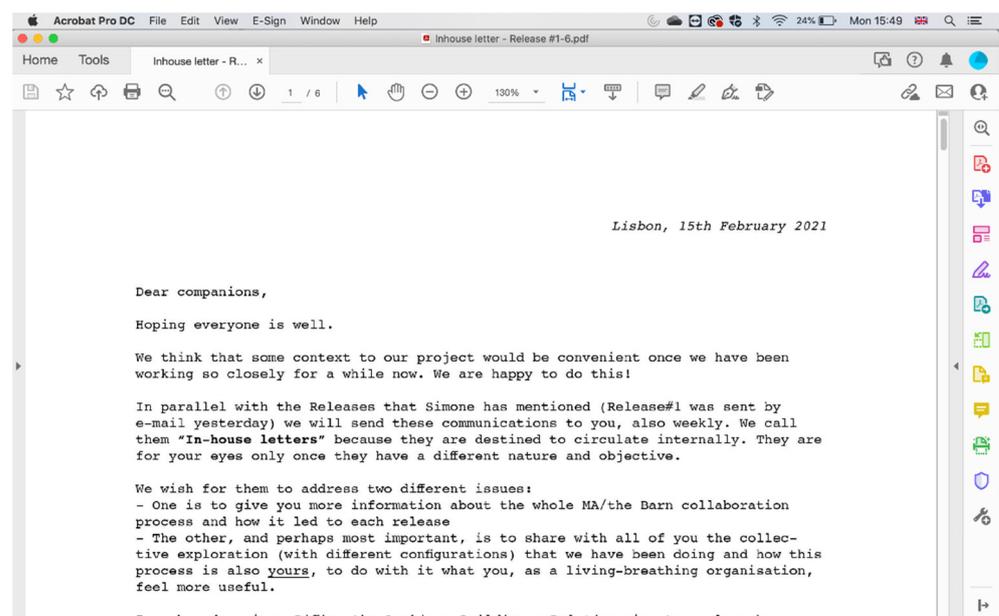


Figure 2. Dear companions. Screenshot MA In-house letter #1.

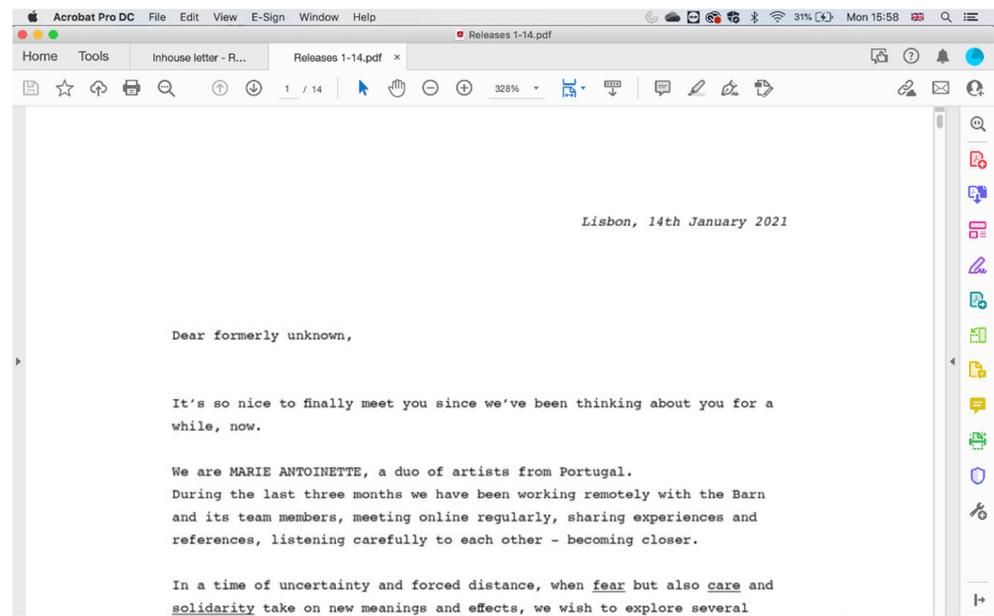


Figure 3. Dear formerly unknown. Screenshot taken from Release #1.

Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation is one of the six projects that have resulted from the *Becoming Earthly* 'learning space' (2020). MA's project has been shaped by the themes and ideas in *Becoming Earthly*, but also within a creative, reciprocal and challenging process of exchange between the Barn and MA. In 2017, MA member Mariana founded CLARA¹⁵—Center for Rural Future—exploring new ways of thinking in rural territories in Portugal. From the outset, MA sought organisational learning that the collaboration offered. The Barn is a relatively small organisation, although the largest rural multi-arts centre in Scotland, and has evolved over 30 years, now employing 12 people in total. The organisational structure of the Barn involves a board of directors, but the Barn directorship is split between three people with major responsibilities: Victoria Layt, head of finance; Cath DuPreez, head of operations and Simone Stewart, head of programme. The Barn delivers and promotes a programme of music, theatre, film events and visual arts, but also supports contemporary art and education/outreach including hosting a singing group, workshops and art classes for children and young people. The Barn's environmental engagement includes also collaborating with Leys Estate to provide Woodend allotments¹⁶, supporting a wild garden, and sharing its site with an organic bistro aligned with the 'slow food movement'.

The Barn, as an arts organisation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, has already foregrounded new approaches and is open to new forms of thinking and leadership. Anne Douglas, a board member of the Barn, highlights the readiness of the organisation for change.

My experience of *Becoming Earthly* (BE) and MARIE ANTOINETTE's subsequent involvement/project with the Barn, came out of (at least) two forms of creativity: that of the artists (alongside their professionalism of always participating and responding in full) but initially that of the leadership within the organisation itself needing to change. The BE programme came first and was a product of Simone (Stewart)'s immense creativity, foresight and experience, working collaboratively with Cath du Preez (Head of Operations) and Victoria Layt's (Head of Finance), both of whom are also very creative and open to ideas, establishing a radically different form of leadership. They had all recognised the need for change but probably in different ways. Without this BE programme, the opening and way of working of MA would never have had any traction. I would be curious about all their perceptions of this groundwork. That is why I think Covid was a trigger, a

spark for a sense of change that was already ‘in the air’, that needed to happen anyway. (email to the authors [Douglas 2021](#))

Simone Stewart highlights ([The Barn 2021](#)) certain qualities of *Becoming Earthly* which are worth discussing and significant for setting up the project. This can be summarised as a sense of a *collective* bringing together a diverse set of artists who could draw on each other for support, *reciprocity* whereby participants listened, reflected and shared ideas and learned from each other and the organisation, *support and openness* to learning and exploration, while also giving participants a breathing space in turbulent Covid times, *purpose* by which participants addressed urgent societal issues with a specific focus on ecology, and had the opportunity to submit a concrete proposal at the end of the learning events. In the experience of MA, this made it a perfect starting point of the relationship between MA and the Barn.

3. Theoretical Underpinning and Approach

Éduard Glissant’s postcolonial non-Western thinking informs MA’s practice (Author’s interview with MA). In Glissant’s work, we see geographical setting has a metaphoric status for understanding the modes of thinking. The Caribbean Archipelago, the greater arc of the Caribbean islands, is exposed to the unpredictability of the sea and unknown encounters of the future, for example, in comparison to its Mediterranean counterparts. Similar to the islands themselves, such thought is *non-systematic, opaque, open to the unexpected*; he calls it ‘archipelagic thought’ ([Glissant 2020](#), p. 26). Taking the characteristics within the unpredictable movements of the sea, this thinking requires intuitive reasoning and invites encounters that lead to transformation and innovation. Its historical setting is tragic, complex and interwoven. It does not have lines of filiation reaching back to a single source as a result of the removal of its indigenous population, the slave trade, and the multiple immigrations and relocations. Glissant calls us to face and to accept such a discontinuous and tragic history in the same way as its potential for unconventional thinking, for exploring unforeseen and for mixing ([Glissant 1999](#), pp. 130–43). This fragility takes into account different insularities and allows us to think through plurality and diversity. It produces a diverse totality, not a unity. This approach generates strength from fragility and new possibilities out of discontinuous thinking.

Another form of thought is developing, more intuitive, more fragile, threatened . . . This thought I call “archipelagic thought,” a nonsystematic, inductive thought that explores the unforeseen of the world-totality and attunes the written to the oral and the oral to the written. ([Glissant 2020](#), pp. 119–20)

The significance of fragility in Glissant’s thinking invites us to develop emotional skills to encounter and react, as well as to make sense. Glissant juxtaposes ‘archipelagic thought’ with ‘continental thinking’. To him, continental thinking is systematic, continuous, linear, and interested in filiation and genesis. Filiation is a major thread that runs through Glissant’s thinking, which he associates with continuity, descentance and tracing. [Glissant \(1997\)](#) questions the preoccupation with continuity. He identifies this as a burdensome legacy in the Western tradition. He opposes a ‘rhizome identity’ as a relational identity, against what he calls a ‘root identity’ which is attached to the land. The former is an open identity towards building a relation by removing traceability and hidden violence of filiation and control. Glissant argues, “In the Western world the hidden cause (the consequence) of both Myth and Epic is filiation, its work setting out upon the fixed linearity of time, always toward a projection, a project” ([Glissant 1997](#), p. 47). Film-maker Manthia Diawara describes Glissant as the “first post-filiation philosopher” ([Diawara 2017](#)). Glissant seeks disaffiliation to break away from the genealogy and tradition of Western and non-Western philosophies (*ibid*). This creates room for discontinuous and new thinking.

. . . if legitimacy is ruptured, the chain of filiation is no longer meaningful, and the community wanders the world, no longer able to lay claim to any primor-

dial necessity. Tragic action absorbs this unbalance . . . [in an] art of unveiling. (Glissant 1997, p. 52)

The right to opacity (le droit à l'opacité), an ethical and political claim, is one of Glissant's key concepts informing MA's work (The authors' interview with MA, and also Releases #10). The notion of opacity has been initiated as a mode of survival against the rational epistemic of enlightenment and universal truth, and the universal transparency imposed by the West. It has evolved as a liberating notion in building a relationship and dealing with incomprehensibility, insularity and ignorance. Opacity, in Glissant's terms, suggests that recognising otherness does not mean understanding it by comprehension and making it transparent and penetrable. It is quite the contrary; it is accepting unintelligibility and confusion. The right to opacity opposes normalising and assimilating the singularities of cultural differences in monolithic worldviews.

That is why I call for the right to opacity for everyone. I no longer have to 'understand' the other, that is, to reduce him to the model of my own transparency, in order to live with this other or to build something with him. Today, the right to opacity is the most obvious sign of non-barbarity. And I will say that the literatures that are beginning to appear in front of us and that we can foresee will be beautiful with all the illuminations and all the opacities of our world-totality. (Glissant 2020, p. 45)

4. Analysis of Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation Process

We will now turn to *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* and look at the various statements within the correspondence and interviews.

4.1. Overall Structure of the Relationship

MA shared the structure of the releases with the audience in Release #10-Walkies, highlighting three phases: 'cartography of sensitivities', 'imaginarium', and 'archipelago'. Releases #1-#5 were grouped under the title of 'cartography of sensitivities' which was described as,

we mapped and engaged remotely with a previously unknown territory and organisation. (MA 2021 Release #10)

These releases are aimed at gaining trust. Releases #6-#9 were entitled 'imaginarium' and were characterised as follows,

dedicated to extending the previously built space of trust to foster a practice of imagination. (MA 2021 Release #10)

This involved generating the artworks through working closely with the Barn staff, oard and involving the audience's participation. The final set, Releases #10-#14 named 'archipelago', were framed in terms of a focus on the shift that occurs by thinking of the world—poetically, philosophically and politically—like a wide set of islands (MA 2021 Release #10).

These three groups of releases and the articulation of the three stages of work are drawn directly by Édouard Glissant's metaphorical language of the Caribbean archipelago and his relational philosophy. The significance of their approach is foregrounded even in the constrained context of using email, streamed videos, collaged images, and mapping interfaces. The works, whilst numbered, structured into phases, etc., do not use narrative as the form of relation with each other.

Being aware that we all share an immense sea that both separates and connects us, how can we learn not to underestimate the DIVERSITY our planet holds? (MA 2021 Release #10)

4.2. Encounter as a Relational Method

Drawing on archipelagic thought, MA offer a different way to imagine the audience as a process of encounter rather than a category of community defined by geographical

location, belief or shared culture. Whilst the *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation* releases were distributed using the Barn's marketing tools, the releases do not conform to the norms of a 'receiving' venues' conventional marketing programme ('news and announcements', 'programme updates', ticket sales, organised into 'seasons').

4.3. 1st Example of Encounter (with the Past)

As mentioned, the project set out to build a relationship with the Barn and to learn about the organisation, its history and challenges in the process. The first 3 months of the project (research and building a relationship with the Barn) and the 'cartography of sensitivities' releases drew on the Barn's history, taking the staff and board from their various roles and engaging with them creatively. Their second release *THIS IS THE BARN* (Figure 4) is a series of fictional billboards that overlay selected quotations from a 1992 interview from a local newspaper *'The Piper'* with images captured by the Barn's team members on MA's invitation to use mobile phone videos to guide them through individual's favourite spots and memories. This constructed a journey through time and space. The 1992 newspaper interview drew on several people involved in the production of a community play. The production of the community play was pivotal in the formation of the Barn as an organisation. MA, in creating a new piece of contemporary art addressing the intangible heritage¹⁷ of the organisation, drew on archival sources and also involved the current staff and board in the production of new artworks (instead of doing, for example, conventional oral history interviews). This is a compelling and innovative approach in its own right. More importantly, it forms a more creative, relational and dialogic view between the organisation and MA, growing trust and facilitating learning for both.



Figure 4. An image from *THIS IS THE BARN* series by MA, Release #2, Digital collage on Google Maps screenshot. The artwork: <https://www.thebarnarts.co.uk/artist/marie-antoinette/2> (accessed on 25 November 2021).

MA released artworks that resulted from several different collaborations. Glissant's relational philosophy has shaped MA's collaboration with the Barn and the audience. This thinking takes art from the aesthetic vacuum of making art and provides an alternative to an essentialist idea of cultural identity, navigating a liberating relation between 'locality' and 'world'. "A new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry" (Glissant 1997, p. 34). These collaborations are described by MA as "*mechanisms of relation with*". Participation by others in making artworks allowed MA to understand the relationships between them (The Barn 2021, min 4) and made the project much more organic, flexible and iterative (The Barn 2021, min 19–20).

4.4. 2nd Example of Encounter (with Each Other)

MA set out to involve the staff and the board of the Barn, as well as its audience or community, as ‘participants’ or collaborators in *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation*. For example, Release #5 (Landscapes of Care) asked members of staff to document their route to work and places around the Barn that were meaningful to them. Simone Stewart was locked down in Glasgow, 150 miles from the Barn at the time. Simone Stewart’s colleague Cath du Preez, Head of Operations, undertook to walk the route based on instructions in the form of a poem provided by Simone. Release #9 features the artwork “Just Happened to be one of those days with beautiful weather” (Figure 5) where Cath du Preez takes her time to re-think her path and its landscapes and her role in the organisation. She discusses the experience in the video (*The Barn 2021*, min 24) and Simone Stewart says,

That’s been just amazing back and forth between us creatively, that I didn’t even know could exist between us as colleagues. (*The Barn 2021*, min 29)

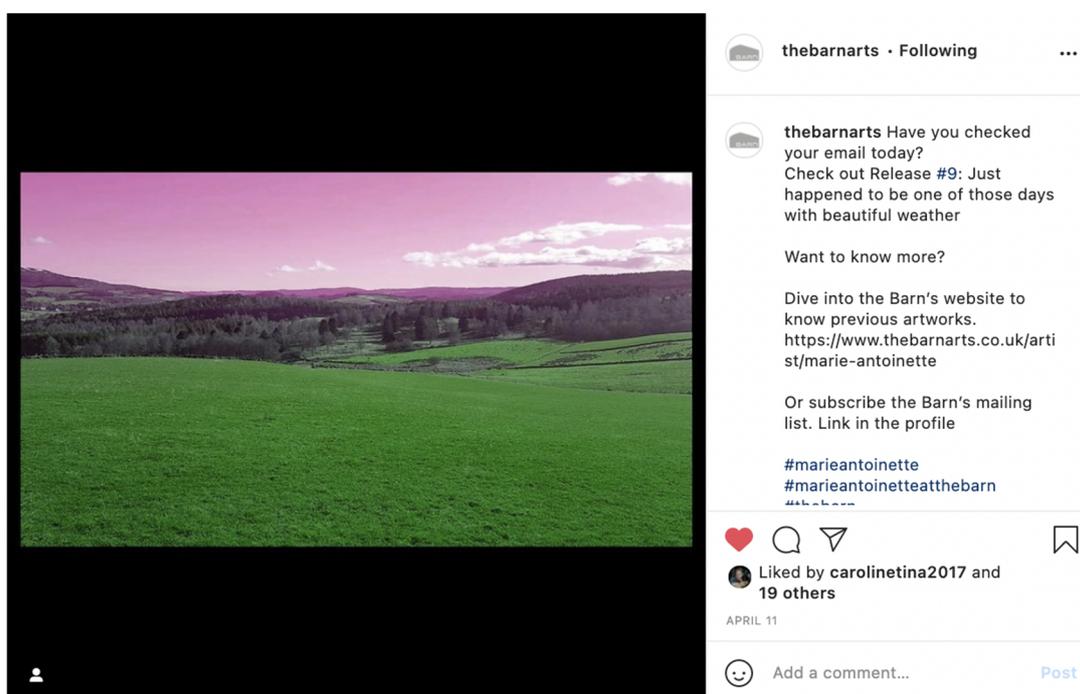


Figure 5. Just happened to be one of those days with beautiful weather, see the artwork: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmyTKR-kq4Y> (accessed on 25 November 2021).

Elsewhere Cath du Preez reflects further on the experience,

Answering an invitation allows me to re-shift my way of thinking (. . .). It slows me down out of respect to her and then as a response of my own desire to be part of that landscape (. . .). I felt led and part of my own journey. (In-house letter #9)

MA’s approach is delightfully subtle and attentive, and not overwhelmed by the pressures described in Glissant’s continental thinking.

With continental thinking, the mind runs with audacity, but then we feel that we see the world as a block, or at large, or at once, as a kind of imposing synthesis, just as we can, by way of general aerial views, see the configurations of landscapes and mountainous areas as they pass by. With archipelagic thinking, we get to know the rocks in the rivers, assuredly the smallest rocks and rivers. (Glissant 2009, p. 45)¹⁸

Relations and remote hospitality, developing relationships at distance, are the centre of MA's work. MA invite us to connect and disconnect the questions raised by the notions of insularity and archipelago.

There is a proximity issue to be considered beforehand to allow a proper transmission and reception. The dialogue between the characters explores how affection, intimacy and (mis)understanding can be influenced by distance. (Release # 10: Walkies)

Facing, accepting, and welcoming uncertainty and tragedy are to some extent what this new world has to do, and these drive innovation. It can be argued that some of the most significant innovations during the pandemic are the new spaces, new ways of being together and new relations. These resonate in their work.

COVID-19 has made painfully clear that the future is a blurry concept where uncertainty rules. We cannot predict when or how it will be possible to safely be around people again. But these limitations also open new spaces and new ways of being together. (Release #10: Walkies)

5. Driving Innovation and Learning: Leading a Process of Tensions and Trust

MA persuaded the staff and the board of the Barn to temporarily suspend institutional authority and explore new forms of interaction between artists, organisation and audience/community. Without aiming to overexpose the process, this has created certain challenges and tensions. Innovation and organisational change entail addressing contradictory logics of exploration and moments of comprehensibility. Artists introduced into organisations drive a mindset of experimentation that fuels learning and innovation (Berthoin Antal 2015). Tensions, unless orchestrated with certain qualities, e.g., openness and trust, might backfire and potentially create bottlenecks. Drawing on the opacity framework, MA challenged the assumptions, particularly of organisational knowledge and priority, and offered a de-hierarchised vision. MA's nuanced approach has foregrounded developing a relationship with the organisation to foster a communication characterised by opacity. This might be opposed to an expectation of art being an element of what the organisation produces and delivers to an audience. Simone Stewart's comments above highlight the organisation's reflection on the intermingling perspectives (releases involved artists, staff and community contributions) and signal organisational learning and transformation (in-house letters engaged all staff and board).

A key example that highlights the changed relationship between MA, the organisation and the audience/community is the use of marketing tools. MA's 'takeover' of one of the marketing channels, email, and in particular speaking *for* the organisation was perceived as 'high risk' (The Barn 2021, min 22). Giving this permission required trust that was built between the artists, the staff and the board (and is traditionally rare) (The Barn 2021, min 32–35). Hierarchically, curators and heads of programmes, not the artists, are traditionally given the *custodianship* of art organisations to speak on behalf of the organisations. They normally control the ways that artworks, performances, events are communicated as they 'know their audience'. The audience is an asset of the organisation. The organisation is responsible for communicating the value and significance of the art to the audience. Simone Stewart highlights how working with MA has been different to commissioning an artist (The Barn 2021, min 32:10). The relationship between the organisation and the artist in this particular project is well beyond an organisation supporting the artist through providing a venue, technical support, or access to their collection. The Barn went on a journey with MA, who called it "coexisting together" (Authors' interview with MA).

Simone mentions during the Barn Arts interview with MA:

To say commissioning an artist to do something, they deliver *a fait accompli* at the end. Or even if you control the process, you commission an artist in the context. Like I have been way more fluid with these projects. I haven't really, sort of, curated them or set the tone in the way I would usually ... An artist

would make the work. **We would sort of translate or mediate that work to the audience ourselves because we know our audience really well.** And we'd do some back and forth with the artist on that but that's usually, **traditionally, how I've been used to working a lot.** And this project, it's been completely different. It's been really much more about the artists speaking on their own terms. We don't have the Barn logo on top of your emails. Your email comes in your own tone of voice. And although I have a viewpoint on it, it's not, I don't control or edit those emails. **In a way, we are truly in the territory of exploring methods of genuine participation without compromising on the autonomy or integrity of the artist. It has to be a lot of closeness and trust.** (*The Barn 2021*, min 32–35 authors' emphasis)

This corresponds to the idea of fragility in Glissant's thinking, which he roots in the uncertainty and vulnerability of Caribbean thought in comparison to continental thought. Accepting and valuing this vulnerability is critical for leading change.

It is a place where both the artist and the organisation have to become quite **vulnerable** and trust one another really really deeply. And that's an easy thing to say, and you hear it [in] lots of industry conversation, but actually, the doing of it is a very different thing and you have to be very present. (*The Barn 2021*, min 36)

While defining the relationship between artists and the art organisation, focusing on 'the artists' creativity may lead to a sense of a binary and bring artist and organisation or artists' intervention in organisational processes in opposition to each other. Hence, the often-used term 'intervention' might have a confrontational metaphoric status in this regard. MA's approach, informed by Glissant, is very particular: not oppositional but equally not ameliorative. Rather, it is relational. Glissant's relationality provides MA with a conceptualisation, not confrontational or driven by audacity but emergent and attentive. MA's practice embodies the relentless movements of the sea from which diversity evolves. It is nonbinary. In his philosophy of relations, Glissant avoids drawing a picture of the world in the binary and antagonistic logic of colonised/coloniser or other/self. An awareness of opacity and having the 'right to opacity' i.e., the right not to be understood, provided both dialogue and honesty (The authors' interview with MA). The very idea of opacity is liberating and leads to acceptance. This is significant even when the partners (the Barn and MA) failed to come to terms and to understand each other in organisational learning.

Language and its role in Creolization are the subjects of some of Glissant's most compelling essays and theoretical works. Language, likewise, is a critical component of MA's work. It is not only reflected in the tone of voice and in the aesthetics of the works but also in the building relations and trust. Most letters start with "Dear friend", in-house letters with "Dear companion" (see Figures 2 and 3). MA say in the letter associated with Release #8,

We decided to address an unknown audience through email. Writing and language became the principle means through which we would communicate with YOU. (MA 2021 Release #8)

And we find further articulation in saying,

Maybe this sounds complex or strange, but we firmly believe that it is the *appropriate* media to explore a RELATION with honesty, commitment and openness to the other. **This is a process.** (MA 2021 In-house Letter #1 emphases -italic and bold- in original)

This 'takeover' of the organisation's email was challenging for the organisation. Whilst 'mail art' has a history¹⁹, and artists have used email campaigns before²⁰, this approach, by creating new encounters involving staff, board, audience, and community, put the organisation in a particularly vulnerable position. The organisation was invited to embrace risk, as articulated by Simone Stewart,

We don't know where this going, but let's just hold our nerve and see what happens. (*The Barn* 2021, min 36:20)

While we are overwhelmed by impersonal emails and longing for intimate letters, using email channels to communicate unique artworks and intimate letters with audiences comes with challenges and opportunities. Email providers often label this type of communication as 'promotional' emails. We cannot yet underrate the centrality of emails in our everyday life and the time we spend using this technology. Hence in this regard, we can call this an example of 'out of the box' thinking, repurposing an 'asset' that is overlooked by the organisation. Using the marketing mailing list to build (opaque) connections and sharing unique artworks has brought contemporary art closer to everyday life and challenged our assumptions around communication channels.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored in what ways artists can lead organisational innovation. We have based this on *Riffing the Archive: Building a Relation*, a project that set out to explore how a relationship between artist, organisation and audience can be developed, amplified and nurtured. It contributes to the research sphere of organisational studies and innovation, as well as to art research. The studies on artistic interventions in organisations often do not unpack the process of artistic practice; instead, they focus on its liberating impact on organisations. Thus, the practice stays in the black box²¹. In this paper, examining MA's practice through Glissant's relation philosophy has shed light on the process of artist-led organisational learning. Glissant's key ideas (opacity, archipelagic thought, and disaffiliation) as exercised by MA, offer a nuanced approach to foster innovation and organisational learning, in particular to dealing with opacity and risk, as well as building relationships and collaborations. MA have foregrounded the generative role that art organisations play in addressing societal challenges. Deepening this singular practice, clarifying what it offers and identifying its relevance challenge the wider discourse and practice of arts organisations (receiving house versus learning space) and contribute to the whole field of art and organisational studies and practices.

While the literature on artistic interventions in organisations highlights the involvement of top managers as a key factor for ensuring success and organisational learning, in MA's approach, involving the entire team was pivotal, challenging learning in both directions from artists to the organisation and vice versa. Through designing small experiments of tensions and risks, as well as collaborative artworks, MA involved all employees in both the decision-making and art-making process, which subsequently led to significant organisational reflection-in-action, and hence to learning. This form of experimentation and degree of involvement has stronger effects on managers and the employees, demonstrated in comments by Simone Stewart, Head of Programming at the Barn. In MA's work, new learning and thinking emerged from archipelagic thinking that is an imaginative and non-confrontational negotiation of tradition, power, and fragility.

A long-term, in-depth relationship between MA and the Barn has been developed which facilitated impactful organisational learning. Their phrases, "went on a journey" and "coexisting together", are reflecting this in-depth commitment and investment. The readiness of the organisation was also pertinent for organisational transformation. Certainly, some of this readiness was due to the COVID-19 turbulence and changes in workload; however, the organisation itself has also been wanting to change. We should highlight that *Becoming Earthly*, resulting from this desire, perfectly catalysed the relationship between MA and the Barn at the beginning.

THIS IS THE BARN series by MA is an insightful example of addressing heritage without being trapped by filiation. It was not necessarily an exercise focusing on the articulation and development of company vision, mission and values as it would be led by a brand consultant or in a company vision exercise²². However, constructing a fictional, playful exercise informed by Glissant's disaffiliation has developed the conditions of

organisational reflection and engagement and provoked a generative organisational vision and values.

MA drew on the intangible heritage of the Barn and Glissant's idea of 'opacity' and 'archipelagic thought' to create conditions of willingness to be fragile in a genuinely committed and trusting relationship, which provided a fertile ground for innovation. Opacity can serve as a liberating concept in addressing misunderstanding and ignorance and in diversifying viewpoints. It is an enlightening lens for risk-taking, dealing with ambiguity and making use of obscure information.

COVID-19 very swiftly and unexpectedly forced us to experience the world otherwise. Yet, further societal challenges, such as food security and climate change which are equally real and urgent, require artists to lead, speculate about alternatives, challenge our assumptions and repurpose the assets we already have. The pandemic has revealed issues with the business model of a 'receiving house' art organisation; more importantly, it has challenged the overall discourse of the creative industries as focused by economics, tourism, and city regeneration. In the case of MA's work, artists stimulated a leap forward within the organisation, possibly more than a temporary change when encountering an unprecedented challenge. This leap is innovation and contributes to resilience (Fremantle and Mabon 2021). The thinking amongst the Barn's staff has shifted notably. The Barn imagines itself as no longer just a venue housing artistic work. The entire organisation has experienced it as a learning space, a development house supporting contemporary artists speculating alternative scenarios, generating radical thinking and practices, and influencing culture, economy and society.

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Notes

- 1 The role of artists in leading through practice has been explored in work led by Anne Douglas, Board member of the Barn, in her capacity as Professor, now Emeritus at Gray's School of Art, and Fremantle, co-author on this paper (Douglas and Fremantle 2009).
- 2 <https://artintimeslikethis.com/about> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- 3 Each of the phrases is explained on the Making Art website <https://makingart.work/about> (accessed on 3 August 2021).
- 4 Learning spaces form part of the educational turn drawing on the legacies of Joseph Beuys' lectures and Free International University and programmes such as the occupation of Hornsey Art School in 1968. Some of those involved in the Barn's *Becoming Earthly* were previously involved in *Working in Public Seminars*, On The Edge Research 2006–08 <https://ontheedgeresearch.org/working-in-public/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- 5 The Barn's *Art and Ecology* programme had previously worked with John Newling and Newton Harrison/Center for the Study of the Force Majeure.
- 6 Critical Zones exhibition was held at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 at ZKM Arts Centre Karlsruhe, Germany. It discusses the critical situation of the Earth through multimedia and spacial articulations and positions itself as "A new turn towards the EARTHLY". <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2020/05/critical-zones> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- 7 Across the EU-28 (including the UK) 8.7 million people were employed in 2018 (Dent et al. 2020).
- 8 See for instance 'How Covid turned theatre companies into community services' Financial Times 18 September 2020 <https://www.ft.com/content/6e83a53d-4a8d-4fbd-b7ac-255d9a0e410e>, accessed on 9 August 2021.

- ⁹ See Performing Medicine programme to support keyworkers <https://performingmedicine.com/our-offer/evidence-impact/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹⁰ See Centre for Cultural Value Emerging Findings on Wellbeing <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/wellbeing-through-covid-a-deep-dive-from-our-covid-19-participation-monitor/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹¹ The artists use MARIE ANTOINETTE in capital letters to distinguish that it is an entity, not an individual.
- ¹² Head of Programme, the Barn.
- ¹³ The complete sequence of releases can be reviewed on the Barn website at <https://www.thebarnarts.co.uk/artist/marie-antoinette> (accessed on 9 August 2021).
- ¹⁴ The authors have had access to the ‘in-house’ letters which are not publicly available.
- ¹⁵ CLARA, founded in Alentejo in south Portugal, is a local platform for cultural, social and ecological regeneration in Portugal, addressing social and environmental issues including land abandonment, local development, and population decrease. www.claralab.org (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹⁶ Allotments are plots of land made available for individual, non-commercial gardening or growing food plants. Much of rural Scotland is owned by private landowners. The Barn and the Woodend Allotments are on Leys Estate, has been in the ownership of the same family since 1323 and comprises approximately 7800 acres/3200 hectares.
- ¹⁷ Intangible heritage is both the cultural manifestation and its transmission in terms of skills and experiences between generations, based on the UNESCO definition. We have used this term consciously because the Barn, established in 1992, is now more than a generation ‘old’.
- ¹⁸ Our translation, in the original French: “Par la pensée continentale, l’esprit court avec audace, mais nous estimons alors que nous voyons le monde d’un bloc, ou d’un gros, ou d’un jet, comme une sorte de synthèse imposante, tout à fait comme nous pouvons voir défiler par des saisies aériennes les vues générales des configurations des paysages et des reliefs. Par la pensée archipélique, nous connaissons les roches des rivières, les plus petites assurément, roches et rivières.”.
- ¹⁹ cf. Gotthardt, Alexxa, 2017. ‘A Brief History of Mail Art from Cleopatra to Miranda July’ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-history-mail-art-cleopatra-miranda-july> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ²⁰ For example Simon Faithfull undertook the artist’s residency with the British Antarctic Survey and over a period of 3 months (November 2004–January 2005) a drawing was made once a day and sent out to the world via email. Arriving in over 3,000 in boxes around the world the drawings were a kind of live dispatch from a journey to the end of the earth https://www.simonfaithfull.org/?post_type=drawing-cycles&p=307 (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ²¹ Black box is often used as a metaphor to describe a process in which the emphasis is on inputs and outputs, leaving the process unobservable (Gulari 2015). The idea that artists’ practices are a ‘black box’ and the need to understand ‘how the work works’ as opposed to its impacts is highlighted in the *Creative Health Report* (2017) and is also discussed in ‘What can’t music do?’ (DeNora and Ansdell 2014).
- ²² www.greenhouse.io/guidance (accessed on 25 November 2021) is one of many examples designed to guide companies to define company vision and core values.

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