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**Paper for Littoral Creative Rural Economy Conference
Lancaster 10-13 September 2006**

When is the artist a creative leader? A provisional framework.

Who are we?

Dr Anne Douglas, Reader in Art and Public Pedagogy

Chris Fremantle, Research Associate

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Ian Hunter, in the *New Rural Arts Strategy*, provides us with a framework for thinking about regeneration by drawing deeply from rural culture, both its traditions as well as the challenges that are posed by social, cultural and environmental change. He proposes that artists could be key to this regeneration process. Working as an artist through the agency of *Littoral*, he has created the circumstances within this conference and its painstaking preparation, as well as through a long track record of work in this field, to lead a focused discussion on the development of rural cultures. Our work has also been rooted in rural cultures.

In this presentation we want to pick up on two interrelated issues that *Littoral*'s work has clearly focused –

- the artist working in the sphere of social, cultural and environmental change
and
- the artist as leader

But we remain concerned about the terminology of 'industry' and the focus on an urban model of regeneration. The 19th and 20th century idea of industry is framed by material profit and commodity. We would ask: "Where is the discourse and criticality within this industry?" and 'Should we be developing a different terminology that speak to an ethos of responsible economics?'

Let us turn to our research with those questions in mind.

Within our current research, we are specifically concerned with exploring the issues of artists working directly with other sectors in society. We might summarise our understanding at this point as follows:

- Artists are increasingly interested in creating the conditions in which the challenges, desires and tensions of changing social, environmental and cultural circumstances become exposed or revealed.
- By immersing ourselves in or inhabiting these 'created' conditions for a while (within artistic processes and projects as discrete experiences), we have the means as individuals to gain a heightened awareness of the circumstances of our particular lives.
- In leading, the artist does not set out in the first instance to solve problems.

Littoral as an organisation can be read as an example of taking this kind of leading role within a new social, cultural and environmental endeavour.

PARTNERSHIP

We have been developing work around the idea of the artist as leader for some time. Our thinking is taking place both as practice-led research, and in a national strategic partnership between On The Edge in Aberdeen, the Cultural Enterprise Office in Glasgow, and Performing Arts Labs in London. This area of work has recently received an award from the Creativity call funded by the AHRC ESRC and the DTI.

All three partner organisations within the Artist as Leader programme work with different remits, including academic research, the training for professional artists, to the development of interdisciplinary work between artists and others. We have come together with a shared desire to understand the implications for those remits for the development of artistic practice in the public sphere.

On The Edge Research was launched by a major AHRC award in 2001. OTE is practice-led research. By this we mean that artistic practice is both a subject and a way of testing ideas and new approaches in the production of new knowledge through grounded, evidenced based experience.

OTE frames and develops a space between the field of practice and the academic to support shared learning and public pedagogy. This space acknowledges that cultural landscapes are constantly changing. Learning and articulating the relevance of the artist's role through ongoing practice and research is therefore a constant, unfolding and dynamic dialogue.

The OTE research programme is increasingly working within a national and international network of artists, writers and policy researchers. We'll come back to some of our other projects and partners as we go along.

The **Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO)** is Scotland's only specialist business development support service for Creative Micro Businesses, Individual Artists and Industry Freelancers. It has four Offices across Scotland and is looking to open a fifth in the Highlands. It is charged with providing a high quality Advisory Service, up to the minute Industry Information and a Professional Development programme of seminars and networking events to support the growth and development of the sector in Scotland. The service also provides training in core business skills such as Negotiation, Getting Started, Managing Finances and Portfolio Presentation.

Developing leadership skills within the sector is currently a significant area of focus and investment in CEO's portfolio and remit. Leadership skills provide arts practitioners with the tools they need to sustain and grow their practice to make a significant contribution to the wider community.

PAL (Performing Arts Labs) provides development laboratories for the creation of radical thinking and collaborative development increasingly in interdisciplinary creative practice. This small not-for-profit company has designed and produced international residential Lab programmes, over 16 years, with talented practitioners across the creative industries, in the arts and architecture, in education, in science, in film, media and new technologies and in research. The company identifies exceptional talents and challenges artists, scientists, educators, funding bodies and policy makers to extend the limits of their individual practice and to challenge the status quo. As of August this year, PAL has produced 110 residential Labs held across the UK and abroad, with a growing talent pool of over 3,700 people.

Further understanding of core leadership skills of artists working with policy makers will enable PAL to develop its role as an innovative training provider for creative practitioners in the arts, across a wide range of disciplines and sectors in higher education, policy making and professional practice.

So that is the background.

Leadership and the rural

This presentation works within two assumptions

- In speaking of the artist as a creative leader, we are not attempting to shoehorn artists into becoming managers. We are interested in understanding the value and nature of the creative process.
- In speaking in the context of the rural, we come with some experience of developing organisations, projects and research through the arts in rural and remote parts of Scotland. This experience, in particular the nature of remote rural living has significantly informed and enriched our perspective and our methodological stance.

The Leadership Discussion

We are aware that within management leadership is considered to be a key to organisational success. Models of leadership tend to draw on the business world and are assumed to have universal application. We are aware that this kind of organisational leadership is an issue in arts organisations particularly when we know that currently the arts represent 5% of the national economy.

In addressing the Artist as Leader in the context of Rural Creative Industries and the *New Rural Arts Strategy*, we take a critical view of received leadership models. Our hunch is that certain kinds of artists are manifesting the skills and competencies of leadership in ways that are different to business culture. In unpacking the qualities and attributes of the Artist as Leader, we are testing the idea that artists are uniquely placed to inform and creatively develop public life.

In our research we are working both with Professor Dennis Tourish of Aberdeen Business School at Robert Gordon University and also with Zoe Van Zwanenberg of the Scottish Leadership Foundation.

Within the Cultural Industries the major recent development has been the Clore Leadership Programme initiated by the Clore Duffield Foundation and subsequently supported by the Chancellor in response to the Cox Report.

The Clore Leadership Programme is precisely aimed at the development of leader-managers for major cultural institutions. This is a mirroring of the focus on leadership in the business and industrial context.

Our work might contribute to widening and deepening the leadership discussion by presenting a different understanding of leadership, but our primary objective is not to reflect on leadership, but to understand artists' practice in the public realm – the specific attributes and their value.

Though it is nice that Chris Smith, who now heads up the Clore Leadership Programme, commenting on our development, said: “You can never underestimate the contribution that artists can make to the leadership discussion”.

Remote rural as a context for contemporary art

During the first phase of OTE we were in fact also inhabitants of the rural North East of Scotland, as were most of the partners. All of the first raft of live projects were located in the rural North of Scotland, and most took the locality and vernacular culture as their focus.

OTE has gained substantially from working in a rural context. The landscape has been a reference point. Vernacular culture continues to play a vital role in the rural North East of Scotland.

Most of us were ‘incomers’ and so there were personal challenges in bridging different cultures, and expectations. It probably took us all a number of years to adjust our sensibilities.

'Inhabitation' is both a useful approach to the development of contemporary art in rural areas and

also valuable in understanding the way of working. Our approach is critical, but our aim has not been to ‘find fault’ with the rural as a context for contemporary art, nor to approach it as a new territory ripe for colonisation. At the outset of *On The Edge* we ‘suspended belief’ about genres and theories. Irit Rogoff has developed an interpretation of the concept of ‘criticality’ to describe the practice of the artist in contemporary culture “the point of criticality is not to find the answer but rather to access a different mode of inhabitation”ⁱ. Rogoff is offering a position from which to “actualise people's inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it.”ⁱⁱ. The objective for both Rogoff and ourselves has been to gain a heightened awareness of the work, rather than to solve problems.

Gathering the Complexity of the Artist as Leader

: Contextual Examples

The basis of our work on the Artist as Leader has been the observation and investigation of artists who work in relation to other social/cultural sectors. We are focusing on where artists lead processes.

Let us give you some examples outside of our own practice.

The Artists Placement Group

One of our formative examples for the Artist as Leader is the Artists' Placement Group (APG) established by John Latham and Barbara Steveni. The Tate web site describes APG thus,

“The organisation [APG] actively sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context, including government and commerce while at the same time playing an important part in the history of conceptual art during the 1960s and 1970s. *The Observer* journalist, Peter Beaumont, has described the APG as ‘one of the most radical social experiments of the 1960s’.”

The Tate goes on to say

“From the outset their notion of ‘placement’ acknowledged the marginalised position of the artist and sought to improve the situation. By enabling artists to engage actively in non-art environments, the APG shifted the function of art towards ‘decision-making’... The artist would become involved in the day-to-day work of the organisation and be paid a salary equal to that of other employees by the host organization, while being given the new role of maintaining sufficient autonomy to acting on an open brief.”ⁱⁱⁱ

An analysis of this description suggests that APG marks out a territory in which the artist was given maximum freedom to engender creativity at all levels of non-artistic organisations, often investing creativity where it was least expected.

Grant Kester’s analysis of APG places emphasis on the durational aspects of this work. John Latham explained the value of the artist in organisational contexts as lying precisely in their capacity to think through the long term implications of actions within timescales that were far greater and more complex than the short term expedient problem solving of the market. APG placed artists within British Steel, the Scottish Office, the Department of Health in London, and Department of the Environment in Birmingham.

Suzanne Lacy

Another example key to the development of our thinking about the Artist as Leader is the work of Suzanne Lacy. Lacy is Chair of the Department of Art at Otis College in California and has recently joined Gray's School of Art as Visiting Professor at Gray's School of Art. Suzanne's Visiting Professorship is part of a parallel initiative looking at the ethics and aesthetics of artists

work in the public sphere.

In Oakland, California, Suzanne Lacy and cultural worker, Unique Holland have developed, over ten years, significant projects resulting major performance works as conversation pieces between young people and the Civic authorities. These projects frame the tensions between the police and predominantly black youth culture. Over time these artistic interventions have enabled the young people to have a voice and to represent their views and experiences within mainstream media. In so doing, they simultaneously adjust public perception and, to a degree, their relationship to authority.

Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison

The US based ecological artists, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, have been working on projects addressing climate change and environmental restoration for forty years. As artists, the Harrisons work with scientists to evolve interpretative thinking tools based on the visual and the poetic. Maps, storytelling and poetry play an important role in their work. They reframe the ecology of a region as visual and poetic narrative. Newton Harrison articulates their process as follows:

“Much argumentation is in dialectical terms, the idea that there are holes, and one finds a resolution between two forces of opposition. Conversational drift lets you be free of that if you choose. You don’t have to think polarity. There are many forces and voices operating in the conversation; you can play with them all” (Kester: 2004 pp 64 - 65).

Sometimes these proposals lead to concrete changes. For example, their work *Breathing Space for the Sava River*, undertaken in the late 80s, proposed strategies to reduce water pollution and has been implemented with European Union funding in the watershed of the Sava River in Croatia since the end of the Balkan conflict.

OTE is a partner in the project GREENHOUSE BRITAIN being developed by Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) with funding from DEFRA^{iv}.

The Qualities of the Artist as Leader

Reflection on these examples and OTEs initial raft of projects has led to the observation that artists are involved in developing new approaches to social, cultural and environmental issues, drawing together cross disciplinary partnerships, setting agendas and informing policy in the long term. The artists are effectively operating as leaders.

In Britain particularly, although obviously across western culture, there is a shift from an industrially-based economy to a knowledge- and culturally-based economy. There is gap between the political rhetoric about this new economic base and the actual policy, practice and value systems. The examples above and many more contemporary cases, highlight where artists are operating within this newly framed economy as leaders, whilst the policy, practice and values remain firmly located within the industrial model and the urban regeneration of the industrial past.

Looking at these examples of APG, Suzanne Lacy and Helen & Newton Harrison, we can observe a set of characteristics that we believe apply to the practice of artists working as leaders.

We would highlight **working from a small and flexible base at a very ambitious level**. These artists demonstrate working **within a locality whilst simultaneously grasping a big picture**. All demonstrate **duration**: a long term attention to a set of issues, if not also a long term commitment to a particular place or community grouping. They work iteratively, at each stage offering up learning that is built into the next stage. These artists **create space for the work within hierarchies and social groupings**. Their work **transcends categories – people frequently comment “I was expecting more art”**..

These artists manifest **particular skills** – communication, imagination, conceptualisation. It goes

without saying that they are working creatively, but they are also **adopting critical perspectives**. They have a complex relationship with **autonomy**, which we will come back to.

These characteristics are not limited to 'The Artist as Leader', or even to the artist. They are familiar in the creative industries, and in other social, cultural and environmental contexts.

ANALYSIS

It is interesting to note that one of the current gripes regularly rolled out by artists is the instrumentalisation of the arts within the current political context. But, in our understanding, this is also, perhaps, the opportunity. For it is when the instrumental relationship of the arts to social and environmental challenges is flipped over that the artists, particularly exemplified above, are able to **set and drive the agenda** and in fact demonstrate leadership.

There are two aspects of the training that contemporary artists undertake that seem to have a bearing on this – one is around “**looking for a second time**”^v or 'lateral thinking'. The second aspect is the **critical thinking**, probably well characterised by Rogoff as inhabiting a problem rather than analysing it.

If the distinctive characteristic of the artist is the **ability to see and shape the world** differently, then it is when the artist is able to persuade others, particularly outside the arts, to take this seriously, that the artist has the opportunity to provide leadership.

Lets see if we can unpack this idea of 'flipping' and 'persuasion'. One of the key characteristics of leading that all the artists we have referred to demonstrated is **challenging existing assumptions** and **re-orienting the discourse**.

We might argue that the artists we have referred to are precisely rejecting the normal assumptions embedded in communication around social, environmental and cultural issues.

In each of these cases the artist not only challenges the normative communication, they also offer an alternative perspective, driving a discourse based on this new perspective.

Let's briefly test this with one of our examples.

We might observe for instance that Suzanne Lacy, in becoming involved in work in a local High School in Oakland, observed that the relations between the young people and the authorities were characterised by confrontation along very well defined and hierarchical lines. Lacy set out to create a 'level playing field' for dialogue between the young people and the authorities. As an artist she could create and construct space that was different from the conventional spaces available to the authorities. Quite literally Suzanne put young people and police officers in cars to talk to each other! Moreover she assumed that she was not in a position of authority. Her work over 10 years won the confidence of the law enforcement services and the school authorities and influences the development of youth strategy and policy, as well as law enforcement training, within Oakland.

This in turn raises another issue that we said we would come back to – autonomy.

The traditional conception of the artist, particularly evident in Modernism, is of the creative and autonomous individual. In our cases the artist is operating with autonomy, but is also operating within groups, teams, and social contexts. In these cases autonomy is not also isolation. Rather one might argue that a key aspect of the work of these artists is to encourage those they work with to develop their own autonomous thinking outside the framework of the hierarchies .

Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison's approach to ecological challenges is rooted in an understanding of the need to create space for reflection on the personal dimension of bio-regional problems. They frame their work in terms of changing the beliefs of people about their relationship with the environment around them, looking not at control, but rather at co-existence. What they promote through their work is not the traditional artists' autonomy, but the ability for every

individual touched by the work to think about their environment in new, perhaps autonomous, ways.

But what is it when its not leadership – improvise on Mark Neville

Playful, Improvisational Approaches

In offering up these examples of the Artist as Leader we are conscious that they are characterised by large scale and long term work focused on social, environmental and cultural issues. The work of these artists has influenced policy. But we don't wish to offer up a definition of the Artist as Leader which is one dimensional in the sense of being dependent upon a long term commitment to a particular issue such as the environment or to a particular social sector such as youth. Certain artists gravitate towards the engagement with social and environmental issues in ways which require long term working and which in turn impact on policy.

Others demonstrate the characteristics of leadership in different ways that may be characterised by playfulness and improvisation within one to one relationships and shorter interventions.

Within the first phase of the On The Edge Research programme we developed a number of live projects within the rural North of Scotland. (The 'we' here refers to a core group of artists researchers at Gray's School of Art as well as a small group of external partners responsible for the development of arts in culture in Northern Scotland)

The projects we developed were not overtly concerned with regeneration. They did not start from an assumption of deficiency or social need/tension. Rather in inhabiting remote rural places in Scotland as artists, arts administrators and researchers we began to ask questions in relation to our role and the idea of relevance of contemporary art to different sectors and community groupings. In what sense could we function meaningfully in places that had little dedicated arts infrastructure, or curiosity, or knowledge of contemporary visual arts, but that were also culturally rich in their own right?

Working within a funded research programme, we were supported in 'suspending belief', of not working under the normal pressure to develop projects on the basis of first instinctive responses and within the constraints of available funding. We started with developing partnerships and raising questions.

Over time and through a painstaking process of developing conversation, we started to uncover the deeper tensions of organisational remits in their specific contexts, and simultaneously the rich, and highly personal visions of individuals in positions of responsibility.

The 'edge' became a space of creative possibility.

In NE Scotland there is a deep sense of vernacular tradition related to agriculture, fishing and the heritage of the built environment. Without setting out to target these traditions, they became reference points on which to build the sharing of concerns and of very individual and specific experiences of change. Can a museum of **lighthouses engage young people** through communication? How might we re-value traditional **knitting on Shetland**? What should we do with a **field in rural Aberdeenshire**? How should we replace the **loss of a significant 16th century painted ceiling** in Cullen?

Different partners including artists were drawn into the process as the shape of projects emerged. These came from the rest of Scotland, Nottingham and London, and as far afield as Switzerland and Portugal. Each offered their own specific character and approach in response to a framework that the research developed through the specificity of place and people. Working with traditional knitters in Shetland and Performing Arts Labs in London resulted in new design ideas. As previously referred to PAL remains a key partner in OTE. Two new commissions crossing between private and public patronage formed the response to the loss of one 16th century painting. A

complex set of artistic interventions in Lumsden addresses in different ways and through different media, the issue of a 'field' in a post agricultural era (Chris Fremantle remains a key research associate),

The project INTHROW (the local vernacular for 'towards the hearth) raised the question "What do you do with a field?" The reason for asking this question was the increasing suburbanisation of rural Aberdeenshire. The question had been prompted by, amongst many other things, working with Gavin Renwick, an artist and architect. Gavin was invited to work on the project. For him it was an opportunity to explore themes he had been developing in the Northwest Territories of Canada in Scotland, his own home country.

Gavin worked with various people – elders in the village, architecture students and graduates, young people in the village, and with other artists. He developed a number of threads in the work all around the idea of home and hearth.

In all honesty the project ended when it had only just started, but our starting points were, within a framework established by Gavin and myself, to explore cultural continuity through an investigation of settlement.

To this end Sergio Rodrigues, a young Portuguese photographer, focused on particular people and events within the village. Norman Shaw, an artist and DJ from the Western Isles, worked with young people in the village on using their environment to make music.

Constructing a Space for Pedagogy

Underpinning this range of output was an underlying process that we adopted that was highly consistent across all projects, arguably offering a distinctive aesthetic underpinning that might relate to our earlier historical/contextual examples. We gave ourselves permission to ask difficult questions that framed a long term cultural vision. Arguably the investment in time in exploring the territory in an open ended way at the outset; and the ability to draw energy from an extended cross disciplinary network, meant that the projects, as they matured, opened up ideas and generated new activities that could not have been anticipated.

We developed a shared space across all five projects - a series of workshops that acted as a spine to support the individual issues and ideas that were emerging within each place. These workshops were facilitated by Francois Matarasso, cultural policy researcher and writer, another continuing partner in OTE.

John Dewey, the American Pragmatist, noted:

"Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas"^{vi}

The process we undertook was by no means consensual. Tensions arose between expectations of both art and of research. Where partners wanted to deliver within established assumptions of what art or pedagogy was, we failed to develop new work and also failed in the partnership. Where individuals were engaged together with the progressive, reflexive development of a fuller, richer more organised form of exploration, we succeeded in managing to hold the energy of the programme long enough for growth to take place. By growth we mean the uncovering of new issues, meanings and understanding.

New issues have arisen that touch on wider debates and experiences of artistic practice, in particular questions such as

- What is the new aesthetic involved in artists working in the public sphere?
- What ethical issues arise and how do these shape a different aesthetic?

- What policy needs to be put in place that supports the development of this area of work appropriately?

Conclusions

Now, we have described a number of examples and some characteristics of the Artist as Leader. We have indicated that thinking about the artist as leader is about authoring processes and spaces of encounter that make us think differently. The examples we have explored demonstrate tactics and approaches that result when the artists drive the process. We have suggested that this might involve the artist challenging normative working assumptions. We have suggested that this might be achieved by inhabiting not just the context, but also the issues.

We would like to gather an impression of how this thesis, on the artist as leader, bears out your experience, if at all. To this end we want to engage you with our research questions.

The research questions:

- Who can be leader in addressing new and emerging challenges in social, cultural and environmental change?
- Who sets the leadership agenda?
- What informs leadership thinking?
- Where is it useful for leadership to be positioned?
- In what sense can the artist be considered a creative leader?
- What might a different positioning on leadership (more creative than management based) contribute to our understanding of the nature of creativity in public life?

The research will take the form of a programme of interviews and gatherings. We are looking to build up examples and case studies as well as views and reflections. Perhaps we can finish now by restating our questions for discussion:

- Give us an example of where you think an artist has or is manifesting leadership
- Explain why it is an example
- Describe in what sense is it artistic leadership rather than some other kind of leadership?
- Outline the skills and competencies that you think are being demonstrated?
- Tell us how do you think this definition of leadership should influence policy?

i Irit Rogoff, *Smuggling: an embodied criticality*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2006, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoffl/en>

ii *ibid*

iii www.tate.org.uk

iv Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) including the Harrisons, David Haley of Manchester Metropolitan University and Chris Fremantle

v Newton Harrison uses this terminology

vi Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*, Allen & Unwin, 1934