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SLIDE 1
Leading through Art: exploring action and improvisation
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Introduction and thanks
I would like to thank the Macgeorge Bequest and the Faculty of the VCA and MSM as well as the Centre for Cultural partnerships for this very special opportunity of the Mcgeorge Fellowship to further research. It is a great priviledge to be here, to be staying at the beautiful Macgeorge House in Ivanhoe and to be working with such interesting and committed colleagues.

I would also like to thank the musicians who improvised our way into this evening's event: Ren Walters and Anita Hustas.

A keynote such as this raises the expectations of a new beginning to a discourse, of presenting another way of thinking about a shared set of issues. The process of arriving at the focus of the keynote has been collaborative and discursive through a number of exchanges with Dr James Oliver of CCP. I would like to thank him very much for his support and work on this.

Our shared field of research is the role of the arts in the public sphere. My approach to that field involves practice–led research through the visual arts. To me this has come to mean an exploratory process of understanding what questions to ask-questions that go beyond the 'how to?' of artistic endeavour to 'why does it matter'?. I develop experimental art projects in response that enable those questions to become part of experience as critical understanding.

SLIDE 2 , 3 , 4
Part 1: *The Social Turn*: leadership and improvisation
Part 2: *Sounding Drawing* 2012-13, an experimental art project
Part 3: Some implications of the *improvisatory Artist as Leader*

The keynote is in three parts: the first sets out a proposition for a different point of entry into public art discourse from some current theories (Kester, Bishop et al): I offer 'leadership' and 'improvisation' as possible, interrelated alternatives. The second section draws on an experience of an experimental art project to 'test' some of the (aesthetic, social, cultural) implications of that proposition in experience. The learning from this project resonates in important ways with Hannah Arendt's discussion of leadership and its implication in the notion of action. Leadership is therefore only ever part of a process, one that is contingent, improvisational. The third section draws out some implications for discussion.

Part 1:
Let me try to sketch out a position.....
A problematic set of binaries

There has been a *Social Turn* in the arts. For some individuals in the field this has occurred in the past 25 years, for others much earlier, beginning in 1950s-60s. While it is clear that the point of art since time began, is social, the *Social Turn* evidences forms of discourse and practice that undertake a critical role in relation to society's systems and organizational forms. This is perhaps a different emphasis from the representational modalities in art of earlier periods with greater interest in offering alternative ways of being. Claire Bishop, as one of a number of influential voices, situates the *Social Turn* as an overturning of the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience, exposing consumerist culture and the shrinking of the public sphere (2012).

The discourse that threads through the production and reception of art in the Social Turn, is complex if not divisive. Is this new aesthetic a dialogic aesthetic (Kester 2004, 2012)?, a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 1998)? Is it an anti-aesthetic if conducted outside of the gallery – more social work than art (Bishop 2006, 2012)?

While richly informative, current critical thinking in relation to the Social Turn, has tended to approach it as a problem of categorization in relation to styles of working and related values. Kester (2004) for example, slots social art practice into art history in such a way that the dynamics of social engagement reverse and displace the aesthetics and values of modernism. Bishop identifies two polarities between institutionally based practices and activist practices through quite different sets of opposing values. She describes 'a confusion', between, on the one hand, 'art's autonomy', which is not concerned with instrumental rationality and, on the other, 'arts' heteronomy', which she defines as the blurring of art and life through activist practices, by implication, having a clear instrumental social function. Thus the practice of art in her analysis is clearly divided between two radically different priorities that exist as alternatives in opposition to each other: the aesthetic versus the social (Bishop 2006: 179).

SLIDE 5
A problematic set of binaries

Binaries after Bishop (2004)	
Institutionally based practices: Museum and Gallery	Activist practices: direct interventions in social realm/ social issues
object	process
authorship	collaboration
material	immaterial
Consumerist modes of production and reception	Anti market modes of production and reception
Privileges aesthetic concerns over the social	Privileges social concerns over the aesthetic

Art that allows us to see the darker sides of existence	Well-intentioned art
Autonomy of art (removed from instrumental rationality)	Heteronomy of art (the blurring of art and life)

I will pick up in particular on two of the binaries laid out here, authorship/collaboration and the aesthetic/ social later in the paper. I hope to argue that these binaries; gallery/non gallery, modernist/dialogical etc, trap artists in what Foucault describes as 'procedures of exclusion' (Foucault 1970:) Individuals face a difficult set of choices around techniques and processes that become indicators of allegiance to one ideology over another. Any straying across the binaries would of course destroy their classificatory purpose, their function in 'controlling and delimiting the discourse' – Foucault again (Foucault 1970: 6).

In addition, a number of political forces in the UK have resulted in some appropriation of the terminologies of social engagement that possibly add to the confusion that Bishop is highlighting. Community engagement, social regeneration and access, for example, are social democratic priorities that stem from a welfare era that is, to an extent, still in place in arts funding in the UK. The (re) emergence of the creative cultural industries agenda in neoliberalism brings with it an emphasis on entrepreneurship and economic value, co-opting the semantics of creativity. Both the values of welfare and of neoliberalism come together in the 'regeneration' agenda where even social development is pursued in the name of ultimate financial reward. As a consequence social art practice is distanced from activism, arguably its roots in UK/US culture from 1960s onwards, and increasingly bound into government policy, a move that has over-instrumentalised the arts (Macdonald-Munro 2008).

I would argue that these tendencies are symptoms of a deeper problem with the formulation of the discourse itself, constructed around ways of working that are too rigidly determined in juxtaposition to seeming opposites. They become closely bound to sets of beliefs or ideologies that close in, rather than open up, creativity.

Slide 6
Could there be another way of imagining the Social Turn that retains the function of discourse but avoids this kind of rigidity?

Categories tend to fix, to exclude, to determine. While fixed points may be essential to orientating oneself through time and space, categorization tends not to move to the pace and rhythm of a world that is itself constantly in flux. Movement, as Paul Klee suggests, may be as a line moving freely without a goal, interacting with other forms in its path. What might a discourse of movement, of interaction, of encounter, feel like?

Alternative concepts: Artist as Leader and Artist as Improviser

I would like to offer an alternative way of reading the Social Turn by interrelating the concepts of 'leading' and 'improvising'. These terms are ubiquitous, increasingly used but rarely carefully defined, nor necessarily interrelated.

In working them through, I am drawing on research undertaken over a number if years..

Slide 7 -10 : Earlier Research

The Artist as Leader research (2006-9), developed with Chris Fremantle, an independent producer and researcher in Scotland, resulted in a mode of analysis that offered three scenarios of leadership in the arts. **The first** (**Slide 8)** defined leadership through outstanding artistic practice, the virtuoso. **The second (Slide 9)** overlapped with known forms of organizational leadership found in other sectors such as commerce. Arts organisations are no different in needing good management, in needing to balance resources with ambition. **The third (Slide 10)**, and possibly the most radical, evidenced leadership in the public sphere through activism interconnecting arts practice with the social and political. There is of course a danger that these simply slip into a new set of categories. However what was important in our approach to the analysis was the fact that the same individual could manifest one, two or all three of the characteristics. For example, Daniel Barenboim, as a pianist and conductor, is an outstanding musician (scenario 1). As a lead conductor of various orchestras, he has manifested strong organizational, managerial skills (scenario 2). As co-founder of the East West Divan orchestra with Edward Said, he has offered political leadership in radically addressing the Israel/Palestine conflict (scenario 3). Hence, the permeability/interpenetration between categories cuts across the tendency in Bishop's argument to deploy binaries as a means to exclude.

Slide 11 Earlier Research

Doctoral Study + recent publications

Improvisation was an important construct in my own doctoral study (1988-92), enabling me at the time to focus on the creative, rather than the technological, aspects of a sculpture practice. (I worked with John Cage's notion of indeterminacy). In the past four years improvisation has re-emerged in my research with a different question: How can its specialized meanings in the arts, usefully inform and shape practices in everyday life and vice versa?

Conceptual Challenges

Neither concepts of improvisation or leadership are without challenge because of what they have come to mean in everyday speech. The term 'leadership' is provocative in relation to arts practice if it is interpreted narrowly as indicated earlier to mean only good management where the goal of management implies either profit within an economist agenda or unequal power relations. Such meanings appear at first to have little to do with the freedom of thought and action that underpin the ideals of artistic endeavor.

'Improvisation' is also problematic though not because its connotations are too narrow, but rather the opposite - 'Improvisation' is ambiguous in meaning. The Grove Dictionary of Music avoids defining the term, choosing instead to provide examples (Sadie 2001). Taking initiative as an individual, the acting for oneself that is

implicated in improvisatory acts, appears to sit at odds with organisational/institutional accountability and the urgency for systemic change.

Despite these challenges, I would like to demonstrate how both terms might work in a different way to a binary approach.

SLIDE 12 +13
I draw on A Story ...

In Homer's Iliad, King Priam attempts to retrieve the body of his son, Hector, from his vanquisher, Achilles, a Greek hero. Troy is besieged by the Greeks. Priam and his wife, Hecuba, are enclosed within the city walls, a metaphor for a mental and emotional siege. Priam decides to alter his identity from regal figurehead to commoner to break the entropy of this situation. His act, a reversal of the known protocols and values surrounding his status, creates an opening in seemingly locked circumstances.

In David Malouf's retelling of this story, *Ransom* 2012, the following passage leaped off the pages on my first reading. It is a conversation between Priam and Hecuba, in which Priam outlines his plan. He ends by saying

"If I do not succeed in this and am lost, then all is lost. We must leave that to the gods. Or to chance. " There! - and a little shiver goes through him- he has said it. Chance?
She looks up quickly. Surely she has misheard. "It seems to me', he says, almost dreamily, "that there might be another way of naming what we call fortune and attribute to the will, or the whim, of the gods. Which offers a kind of opening. The opportunity to act for ourselves. To try something that might force events into a different course" p61

In this rendering of the story, Priam searches for a new concept to underpin his action. He seeks to free himself from a set of beliefs in which human life is determined by 'fate in the lap of the gods'. In embodying the risk of unforeseen consequences, Priam re-enters his world differently. He authors an approach in which he is neither in control nor seeks control of the way in which change unfolds. Through 'chance', Priam can imagine action as indeterminate.

In this story qualities of both leadership and improvisation appear to converge in important ways. Priam has to wrestle with his sense of responsibility and status. This exerts a certain power of constraint.

" He is obliged, in his role as king, to think of the king's sacred body, this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in- aches and sneezes and all- at once a body like any other and an abstract of the lands he represents, their living map" p 43

This is not leadership in the heroic sense. The hero takes control, where Priam acts for himself with no guarantee that this will deliver positively. He authors this action

aware that his chosen course has profound implications for the way his political world is imagined from that point on. He is self-reflective, recognizing a tension between being an individual, 'a body like any other' in the private domain, and a body that is representing others, an abstraction or 'living map' in the public domain.

How might one characterize this quality of leadership positioned between these two modalities of social existence, the public and the private? What do we expect from leadership? Priam embodies a situation in flux between different forces at work. It is the gap between these forces that creates the capacity for movement itself, a lacuna of creative possibility.

Priam's quality of leadership is neither institutionally proscribed, nor completely free, in an avant-garde sense. It is grounded in responsibility and real encounter with the world. It becomes a careful judgment to act between what is understood to be pre-determined and what is left indeterminate. Exercising judgment, Priam steps into another role, an artistic act that reveals a new kind of truth. He brings those around him into a new reality, changing the way they listen.

SLIDE 14?
This quality of openness to the world is evident in very simple acts of everyday life. We venture out equipped with some knowledge - a child negotiating a set of paving stones paces these as a game of hopscotch: two feet together, followed by one foot, followed by two feet together... if I remember correctly. The child knows the game and opens her knowledge up to a new encounter, drawing a line that has never been drawn before with a unique pace, rhythm. Her body extends into the world as permeable not bounded, open to infinite variability. The child is an improviser but not a leader in any social/political sense. Nonetheless her act gives form to this quality of openness.

SLIDE 15
The child's experience resonates with that of the improvising musician albeit acting within a different register. Rohan de Saram is a world leading cellist, working across different cultures of improvisation, East/ West., contemporary/classical. He draws from his musical experience a deeper, political principle.

"Life is a continual interaction between what one person would like and what is imposed on them from the outside. **Slide 16 So one can feel that one is being used to do something, your life is being lived rather that you are living it. That aspect comes across very forcibly in improvisation because one's sense of direction is often being turned towards other channels and one is forced to think along different lines. You may, to a certain extent, guide it – but only to a certain extent**.". (Interview Richard Scott http://richard-scott.net/interviews/rohan-de-saram/ 8th October 1989

SLIDE 17, 18, 19, 20
Slide 17
Summary of section 1

An artistic improvisatory act involves working from **a high level of skills** while **stepping outside of habitual ways of thinking**. Both improvisation and classification are ways of avoiding chaos, the arbitrary in existence, but do so in significantly different ways. The improvisatory allows me to use whatever is to hand, judging **rightness/appropriateness**, where the classificatory impels me to niche my activity in pre-existing systems that work in juxtaposition to each other. Applied to the Social Turn in art, the former allows the artist to move freely but discerningly between forms of practice where the latter impels the artist to choose a category and conform to its shape.

How does the improvisation inform leadership? The example of Priam offers a quality of leadership that, like the improviser, manages a relationship between control and freedom**. Acting autonomously** is important to this form of leadership, opening up the possibility for new beginnings. However, in leading, an individual is also **dependent upon the surrounding context to realize the new potential**.

I would like to explore more deeply what is meant by this difference in practice through an example of a project that uses artistic practice. This project defies the kind of categorization represented by Bishop et al.

SLIDE 18
Part 2: Improvisation and Action: *Sounding Drawing* (2012-13)

First a little background to the project....
Sounding Drawing was one of two projects within a research project, *Time of the Clock, Time of Encounter*, PI Dr Johan Siebers, philosopher. The overarching research set out to challenge notions of community, based purely in spatialised metaphors such as community as a group of people that share an identity or geographical location. The researchers included artists, designers and philosophers working with community partners, involved in re-thinking 'community' as process, as a relationship of time and encounter.

Sounding Drawing was tasked to explore different temporalities that would imaginatively enrich experiences of both time and community.

Working consciously within a phenomenological approach, Kathleen Coessens, a musician and philosopher from Brussels and I, as a visual artist and researcher, conceived Sounding Drawing as an experimental exchange between two artforms and their different respective senses: music and drawing.
SLIDE 19 +20
The project was hosted and developed in partnership with Woodend Barn, Banchory, Aberdeenshire a rural arts centre that is underpinned by a strong ecological sensibility. Its support in the ethos of the project, not just as venue was crucial to what we learned from the experience. Sounding Drawing took the form of several linked events, an exhibition, a performance and two public workshops. - a

series of encounters within three interdependent groupings of visual artists, musicians, members of public. We wanted new work to come out of the interaction.

The visual artists were invited to produce drawings. The musicians were asked to respond through initially one minute soundings, not necessarily pieces of music, but experimental beginnings. Soundings were time limited to one minute for each drawing. The artists came from two different cultural contexts, Scotland and Belgium.

The public was invited to share the same brief, to produce drawings in response to soundings and soundings in response to drawings. These took the form of two separate workshops over a weekend.

What occurred was unanticipated. Some artists responded to the brief in quite straightforward ways. Others deconstructed and represented the brief to Kathleen and myself, challenging themselves to work beyond their artistic habits. The public was made up of a cross section of aspiring artists, designers and musicians as young as eleven years old and as old as 70, as well as individuals who simply wanted to have a go. I will offer selected examples of responses though the whole is documented on our website (www.ontheedgeresearch.org):

Example 1
The visual artist, Donald Urquhart describes himself as a landscape painter. He is an established Scottish artist who confounds Bishop's categories by simultaneously working in the privacy of his studio and in public art works that involve elements of collaboration.

SLIDE 21 Recurring Line North/South, Irish Museum of Modern Art 2007

SLIDE 22
In being invited to explore time in the intersection between sound and the visual, Donald responded that time for him was the seasonal movement of swifts.

...I wanted to embed the idea of time in a performative aspect into the drawing. I suppose this is a metaphor as well because ...I think most people – certainly I – prefer when the swifts are arriving to when the swifts are leaving because when the swifts are leaving, we are just about to go into the darkness and coldness of winter. Swifts arriving mean we are in summer – so, there is a degree of melancholy about swifts leaving and I wanted to deal with that sound disappearing from the sky and the actual swifts disappearing so they're no longer visually available to us.
I see all art as performative and containing time.

Donald worked with the musicians Kathleen Coessens and Ann Eysermans. Sourcing the sounds of different species of swifts as material to work with, Kathleen created several levels of transposition so that the swifts would become perceptible to the human ear. On a wall of the gallery and over two days, Donald painstakingly drew blocks of tone as discrete figures. In standing at a distance these blocks of tone

became images of swifts in flight. At the opening of the exhibition, Donald, accompanied by Kathleen and Ann's improvisations on the sounds of swifts (double bass and piano), Donald marked the passing of the swifts by gradually painting out his drawings, leaving faint traces of their presence.

Film clip

Slide 23
Example 2
David Crossen's response to my own Leaf drawing was an entirely unrehearsed improvisation during Workshop 2, drawing to sound. For Dave, a communication design lecturer and musician, Sounding Drawing revealed the complexity in acts of communication.

"Communication isn't just in the words or the order that the words come in. It's to do with the speaker's context, the listener's context, and all the assumed knowledge that they have. There's much more than what is actually being said.."
(conversation with the author Jan 2013)

The fragility and authority of this moment of communication can be felt in the recording.

1 minute video Dave Crossen/ Leaf

Creating Permeability

If we were to analyse this project as socially engaged art in the terms set out by Bishop, the project would appear to fail in a number of ways. Within a socially engaged model, participation and collaboration in the arts should displace material objects, rituals of exhibition, and dissolve the roles of artists as author in relation to a viewer/audience. We should have privileged social concerns over aesthetic concerns, driving the work through good intentions over truth (2006:179).

A condition of engagement was the confidence to be open up to a world of sensory experience in ways that were deeply personal but to also share the experience. In the words of a participant,
 "Sounding Drawing required the artists themselves to be 'participants' and was based on non-hierarchical involvement. We knew who the artists were, and some of them clearly responded in particularly rich and skillful ways to the brief, but the exploration of the space defined (between sounding and drawing) in the time-frame of the workshops occurred collaboratively."

While the deeply sensory nature of the material was core to what drove Kathleen and myself, there was another unexpected quality to the project that could help to explain the creative depth that this encounter produced. At the outset of the project, we had understood that the visual and the aural operated differently as

sensory experiences. By doing the project, we came to understand that sound and drawing are quite distinctive sensory forms.

SLIDE 24
"I did not want to imitate the sounds I heard, to trace them on paper, translating pitch, tone and rhythm to their graphic counterparts of position within the compositional field ...I wanted to crack a mystery: how to draw to the sound, in such a way that the incommensurability between them opened up in a space they both share..."
Johan Siebers blog entry 24.10.2012
www.timeofencounter.org

By constructing a space and time as an encounter between the two, by putting together elements that lacked a common quality, we had framed a space in which individuals perhaps faced another kind of confounding: the gap between their inner world, its sense of time (the private nature of perception) and the outer world and its 'real' objective time; between the private, unformed nature of experience and the impulse to give experience shape through communication.

This touches on an important quality of improvisation as characterised by Gary Peters, a contemporary musician, improviser and philosopher.
" the inevitable situatedness of the improviser in a work, the contingency of that work, and of the agility necessary to avoid becoming trapped in the communicative community created by it ..." (Peters 2009,3).
Peters is critical of notions of improvisation of what he describes as a 'glorified love-in dressed up as art' between one improviser and another.

Sounding Drawing was undoubtedly challenging. Siebers, Urquhart Crossen and others (that I do not have the space to describe here) targeted the lack of fit between the modalities of 'sounding' and 'drawing' as a new stepping off point, exploiting the opportunity to be free to move in a fresh direction.

This construction chimes well with Hannah Arendt's articulation of the human condition as co-created, co-constituted between individuals. Arendt (1958/1998) articulates the difference between the private and public sphere as an issue of appearance. **Slide 25 " For us appearance — something that is being seen and heard by others, as well as by ourselves — constitutes reality"**
Arendt, Hannah The Human Condition 1958/98, p 50. The most intimate and personal experiences remain shadowy and uncertain unless/until they are 'deindiviualised, deprivatised, transformed in a shape fit for public appearance' p 50. In drawing the private into the public, she argues, we construct a new reality that is influential in furthering experience. Arendt is talking about the creation of a commons in the public sphere that is clearly distinguishable from the private sphere i.e. not exclusively about art, but this is perhaps also an excellent articulation of what art does in the world and perhaps has done for a very long time.

It is Arendt's way of imagining the human condition as an improvisatory process (though she does not use this word) that is important here. We are born into the world as distinctive beings. It is through word and deed that we insert ourselves into the world a second time. This is not out of utility but out of an impulse that is, like birth, an urge that is a springing into the world, the desire to disclose or reveal our distinctiveness, one to the other. A tension exists between the intensity of experience in the realm of the private and, as a consequence, our need to be assured that others hear what we hear and see what we see. Our forms of communication and of action are highly nuanced to cope with this tension. If it were enough to grunt at each other, we would do so. Instead we practice extraordinary skills combining speech and action, developing and enhancing complex tonalities within sound and gesture, finding commonality within extraordinary diversity. The interval between beings is never fully closed and it is the *inter*-val of *inter*-est in which we are with each other.

This quality of communication is dependent upon equality of relationship. Equality and distinctiveness go hand in hand. If we were fundamentally not equal, we could not understand each other. We could not socialize, or learn from the past or plan for the future and foresee the needs of the future. It is also important to note that it is precisely experiences of inequality and injustice that lead socially engaged artists to address the problem of not understanding, navigating the possibilities and pitfalls of an uncommunicative community. (Sophie Hope email conversation 24.2.2014).

Whichever way we approach this, what is involved, I would argue, is far from a relinquishing of authorship described by Bishop as a necessary condition of the category of activism in art. In fact it is the act of authoring that enables a shift in perspective in the public sphere. In this sense, we are authoring at every moment of our shared existence whether within art or simply within life. Effective communication is not simple but demands form and skill. It is fundamentally an aesthetic practice.

Arendt situates leadership as the first part of a two part process that also includes implementation as the second completing element. The two together form action. In this construction and because of the nature of human interaction, the outcomes of action can never be fully pre-planned or determined. Leadership is therefore only ever part of a process, one that is contingent, improvisational, not bound to a personality type ('the hero'), or to an institutional role, ('the figurehead'). In this sense improvisational artists as leader are able to inhabit and prioritise the aesthetic and the social simultaneously, without the need to priviledge one or exclude the other.

SLIDE 26
Part 3: In Conclusion
My aim has been to introduce into the binary that Bishop suggests, some terms that challenge her and others' categorisation of the Social Turn. I have used leadership and improvisation, terms that I have set out to demonstrate are both relevant to her categorisation but also incommensurate with it. In particular I have targeted the

binaries: authorship v collaboration and aesthetic v social concerns and suggested that it is easy to become struck or trapped by these because categorization itself is an exclusionary force in the Foucauldian sense in which practices become grounded and rationalised in ideological positions. I have also attempted to suggest that it is the overlap between improvisation and leadership that is catalytic. Both constructs are concerned with movement and experience rather than the more spatial concerns of position, type, hierarchy that become important within categorization. *This research, alongside the experimental projects, will be developed further through the work of a selection of improvisatory artists as leaders. These may include Cage, Kaprow, Lacy, the Harrisons, Artist Placement Group among others. These artists have sought to both practice and to capture practice through key metaphors: Cage's 'indeterminacy', Kaprow's 'the education of the unartist', Lacy's 'imperfect art' . It is the two registers, the practice itself and its conceptual forms, that have enormous power in enabling us to see, listen and act differently. These examples have enormous potential, in informing the practice in the world of the improvisatory artist as leader.*

This continues to be a work in progress, one that I believe is important not least in the current moment and problematic role of the institutionalisation of the *Social Turn* , but of artistic research as well.

To be bound in the binary of aesthetic versus social is to be trapped in an ideology which insists on their mutual exclusion and antagonism. The literary theorist Terry Eagleton once observed that

Slide 27
"the opposite of ideology would be not truth or theory, but difference or heterogeneity" (Eagleton 1991, 126). By understanding improvisation in relation to leadership we have the opportunity to think and, crucially, to act, in ways that can escape this ideology, break free of the binary. Both for artistic endeavor and for the practice of research such action offers scope to generate new, heterogenous possibilities. What it will not do is lead you to places that are familiar, comfortable or predictable.
(Reference: Terry Eagleton, *Ideology* London & New York: Verso 1991.)
(I owe this insight to Jon Price, Cultural Policy Researcher)

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