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# Generating space to articulate the value of an artists' practice.

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# Generating Space to Articulate the Value of an Artists' Practice



Helen Smith, Robert Gordon University, UK

## Abstract

The expertise of the artist, as a relational and social practice, is unstated in the sense that it is present but not articulated. Donald A. Schön's structure for the making of generative metaphor offers a theoretical and analytical framework for movement from the tacit into the explicit. "FOLD" is an art-work at the centre of this enquiry. It is the subject through which Schön's framework is tested to reveal new ways of valuing an artist's expertise. This project is part of a doctoral programme between Gray's School of Art and Woodend Barn arts centre, Banchory, Aberdeenshire. The author is the artist/ researcher tasked to ask how the presence of an artist in an organizational context can influence, through provocation, their long-term sustainability in the light of social, economic and cultural change.


## Keywords

generative metaphor; visual/artist/social/relational; value; organizational

## Introduction

This research began as a conversation in the autumn of 2011 between myself and a group of people whose story spans two decades in the development of a successful rural arts centre in Banchory, Aberdeenshire. It grew out of a shared concern with the research community at Grays School of Art to understand how relationships, between artists and organizations, shape experience in profound ways that are not fully grasped. In particular, the research seeks to understand how the presence of an artist might influence the inevitability of change in sustaining the case study for a further twenty years.

As the selected artist-researcher and as part of a practice-led methodological approach, I took up in residence, in a studio within the arts centre. There was an expectation that I would produce an exhibition at the end of the first year, a year in which I was free to move within the organizational structures. As a result FOLD grew out of an intense period of mapping the organization and its network of associations marking an important milestone in my doctoral research. FOLD is an exploration into the value of creativity as a social process in the sense proposed by Berys Gaut in his "Agency Theory of Creativity". Creativity is both "the capacity to produce original and valuable items." (Gaut, 2010, p.1039). And "a particular exercise of agency, or will." (Gaut, 2010 p.1041) He argues for the development of a philosophical theory of creativity that sits not just in aesthetics, but "exists in the domains of science, craft, business, organizational life and everyday activities." In these terms FOLD is an open conversation between aesthetic experience, the everyday and organizational life. It is a collaborative and organizational process, a sculpture and installation, a performance, a series of workshops and a book. When traced through Schön's generative metaphor FOLD offers the potential for rich insights into the relationships between an artist and a community.



Generative metaphor is, “central to the task of ...how we think about things, make sense of reality, and set the problems we later try to solve,” (Schön, 1996, p.137). Schön saw this happening occasionally and intuitively, but without any reflection or shared learning. Consequently he developed an anatomy of the making of generative metaphor because “starting with reflection on these rare intuitive processes we need to build a full and explicit understanding of them.” (Schön, 1996, p.149). He carefully follows a thread by which metaphors emerge and unfold in experience. He traces the implications of “seeing as” within concrete experiences in which metaphor acts as a generative force in the construction of particular ways of knowing.



Fig. 1 FOLD 2012

## **FOLD: An Artwork**

Inspiration for FOLD came from the over-abundance of rotary washing-lines, visible behind the hedges of Banchory's gardens; and the details of lives in the washing revealed to passers-by and neighbors. In preparation for the exhibition large quantities, of bright, white, starch-folded and steam-ironed cotton sheets were borrowed from the mending cupboard of the Deeside Laundry. The sheets told their own stories; tiny squares of darning, top-edges ready for replacing with bottom seams, and the names of the Royal Deeside Hotels they belong to, stitched into their pink or blue edging.

Many people have contributed to the story of FOLD. This dialogue allowed the author as researcher to be known as an artist and equally to get to know the individuals within the organization. FOLD became a motif for a discussion within the organization around the future of the visual arts programme. It built trust in the author's presence; creating a significant milestone in the broader enquiry into how an artist might influence organizational change.

### FOLD

Let's dance! If not, dance, then let's fold cotton sheets together.

Lifting a folded sheet from the top of one of two piles of sheets and asking another person to unfold the sheet with you.

Offering them 2 corners and fully unfolding the sheet.

Then, folding the sheet up again. Doing this together, and on finishing, putting it on top of the opposite pile of sheets.

Doing this as many times, and with as many people, as you have time and energy for.

(Smith, 2012, p.1)



Fig. 2. FOLD 2012

In a public environment this everyday interaction became playful, conversational, confrontational, reflective and political. The invitation was often made by offering a folded sheet to another person; if accepted the two people would find and hold the four corners, as if in conversation with each other. They would then negotiate the moves of stretching their arms wide, holding the corners tight with the full billowing sheet between them. The often unspoken negotiation on who would lead by determining the “left hand”, “right hand” mirroring action, sometimes resulted in emotional tension or the sharing of intimate experiences describing why it had to be this way. Pulling and wafting the sheet, up and down, to air it, happened vigorously and tentatively, calmly and with much energy. At some point, the aim of folding the sheet would be remembered, and the partners would bring their corners together. One of them would accept the other’s corners and still holding their own would manage to hold all four together. The other person, released of their corners would bend forwards and take hold of the corners, of the now, half size sheet. This sequence continued, often more business-like now. The fun was had when the sheet was fully unfolded. The final movement would be a letting go by one of the pair and the other would make a final fold of the cotton sheet and return it to the others. This was the experience of FOLD.

## Generative Metaphor: A Method for Social Change

Schön’s field of expertise is social policy. His most coherent examples involve large - scale and complex negotiations between disenfranchised communities and planning authorities. In this sense it is a substantive method for bringing about new social positions though revaluing previously estranged values. FOLD as an experiment tests his method as a theoretical tool to see if the same process can draw out new language to articulate the value of an artist as an agent for change. Schön draws on pragmatism in the formulation of a series of steps:

setting the conditions; identifies the metaphors; story telling; identifies new references; renames and resets the original boundaries. Graham Low describes Generative Metaphor as “an influential narrative approach...to locate problems (conceptually)...and then bring about some sort of change.” (Low: 2008: 212).



Fig. 3. FOLD 2012

The underlying principle of Schön's process is to draw boundaries between or “frame” situations as a way to give shape to the problem to be explored. “If we can once see it, however, in terms of a normative dualism such as health/disease or nature/artifice, then we shall know in what direction to move.” (Schön, 1996, p. 128). Following the harsh “blight and renewal” policies of the 1950's Schön was seeking a new method for conflicted public situations in American urban planning to “reinforce and rehabilitate” rather than “redesign and rebuild” communities such as the North and West Ends of Boston or the East Village in New York City. His proposal acts as a catalyst in the sense that if both communities experience each other's stories, in such a way that generates new and deep understanding between them, Schön felt that their original identity and integrity is retained through the process of re-orienting to a new, single, position.

Schön recommends the following five stage sequence; The first stage is the process for **setting the conditions** to generate the stories from which the metaphors will emerge. The second stage **identifies the metaphors** from the language in which the stories are told, letting us “interpret the story”, incorporate “the centrally important features”, and become “generative of it” (Schön, 1996, p. 149). The third stage engages in a process of **story telling** that allows new language to emerge. These new references describe and orientate this confusing mid-way stage. As Schön advocates through contrasting, or “naming and framing” oppositional positions the terms of the stories begin to shift from facts about the particular situation to sets of values. He refers to this as a “normative leap from data to recommendations, from fact to values”. (Rien and Schön, 1997, p. 147). Now, Schön, says “we are dealing not with 'reality' but with various ways of making sense of a reality. Then we may turn our attention to the stories themselves.” (Schön, 1996, p. 149). The fourth stage **identifies new references and “sees” them as oppositional values** which “underlie our problem setting stories,” by noticing “the presence of several different and conflicting stories about the situation.” (Schön, 1996, p. 148). This “leads to critical reflection awareness through becoming involved in critical enquiry (Schön, 1996 p. 150). The fifth and final Stage **renames and resets** the original boundaries by using the new sets of values to map the similarities and differences between them.





Fig. 4 FOLD 2012

## Definitions

Metaphor is from the Greek *metapherein* meaning to transfer. This translates to the application or transfer of a word or phrase to an action or an object to which it is not literally applicable. It “is a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualize the world and their own activities” (Raymond W. Gibbs Jr: 2012 p3).

Generative metaphor is by definition a new conceptualisation of the world or our own activities through transferring the meaning of a word or phrase to something else. It is in this sense a live process of making new, or moving, to a new position. Schön’s method relies on stories that grow from real experience to generate the metaphors for his process involving transference from two positions to a new unimagined place.

## Applying Schön’s “Anatomy” to FOLD

The analysis of fold moves through Schön’s five stages of generative metaphor, one-step at a time, as a way of opening-up aspects of the experience to draw out language relating to the role of the artist in this situation.



Fig. 5. FOLD 2012

### **Stage 1. Setting the Conditions**

These are the props and attributes of FOLD.

FOLD is two identical stacks of crisp cotton sheets piled high, and folded to fit the shape of the plinths they are balanced on. It is the daylight in the gallery, and the continuously changing tonality of shadows and uplifting brightness it brings to the sheets. It is an atmosphere of calm, the ordered linen-cupboard, waiting to be disrupted. It is an invitation to fold sheets with someone else, and following this to reflect upon the experience, which, like any invitation, may be declined. It is also a series of workshops before the exhibition opens with volunteer stewards to experience folding sheets together before discussing ideas on the best ways to invite visitors to fold a sheet. It is the uncertainty of wondering: How might they respond? How might they gather visitors' reflections on the experience and display them in the gallery? FOLD is 100 hand-made books designed collaboratively through conversations about the printing traditions of creasing and folding with a print-maker. It is the photographs taken by an Aberdeenshire photographer of the author and the chairperson of the gallery committee folding sheets.

Through the precise placing of the sheets on plinths in a symmetrical, and ordered, fashion I created a calm environment; animated only by the gently changing daylight. The space FOLD occupies is carefully prepared in readiness for the arrival of the public. This atmosphere was crafted as a minimalist aesthetic and politely punctured by an invitation to disrupt its formality. Within the invitation I laid a path that led to a set of experiences; a sociable engagement; a reflective and collaborative event to which "they" are invited to contribute their own expertise and become a part of the event.

The stories generated from these conditions in Schon's 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the Anatomy reveal the role of the artist in the careful construction, through making choices informed by experience, of a very specific environment. This involves, to some extent, an intuitive sense of "what will work," based on previous experiences. But, it calls into play, in terms of expertise, an ability to read a complex set of systems and cultural behaviors and a high level of communication and organizational skills to build trust, credibility and interest in the work. A commitment to the idea and a genuine interest in working with and learning from other people is essential, as well as traditional craft and new-media skills used to make objects and disseminate the work.

### **Stage 2. Identifying the Metaphors**

FOLD is a metaphor working at different levels. The act of folding sheets in a gallery situation becomes symbolic, physically "folded" into the architecture of the gallery as an event in time; conceptually folded into the cultural and organizational life of Woodend Barn as an experience. It is also a conversation from which we emerge changed in some way. Julian Barnes in his 1998 novel, *England, England* expresses this as a tacit and transformational experience. "One day they were folding sheets, air dried, from the line. Suddenly, as if to herself, but loud enough to hear, her mother said, 'This is the only thing you need two people for.' They carried on in silence.....When they pulled, there was something which ran through the sheet which wasn't just pulling the creases out..., it was more, something between them...Was that always there?" (Barnes, 1998, p.21). In referencing this quote in the book of FOLD, my intention is to trigger participants' own experiences, beyond the space of the gallery. In this way the sphere of influence of FOLD is extended in space and time.

FOLD creates the conditions for valued experience between two people. It is like having a conversation, or “dialogue” in which, when you have finished, you feel that you know the person you have been talking to, and yourself better; you have heard yourself say things you hadn't said before; you have been challenged and you have challenged; you have experienced emotions; you remember this conversation because it has affected you. FOLD is not like being talked at, or experiencing a “monologue” by someone who is more interested in telling you their ideas than knowing yours; appears to be satisfied and unaware of the purposelessness of this one sided “dialogue”; leaves you feeling disappointed because you didn't have the opportunity to contribute your knowledge and respond to the ideas of the speaker; and ultimately doesn't inspire you to want to repeat it.



Fig. 6. FOLD 2012

The metaphor from the language in the stories pivots around folding the artwork into the life of the organization, and a network of other people I have collaborated with. This process took place over time and involved reflecting critically on the experience with each other. FOLD is a distinct event leading to other events. The emerging theme is a dialogue on many levels that generates experiences through forming relationships. This is a generative dialogue folded into the social and organizational spaces of Woodend Barn. It is not, by contrast, an oppressive or “non” dialogue that doesn't engage us. The role of the artist in this sense can be said to be that of a conduit, in the sense that the dialogue happens through and in their practice.

### ***Stage 3. Story Telling***

The evocative stories told by visitors who experienced FOLD are the source of new language to be translated through the frame of the metaphor of FOLD as a conversation in Stage 4. The stories are rich and contain metaphors of their own. Capturing the stories was one of the conditions of “letting it go” (Unpublished interview, F. Hope, November 2012) to see if visitors accepted the invitation to fold sheets, would they then post accounts of their experiences to the gallery wall, or engage in conversations with stewards, who transcribed these conversations and pinned them up. The over-riding responses are of personal recollections; “The smell of the warm linen cupboard” or “giggles with, my sister, or mother...trying to keep a tight hold of my end of the sheet.” Some reflected on their observations of others; “Two ladies in the room folding now, it's infectious.” (Unpublished visitors reflections, September 2012). “Letting it go” is a metaphor for a liberating openness,



while “infectious” denotes a viral way of being affected by something, either healing, or harmful. To recall the “smell of the linen cupboard” triggered by the sight of the beautifully folded sheets, leads to transference of meaning across the visitors’ senses and indicates a depth to their experience in FOLD.

One visitor left a response after spending time in the gallery without folding sheets and another, strikingly different response after a following visit when she did. The first reflection is; “Unsettling. I worked as a nurse and associate sheets with the purple-edged mortuary sheet in which, we reverently wrapped the dead, before the porter came to take the body away.” And her following reflection; “Beautiful day, so we went outside...to the grass... to fold sheets; run up and down with sheets; singing while folding sheets. Great fun.” (Unpublished visitors reflections, September 2012). The contrast in these emotional responses, “Unsettling” to “Great Fun!” is also striking in relation to their correlation with, firstly, witnessing FOLD, and on a following occasion, actively participating in the experience.

FOLD evoked negative responses. “Weird, not really an exhibition” (Unpublished visitors reflections, September 2012) is just one of these. Most were not written down, but heard, or observed through visitors choosing not to accept an invitation, or staying in the gallery briefly. The sharing of negative responses or more poignant experiences contrasted with the positive and celebratory. They inspired more critical conversations, and a deeper level of trust and insight grew between the author, the stewards and the work through this process.

Drawings, photographs and short videos were made by visitors and brought back to the gallery or put up on UTube. A steward described one afternoon’s experience of FOLD: “They took photographs, and...were throwing sheets up in the air and running backwards and forwards. They were really having a ball” (F. Hope Unpublished transcription; 27.11.12) “Having a ball” reveals the possibility for active, social and celebratory experiences to occur as a response to FOLD.

FOLD found its way out of the gallery. It became a symbol for the organization’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary event. “What else does it take two people to do” was discussed, wryly, and at length by a group of women friends. A book swap on the history of serviette folding and folding “as the art of manipulating fabric” took place. These are immediate and reported events, and there are, presumably, many more, that are only known to the people affected.

The facts of the stories held within FOLD evidence and describe what took place. In this stage of Schon’s Anatomy the facts begin to shift to sets of values. This involves making a judgment in relation to the value of an artist and their practice in the process of becoming a more sustainable organization.

Sociability - one person is motivated to invite another person to fold a sheet, and they respond with a choice to either accept or decline the opportunity.

Empathy - within the act of folding a sheet together there is an intimacy between the participants that involves watching and mirroring the other persons’ actions.

Openness - to enter the arts centre and become a part of its life is a choice that indicates we are looking for new experiences.

Commitment - once the choice to accept the invitation is accepted a level of commitment to the task is necessary to complete the action.

Collaboration and Partnership - in the willingness to engage in an experience with others we are building relationships, which become networks.

#### ***Stage 4. Identifying New References and Seeing them as Values***

The stories that occurred through individual and shared experiences helped to raise interest in the method, process and experience of FOLD across the organization. An interest in knowing how it might lead to a deeper collaboration and influence change in the organizational life of this community grew informally as a conversation during the exhibition, and subsequently, as unstructured recorded conversations discussing what was successful, what didn't work and what was revealed through FOLD and its delivery. In this sense FOLD began a conversation about underpinning the values of the organization as an intervention into the everyday pattern of the visual arts programming, marketing, audience development and business planning. Through the telling and re-telling of the facts of these stories they increasingly became values associated with the metaphor of dialogue.

In my role as artist in this process I act as both a leader and a co-learner in a collaborative process. The experience of FOLD and our critical reflection has generated a new event that is a more deeply embedded collaborative practice operating across a broader reach of systems outside of the organization and over a longer period of time. I am acting as a conduit within an organizational and social situation that contains the political, creative, meeting and physical spaces in which we act. I move through the whole arena, in relation to others, with the aim of creating what I see as a key element of their future sustainability; a critical space for generative dialogue that is arrived at, and inhabited, through collaborative and creative experiences provoked by an artist.



Fig. 7. FOLD 2012

#### ***Stage 5. Renaming and Resetting the Original Boundaries***

Schön describes this as a sense-making exercise, which if the metaphors have generated rich stories will allow for “the integration of conflicting frames by including features and relations drawn from earlier stories without sacrificing internal coherence”. (Schön, 1998, p. 148). This he suggests is how positions that have shifting reference points or values can now be mapped across different domains.

I have found the artist to act as a conduit in the sense that a dialogue happens through, and in, their practice. One aspect of her role lies in generating a set of highly tuned conditions to engage the public and shape their experience. My analyses of setting the conditions for FOLD has shown that an artist engages in an immersive process of experiencing the situation and critically reflects on her findings to inform decision making and communication for further analysis with fellow collaborators. Artists have different traditional “craft” skills underpinned through a practical knowledge of new-media. What is essential to this practice, I have found, is an interest in learning from new situations and a respect for the expertise of others.

In response to the experience of considering FOLD to understand the role and value of an artist in relation to Schön’s generative metaphor a new description of the project might now read: FOLD is relational to the entire cultural, social, economic and political surround of the community. Expertise is not limited to the artist. Her expertise lies in developing a range of experiences through her arts practice in which the sustainability of our organization is embedded as a question and in the process. To achieve this, the artist sets an aspirational ambition for the project, and collaborates with others to agree a collective and realistic commitment to an evolving and flexible plan.



Fig. 8. FOLD 2012

## Conclusion

Devising and making FOLD has created rich experiences and stories for exploring Schön’s anatomy. The aim has been to test the “anatomy” as a method to reveal new ways of articulating the process and value of an artist’s expertise. The process of framing was used to articulate the experiential qualities of FOLD; its purpose and relationship to the author’s research; its context; and theoretical position. Through this experience of calibrating FOLD and the “anatomy” it has become clear that in setting the conditions, or developing the attributes of an artwork the experiences cannot be predicted. And, without the willingness and trust of the conflicted communities or skeptical visitors to engage in an unfamiliar experience labeled art the conditions will not offer up any insight or learning. Schön does not

touch on the expertise it takes to build this trust and create this willingness to engage in a process in such a way as to be changed by it.

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## Helen Smith

Helen Smith, visual artist and founder director of Waygood Gallery & Studios, is the doctoral researcher for "Connecting Communities through the Arts" AHRC funded Collaborative Doctoral Award with Woodend Barn Arts Centre, Aberdeenshire, Gray's Art School and the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University.

After graduating in Fine Art from Sunderland Polytechnic (1985) and Newcastle University MFA in 1994, Smith founded Waygood Gallery and Studios as an artist led initiative in the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne as a programme of critical contemporary art presented in the context of an artist's venue.

