

The Art of With Summary Report

The Art of With is an action research project by Cornerhouse that aims to explore how a contemporary arts organisation should work with audiences, artists and curators at a time when technological development and web 2.0 means we live in a culture of openness, participation and collaboration.

The project was launched with the commission of two flagship essays, Charles Leadbeater's *The Art of With* and Tom Fleming's *Embracing the Desire Lines*. Published online, *The Art of With* launched a virtual debate which was then transposed in the physical world with a first seminar (including talks by the two authors). New York based curator Michael Connor then contributed his essay, *A Manual For the 21st Century Gatekeeper*, which led to a second seminar specifically focusing on the contemporary visual arts. Both seminars were based on comments, feedback and suggestions from the audience (virtual and physical) and a report on each is available online.

Background

The Art of With was inspired by two specific Cornerhouse projects. The first was LiveWire. Launched in 2003 and funded by two consecutive Lottery grants, LiveWire was a landmark project that handed the authority over to the young people themselves to design their own programme. Whilst our motto became 'what's the worst they can do?' the young people continually impressed us with their innovation, motivation and capacity to initiate a diverse range of projects. They were very keen to find access routes for other young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to participate in projects they initiated. As a consequence of the success of LiveWire we developed a reputation for working *with* audiences and instigating ambitious participation and engagement projects.

The second project, *From Silos To Shrek Ears*, was a Cultural Leadership funded initiative. Cornerhouse led a group of Cross Artform Venues (CAVs) venues through an action research programme resulting in the influential report that argued arts centres must update their organisational practices to respond to the new challenges faced by them technological or economic. This led to our firm belief that openness, innovation and creativity must underpin our business practices as much as our programme and flexibility would be essential for an uncertain future. A traditional model based heavily on in-house expertise and siloed departments would not fit this ethos.

We-think / the theory

In *The Art of With*, Charles Leadbeater explored how the advent of new technology and specifically the collaborative process enabled by web 2.0 could influence and transform art practice and institutions, stating that the web invites us to think and act with people, rather than for them, on their behalf or even doing things to them.

People are after a mix of three different experiences when they engage with media and culture:

- Enjoy (passive experience of engaging with a piece presented AT people)
- Talk (experience is enhanced by the conversations and social exchange they provoke)
- Do (experiences that allow people to be creative, get involved and have a go)

Leadbeater argues that the advent of the web has allowed access to a lot more 'do' experiences than before. Therefore the consequences for arts organisations might be that their audiences expect a more open and participative approach to the artistic experience they provided. However Leadbeater also acknowledges that only a small percentage of audiences will want to be significant participants. What will be vital for arts venues will be to get the mix right. This will mean going beyond *just* being open and collaborative but doing it in a way that is engaging, challenging, exciting, demanding, as well as facing some of the dilemmas which come with being more "open".

Exploring what kind of openness really counts should be a stage of this discovery; Leadbeater advocated that organisations should engage in a portfolio of experiments, each testing different ways to engage participants in different kinds of projects. Leadbeater concluded that "It would be naive for an arts organisation to endorse a shift towards collaboration and participation as always and essentially good. It depends how it is done, on what terms, in whose interests. Engaging with *The Art of With* is inescapable and unavoidable. But it needs to be done well, intelligently, thoughtfully, testing the limits of collaboration rather than simply celebrating it."

Following on from this essay, Michael Connor explored how the role of a curator may evolve in our new participative era. As audiences today are used to curating their own cultural activities from a seemingly endless supply of content, we now effectively live in a world where everyone is a curator. In such an environment what then is the role of a curator?

Connor noted that a perceived conflict between openness and quality exists in contemporary art that partly explains the continued existence of the gatekeeper (curator). Arguing that gatekeepers must re-define their role in ways that harness the power of the audience, without losing the sense of subjectivity and personal risk that lie behind aesthetic decisions, Michael Connor then set out to explore how this might be done.

Noting that every cultural organisation has both 'pebbles' and 'boulders' (small events and blockbusters respectively), Connor argues that arts organisations that want to be more participatory should reverse the flow of programme: start with the pebbles, and let the boulders build on their success. The programme should allow the low-cost elements, which can be made receptive to ideas from unlikely places, to direct the high-cost ones.

Shrek Ears / the practice

The Art of With has had a huge impact on Cornerhouse's organisational structure, culture and ongoing artistic vision. Cornerhouse now works with a wide set of curators, freelance producers, universities and organisations to create a unique and engaging environment and experience. The organisational structure that is now embedded first merged education and marketing into a single Engagement Team and then Visual Arts and Film into Programme Team. This then was modified later when Engagement and Programme became one team and a Marketing & Communications Team, was established to work side by side with the Programme and Engagement Team. Delivery is then focused on project groups that took the lead on specific exhibitions, festivals and specific programmes. These project groups include freelancers, external partners, volunteers, academics; what ever is needed to deliver the project. Reducing the size of the core team ensured that collaboration took place, we simply could not do everything ourselves.

Our Relationship with Peers

This new structure facilitates a range of small conversations and the production of multiple projects and exhibitions. Significantly, smart collaborations have evolved out of these conversations, particularly with universities – *exposures: new talent in moving image* became a jointly owned company directed by both Salford University and Cornerhouse; 2011 exhibition *New Cartographies: Algeria – France – UK* is the result of a three year AHRC project with Manchester University and University of Durham. The evaluation for this period speaks for itself, attendance figures for visual arts doubled, significant increase in PR activity, a new profile amongst peers evidenced by number of national and international partnerships.

Cornerhouse's Programme and Engagement team cover traditional curatorial tasks but with particular emphasis, and skill, on production. There is no one person designated as a curator in the organisation as we work with a range of freelance curators from emerging, established and independent who can be institution based or academic. This method of working has been especially beneficial to local curators who have improved their engagement, production and marketing skills through working with our team.

Directly inspired by Michael Connor's essay, Cornerhouse obtained funding from Paul Hamlyn and launched an innovative micro-commissioning scheme that will initially run for 2 years until 2012. Micro Commissions aim to enable the realisation of low cost good ideas and open up artistic practice to a wider audience. Open to professional and amateur artists, curators and producers who have innovative ideas that fall within the artistic policy of Cornerhouse, these commissions for an artwork, art project, exhibition, or online project are worth £500 each.

Our Relationship with Audiences

We have discovered that our audiences want to have a conversation with us but do not want Cornerhouse to abdicate all responsibility for the programme. They want us to be open and permeable. They understand Cornerhouse

brand values and expect us to create a programme that sits within these. But Cornerhouse must be more responsive by:

- always listening
- increasing digital engagement
- being flexible enough to respond to demand
- provide opportunities for participation projects

In short they want Cornerhouse to be an intelligent search engine. We do this in two main ways. Firstly, through multiple conversations with our audience. These take place in many different ways: through one-one conversations, comments book, at events and increasingly through social media. All Cornerhouse team are encouraged to enter into conversations with our audience, particularly about the work. Secondly, through participation. Participation is available in many forms through engagement activity or specific artists projects, but it is integrated into the programme and central to Cornerhouse practice. A great example of this approach in practice is *The Unrealised Potential* exhibition which had a unique take on *The Art of With*, blurring the lines between artist, curator, visitor and producer.

Legacy

There are a number of outcomes from *The Art of With* programme that have resulted in lasting change for the organisation. Participation is embedded in Cornerhouse practice so projects like *Procession* or *Marxism Today* will continue to feature in the programme. *The Art of With* has been and continues to be influential with peer organisations contacting Cornerhouse to find out more about what we are doing and thinking about their own processes. The collaboration around *Abandon Normal Devices* would have been very difficult without the new structure and processes as the level of collaboration required to deliver the festival is far beyond what was previously possible for Cornerhouse. In addition to developing the programme and artists by working this way, Cornerhouse is also playing an increasingly significant role in developing curators. Most importantly the programme has developed significantly. There are clear lines of investigation in the programme so partners and prospective partners know what we aim to do and how they can work with us. This has led to us working with higher profile artists and touring more work. Having re-positioned the programme as a result of *The Art of With* programme, Cornerhouse has been able to develop a new 5 year strategy for visual arts programme, using this research, with great confidence. There is now no going back.

The Art of With action research project continues as a series of exhibitions, projects and a platform for debating change in producer-consumer relationships.

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