
Research and Development towards Effective Partnerships between Higher Education and Rurally Based Participative Arts Organisations

Project aims

The core premise of the project was to explore means of developing effective relationships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and rurally based participative arts organisations, namely The Stove Network (TSN). The underlying motives for this were:

- Developing innovative, sustainable and resilient funding mechanisms.
- Enhancing TSN's current activity in terms of practice, embedding social innovation within a wider non-arts community and creating a critical community of practice.
- Exploring synergies between research questions and capacity in the sector and those within HEIs for mutual benefit.

As originally proposed, the above were to be investigated through three strands:

- Development and establishing of a possible MA Module that could be delivered by The Stove Network as part of HEI courses offered by one or more HEI.
- Researching the potential for a practice based PhD in partnership between TSN and an HEI
- Development and delivery of a 'summit' around contemporary participatory art practice in rural contexts that brought together multiple stakeholders, representatives from the cultural sector and HEIs with a view to strengthen partnership working and develop models to enable innovative partnership projects.

As an emergent model for a networked, artist-led organisation working within the context of a rural market town, TSN seeks to develop responsive and new models of social innovation that are embedded within the wider regional community and have national and international reach. As part of this, TSN has been developing relationships with a number of HEIs and rurally based arts initiatives throughout the UK. This set the context for the project, which aimed to harness these relationships into activity and in so doing provide meaningful models for partnership working that, in keeping with the ethos of TSN, were co-produced and relevant (to both the network and its wider community) rather than parachuted in or co-opted. It was hoped that through the project partnerships would be strengthened and expanded, and longer-term sustainable means would be found to apply, enhance and develop the learning from ArtWorks.

What we did

The project evolved through the three strands, with the PhD proposal and Art_Inbetween summit developing concurrently.

1. MA Module

In 2013/14, TSN had initial discussions with the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) about the potential for TSN to create and deliver an Environmental Art MA module. This was partly prompted by a university in North Finland being unable to deliver the module. Unfortunately, whilst negotiations with UWS were proceeding, changes in staff, including key advocates leaving, meant that momentum waned and it was practically impossible for TSN to carry this idea forward on their own.

2. PhD proposal

In late 2014, TSN took part in a Knowledge Exchange event at Glasgow University and through this made contact with the newly formed Scottish Graduate School for Art and Humanities (SGSAH). This is a consortium of all Scottish Universities, through which allocation of Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) research studentships are allocated. SGSAH run a scheme where by PhD proposals are welcomed from non-academic institutions and they then match the potential partner with an appropriate HEI. Dr Venda Louise (Vee) Pollock, in her role as a Board Member of TSN, drafted a PhD proposal which was submitted to SGSAH.

The administration of the system meant that it took some time to get a response, but eventually Gray's School of Art at Aberdeen University were identified as potential partners. However, academics at Gray's, while helpful and positive, felt that the PhD candidate should be based in Aberdeen for the majority of the time, with a limited (c.3month) period of fieldwork at TSN. There were also concerns about the distance between the two organisations making the project unviable. Approaches to other Scottish Universities did not yield any other interest.



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Running concurrently with this process was the Art_Inbetween Summit. The partners for this were Newcastle University, in particular the Institute for Creative Arts Practice, and Crichton Institute. Newcastle University has a mission to be a Civic University, which conducts world-leading research with a purpose and this ethos sat well with TSN's approach. The organisations also shared a commitment to co-production. Newcastle University is unique in having a critical mass of creative practitioners sitting within a Russell Group Institution and working in collaboration with academics from a range of disciplines across the University. The presence of the award-winning Centre for Rural Economy and researchers focussing on cultural industries in the Business School meant that Newcastle University could offer an interdisciplinary team to support the supervision of the PhD project. Unfortunately, the AHRC chose not to continue its Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme. However, Newcastle University is running a Research Excellence Academy competition this year to which project studentships can be submitted. Therefore, the PhD proposal will be submitted to this competition in April 2016.

3. Art_Inbetween

The core focus of the Development Grant project became the Art_Inbetween summit. In 2012, TSN worked with Newcastle University (through their Intersections research platform) on an AHRC funded networking project called Inbetween: Cultural Regeneration in Market Towns. Developing from this and taking into account significant shifts in practice and the rural economy, the proposition of Art_Inbetween was that rural places provided a unique but largely unrecognised context for participative arts practices and that there was a need to recognise, rearticulate and explore this distinctiveness.

In development, the project team sought to employ the principles and methodology of participative practices and co-production to shape and deliver an event that shared experience and became a platform for future practice. The initial vision, devised by Matt Baker and Vee Pollock, was an event which brought together four core teams of participants from around Britain; so as to embrace and reflect different policy and funding structures. Each team would comprise of an existing partnership between arts and academia, with additional stakeholders (e.g. local authorities) also invited. These teams would then take part in a two-day event, with the first being an open discussion (open also to a wider pool of participants) and the second a more structured workshop (open only to the 4 regional teams). The event also offered the opportunity to embed practice-led methodology, with a residency commission starting at the summit and then being a means to reflect and take forward some of the thinking.

The teams involved were: Anna Vermehren, Timespan (Helmsdale, Sutherland), Jên Angharad (Possib project, Merthyr Tydfil) and a team from Northumberland involving James Lowther from Berwick Visual Arts, independent artists and Wendy Scott, Arts Development Manager for the local authority. Matt Baker spent time developing a partnership with the Crichton Institute with a view to it being the foundation for a longer term, local partnership. Matt travelled to South Wales and Northumberland and conducted Skype consultations with team from Sutherland during the research and development phase.

During the process a series of partnerships solidified and this resulted in additional resources of time and money being brought into the Art_Inbetween project. The final core partners were:

- **Paul Hamlyn Foundation** – £3500 + support with evaluation and initial project framing
- **The Stove Network** – £4000 + in-kind/volunteers support from members and staff
- **University of Newcastle. Institute of Creative Practice** – £1400 + project support from Dr Vee Pollock
- **Active Northumberland** – £1000 + project support from Wendy Scott
- **Crichton Institute** – project support from 4 staff members
- **ArtWorks Scotland** – £600 + consultation
- **Artworks Cymru** – £300 + consultation
- **Creative Scotland** – £500 + two staff members attended and gave presentations (NB. Creative Scotland included Art_Inbetween as part of their year long Visual Arts Sector Review – being one of only five national consultation events)

There was limited capacity for the event, but when invitations were issued for the open event on Day 1, demand was overwhelming. In total over 70 people attended, with others still on the waiting list. Likewise response to the advertisement for the commission was significant: attracting 18 applications from all over British Isles. After shortlisting and interview, the residency was awarded to Jo Hodges and Robbie Coleman. Hodges and Coleman were 'in residence' throughout the summit.

The summit unfolded over two days. The first day used a discussion structure inspired by Creative Solidarities at their event *The Arts and Precarity: Forging New Solidarities*. A non-hierarchical atmosphere was created whereby participants took part in themed group discussions with a facilitator and scribe on hand to catalyse and record respectively. Themes included: Getting new things started in rural contexts; Hinterlands, nodes, distance; and What does a 'cultural high street' look like? In the evening, there was an event dinner attended by 45 people. Crackers containing soundbites from the day were on the tables to inspire further discussion.

Day Two was facilitated by Sam Cassels of Scottish Futures Trust who guided discussion from issues raised in Day 1 to concrete proposals for action. Each respective team gave presentations on the micro-context in which they worked and there were also talks on European Funding (Kate Deans, Cultural Europe desk, Creative Scotland), HEI Funding (Vee Pollock), Cultural Innovation (David Smith, Cultural Enterprise Office, Glasgow) and Arts Funding (Karen Dick, Creative Scotland). The intention was not to realise concrete project proposals, but rather narratives that might guide means of tackling some of the issues raised.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

The project successfully identified an appetite in the sector and HEI for collaboration around rural participatory practice and embedded social innovation. It also clarified means by which this can be taken forward (see below).

Key learning was:

- Developing work with HEIs has immense potential for developing the reach, capacity, activities and impact of a small arts organisation like TSN. That said, this can be an uneven endeavour and is largely reliant on relationships established with individuals. This work has shown the need to develop partnerships founded on mutual areas of interest and where there is a commitment and capacity to developing relationships with partner organisations. The MA module might not have worked, but Art_Inbetween and the PhD proposal show positive collaborations.

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- Art_Inbetween clearly demonstrated the potentials of co-producing events/projects between arts organisations, stakeholders and HEIs. This was reflected in the relevance of discussions to participants, feedback and development of future work. In this research and development time was crucial in building the trust that enabled generous and honest participation.
 - Art_Inbetween demonstrated a demand for a platform for serious debate and development around practice in a ‘not-city’ context between the sector and HEI representatives from a range of disciplines. The methodology of participatory conversation (rather than presentations) was clearly in tune with contemporary practice as understood by the people attending.
 - Art_Inbetween demonstrated the value of critical and reflective practice-led activity as a methodology within research activity.

The main outputs were:

- Art_Inbetween and related documentation
- Significant online presence for the Summit before, during and after the event including blogs by participants published on TSN’s website.
- Art_Inbetween artists’ residency
- PhD proposal
- Forthcoming Research Councils UK funding bid

The impact on those involved has been significant. Feedback has identified that the event has raised ambition in individual’s and organisations’ practice, enabled networking, provided a forum for sharing best practice, which will then be implemented in various locations. It also highlighted the potential policy relevance for issues raised and the ambition to develop work moving forward.

What is happening next

TSN is working with Newcastle University to develop further work and plan to involve partners in this as possible. The Art_Inbetween residency is enabling an on-going critical and reflective conversation and we are looking for potential sources of funding to host a ‘follow-up’ event so as not to lose participants’ voices in the conversation. Partners in Wales are also investigating the potential of holding a similar event.

The PhD application will be submitted shortly. TSN are working with Newcastle University (Vee Pollock and Fran Rowe, Centre for Rural Economy) to develop an RCUK grant application.

This would enable a major research project between academics and partners to investigate some of the questions raised by the event and incorporate some methodologies.

The key challenges to taking learning forward are maintaining momentum and keeping partners and participants engaged.

More Information:

- Event description – www.thestove.org/portfolio/3682/
- Article by artists in residence – www.thestove.org/art_inbetween-as-a-starting-point/
- Article by Sarah Beattie Smith (Scottish Green Party) www.thestove.org/art-and-politics-at-art_inbetween/
- Storify record of #ArtInbetween storify.com/MoxieTheHerald/art-inbetween-the-stove
- Summit invite and info www.thestove.org/event/art_inbetween-summit/
- Summit in pictures www.flickr.com/photos/thestove/albums/72157666036281891