Inside, Outside, Beyond:
Artistic Leadership for Contradictory Times

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice

A provocation paper for Bluecoat, Liverpool

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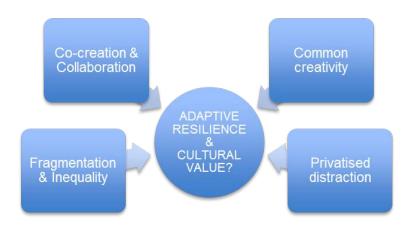*"I'm definitely perhaps a contradictory person, but I operate in very contradictory times."*

- Rem Koolhaas, architect

1. Introduction

This short paper is a response to a challenge set by Mary Cloake, Chief Executive of Bluecoat to consider the changing nature of artistic leadership, and how it might relate to both cultural concerns and organisational purpose. It sets out a take on the current context, the demands placed on leaders, and a framework for leadership I hope is useful in focusing effort.

This paper was sharpened by two 'think in' discussions held at Bluecoat. I want to thank Martin Drury, Matt Fenton, Joanne Irvine and Kathy McArdle for their reflections. Thanks also to the cultural leaders I have worked with in recent times, whose insights inform my argument here. Particular thanks to Mary Cloake for her input, support and original invitation.

2. Contradictory, contrary, times

If we lived in a simple, peaceful, harmonious world, would artistic leadership be a straight-forward job? I very much doubt it. Artistic leadership expresses itself in a myriad of ways, and finds its necessary homes via similarly countless routes. It takes shape in and from the individuals and teams that make and share its results. It is a voice or group of voices, an atmosphere, an argument, a composition emerging over lifetimes, as well as programmes, plans and budgets. It isn't always smooth or graceful. But it echoes.

The forces shaping artistic leadership in the UK are high-tension and often-contradictory currents in politics, people, work, technology, business and education. Each brings both opportunity and damage, abundance and want. Leadership in this context is neither a simple set of tasks or capabilities, nor a complicated set of interrelated actions and projects. Instead it is ever more concerned with what can be termed complex problems, where solutions and results are unpredictable and bringing together multiple imaginations and perspectives a core skill.

People increasingly integrate creative activity into their everyday lives, although they may not call it Art or Culture. Films, books, music are made on objects that live in our pockets, the means of production and distribution in all our hands. At the same time, there is concern that social media distract us, commodify us and distance us from each other. Recorded culture, new and historical, is available to people at the click of a button, often free or very low cost which has damaged artists' livelihoods and industry business models. Art form distinctions are now found less on minds than monitoring forms. Much art is likely to be 'socially engaged' in some way, rather than be purely aesthetic, spiritual or commercial.

Digital technology has encouraged a culture of co-creation and collaboration. Artists, makers and audiences are increasingly joint participants in what happens or is made. Some building-based organisations are evolving into (or back into) shared spaces for everyday creativity, play and making, homes for ideas, creative people, and tools, from 3D printers to stages. Meanwhile, digital technology has transformed processes from buying a ticket to enjoying a performance at national theatres and opera houses, changing what people demand in terms of information and access. Where ownership (of books or records, say) was once central to 'cultural capital', there is a move to rental, subscription and less tangible modes of enjoyment, displayed in different ways. ('Admire my playlists,' rather than 'Admire my record collection.')

This conflicted flourishing is happening at a time of social unease, of gentrification, poverty and exclusion alongside great wealth and growth in the creative industries. Despite policy consensus on the benefits of a more diverse sector, including for social mobility, some types of people continue to dominate and others continue to be under-represented. Longstanding inequalities in who gets to be an arts professional deepen.

Cultural policy emphasises equality and diversity, engagement and civic contribution as well as 'great arts and culture' and flourishing creative industries. But there is a persistent dissonance between rhetoric, desire and the patterns that result. Few people have promoted diversity as much as Sir Peter Bazelgette, yet in a valedictory article he explained without apparent irony how he drew confidence when dealing with George Osborne from a portrait of Disraeli, Disraeli having loaned his ancestor £3m for London's sewers. How far are we from an Arts Council chair more likely to recognise their roots in the cleaners at Westminster than the portraits? Evidence of the systemic narrowness of the cultural workforce suggests a way off.

Changes to school curricula and to higher education, tightening of the benefits system and narrowing of routes into the workforce due to reductions in public funding are affecting people without middle class family support. This corresponds with growing equality gaps in many areas of society, which are especially important to the arts given how gender, education, disability and class affect engagement, participation and who progresses within the sector.

Alongside this inequality is a growing fragmentation. Young people find it hard to establish the kinds of jobs and homes that were seen as standard previously, and can resent the Boomer generation. More people live alone. Politics is also polarising, any consensus fraying in face of global crises and varied fundamentalisms. (The EU referendum, Brexit process and inquest, 2017 General Election, and Trump administration in the US came after my initial drafts of this paper. Bluntly, this proved too much depressing messiness for me to keep revising to show how they illustrate my point.)

Climate change is having physical and psychological effects, with many artists responding urgently. The world is more interconnected and internationalised, and Britain richly diverse, but some define their identity in narrower ways just as others embrace it. Divides and tensions result, with many feeling ignored, sidelined, frustrated or just puzzled. Culture can reflect, react to and reimagine these crises, though notions of instrumentalism personally ('well-being'), locally ('place-making', 'regeneration') and nationally ('economic return') are contested.

This fragmentation is reflected in a more personalised or privatised society, impacting public spaces and private expenditure. People increasingly expect – albeit unwilling - to pay individually for things previously paid for collectively through taxes. As seen in higher education, this is transforming relationships, turning communal activities into customer transactions. Expectations of 'the arts experience' are changing, some might say. However, these may lead to new income streams to replace public funding – but at what cost?

2. A richly complex job becoming simply painfully complicated?

It is perhaps no surprise that many boards and funders then seek a charismatic super-being to lead their organisation, or that others look for art form or sectoral leadership defined by personal charisma and institutional title. An artistic director has always needed to balance the books whilst satisfying their board, audiences, customers, funders and partners, and investing in the future by developing artists and staff, not to mention the reserves. But those pressures are now multiplied by the contradictory forces described earlier.
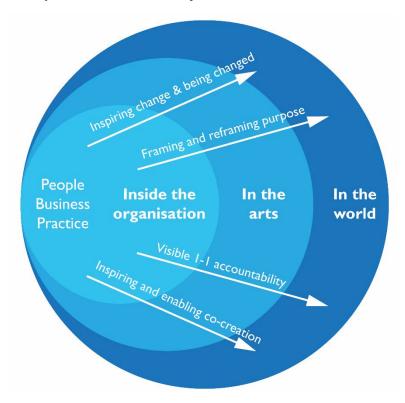
Studying the long lists of essential characteristics in artistic director/chief executive job descriptions cannot help but beg the question: 'Is being an artistic director or leader now a job no single ordinary human can do?' In many circumstances the answer must be no, hence a growing range of ways to split the roles across two or more people. (This paper does not attempt to assess the different models around this, but I do believe more collaborative models may be one response to the scale of the task.)

Many jobs are becoming ever more demanding. This in turn is hampering the diversification of the leadership, necessary for the creative health of the sector. It will take a fundamental redesign of job roles and working culture to enable people with, for instance, potentially limiting physical or mental health conditions, or families and other caring responsibilities, to become and remain leaders. If the task cannot be made less demanding, the way in which it is delivered must be more flexible. This is currently beyond much of a sector where long hours, frequent travel, low pay and precarity are taken as read. Many fine words are spoken. Recruitment and employment practices, however, continue to leave the parsnips unbuttered.

There is a risk that the behaviours needed to really address complex 'wicked problems' are given too little emphasis, that the subtly complex way in which relationships, conversations and setting lead to the creation and sharing of great work becomes hemmed in by an ever longer list of responsibilities. Operating in a complex and ever-adapting system requires more a set of capacities than a list of duties - capacities for integration and adaptation as well as creativity and management. How to make the most of the opportunities whilst not being eat up by the tensions, how to use shared creativity within communities, and how to make positive change in any worrying local or global dynamics, for instance?

The next section sets out a simple framework for artistic leadership in the future, one which can be used to develop ways of working, organisations and networks which can be adaptive and resilient and which can produce the kind of rich cultural value desired. (I use 'cultural value' here as shorthand for the very broadest set of definitions of what art and people can do. – we don't, at least for my purposes here, have to agree.)

3: Artistic Leadership Inside, Outside, Beyond

1 A Pictorial Representation of The Argument

Before describing the different capacities and roles I believe characterise the best of artistic leadership today, I want to make one general caveat. Leadership in the arts, as in other fields, is increasingly generated by collaborative teams, rather than by the Great (Wo)Man Leader. Counter-examples of individual impact abound, of course, and an almost sentimental attachment to the idea lingers. (Especially amongst senior leaders, interestingly, not to say ironically.) But increasingly artistic leadership takes both individuals and the teams they are part of, and is less hierarchical than in the past, so what follows should be read as applying generally. Capacity begins with individuals, of course, and most roles will continue to be held by one person at a time. It is for individuals to build their own capacity and skills, but also to ask how they can build that of those around them and when they wish to share the load.

What are the domains of Artistic Leadership now?

There are three key domains artistic leadership must influence to make the most authentic and lasting impact. (By impact I mean, put very briefly and not restrictively, successfully adding art or artistic processes of worth to the world and developing a community of artists, audiences and others around places, practices or ideas in order to make a positive contribution.)

The first is **inside the organisation**. (What follows assumes for the purposes of brevity that leaders sit within some kind of organisation – this need not be a business or company as typically constituted, but could be a network, a coalition, a gang, a band, a one-off gathering or even a global conglomerate. It could even be a sole trader such as myself. I make no assumption, here, about the type of organisation – having a hunch that the arts charity model will diversify further over coming decades.)

To operate inside the organisation, there are three key areas for artistic leadership to be aware of, which I would summarise as developing **people**, building the **business** and nurturing **practice.** These cover the crucial leadership roles of defining team roles or structure, business strategy and alignment, decision-making and knowing the factors influencing the organisation. They include artistic disciplines, as well as the business acumen fit for a period where every penny earned counts, and new sources must, for many, supplement previous income streams without damaging mission. They would also apply to relationships with artists and audiences, who might be thought of as on the cusp of 'inside' and 'outside'.

The second domain is **outside the organisation, in the arts**. Each act of leadership, each creation or activity enabled, has the potential to change an art form, or shift thinking in the arts and cultural sector, or to reinforce current practice. Leaders operate in the arts as well as in their own organisation's work de facto: every behaviour models the sector for those in or considering it. This means that the way in which leaders develop relationships with people including makers and audiences, the way they run their business and the way they practice their art has an effect at a sectoral, public and social level. (Even if for some the end result is irrelevance.) To give just one example, the extent to which leaders who have been supported to develop and achieve status within the sector mentor others – whether they 'pull up the ladder' or help others up – is crucial to the well-being of the sector. In a collaborative age the contribution people make to broader agendas is also vital. As the leadership moves outside the organisation it becomes more about sharing or creating shared platforms or tools with which others can be creative and make culture than about individual performance.

The third domain is **beyond the organisation, in the world**. The best contemporary leaders, it has been argued, lead 'beyond their authority', achieving things through influence more than control. Great social changes arise not from leaders deciding what should be made to happen, but by leadership that brings people into the process and reaches beyond traditional borders. This is where artistic leadership can become civic leadership, influencing a particular town, city or region, or social leadership changing minds and hearts. Think of the influence of an artist like David Bowie on attitudes to creation, sexuality and identity, for instance, or of many arts leaders active in city developments, from Margate to Dundee and all points between. At its most prosaic-seeming this can manifest itself as an arts leader getting involved in the local chamber of commerce. At its deepest, places become identified with artistic leaders of all kinds, inspiring everything from emulation to tourism.

Capacities and roles

To operate powerfully and influentially in all of these domains, but especially the second and third, there are four capacities and roles I believe must be nurtured and lived up to.

Visible accountability

Leaders step forward and take responsibility for situations, work, organisations, other people. They are more likely to say 'if not me, who?', than, 'I'm sure someone will do it.' There is a degree of self-confidence implied in this, although it is often illusory, a way of covering up Imposter Syndrome. It is one of the reasons for the persistence of the Great Leader model: individuals do step out from the crowd. This also provides a figurehead for establishing and driving forward a vision, and clear accountability: a head that will roll as well as a face for the poster. None of this means they do things alone or do not, in our current context, need to work with others to achieve things. But they take responsibility and make themselves accountable for doing that.

This has practical manifestations. The best leadership creates visible accountability for individuals and their organisations or networks, one-to-one or through the group. This means artistic leaders have a responsibility to artists for equitable pay and collaboration, to the communities they serve for what is produced and shared, and how, for what opportunities are created for making together. They have a responsibility to funders and the public, including those who never see their work. They should make themselves accountable for the diversity of their staff and their programmes, and to those people with whom they choose, through their practices, not to work. This is essentially about developing high quality relationships built on trust, and then making the accountability within those relationships as visible as possible.

The difficulty for artistic leadership in the middle of the 21st century will be that the most vital part of the job, developing ways of turning complex problems into positive change, is least likely to have direct consequences. Work within the organisation currently often trumps the work in the arts and in the world in terms of accountability. To put it crudely, a leader is currently far more likely to get sacked if they run up a deficit or have a series of artistic failures than if they allow their organisation to be irrelevant to most of its community. (Although arguably that makes the first two things more likely.) To meet the challenges of the changing environment in ways that create adaptive resilience and cultural value for society as a whole this needs to change. Leaders must consider a new 'triple bottom line' – not just their organisation's, but those of their sectors and their communities.

To be genuinely accountable, the artistic leader has to develop a set of values that operate inside the organisation, outside in the arts and beyond in the world. Then they need to know and communicate how they mean to live up to them, and do that consistently.

Framing and reframing purpose

One of the aspects of traditional leadership models in simple or complicated settings is defining the direction to be taken. In our contradictory and complex times, however, the most powerful leaders are as concerned with framing and reframing purpose as they are with timelines. Artistic leaders will find the best uses for crisis, as the biggest problems can lead to the biggest breakthroughs. The artistic leader's role is to lead the reframing of the purpose – what is it we are doing here and why? – as much as decide exactly what to do next.

This has layers related to the domains set out earlier. What is the purpose of the organisation or the artworks or activities, how do they relate to other aspects of society – social, moral, financial, ecological, psychological and so on – and what impact might they have in the world? To operate well the artistic leader needs to be as skilled at asking questions as answering them. They need to take in information, patterns and hints from data or from observing how people act, and help others synthesise them. They need to be able to draw and redraw the frames and know how to stop when a useful-enough framework has been reached.

There is something here, I suggest, shared with the essential creative and cultural impulse: sensing and sense-making, inside the organisation, outside in the arts and beyond in the world. This process recurs in each formal or creative decision, in the shape of a programme, in the mix of artists and others involved, in debates and shared learning within the sector, and echoes out into the world. Art can help people make sense of local, national and global issues, or of current and eternal themes, but also make them question what they thought before. Leaders also have a role in introducing new modes of sensing and sense-making into the culture: new modes of art-making lead to new ways of imagining both art and world.

Inspiring and enabling co-creation

Arts and culture are acts of collective interpretation: a key skill for working with complex problems. The complexity of the environment for culture is such that more than one perspective is generally required, although there may be times this needs to be simplified to the stillness of one person's final decision or contemplation, and times an individual vision cuts through the noise. The artistic leader now has, therefore, to inspire and enable co-creation.

This can be at different levels. Some works and activity will be entirely co-created, some not, although bringing them to public attention generally involves a range of people. Some programmes and projects will involve co-creation or co-curation, and others will be 'authored'. Not every organisation will make co-creation part of its artistic vision or business model.

To work inside the organisation, the leader must inspire a team, with appropriate delegation and accountability. To work outside in the arts, the leader must, by the very nature of the sector, see themselves as co-creators of their art form or sector, contributing as best-placed and suited, stepping ahead at times, sometimes following the lead of others. And certainly, to work beyond in the world the artistic leader must inspire others to action around shared goals.

Inspiring change and being changed

Artistic leadership in contradictory times is not about managing provision, selecting or making hits. It is fundamentally about the paradoxical combination of change and stability scientists suggest make for resilient ecologies. (This is not a balance, but a paradox: you can't forgo a bit of one for a bit more of the other and hope to be successful.) Leadership is about inspiring change: in people, in their work, in the relationships they build, in what is achieved together.

The artistic leader seeks to be changed by the people they meet and work with. This applies as much inside the organisation, with staff, board and customers, as it does outside in the arts, and beyond in the world. This demands an openness to learn from experiences and what results from them. Practically, this means having all channels open to new ideas, new talent, new forms that might emerge from old ones – or indeed, spotting old forms that might have new uses today. It means establishing relationships and accountability with multiple constituencies – the community groups and activists, the young artists and the older ones, audiences and non-audiences, amateurs and professionals, the policy makers, the businesses and the scientists: everyone.

Conclusion

Having begun by describing complex, and contradictory times, and then noted the huge range of demands made of artistic leaders, especially those in complicated organisations, it may seem contradictory to suggest a framework for leaders operating not just inside organisations, or even in outside the arts, but also beyond into the world. Many people already feel they have to be in three places at once in their jobs, and here I am asking artistic leaders to be inside, outside and beyond… I am tempted to say 'I can hear the groans…'

What stops me is the number of examples I have refrained from giving here of people being exactly that ambitious and daring, from a passion for art, culture, beauty and creativity and what it can do. Some, maybe even many, are working at their physical and psychological

limits at times, however, and one of the 'practicalities' which needs to be thought through more is how this is made liveable. I hope this paper will provoke that thinking. I hope it will provoke other questions too.

If this framework is at all relevant, what training and development is needed? What adaptations to working cultures are needed – and what needs to be torn up and started again? How do boards support their leaders better? How do the artists, makers, staff, audiences and participants and communities involved in the arts balance support and challenge for those in leadership positions as well as vice versa? What areas might technological solutions help in? If arts leadership is driven by values, what limits, if any, are there to the social and political positions an arts leader should take in the conflicts and tensions of contemporary society?

What I hope is clear, though, is that that leaders' central role is not to answer the million questions their day could be filled with, or to make endless selections and choices. It is rather to foster environments of trust and accountability, where people can create work and a culture together, that changes and is changed by the world around it.

Our contradictory times demand nothing less than 'the whole business' if sense-making is to be held in common and healthy and artistic leaders have a key role in devising the stimulus and homes for that process.

Mark Robinson

August 2017

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Mark Robinson founded Thinking Practice in 2010. He has since worked internationally with over 90 organisations and published several influential papers, notably Making Adaptive Resilience Real. Previously he was Executive Director, Arts Council England, North East, where he worked for 10 years. Before that he led organisations in community arts, poetry and literature development and adult education. He is a widely published poet, whose New & Selected Poems How I Learned to Sing was published in 2013. More information: www.thinkingpractice.co.uk.