Culture Caleidoscoop's inaugural issue: Mapping socially engaged practice in the cultural sector

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With our inaugural issue – 'Working with and for people: Mapping socially engaged practice in the cultural sector' – we wanted to explore the main focus of *Culture Caleidoscoop*: socially engaged practice in the arts, cultural, and heritage sectors. This first theme reveals what this kind of practice looks like in different organisations and to people working in different roles around the globe, touching on some of the challenges that people face working with and for people across the sector as well as the valuable impact of this type of work. The contributions that we have received so far are a great start to this continuing conversation.

In this editorial we reflect upon the response we had to our first call for contributions and indicate what you can expect from the first issue. Some of the themes that have emerged and the questions posed include defining community, social impact, co-creation practices, the role of the professional, and experimentation and evolving practices. We also look ahead, as we look forward to continuing to build on these perspectives.

Culture Caleidoscoop and socially engaged practice

With this issue and the various contributions we hope to unpack what can be a vague term – socially engaged practice – and to do this together with those involved in this work in various ways. For *Culture Caleidoscoop,* socially engaged

practice has been envisaged so far as encompassing the activities, actions, methods, skills, and strategies that relate to, involve, and affect individuals, communities, and society. Think: a city museum co-creating an exhibition with members of local LGBTQIA+ communities, a national symphony orchestra collaborating with a local brass band, a performing artist hosting afternoon teas for isolated older adults, or a volunteer-run community archive researching and promoting missing or untold narratives.

When we created the first call for contributions we imagined we would receive responses from a wide range of practitioners and researchers touching on a variety of subjects that the sector is currently researching and reflecting upon – from more theoretical concerns around how the social aspect is defined and whose knowledge is valued to more practical issues such as how people give this work shape and how much agency they have in their role. Researching, questioning, and reflecting upon our practices helps to collectively adapt, develop, and grow socially engaged practice within the sector. It helps us to make sense of what we do, how we do it, and what the impact is.

What you'll find in this issue

Although the contributions in this issue may not use the term *socially engaged practice*, their themes and the content of each piece falls under this umbrella and reveals the breadth of activities and approaches of this way of working. In 'Communities that film, watch, and walk: On the work of Imperfect Cinema', Henry Mulhall discusses how a local DIY film collective engages and contributes to a sense of community in Plymouth, UK. In 'The civic role of cultural spaces in culture and immigration: Reflections from the Becoming […] projects', Lora Krasteva reflects on her experiences as a cultural producer and her residencies at various cultural spaces across Europe, in which she adopts co-curation approaches to support these sites together with their publics to explore migration and belonging. In their interview, 'Let's Talk Art: An interview with multidisciplinary artist Michelle Lisa Herman on collaborating with AI software to expose bias', Sarah McGavran and Michelle Lisa Herman discuss Herman's experiences playing with machine learning software to highlight issues of bias and representation in the art world.

The first contributions reflect the ways that socially engaged practices continue to develop against a backdrop of ongoing theoretical debates, recent policy changes, and growing calls from society regarding the social role, social value,

and accountability of the arts, culture, and heritage. Mulhall's suggestion that Imperfect Cinema's practice 'moves away from a metrics based on failure and success towards a responsiveness to specific times, places, and people'[1] suggests how this demands a rethinking of mindset, values, and priorities. What we see in the contributions is that practices grow and evolve in response to, for example, rejuvenation and evolution of urban spaces and changing perceptions of local history (Mulhall), migration policy (Krasteva), and conversations in society around inclusion and excluded narratives (Herman and McGavran).

Culture Caleidoscoop is an interdisciplinary publication and one that aims to bridge theory and practice. We're pleased to see that the contributions share perspectives from different corners of the sector – from film, theatre, and art – as well as from people involved in this work in different ways – as an employee at a museum, a freelance researcher and freelance cultural producer, and as an independent artist. At *Culture Caleidoscoop*, we recognise that people in various roles make meaningful contributions to the way we work, and we value different types of knowledge and research. We believe there is much to learn from one another.

In the first contributions to this issue, a number of similar questions are posed and common themes emerge.

Socially engaged: Defining community

When talking about working with and for people, who are the 'people' we're referring to? When talking or writing about this kind of work, we often refer to 'communities', 'audiences', 'stakeholders', or 'the public'. At best, these terms are unclear – although used with good intentions to incorporate the breadth of possibilities. At worst, this language suggests there has been little reflection within organisations or within certain initiatives and activities upon who could or should be involved and who could or should benefit. The first contributions to this issue reflect the diverse ways that community or the social aspect can both self-identify or be defined: a group of people connected by geography, interest, or practice.

In his contribution, Mulhall reflects on how Imperfect Cinema has an open understanding of community, from 'groups that share a neighbourhood to those that share interests and passions'.[2] In comparison, Krasteva challenges geographical boundaries, reflecting on a community formed by experience. Both Mulhall and Krasteva reflect on how participatory cultural and heritage initiatives can also play a role in community forming. While Herman and McGavran's piece does not focus on engagement and collaborative activities with a specific group, Herman's

'work challenges us to think more broadly about how women, individuals with disabilities, people of colour, and members of other marginalised groups can insert themselves' into the art world and effect change.[3]

Social impact and social value

The contributions in this issue make clear that individuals participating in culture are making change through their practical actions.

Imperfect Cinema organise film events *with* the community; for Imperfect Cinema, film is, as they say, '"an excuse to enable intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, through creativity"'.[4] By organising historical walks related to the cinema history of the area, Imperfect Cinema also increase awareness of the rich history of the area and engage in conversation with local communities about what Plymouth is and can be.

Through her residencies working with migrants in different countries, Krasteva has focused on how creativity is an essential part of belonging and integration. She argues that, rather than being superfluous, creativity empowers migrants to feel a 'sense of belonging […] a positive and powerful feeling that cultural spaces should strive to generate with and for migrants'.[5] Krasteva suggests that further work can be done here if arts and cultural institutions are to stand in solidarity with migrants by encouraging migrant-led cultural work and embedding migrants into organisations, rather than seeing migrant-serving projects as fleeting add-ons.

For their part, Herman and McGavran's conversation and Herman's book highlight what and who have historically been prioritised in collecting practices, whose stories have been told, and who have been able to move with most freedom within the arts sector (hint: it's been white men). *Let's Talk Art* and Herman and McGavran's conversation tie into larger debates around inclusion and equality in the arts, cultural, and heritage sector as well as in society more broadly.

Co-creation practices

Cultural production should – some of these first contributions argue – be of and by the people. Everyone has the right to make and tell stories and share their perspectives and experiences. Co-creation and working *with* people not *for* them, for example, is core to Krasteva's practice. At the heart of Imperfect Cinema, a community-based grassroots initiative, Mulhall suggests, is a genuine appreciation of film produced by anyone. They invite and welcome content produced by

anyone and do not place less or more value based on who the maker is. Krasteva's and Mulhall's contributions begin to unfold the social value this participatory work has, the benefit this has to wider audiences as well as the cultural organisations or initiatives in return. Herman and McGavran's piece also indeed highlights the dangers of only ever hearing from one group of people and of only one group of people controlling the narrative.

In the arts, culture, and heritage sectors in recent years, there has been some scepticism about how much this work and its outcomes are embedded within the heritage organisations or bodies that initiate them. This kind of work can unfortunately be superficial and tokenistic or siloed to one person or team, and organisations can fail to engage in long-term relationships with communities or learn from these collaborations. McGavran and Herman's piece reflects how individuals within and working with organisations can take steps to challenge stereotypes and champion different voices, which is an important step towards long-term change. Krasteva's 'beyond content' argument[6] – that programming is only one step towards an organisation fully embodying their social value and potential – echoes this concern. She argues that organisations need to rethink their ways of working more holistically and need to (re)imagine their role and relationship to the rest of society. It would be interesting to know more about how much the venues that Krasteva worked with and a large organisation such as the Smithsonian will further be building on the work presented in the contributions.

The role of the professional

Arts, cultural, and heritage organisations, practices, and research are not neutral. And the different experiences that shape us as professionals and people are significant to how we make sense of and do our work. This is one of our manifesto points and something all the contributors spoke to in their pieces through personal reflection on their relationship with their work, how they carry out their work, and their own values or assumptions. Krasteva, for example, explicitly names how she draws on her own personal experiences with migration in her work and in writing her contribution. McGavran also reflects on how her background as a historian in gender and as a museum editor motivated her interview and led to her interest and engagement in Herman's work.

These first contributions also reflect the importance of working with others outside of an organisation: an artist or freelance cultural producer and theatre maker (Herman and McGavran and Krasteva respectively). Does this say something about comfort, skills, or capacity within an organisation?

Krasteva also draws on the idea of solidarity and being a proactive ally. This is perhaps a role that some cultural and heritage professionals are not used to (considering) playing.

Experimentation and changing practices

What is clear from all the contributors is that this work involves continuous learning and evolution. The contributions reflect some of the ways people are rethinking, reframing, and developing their work, and they show that working in socially engaged practice is a constant process of trial and error.

Imperfect Cinema have adopted an organic approach, trying things out in response to the community's needs and interests. Similarly, in her residencies, Krasteva also allows the process to unfold as she co-creates with local migrants. Rather than having an idea in mind of what the final artistic product might look like, she acknowledges that each community will have different needs and ways of expressing themselves creatively.

Highlighting the importance of adopting new methods and tools, Herman has made use of new digital technologies to uncover long-lasting bias and inequality in the art world. She experimented with machine learning software to produce revelatory interviews. At first the software wasn't generating interviews with much depth – there weren't 'many (or any in some cases) discussions about gender, race, or disability [...] this was really telling'[7] – so she continued to push and work with the technology to curate meaningful, provocative content.

This socially engaged work involves an ongoing iterative process of trying, reflecting, learning, and trying again.

Future considerations

These are just some of the threads we see emerging so far. We hope to continue this conversation on socially engaged practice throughout the lifetime of *Culture Caleidoscoop*. Although future issues will focus on different themes, socially engaged practice will remain a common thread throughout our work and the content you find on our platform.

Culture Caleidoscoop itself is a living, breathing, dynamic organisation, and we're approaching our issues like that too. This issue isn't finished now that it has been launched: we will continue to add contributions to this issue as we receive

relevant proposals. A few contributions are in the pipeline already, so we look forward to sharing those with you soon.

In the making of this issue we have been experimenting with new ways of doing things and learning about our own practices. On a more technical note, for example, we're working on digital accessibility and will continue to fine-tune our open peer review process.

We would love to see even more perspectives on this topic from an even greater variety of people working in the field around the world. Several fields and areas of the world are not yet represented in this issue. As outlined in our manifesto, we'd like to continue to work towards promoting more voices, perspectives, and ways of knowing that have traditionally been excluded or marginalised from the debate. We hope to make the landscape of sharing knowledge more inclusive. We are working towards including multilingual contributions (which will be translated and included in the original language as well as in English), and we welcome other formats such as photo essays.

We would also like to see further exploration of professional and personal identities and how this affects the work that they do. We are also interested in the agency, space, and freedom people have to carry out socially engaged work within organisations.

With this issue we invite you to think about your own work. How do the experiences of the contributors relate to your work? What motivates you or drives you in this work? How do you see the role of museums or heritage organisations in society? (How) do you feel your values are aligned with those of your organisation? What are the biggest challenges or stumbling blocks in this work right now? And where do you think this work is headed in the future?

If you want to share your research and reflections, we hope you will consider publishing with us.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Henry Mulhall, 'Communities that film, watch, and walk: On the work of Imperfect Cinema', *Culture Caleidoscoop* 1 (2022): 2, DOI10.57031.culcal.v1i1.12136.

2   Mulhall, 'Communities that film, watch, and walk', 11.

3   Michelle Lisa Herman and Sarah McGavran, '*Let's Talk Art*: An interview with multidisciplinary artist Michelle Lisa Herman on collaborating with AI software to expose bias', *Culture Caleidoscoop* 1 (2022): 13, DOI 10.57031/culcal.v1i1.12192.

4   Mulhall, 'Communities that film, watch, and walk', 2.

5   Krasteva, 'The civic role of cultural spaces in culture and immigration', 9.

6   Lora Krasteva, 'The civic role of cultural spaces in culture and immigration: Reflections from the Becoming [...] projects', *Culture Caleidoscoop* 1 (2022): 9–11, DOI 10.57031/culcal.v1i1.12138.

7   Herman and McGavran, '*Let's Talk Art*', 6.

About the contributors

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Lorna Cruickshanks is an independent consultant and Participation Specialist at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. Before moving to the Netherlands, Lorna worked for several years in museums in the UK where she created collaborative relationships and developed projects and programming with local communities at the British Museum and Museum of the Home. Lorna has a background in anthropology, first obtaining a BA in Anthropology at Durham University before later completing an MSc in Visual, Material, and Museum Anthropology at University of Oxford. She has co-authored the chapter "Partnerships and Plurality: Evolving practices at the British Museum," in *Museum Participation: New Directions for Audience Collaboration* (MuseumsEtc, 2016) and the article "Understanding Audience Participation Through Positionality" (*Stedelijk Studies 8*, 2019). Together with Danielle Carter, Lorna is the co-founder and editor of *Culture Caleidoscoop.*