BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL IN ARTS MANAGEMENT

LEILA JANCOVICH,
Senior Lecturer, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Leila worked in the arts for many years as a producer, researcher and policy maker before developing her academic interests in cultural policy, arts and festivals management. Her current research focus is on participatory decision making. She also coordinates a knowledge exchange network on participation and engagement in the arts.

ABSTRACT

There is a "crisis in legitimacy" (Holden, 2006) as arts organisations fail to attract diverse audiences, in terms of age, social or ethnic background. Within England research found that whilst the public are positive about the arts in principle, many see what is presented as elitist and "not for us" (OpinionLeader, 2007), making subsidised arts vulnerable to reduced state funding. Arts Council England recently received a 30% cut in funding to invest in the arts and some local authorities have cut their arts budgets entirely (Channel 4, 2013).

Across public policy the "choice and voice agenda" has increased participatory decision making (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010), whereby the public are engaged with in a dialogue about what the state should fund and how services are managed. This paper examines how breaking down the barriers between professional and public may help arts managers make the case for continued public investment and become more creative organisations.
Key words: public participation, organisational change, cultural policy, arts management

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

There has long been tension in the arts sector, between the desire to support the artistic independence and creative freedom for the professional artist, at the same time as encouraging creative opportunities for the general public (Matarasso and Landry, 1999). However the existence of "cultural elites" (Griffiths et al., 2008 p198) have been argued to have created a level of self-interest within the management of the arts and a narrowness that militates against both free expression and access. Attempts to broaden definitions of the arts or to engage those beyond the professional cultural elite are often met by accusations of crass populism for widening the voices involved (Tusa, 2000). But this paper argues that it is the self-interest of the established arts industry, rather than an opening up of decision making which limits cultural development (Garnham, 2005) and has led to a "crisis in legitimacy" (Holden, 2006) for the publicly funded arts sector. It further argues that this may be addressed by involving a wider range of voices in the management of the arts.

The paper will examine the attitudes to and the implications of participatory decision making, as a mechanism for arts managers running public institutions. It aims to offer insights into the processes and outcomes of such practices and challenges conventional thinking about the role of the expert in the arts. The central question this research aims to explore is whether participatory decision making can not only act as a tool for advocacy, but whether it can in fact become a learning mechanism for arts managers as well as audiences.
It is important to note that the theory underpinning practices in participatory decision making draw from at least two distinct sources. The first comes from management theory and suggests strategies for organisations to increase their legitimacy and efficiency, by involving stakeholders in decision making (Moore, 1995). This has led to wide scale acceptance of stakeholder analysis in both the training and implementation of arts management practices. This model does not advocate for public involvement but rather the engagement with professional interest groups and the kind of public-private partnerships which have been critiqued for forming part of a neo-liberal retrenchment from state interventions (Peck, 2009, Hay, 2007). Within policy and management some have argued that this has further reinforced what was previously described as "an interminable circuit of inter-legitimisation" (Bourdieu, 1979) within the arts, whereby stakeholders are defined as those already working professionally in the sector rather than the public as the beneficiaries of the work produced (Keaney, 2006).

The second model in contrast, which is this the focus of this paper, comes from Brazilian participatory budgeting, grew out of community activism and places the public at the centre of participatory decision making, rather than just relying on the professional or the expert (Community Pride Initiative, 2003). The origins of this as a concept contain political objectives to change the status quo in public organisations, rather than just to legitimise the way things have previously been done. Participatory budgeting is supported by theory on deliberative democracy that suggests that changing the agents involved in public management, and moving beyond engagement with those with a professional vested interest, will of itself change the practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). Where this has been used, it has been argued to have brought about significant redistribution of funding from elite to more community based activities (Community Pride Initiative, 2003). The participatory budgeting model has been highly influential internationally in the last decade. It has been adopted by organisations as varied as the World Bank (Herz and Ebrahim, 2005) the European Union (Calabuig et al., 2006) and is becoming commonplace in local government (Community Pride Initiative, 2003, SQW Consulting, 2010). But it may be questioned whether the level of interest from governments and major institutions in a bottom up community led model, such as Brazil's, is at odds with a top down approach by governments to enforce it. In England the attempt to impose a "duty to involve" the public (DCLG, 2008) in all public sector organisations has met with considerable resistance, particularly within the arts, where there appear to be real fears of the impact that such practices has on artistic judgement and expertise (Fennell et al., 2009).

Despite this a growing number of organisations, projects and initiatives have begun to engage with the public in new ways including co-curation or programming of exhibitions and seasons of work, to the management of the arts organisation itself. Many argue this has happened independently of policy directives, as a response to growing public demand for more immersive artistic experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). This paper therefore considers the tension between the resistance to greater public involvement and practical cases where the "fourth wall" separating the artist from their audience has now only been demolished on the stage but also in the management of the organisations.

This paper forms part of a larger research project which included a detailed analysis of existing theoretical and empirical data on participatory decision making practices, alongside a focussed study on how such practices are being adopted and adapted within England. Over sixty industry experts have been interviewed, including government ministers, cultural policy makers and advisers. In addition this paper will examine one case study, of Contact Theatre in Manchester, a regional venue for young people which has engaged "users" in participatory decision making, across every aspect of the management of the building for over a decade. The case study involved interviews with fifteen people connected with the theatre. This included the current and previous artistic director plus members of staff and users who have been engaged in participatory decision making processes. In addition interviews were conducted with the venues main funding partners, and a number of artists and arts organisations around Manchester, to understand how the building was seen externally.

This case study was selected as an example of an arts management approach to participatory decision making to consider the impact on the organisation and the artistic programme over a long period of time. Consideration will also be given to who the public are who participate in such activities to consider whether such practices have engaged new audiences or merely given greater voice to those already engaged.
Before this, in order to better understand the levers and barriers for participatory decision making, the following section will consider the attitude towards such practices becoming more widespread in the arts, from the interviews which form part of the wider research.

ATTITUDES TO PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING IN THE ARTS

Despite the resistance to an obligation for public involvement identified above, many people interviewed believed that such practices were growing in the arts. One person believed all arts organisations were involving the public in decision making more now than in the past. However others argued that "we use the same five kind of examples" (Arts Council England officer) whenever discussing participatory decision making. Furthermore these five examples were argued to be organisations or individual cultural leaders, who had grown out of the community arts movement of the 1960s, which some suggested meant that nothing much had changed since, in wider practice. This difference of opinion may relate to whether such practices directly lead to decisions being made through these processes or how much they relate to public involvement in discussions. By analysing the language used in interviews and applying this to the widely recognised "ladder of participation" (Arnstein, 1969), it was clear that for those who felt such practices were common their definition was closer to the concept

of "inform and consult" which comes low down the rungs in the ladder, whilst those who were more sceptical of how many organisations were involving the public in decision making, tended to refer more specifically to the definition of "power and control" at the top. This was supported by the findings in the literature review that demonstrated that although consultation might not be unusual, decision making itself had to date impacted more in other public policy areas than in the arts (Fennell et al., 2009, SQW Consulting, 2010).

Most often examples of participatory decision making within the arts in the UK, have involved galleries and theatres involving the public in co-curation projects rather than budgeting or policy formation, as seen in the Brazilian model. Where co-curation has been trialled it was seen, by everyone interviewed, who had had experience of it, to be very successful, both challenging thinking about work and in bringing in new audiences. From a marketing perspective a number of people recognised that such practices led to both increased attendance and improved public opinion on the arts as "the more people are involved means that they are passionate, means that they care and means that they want to be involved" (Arts Council England, officer). This clearly supports the case for co-curation as a means to increase public value of the arts, but many who had not had direct involvement in such processes, argued that it challenges the traditional view of the Curator or Artistic Director as someone whose "vision drives the organisation... and if you involve other people, inverted commas, amateurs, it potentially dilutes, weakens" (arts manager). Many people interviewed felt this might damage both the quality of the artistic work and artistic independence. However some questioned the conflation between the Curator and Artistic Director and the individual artist's freedom of expression, arguing that whilst the former ran public buildings and therefore had a public responsibility, the latter did not. As one argued "it's ok for an artist to be insular....but not an organisation, the bigger the organisation the greater the responsibility to engage" (Arts Council regional manager). This tension this paper argues raises important questions about the role of arts managers in the future.

Several of those interviewed questioned not only the concept of challenging the singular vision of an artistic manager, but also the practicalities. One argued that the idea that "most ordinary people want to get their fingers closely involved in what arts organisations do, seems to me to be not supported by experience" (arts policy adviser). However, the evidence is demonstrated in cultural policy research in the UK, where the response to public consultation showed that many people wanted not only greater transparency about how decisions on arts policy were made, but also greater involvement in the decision making processes (OpinionLeader, 2007). A small number of people interviewed for this research also felt that it was the inevitable direction of travel as people were increasingly debating the arts along with other areas of public life, through the internet and other forms of mass media whether the arts organisations liked it or not.

But there were concerns about the assumptions within participatory decision making and criticisms that the concept ignored the fact that there was not one definition of the public with whom to engage and that "there are communities that are much more able, through confidence, skills, money, attitude, to engage ... than others" (Arts Council England, regional manager) which it was argued challenged the legitimacy of decisions taken through such processes. The failure to identify the complexity in the notion of "the public" and the unrepresentative nature of participatory practices, is one of the main concerns expressed in relation to participatory decision making in academic literature (Cooke and Kothari, 2009), but a smaller number of people interviewed cited evidence that where organisations "genuinely made an effort and went to different venues that you weren't normally seen in... people turned up who hadn't normally turned up" (participation consultant). It is also interesting to note that concerns about representation were stronger within the Arts Council, which is totally unrepresentative of the broader public, by virtue of the arm's length principle keeping it independent of government control. There was less concern about representation expressed by the local authorities surveyed, who are accountable to an electorate. This may in part be to do with the counter check on representation within local authorities through the electoral voting for councillors. There was however a view that local councillors themselves, rather than the staff interviewed, were often less supportive as "there are a lot of councillors who...are of the view that we are the democratically elected people, it is up to us to choose...what we prioritise in this community, it is not up to [people] who are not elected" (local authority officer). But electoral representation was itself questioned by one person who queried whether "any form of government or democracy in this country is getting close to being representative" (participation consultant) due to increasingly low turnouts at elections. The resistance may be argued to be an attempt to hold onto power for themselves rather than based on a commitment to representation.

An overemphasis on representation has also been challenged in academic literature, as the process of shared learning within participatory decision making is argued to be more important than who the individual participants are (Blakey, 2009). However, within the context of this research, a key question is whether involving a broader range of voices changes the artistic practice and the make-up of those who engage in the arts. The case study discussed below, will therefore consider who the participants are in the participatory processes described.

For some, the concern over public involvement related less to levels of representation and more to the importance of expertise. The arts professional was described as helping avoid the "potential for dumbing down content if you allow the public to choose" (arts manager). This was evidenced by one person, with an example, from public art, which it was claimed "everyone hated...when it went up, [now there's a] feeling of 'this is ours, so therefore we want to protect it' (arts manager). A number of people agreed that whilst participatory decision making may not have seen some art created in the first place, public value was something that might be developed over time.

A smaller number of people interviewed felt that rather than replacing expertise participatory decision making was "that role enhanced by public involvement ideas" (Arts Council England officer). One person pointed out that rather than ignoring expertise it should be recognised that the public "would be experts in being audience members...and that's an expertise that would be useful to have round the table" (Arts Council England, officer). Rather than believing that much art would not have been created if consultation had taken place, some argued that the initial aversion leading to public value created over time, could have in fact been shortcut by engaging the public earlier. This was based on specific examples where participatory decision making had been used, which suggested that the risks described above were not borne out in practice. There was acknowledgement that much research "actually found that by and large people got the notion of 'you invest in innovation', and that arguably the edgy stuff is a legitimate thing to create that" (Arts Council England, senior manager). The fear of dumbing down was also countered by the argument that "you can't generalise about how risk averse the public is or how challenging the arts are" (participation adviser). A number of people were uncomfortable with what they saw as paternalism within some sections of the arts, which they characterised as the cause for the resistance above. Some criticised many arts leaders for having a "kind of contempt for the ignorant public, who have to pay for [the arts], but have no right to comment on it and its quality" (arts policy adviser). It was acknowledged when addressing practical examples where the public were involved in decision making that often "the most unusual and radical of those solutions was the one that was successful" (Arts Council England, regional manager). An example of this is demonstrated in the case study below.

It is worth noting, that the examples described above, where public involvement was said to have led to radical outcomes, were based on a slow process of deliberation between the arts organisation and the public. There was an overriding sense that "it's useless if there's any sense of quick win...it only delivers for the community and for the work if there is an on-going dialogue" (Arts Council England, officer) which allows for learning to be shared between the participant and the arts organisation. This is further supported by the view, based on evidence from research into deliberative democracy, that "deliberative processes do seem to support more progressive outcomes" (participation consultant) than tick box approaches to voting which might reach more people and therefore potentially be more representative, but over which there was seen to be the "danger of tabloidisation." (ex-minister of Culture).

However, there were doubts about the practicalities of implementing lengthy deliberative processes, which were seen to be "resource intensive" at a time of reducing funding (arts manager). There is evidence in literature that an increasing number of participatory decision making initiatives are employing online engagement and voting (Wilson, 2010). It was acknowledged that as "more people are likely to go online first" (participation consultant), so online engagement could be a useful tool to reach out to people who are not the usual suspects. But this growth in budget simulators may be more likely to confirm the worst fears of some working in the arts that participatory decision making, without detailed deliberation, may indeed reduce risk taking and innovation. It was further argued that it may negatively affect overall levels of investment in the arts, if arts budgets were compared with other parts of the public sector through such tick box processes. There was common consensus that within local authorities the arts would not end up in the "top ten priorities about what councils should do" (local authority officer).

But whilst arts budgets, as non-statutory funding, have clearly been seen to be insecure, in the UK local council budget cuts of 2012 (Channel 4, 2013) there is no evidence that this has been more or less true where

participatory decision making was used to inform decisions. Conversely it has been found that "where [budgets] were allocated to a ward and they could spend it on anything, then depending on how broad your definition of arts [they did well]. But it was funding because [of outputs] rather than because people wanted art or some artistic output in their area" (participation consultant). The local authority surveys confirmed this. Indeed in a couple of cases the arts were seen to have been saved by public participation. A number of people cited arts centres, which when "threatened with 100% cuts to their funding, the local people all got together...to keep it open and keep that resource in their town...and the council just had to sit up and listen" (arts manager).

It is clear from the attitudes described above that there is a disparity in perceptions between those who have engaged in participatory decision making practices and those who have not, with the most resistance to the concept existing where there is least experience of it in operation. This may suggest that the initial fears and perceptions are misplaced, and may be eradicated over time. But it is worth noting that such initiatives most commonly involved one off projects rather than an on-going programme of work, Evidence from literature, suggests that such practices, done at the margins to mainstream activity, do little to change either the demographic of participants or the management of organisations longer term (Stoker and Wilson, 2004, SQW Consulting, 2010). Conversely it is argued that through long term commitment "that arts practice would change if the kind of involvement ideas or techniques filtered through a lot of arts organisations" (Arts Council England senior manager). The next section will consider an example of one such commitment to participatory decision making in detail to assess how much such processes impact on the artistic and outcomes and audience profile.

PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING IN PRACTICE – A CASE STUDY OF CONTACT, MANCHESTER

Contact theatre started life in 1970's, out of the University of Manchester and for many years existed as what was described by one person in the interviews as a "repertory theatre in bright colours" (Arts Council England, regional manager) attracting school parties to productions using set texts from the school curriculum. After a major refurbishment a new Artistic Director took over in 1999 and stayed with the organisation for ten years. Influenced by his background in both experimental theatre and youth work within New York, Liverpool and East London, and collaborating during his time at Contact with artists in Brazil, his aim was to make the venue more contemporary in style, more diverse in outlook and more inclusive in atmosphere. He describes this ambition as coming from a "creative drive [that] isn't just about audience development it's about the range of work you are putting out there" (Artistic Director from 1999-2009). From all the interviews conducted, both within the organisation and across the city, there was an overwhelming sense that under his tenure the organisation had gone through a transformation, to what is now described as a cross art form laboratory. It was said that is has not only changed its own artistic practice but "has transformed the arts ecology; the number of organisations that have been influenced by Contact is huge" (local artist).

Whilst much of this change is credited to the vision of the artistic director, he himself says the change was only possible because of the governance structures and recruitment practices which meant that "the challenge I was given from the board was 'how would you really put young people at the heart of this organisation?' (Artistic Director 1999-2009). But it was his interpretation that the heart of an organisation should not be defined by "people on pay roll, which is what it often becomes, and much more about a community of users, which include artists and young people, as well" (Artistic Director 1999-2009). This resulted in participatory decision making becoming core to everything the theatre now does, from recruitment of staff to programming decisions. The process of this was described by staff at the venue as requiring a long term relationship with people. This involves a number of strategies, which engage people in different ways at different stages. Contact offer the more traditional outreach programmes in community settings, to introduce people to the building who have not been before. They also provide long term support for young people to provide pathways into professional practice. At every stage of this process they use positive action to engage a broad cross section of young people, including those who are not otherwise engaged in the arts.

The organisational commitment to this strategy is reflected in the appointment of the current artistic director, to carry on the company ethos, whose describes his leadership role as harnessing the "real creative benefit [of] a wider range of voices having agency in the creative process" (Artistic Director 2009-2013) not just from a marketing point of view or to increase the legitimacy of the organisation, but in a belief that the work created would be enriched by the process. One of his stated aims it to create a pool of more diverse artists and managers, who can work within the organisations, but also beyond.

Despite the venue's stated commitment to engaging people who are not otherwise engaged in the arts, the background of everyone interviewed for this research was examined, to address the question raised above about whether such practices engage new people in decision making or merely give voice to those already engaged. It is worth noting that all the staff and the young people interviewed had in fact already been introduced to the arts, usually through their family when a child. Most described their interest in the arts as a passion, rather than a passing interest, which may suggest that those actively involved in decision making still come from a narrow group. This supports the concerns raised earlier about how representative of "the public" participatory decision making is. However whilst all of those interviewed, had a pre-existing interest in the arts, many said that the passion for the arts had been developed through their engagement in Contact, rather than being the reason they were engaged in the first place. Furthermore there was significantly more variance in the social and cultural backgrounds of those interviewed at Contact than was identified in the larger sample of those interviewed for this research and as identified above as the cultural elite (Griffiths et al., 2008) which mainly work in and manage the arts. One person interviewed challenged whether you would ever get people not interested in the arts involved, "as it is an arts organisation after all, not a youth club" (audience member).

Despite this suggestion that Contact may not be attracting new voices into the arts, it was acknowledged by people interviewed from other arts organisations in the city, that they had broadened both those who work within their own venue and further afield. This shift was from what was previously described as a university educated arts community, to a cultural sector which more accurately reflects the culture and diversity of the city. Furthermore the range of artistic practices that those at Contact has engaged in and the definition of the arts that they described was also very broad, and much more so than those interviewed outside of Contact. This may suggest that some of those interviewed might not be defined as having a background in the arts by some definitions, but through their engagement at Contact they had grown to value the experiences they had had for themselves. This was the case with one person who had been involved in street dance from childhood, but acknowledged that his teachers had always told him this was not art. At Contact he has developed his practice and is now an internationally renowned artist. From the interviews with the young people engaged in decision making, whilst all were university educated only some had studied before engaging with the theatre. Others credited Contact as the reason they had become motivated to study. Whilst this may suggest that the theatre attracts a certain type of people to engage it may therefore equally be argued that the theatre provides a learning experience for those who do engage, which impacts not only on the lives of the individuals involved but on also on the broader arts sector.

Some people did voice concerns about the extent to which Contact's challenge to the idea of a "cultural elite" merely created an alternative orthodoxy. One person referred to the cliquey-ness of the venue, whilst others said you could recognise work from Contact as it had its own distinctive artistic style. There was a risk that "people who come into these programmes almost become native by the end of the process. So there is a sense with Contact that you get a different profile and that sense of ownership, but at some point they become too similar to the profile of the institution almost" (arts manager). However others praised this very process for creating an artistic movement, which was influencing artistic practice in the North West of England. The artistic programme was described as no longer restricted to theatre, let alone an established canon, but rather providing access to a range of art forms including theatre, dance, music, spoken word, multimedia, which is increasingly touring to other venues as well. The wider audience profile, not restricted to those actively engaged in decision making, has likewise changed from school parties visiting as groups to a culturally diverse young audience, attending under their own volition, where approximately 45% of the audience are from black and minority ethnic communities. This audience were described by many of the other arts organisations in the city as the very hard to reach audiences that they struggled to get through their doors, many of whom "come here who wouldn't normally step into a theatre" (Contact staff member).

Furthermore everyone interviewed for this case study refuted the concerns expressed above, that engaging the public in decision making may lead to conservative or populist programming, thereby reducing the quality of the cultural offer. In terms of the question of the role of the expert discussed above the staff interviewed at Contact were confident in the notion that "we want to share that expertise, it's not about people holding on to expertise, is it?" (Contact staff member). They were clear that they did not give up their responsibilities as either artists or managers to an x-factor style popularity contest but that their "genius is not in the right answers; the genius is in the right questions" (local artist). Rather than having deskilled the staff or ignored expertise this was said by many

across the city to have allowed Contact "to build a complement of professional staff who are quite remarkable, and in a lot of ways very different from what you might expect in a complement of staff of a producing theatre" (Arts Council England regional manager). The process of participatory decision making was therefore seen to have learning benefits for staff as well as participants.

In reference to the concerns above regarding the impact on quality and risk in the arts, the staff at Contact also all felt that, from their experiences, those new to the arts were more open to risk taking and new ideas, precisely because they were less conditioned in their responses and did not have as many preconceptions. Engaging them in participatory decision making therefore was argued to allow for more risk taking and not less, leading to more interesting work to be developed as new audiences "don't go down the obvious routes, and so many of them go off to explore all sorts of things, quite far removed from what people's prejudices or expectations of what they would be interested in." (Contact staff member). It was acknowledged that this challenged any universal definition of "great art" and required an appreciation of freshness and innovation over heritage and tradition. When asked to define "art" the words used by people at Contact were conviction, passion, intensity, intention, discipline, commitment and connectivity, which may be categorised as all relating to the artistic process. Whilst at some of the other venues in the city the words used were canon, polish, quality, which relate more to a finished product. But both within and outside of Contact there was a widely held view that the traditional producing theatre model of the three to four week run encouraged programming that was safe enough to attract a large audience of repeat attenders, who were described as "a user base of mainly pretty well off people... not actually from the city itself" (local authority officer). Many of the staff and audiences at Contact described such work as formulaic and staid, whilst the manager of one such venue said that they thought that "it's really hard for a building to become all things to all people, and actually whether they should or not, I don't know, I think that weakens an offer" (arts manager). This defence of a narrow programme for a narrow audience was widely contested by many who felt that where an organisation is in receipt of public money it should have a wider public remit rather than what was seen as "a little bit separated and it is a little bit specialist and a little bit elite" (audience member). Some people felt that such organisations would also benefit from introducing participatory decision making and one person even suggested that any manager who was unwilling to do so should be removed. However most people interviewed were strongly against such directives being imposed on any organisation. Any attempt therefore to impose a template or model was generally seen as counterproductive to the process. This suggests a tension in the arts between the desire from both the public and many practitioners for greater dialogue between arts managers and the public and the challenge of persuading some organisations to work in this way.

The key success factor for Contact in achieving the transformation described was identified as "authentic commitment to work with people and give away power... that hasn't been achieved in a season, it's been embedded over a number of years" (arts manager). This clearly supports the value of such processes being developed out of an artistic desire or vision and not an imposition. It also identifies the value of developing long term deliberative practices rather than short term project based work, such as the co-curation projects mentioned above. But one of the challenges recognised by staff at Contact is the need to balance continuity of opportunity for the young people they are working with, which takes the individual on the journey described above, whilst also ensuring that you are constantly freeing up opportunities for new people. The staff interviewed acknowledged the difficulty of sometimes getting people to move on and saw their greatest success as being when the young people left the building and worked elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this research demonstrate the potential of participatory decision making in challenging artistic traditions and assumptions about theatre audiences. Whilst those with little or no experience of such practices were often resistant to or fearful of the impact of widening the range of voices through which decisions were made, there was universal acceptance for such practices amongst those who had worked differently. However such practices do require a shift in ethos from the transformational manager who imposes a vision on an organisation to a relational leadership who nurtures a shared vision across the organisation.(Hewison, 2004) and sees the arts as "a platform for people whose voices are not often heard to be heard. And I think a lot of times in the arts there is a tendency for only certain voices to be heard, and for certain similar voices to be heard over and over" (Artistic Director 2009-2013). It could be argued that this may reduce the insular and self-interested perception of the arts that has been identified in other research.

It is however clear that the process of decision making is crucial to the outcomes. Deliberative processes were widely seen to allow both real ownership of decisions by participants at the same time as the opportunity for shared learning between the participant and the arts organisation. Conversely tick box approaches to decisions, which many saw as responding to the cult of reality TV, whilst potentially more representative of a wider public, were seen, to produce less benefits in terms of artistic quality or learning. For many such processes were seen as counterproductive as you need to "be clear about what the parameters are, because obviously you can't do everything" (Contact staff member). Tick box voting may leave those who did not vote with the majority disenfranchised, rather than providing a vehicle for discussion and understanding of how the decision was reached. They were also seen to lead to more conservative outcomes.

The extent to which people believed that the model at Contact, which had been used in a venue specifically for young people, was transferable to other venues was varied. Several of those interviewed acknowledged participatory decision making was made easier at Contact by nature of their target group being limited to young people, in comparison with a venue that had to reach a wider cross section of the public. But one staff member pointed out that volunteering in other sectors, was more commonly done by older people and therefore other arts organisations, who commonly have a much older clientele should not assume a barrier to engaging people from different audience segments. But the problem of balancing continuity and refreshment was recognised as a greater problem with a more diverse audience profile, as Contact's young audience by definition eventually moved on in age, whereas another organisation may find it harder to refresh.

Whilst there were difference of opinion about whether such practices are becoming more common in the arts, there was a strong conviction amongst those who have engaged in such practises that "you can no longer be an organisation that sits within four walls and decides of its own volition what programmes are going to be put on, and sell that to an audience, I think that whole relationship is changing" (local authority officer). There was however resistance to the idea of such practices being imposed on arts organisation. The challenge therefore is for arts managers to embrace the possibilities and rather than replicating models find their own way to implement it within their organisations and break down the fourth wall that creates a barrier between the organisation and its public, whoever they might be. As one person argued "there's not really an argument for or against it, it's a bit like arguing for or against oxygen...it's not about if, it's about how [it should be implemented]" (participation consultant).

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