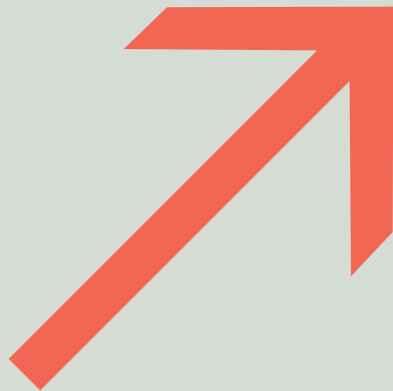


Conversation starters for colleagues across the arts sector

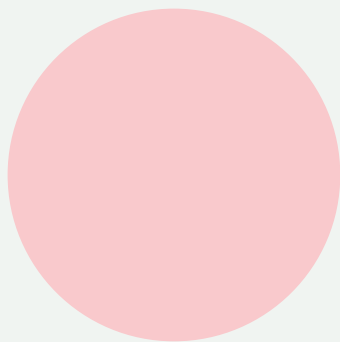


Extracts from inspiring and honest interviews with people in a range of arts organisations about leadership and 'cultural democracy'

Engage

Bringing people and art together





**Interviews conducted by
Frances Bossom, Lucy Foster,
Catherine O'Brien, Meg Parnell,
and Karen Thomas with people
from organisations that inspire them**

Autumn 2018

Contact Theatre, Manchester

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

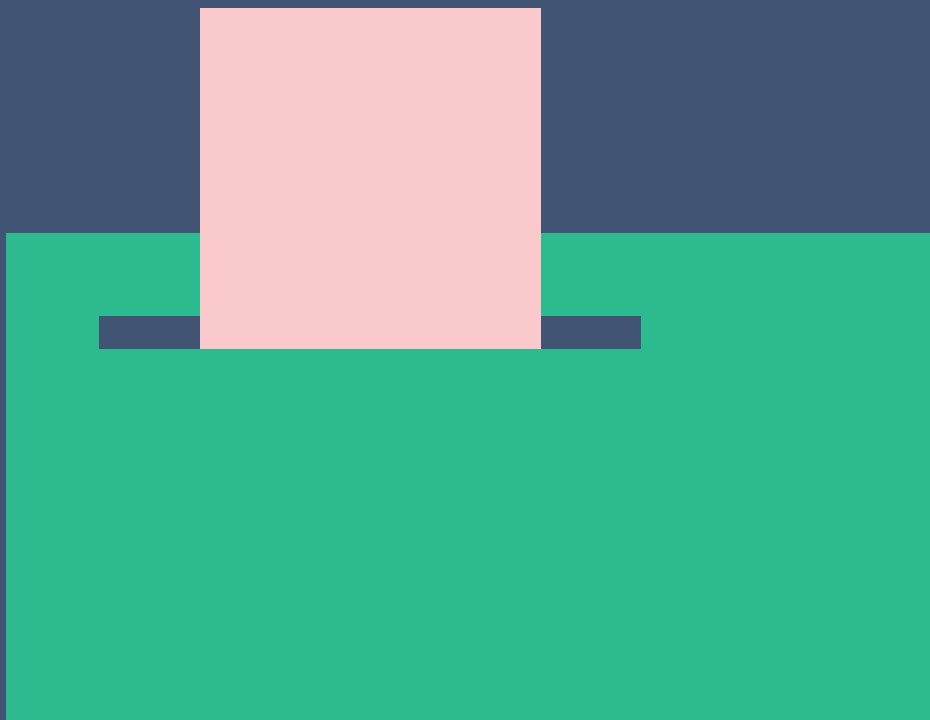
Makespace, Cambridge


Rising Arts Agency, Bristol

St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and Provand's Lordship

The Showroom, London

**‘What does it
mean—
Cultural
Democracy?’**





At a 'Whose Culture' event one of the questions was 'What do you think culture is?' and someone said "Culture for me is heritage and heritage means family and family means roots", and that is what his take on the word culture meant. Mine was "Culture is what you put out in order to share yourself with other people". It's your way of saying this is me that other people might like and we can connect over it.

Eli Lower, Creative Team Coordinator
Rising Arts Agency, Bristol

For us it's absolutely about 'governance'. It's about your community, in our case young people, being involved in the non-artistic stuff, as well as informing the programme. It's about them being involved in making staff appointments, writing business plans, and challenging the executive. There are few organisations that take it to that level, and that's why Contact remains interesting. It's not a radical takeover and it's not a theatre where young people are just charging round deciding what to do. All of their decisions are enacted through the structure of an institution, a charity, an NPO.

Matt Fenton, CEO and Artistic Director
Contact Theatre, Manchester

I've never heard it before, like I understand what it would be, but I've never heard it. I think it would be, for me, allowing everybody to have a voice. I think it would be allowing culture, not just people that are interested in the arts. It should be a city, representative of that [city]. So cultural democracy would be a city discussing different things and everyone involved.

Grainne Flynn, Young Board Member
Contact Theatre, Manchester

**He who feels it
knows It**





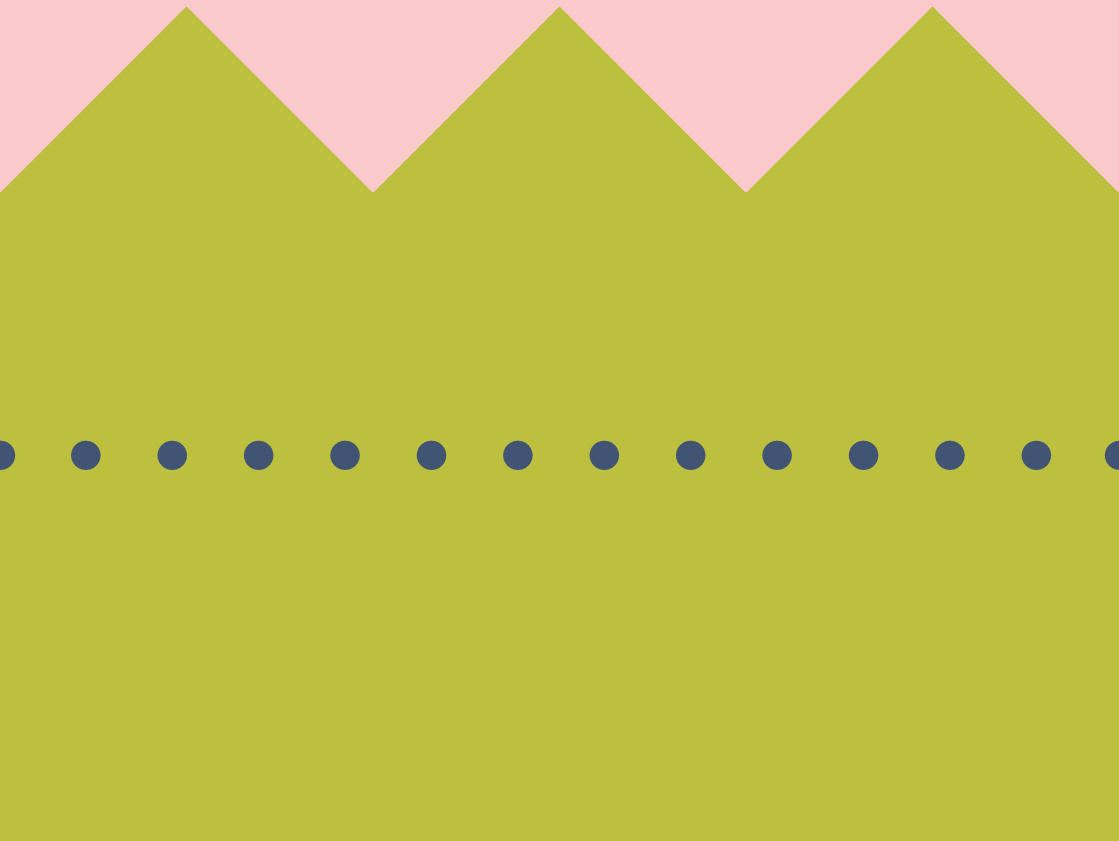
I always feel like the best change happens when someone at the top goes "I actually don't know the answer to that question and I would really love it if we solve this by committee".

There's that idea of "If we have too many voices it's going to get too confusing". But you are assuming that one person knows the answer to every single question. I think that current approaches to leadership assume that if you don't have absolute knowledge admitting that is an enormous weakness and you are opening yourself up to criticism and to be voted out of power. I feel the thing that young people in particular do really well, and where they succeed, is going "Oh I don't know the answer to that question".

It's like us going "There's no way it's appropriate for us for us to run a project predominantly for young people of colour". It's important that the staff team for that project is people of colour who know. There is a Bob Marley quote that's like 'He who feels it most know it', or something like that. Our leadership is "I don't know, so I need to be quiet and find someone [who does] and pay them to do that work".

**Eli Lower, Creative Team Coordinator
Rising Arts Agency, Bristol**

Hacking through the undergrowth





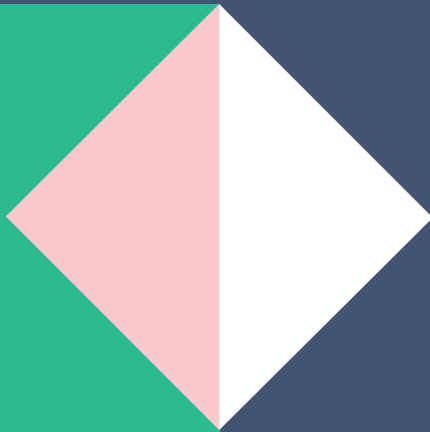
I think I probably still say I'm a facilitator more than anything else. I'm very much behind the scenes at Rising. We had an event recently and I put together a slide show of all the young artists' work. Everyone was like "How does she know who I am?" and I'm sat there "Hmmm, I know who everybody is but nobody knows who I am". It's like my secret super power that I know everything about everyone we work with. They've forgotten that we've met before and I'm like "Hi, I'm Eli, I need all this information from you? Thank you very much, I hope you are having a good day". I think I'm keeping the engine running.

I think I'm like the person who is at the front of the expedition rope who is hacking away at the trees so everyone can walk through. That's admin! Hacking through the undergrowth so everyone is just like "Oh she cleared the way, it's easy to do it, let's go."

This person actually might find it really difficult to do that so I need to make sure I clear the way and then I go "Right your turn. I'll do the hard work to get you here because at the moment the system doesn't want to listen". I feel like that's how it's got to be. Our job is to go "A big old clear space - would you like to come and contribute to the conversation?"

**Eli Lower, Creative Team Coordinator
Rising Arts Agency, Bristol**

Carving stone, finding diamonds





KW: Sometimes we have to agree to disagree. We are doing a rebrand at the moment. We've brought a designer in to work with the youth board to try and really identify the vision, the mission, the tone of voice, all those sorts of things. It's been really fascinating for me because I've stepped right back and I've let the youth board lead those sessions. There is quite a lot of "Ahhh I think....." and actually in the end everyone reaches a consensus, but it's through that discussion and debate.

EL: It's refining, it's chipping, as if it's a big block of stone. Someone goes "I think that, but not this". And someone else goes "And it's also not really this, but it is that".

KW: And someone will go 'Oh but we've missed that bit out.'

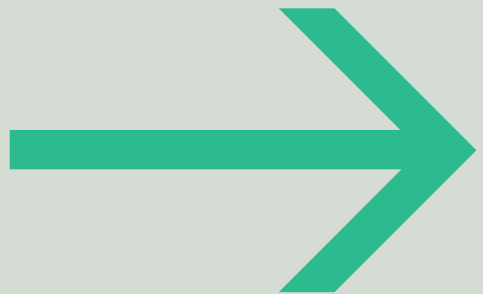
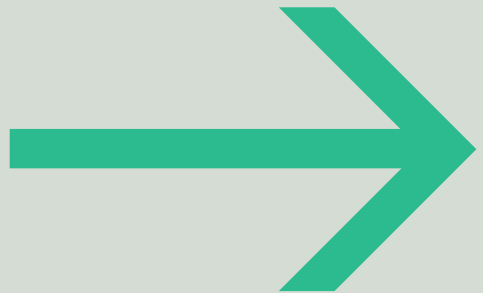
EL: And we'll add that bit in.

KW: And it's something that's really rich.

EL: We are all coming at it from a slightly different angle, but everyone's ultimate goal is the same thing. The way it gets refined along the way is that someone goes "I think there is something about authoritative being a word", and then we go "but that is a horrible word". And they are like "Yes I know what you mean, but we need to get the first word so we can find what it isn't". I think that is so much better than if one of us was to go "Maybe it's leadership". If you don't have people to challenge, you don't get that amazing diamond in the middle.

**Conversation between Kamina Walton, Director,
and Eli Lower, Creative Team Coordinator
Rising Arts Agency, Bristol**

Giving permission



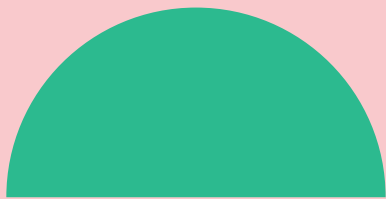
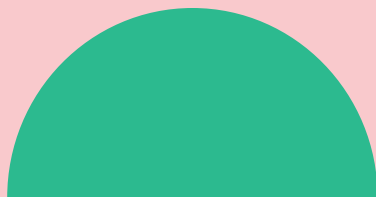


An organisation like this, isn't actually an organisation. It is very difficult for some people to get their heads around. Because most people in their daily life, operate inside a structure and someone is telling you what to do and then evaluating what you do for them. Out here, that doesn't happen, it is completely and utterly a self-agency. It's a bit of a strong statement there but it is a lot about personal agency and responsibility.

So we get lots of people saying "I'd like to do this, but I don't think I'm allowed". Why aren't you allowed? And then through the conversation it is that they are not allowed because they feel that no one had given them permission. No one has come and said, "I'd like you to do this". Therefore giving you permission to do it. Even though they see that it needs to be done, they are waiting for someone to say, this needs to be done. Trying to get them over that moment of inertia to step up and say "I'm going to do that" is very, very difficult.

Ward Hills, Member of Make Space, Cambridge

Speed bumps not walls



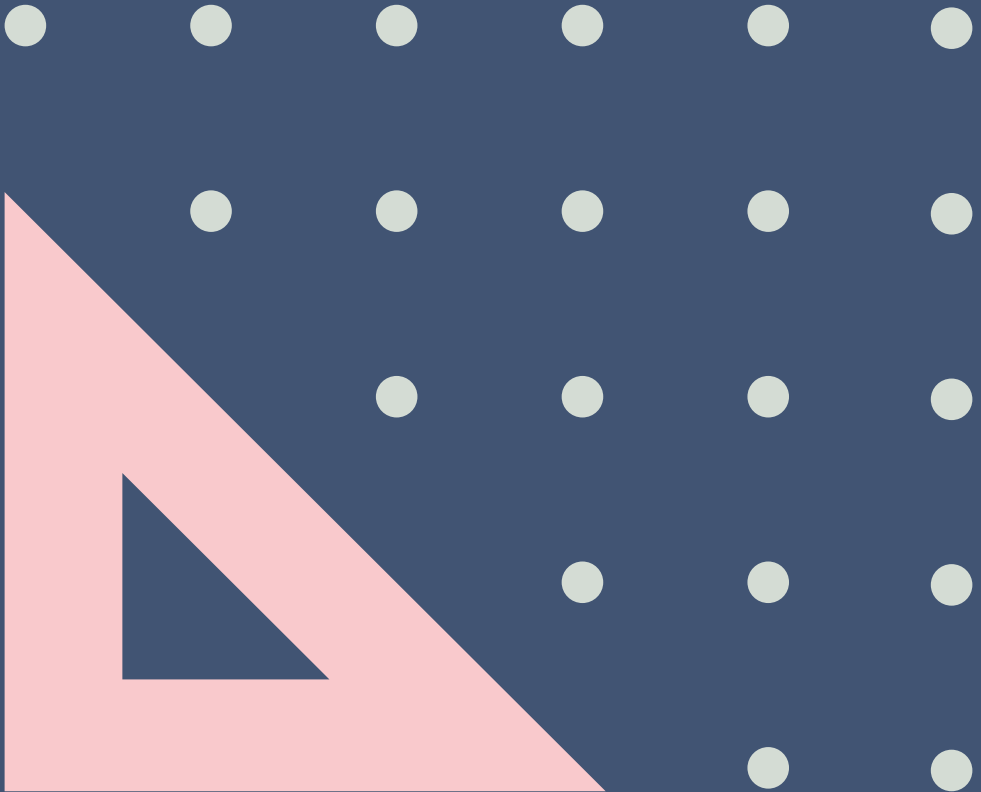


We've found that if you give people a little bit of structure that can be catalytic to getting something done. Most people are here because they want to be, nobody has to be. Some people are sent here on work assignments but that's very rare. Most of the people are here because it's fun. And, part of the trick is, if you help us put the workshop together, then you can have more fun. But it has to be a speedbump rather than a wall. That's kind of the difficult role of our admin person. He's fantastic at that. He is good at giving just enough structure for enabling someone, but not enough that they see it.

Once a month we will have time set aside for a masterclass and that will be either one of our members stepping up or someone from outside our community. All this is happening not because it's top down, but because it's bottom up. The problem, in terms of a management level, is how do you perceive what the people actually want? That's kind of watching what is actually happening and doing more of it.

Ward Hills, Member of Make Space, Cambridge

From the grass roots of the wood shop





I expect that this is cultural democracy incarnate because it really is a facility and organisation put together by a bunch of people who wanted to do something for their own ends. I guess that, in the true sense of democracy, they all advocated for something and did something about it.

And now things are advancing in other directions, because that is the direction that the group wanted to go. For example, what used to be the secure tool shop is now the wood shop. We moved the metal shop into their own room so then the wood shop had a big space. When they saw the space the woodshop people said "now I can do that big thing", and had other plans for that space. All of that was motivated from the grassroots up. None of us at a management level said "this is where we should go". What we did say is that wood shopping is becoming more interesting for more members and we are here to facilitate the needs of our members, so we are going to make it as easy as possible for the woodshop people to do things. So if they want to do this, we will give them the materials to do this, if they can convince us it's a good idea.

So in that sense it is a culture of democracy, because nothing happens here unless it is motivated by the members.

Ward Hills, Member of Make Space, Cambridge

Creating spaces





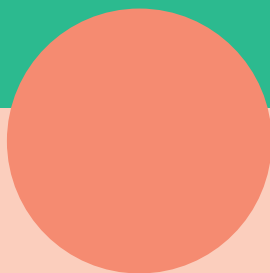
I was born in Spain but I am originally from Equatorial Guinea. When you grow up as Black in an environment which is mainly White and Western it's not that you're not recognised as an individual being part of that large community necessarily, but it's harder to see elements that undoubtedly express your belonging to it. Most of the things that I have done in my career are in pursuit of trying to create spaces where I, or others, could feel engaged with the world around us, without having to give up who we are or what constitutes our cultural legacy. So instead of trying to accept established given spaces, I found myself claiming them.

There was not an official history of blackness in Spain that I could cling to. I looked at the story of my parents, the history of Africa and its Diaspora, to processes of colonisation. I observed what Africans, and African artists in particular, were doing around the world to formulate something specific that could be happening in my context; to me and to others like me, born in Cordoba, in Andalusia, in Spain.

Creating a space for unheard voices wasn't always easy. However, the fact that I could pick and choose from a larger history of Blackness to my own advantage, to reflect on a local narrative, helped a great deal. It wasn't about representing everyone or everything, it was about finding a platform, holding a space. Each of us is just a human being, doing what she or he think needs to be done —we are doing our part. In that respect, I'm not sure I can call myself "a leader" but I could see how aspects of my life could serve a narrative of determination.

**Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director
The Showroom, London**

**Sitting,
listening,
listening**





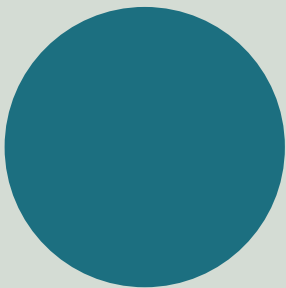
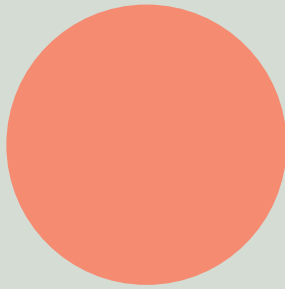
Now I'm a Director of an organisation, and in parallel I have become a mum, I understand what it means to be in a leadership position. I understand how care constitutes a critical aspect of the role. Not that I am a mother to my colleagues at work, but as I occupy a higher position in the institutional structure, as a senior manager, I know that caring and pragmatism are key. I also try to empower those around me, because I would love for my colleagues to feel that they can grow in their role at a personal and professional level.

I try to be a good colleague. I'm here. We can talk, and a lot! This is a horizontal organisation at many levels. My team love to talk so we end up having long meetings. They are terribly long, but we know each other through those meetings, which is what I like about taking the time, about investing in it. If I had to think of myself in such a role, I would say I'm trying to be the person I wanted for others to be with me when I was under their guidance.

I grew up in a household where my mum made us believe all of this and I'm trying to live up to her expectations. Yes, I don't think I have a particular style. If anything; sitting, listening, listening.

**Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director
The Showroom, London**

**What is your
favourite
colour?**





When you are a kid you were always asked 'what is your favourite colour', 'what is your favourite number?' I have always thought 'why do I have to choose?'. I remember asking my mum, what would you call someone that doesn't want to choose 'the one thing'? My mum replied: indecisive, ambivalent. Because there were times when I found that grey was amazing, but you know, I also love orange! And because I love orange so much people think that I will only wear orange. But that selection does not define the way I want to dress or the colour I would choose at any given time. I love uncertainty. I think that we have been told what to do, who to be for far too long, and that at times this has been presented as transparency, as a fixed category, we could only be that.

When you hold space for others you do so hoping they will find a platform in which they could define themselves for themselves. We have been ascribed to so many certainties, so many rules. So what happens if instead of having the rules, you try to live with no rules, or at least propose spaces for distorting them?

**Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director
The Showroom, London**

Basketball





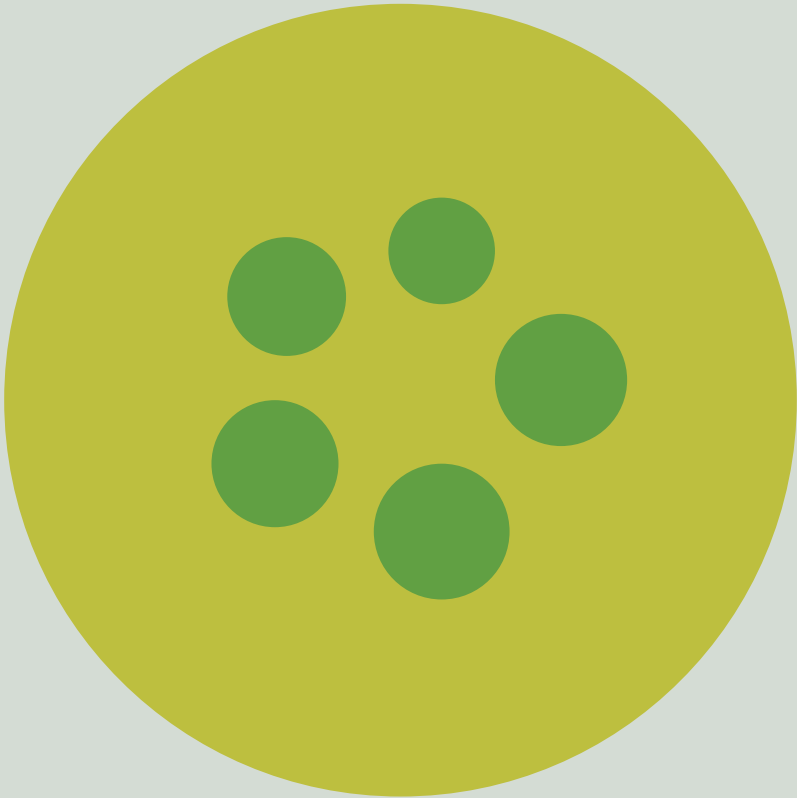
One thing that you might not know is that I used to be a basketball referee, so part of my understanding of how to be around people comes from the philosophy of the sport. A key thing there for me is the interpretation of the game. As a referee in basketball you are not a judge, you are an interpreter.

It's all about reading the game. Make the game the best possible. The more you know about it, the best you can read it, interpret it. Things are not just what they are, they are what they are in relation to other things. A touch doesn't necessarily mean a fault. I can touch you like this [gentle touch] and you can continue dribbling and make the basket. As a referee, you can decide when a touch is a fault and when it's not. And you should establish that, according to the rhythm of the game, in the first 5 to 10 minutes. So that everyone on the court knows what is the level of the game to be played. I interpret the game as the players play, and then we all hope to share the best version of such interpretation. The best way to read the game is to be able to let it happen before you take a decision.

In basketball, like in life, you have to make decisions and live with them. That's one of the things I learned. If you stay on a wrong call you made, then you won't be able to see the next call. I don't know if you're a fan of basketball but if you see it from a very philosophical point of view you might understand my point.

**Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director
The Showroom, London**

The organic intellectual





Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist philosopher, who referred to intellectuals who come from a group and help the group to formalise their ideas and to get a communal voice. He talks about the organic intellectual in the context of a labour formation, of workers' education, of the unions. The organic intellectual is the one who comes from the group —working class— to transform the group; that is the voice of the group among the other dominant classes. That is, representing anew the ideology of the group but is originated within the group. And that is, in a way, how a leader within the context of a cultural more open democracy can be established.

And that's what I try to formulate with the team here. There are many things that we decide collectively. But you also need somebody who takes responsibility before any regulatory organ. So you are an organic intellectual in a way; a leader that is prompted by the group, in order to be the representative of that group. If it is organic in that way, it is actual representation of the views that the group already have.

**Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director
The Showroom, London**

Not about my worldview





In my job, my leadership style, there's no way it could be anything other than collaborative. Quite a lot of listening and facilitating conversations to try and reach consensus, and trying to reach diverse points of view.

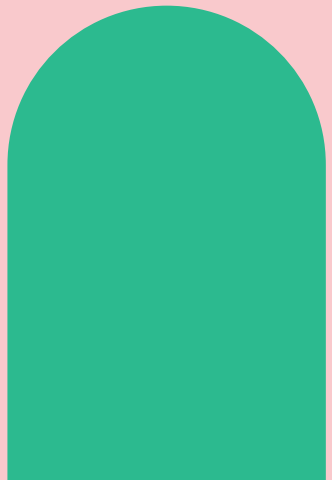
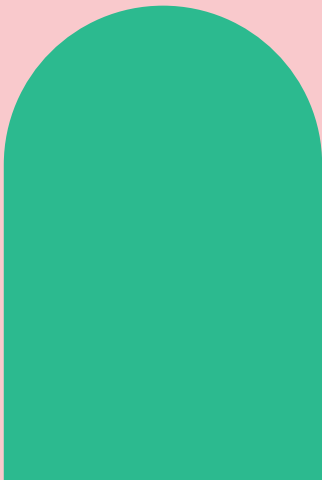
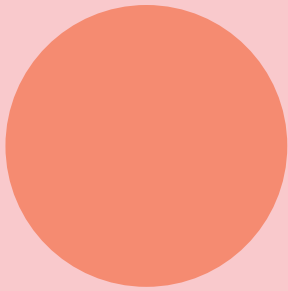
It's absolutely not a model that could handle a big ego that thinks that their version of excellence should define what the organisation does. I'm far less interested in my opinions and world-view than the young people we engage with. None of our produced shows are about stuff that's to do with me, my opinion, my world-view, literally none of them.

You have to be curious, about young people, about art, how it connects to the world, what you're reading, what you're seeing in the news, what you are seeing in the street.

Having an attuned radar to what is going on in the world, it's as much about receiving as transmitting. And a lot of facilitating conversations and being proactive. Making sure that quieter voices are heard. Making sure that conversations remain safe and trusting and collaborative.

**Matt Fenton, CEO and Artistic Director
Contact Theatre, Manchester**

Less about the figureheads





In the future, I definitely think it is a different set of skills and competencies that are required for more collaborative open, consensual and diverse models. There need to be different kinds of experiences which prepare leaders, which I personally think is a good thing. So it will change the kind of skill-set, trajectory, training that people do, and will involve much more facilitating than directing.

I think there is a change afoot and it's not unconnected to wanting much greater diversity and a broader spread of different kinds of people with different kinds of lives and backgrounds in senior leadership positions. I think Arts Council has been part of that change, and are really trying to drive that change. But I don't think they've tackled some of the big issues and some of the big institutions. If there is going to be any kind of change you have to address the big institutions, which can be the least far on in terms of these issues and therefore the least diverse.

**Matt Fenton, CEO and Artistic Director
Contact Theatre, Manchester**

I think there is a need for, and will be much more 'team leadership'. Out of sheer necessity there will be recognition that young people are and can be leaders and what they have to say is really vital to ensuring any kind of successful future. I do think leadership is going to shift. I think it's going to be less about the figure heads and more about, not necessarily grass roots, but people coming in with certain knowledge or skills with a really big investment in shifting and changing what culture means, who I think are going to demand more power and control.

**Kamina Walton, Founder and Director
Rising Arts Agency, Bristol**

Not just playing with representation





The young decision makers who've been involved in making staff appointments know that the young panel have exactly the same weight as the board panel. I know examples where the board had a preferred candidate and the young people had a preferred candidate, and we did a second interview where we combined the two panels. If we don't reach a consensus then, we don't appoint, and that really slows things down. So the young people know that they have power, and they also know that we have four young people on the full board of trustees. That's quite a significant number. That's not just playing at representation.

The [young people] can go to the young board members to express their concerns about anything. And those concerns come through to board and the exec as a challenge, and I can honestly say that that happens.

Matt Fenton, CEO and Artistic Director
Contact Theatre, Manchester

A young individual would have an opinion and that would matter the most to the organisation, because even if they had a view of something they would listen and be like "why do you think that?", and then would consider it and then navigate the decisions of what we make in the programme, or staff, or decisions about the building.

A young person's perception of how an adult is in an interview would be different compared to that of an adult. A lot of people came in thinking they were just having a chat. It is about how professionals treat young people.

Grainne Flynn, Young Board Member
Contact Theatre, Manchester

It is an issue of ethics





I think before the issue of quality there is the issue of ethics; who are you accountable to and who are you accountable for? This gallery (Kelvingrove Museum) is owned by the people of Glasgow so you have to be as accountable for as many people as possible. And if nobody wants to share it with anyone on that basis that is their decision, so they might have a different definition of quality but it's not for them. But I don't. If you are trying to do cultural democracy, quality is about being intelligent, accessible and beautiful. But if you are objecting to cultural democracy then quality is an excuse for that objection. So it's not an issue of quality it is an issue of ethics. I mean the basic decision for any museum is: who is going to be made welcome, who is it for? And if you decide that people who have a reading age of 12 are not welcome then that is an ethical decision over a quality decision.

**Harry Dunlop, Learning and Access Curator
St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and
Provand's Lordship**

Crystal ball





I think it is being affected by the significant increase in inequality. In London, Oxford, Cambridge, big cities, with lots of tourists, there are enough well educated people in these places to fill [museums]. They will spend money in the shop, they will spend money in the café. I suspect that with budget pressure on local government, where most community engagement and cultural democracy stuff happens, there is going to be a shift. I think that the perception of museums is still dominated by the big London, nationals etc. That's what politicians think museums are. They are dead impressed with school numbers, photos in the annual report of the black people and disabled kids as a report card; people that are brought in to sit and it will look like it is all fine. The complacency of major organisations will continue. And then the educational departments will solve their consciences. That's what you are doing. You are a form to make them look reasonable and this is only going to get worse.

Mark O' Neill, (2009-2016) Former Director of Policy & Research for Glasgow Life and Head of Glasgow Museums (1998-2009)

Layers of identity





The museum is changing and Glasgow is changing. It has been a dispersal centre for asylum seekers - I hate that word - for refugees, and since the early 2000s caused the city enormous problems. I think it's been really to the benefit of the city. Post Brexit you know everything lurching to the right, not only in politics but also faith groups as well. Building walls in some parts of the world, quite literally.

I see my role as using the museum, the collection. Everything starts with the collections and then a dialogue is created or a debate. We continue that within the building and without to create a story of their own (the public), which was them telling their story, not me choosing for them. How can a Syrian possibly be Scottish? They absolutely can be, as there are layers of identity that exist. Glasgow has always been a city of migration and change and people coming and going and also it makes a very bold statement for people who come here from all over the world. It sends quite a positive message at a time when people are becoming treated as Other or suspect, all that kind of stuff.

**Harry Dunlop, Learning and Access Curator
St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and
Provand's Lordship**

Building bridges





I see myself as much more of an enabler, facilitator. As somebody who builds bridges. Who provides the materials for people to create their own stories and narratives. I think that is why our role should be about humility. I think we all need to take a step back and allow that creative process to take place. And I'm a bit of a control freak so that's a very difficult place to start off in a project when you don't know what the objects are going to be or what it's going to look like, and it is also difficult for colleagues within the organisation to understand that. But we (gallery educators) are also much more engaged in this process and trust this process more than our colleagues. But that's changing I think.

**Harry Dunlop, Learning and Access Curator
St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and
Provand's Lordship**

The trenches





Mark is like the master builder. I am like the bricks and mortar. I lay the bricks and find the mortar and I am quite happy with that. It took me a long while to realise that being in the trenches is really fine. I think that is job satisfaction. I was unhappy for a long time because I realised that I was in a role that was fundamentally not me and it was my ego that was actually taking me in a certain direction that I realised was the wrong turn for me.

But you learn. I mean that's just life and we all learn that and we'll all need to find who we are and where we are and make sense of that, if you like.

**Harry Dunlop, Learning and Access Curator
St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and
Provand's Lordship**