

Cultural ecology connectors and the creation of public art

By Simon Crisp, Birmingham City University

Abstract

This paper seeks to consider the role of art administrators involved in the creation of public art using a 'cultural ecologies' lens shaped by the work of Holden (2015). In decentring, though not ignoring, the traditional economic focus of creative industries research, it considers the role such administrators play in the broader cultural ecology responsible for the creation of public art.

Taking Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural intermediaries, it examines their role in implementing policy and the production of public art by focusing on issues such as values, motivations and identities. These are factors identified as important in the study of such individuals by Maguire and Matthews (2012) but can be overlooked when taking an economic-based model. Adopting an approach which sees culture and cultural production ecologically, this paper considers the cooperation and relationships between the actors involved and the complex interdependencies which exist around their work.

Engaging with literature which has looked at the roles of cultural intermediaries and cultural ecologies, the paper focuses on the ecology in which the art administrator finds themselves working. This ecology and the resulting relationships are examined through the use of an interview with a current art administrator who talks about their motivations, identity, and their skills, networks and relationships. This allows the exploration of the multitude of factors beyond economic demands, which influence what public art is produced, how, and when.

Introduction: cultural ecology and its uses

In proposing an evolutionary economics approach to the creative industries, Potts (2011) notes that institutional moves to connect the cultural sector to economic growth

and innovation policy from the 1990s led to the development of an 'economics of creative industries' framework seeing focus on the entrepreneurship, economic growth and development benefits of creative industries. In contrast to this, Holden's (2015) use of an ecology lens can be seen as liberating in the way it de-centres financial powers and hierarchy, instead seeing culture as an organism built on and requiring each of its parts. He suggests this adoption of Markusen's definition of cultural ecology, that is as a network of interdependences which influence the demand and supply of cultural production and art, means, "examining culture as an ecology rather than an economy offers a better approach, because it provides a comprehensible overview which does not privilege one type of value - financial value - over others that attach to culture" (Holden, 2015:2). This allows a focus on the non-monetary flows within the ecology which can sometimes be neglected.

Such an ecological approach can, therefore, offer insight in the emergence and evolution of ideas as they flow across the spheres of culture by focusing on the complex interdependencies and networks which come together to allow things to happen. Holden also suggests treating culture as an ecology allows for the deployment of ecological concepts to explore cultural endeavour, and that seeing culture as a communal phenomenon will enable us to see our position in relation to it. However, while suggesting the ecological approach to culture helps to focus on cultural systems and the social meaning they can generate, he reiterates that this still needs to include a focus on economic return.

This paper takes Holden's suggestion that the cultural ecology approach could be used to analyse roles and not business models, and uses it to consider the roles of art administrators in implementing policy and the production of public art. I suggest interrogating the art administrator's role, which exists between policymaker and artist, can offer insight into the development of public art from policies with objectives such as community-building and place-making to physical reality.

Connectors and intermediaries

While Holden suggests people and organisations within the cultural ecology can be active in more than one of his identified interacting roles (guardians, connectors, nomads, and platforms) he highlights the connector role of arts administrators. These are people who bring people and resources together to make things happen, or “move energy around the ecology” as Holden puts it (Holden, 2015:30).

In considering this role, it's key to also note the importance placed on the power and networks at play within a cultural ecology by Holden's interviewees, many of whom related the concept of 'the ecology of culture' to connections which exist within the industry and beyond. These are not just the professional networks and interactions which are often focused on due to their financial power, but also social networks and those which exist around physical or locational nodes of cultural activity.

As such, Holden's connector art administrators can be viewed as an example of Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural intermediaries, a term which Nixon and Du Gay (2002) observed was broad in Bourdieu's use when referring to the “new occupations” between the spheres of production and consumption. While early uses of the term focused on economic issues, the varied ways in which 'cultural intermediaries' has been deployed to look at positions which include fashion designer (McRobbie, 1998) music industry executive (Negus, 1992) and journalist (Mellor, 2008) gives us a tool with which to explore the cultural ecology role of arts administrators in the creation of in the commissioning and delivery of public art. They are a connector in the space between local authorities, developers, communities and artists.

The importance of self-identity was discussed by McRobbie (2011) in regard to creative industry working, an overlapping category into which the role of arts administrator connector or cultural intermediary would fit. It is with this in mind that I explore the role of arts administrator in developing public art and how their identity, motivations, passion, networks, skills and industry expertise fit into the policy process. The relevance of researching such roles has also previously been highlighted by Smith, Maguire and Jackson (2012) for the way it can be used across industries to examine the production

of symbolic goods and their cultural value.

Public art and policy

Given the role of policy in directing the creation of public art, it is also relevant to consider notions which have shaped it, particularly the idea of art's social impact. While this is nothing new, Belfiore and Bennett (2007) observe discussions about the social impact of arts go back at least as far as Classical Greece (fifth century BC), it could be argued to hold increased importance when taking an ecological model of culture which extends beyond economic considerations. Indeed, policy rhetoric about the 'social function' and 'public good' of public art is often used, with Hewitt (2011) observing it played a vital part in the development of cultural policy under the New Labour government of 1997.

While city regeneration schemes with economic ambitions can be culture-led (Vickery, 2007), and with public art seen by some as a key driver of economic regeneration (Pollock and Paddison, 2010), Jordan and Santomauro (2017) note that public art during the tenure of New Labour also came with a new emphasis for art which performed tasks based around social engagement, identity-shaping and the utilisation of heritage. In a critique of New Labour's cultural policies, Hewitt (2011) claimed these emphases added to pressures on artists and commissioners and contributed to the industry which developed around it, including agencies and consultants which work with clients (such as developers with '106' planning stipulations), to help develop public art which met various criteria. It is with this in mind that this paper considers the role of art administrators beyond their economic environment, and suggests that understanding their motivations and networks within the role can add to the understanding of the cultural ecology.

Methods

This paper uses two main sources within its research: *Birmingham's Public Art Strategy 2015-19* (BCC, 2015) is used as a way of investigating the subject, and an interview

with an arts administrator working within the region is deployed to explore the role in relation to the policy. The aforementioned art strategy was produced following engagement and consultation with organisations including developers, arts groups, academics and planners, and sets out a vision for public art across Birmingham. In my analysis, I focus on aspects of the policy relating to how art can be used to strengthen communities and place-shaping, outlined as one of six key outcomes for the strategy, as it is proposed these are areas where the cultural intermediary or cultural ecology connector is allowed freedom to act beyond the contractual demands of their role.

An interviewee was also identified who works in the West Midlands as an arts administrator who specialises in commissioning artists within site-specific and context-specific projects. This person was introduced to me by a shared acquaintance, and I was already aware of some of their work. While this could raise ethical questions about the validity of selecting them, I believe that I gained a level of access I might not otherwise have had, and as Kuipers (2014) notes, “access is greatly facilitated through good introductions”. (p 58)

Before the 45-minute interview, I was also given access to a draft in-depth report about a recent multi-year arts project within Birmingham, on which the art administrator had worked. Designed to be shared with funders, stakeholders and partners, this 250-page document went into great detail not only about the practicalities of the project but also issues experienced by the arts administrator throughout, including dealings with various people and organisations across the cultural ecology which I would otherwise not have been aware of. As this report was still in a draft stage, I was unable to quote directly from it, but it did help me to shape and direct my questions throughout the interview. While my interviewee was initially happy to be identified, I have opted to keep them anonymous, referring to her as ‘Fiona’ because some potentially sensitive details were later mentioned in the semi-structured interview.

Looking at policy

As mentioned, Birmingham’s Public Art Strategy 2015-19 (BCC, 2015) sets out a vision

for public art in Birmingham. Covering 43 pages it outlines six key outcomes which include, to, 'Strengthen Birmingham's communities and place shaping', 'Enable Birmingham residents to experience creativity', 'Improve Birmingham's reputation as a desirable location', 'Enhance Birmingham's cultural offer', 'Enhance the quality of the public realm' and 'Recognise and create key events'. It goes on to set out objectives and future actions to achieve these outcomes.

The document also describes the objective of strengthening Birmingham's communities and place-shaping making, stating: "Public art can empower residents and artists to have a voice, and actively shape the future of a place. Projects that successfully engage communities can create good quality and relevant public art, where residents can feel proud and have ownership. Such artworks can contribute to place-making, feeling safe, cohesion and sustainable communities" (p 20). However, it is not clear on how this should be achieved, often relying on the sort of common-sense assumptions criticised by Belfiore and Bennett (2009). In contrast, in addressing strategic objectives such as improving the funding base for commissioning public art, or improving the management of the existing portfolio of public art in Birmingham, the guidelines and actions for implementation are more clearly identifiable and can be easier mapped to objective outcomes.

While the strategy and Birmingham City Council (BCC) are prioritising outcomes of art relating to communities and place shaping in this document, this is done with sweeping statements rather than clear direction, or a way to measure it. As such, the policy is not prescriptive about how it is executed, or its impact measured. This allows space for the actions of the art administrators, connectors, or cultural intermediaries this paper is looking at, and reiterates the value of a cultural ecology approach which allows for the probing of such roles and how their actions are shaped by the wider discourses and their position within the ecology.

Going beyond policy

Given the lack of direct guidance offered in the policy document about how to create

public art which fulfilled the policy objectives, the interviewee seemed to have a very clear idea about what her role could be in developing public art which she believes relates to community and place-shaping benefits. For example, she detailed how she had had a meeting with developers about the possibility commissioning sculptures to help them meet policy-directed planning obligations but had turned down offers because the developer merely wanted to fulfil their policy commitments whereas she felt there was more which could be done. Fiona reiterated that as far as she was concerned there's no point producing public art which meets planning obligations, but does not mean anything to its audience concerning heritage or community engagement. "Without a doubt that (meaning to people) is the most important thing, the most important thing," (Fiona, 2017). She also contrasted the sort of public art she is involved in with 'plop art', a disparaging term used to describe sculpture which installed without meaning. In doing this, she was framing the legitimacy and social value of what she does as a cultural intermediary and promoting it as useful and desirable. This also suggests that while the role of art administrator is primarily one of Connector in a cultural ecology, it can also be part Guardian, with Fiona not only wanting to get the job done, but done in a way which she feels it should be based on her own personal values and motivations.

Fiona also spoke with passion of examples when she had acted to persuade developers, who had initially just wanted to fulfil planning obligations, to instead commission long-term art projects which went beyond policy guidelines and were more in line with the sort of art she thought should be produced to have meaning. Here she was simultaneously positioning herself as having the power to alter the course of actions, doing more than policy, and displaying the sort of ability to exert influence others through expertise which is described by Maguire and Matthews (2012) and relates to Holden's (2015) description of connectors putting resources together and "move energy around the ecology" (p 30). This also shows how an ecological approach, where consideration of financial value is not prioritised over other types of value, but seen as one of many, can be used to explore how ideas shape cultural production. Arguably this can lead to a better-informed idea of what is produced and why, which in turn can lead to a better understanding of the economic outcomes of the cultural

ecology activity.

Networks

Regarding how she has succeeded in developing the sort of public art she has, Fiona said it was due to a combination of skills, "I am idealistic, I absolutely am, but I'm also incredibly practical, and it's a really good mix". She also attributed successes to networks detailing several occasions she gained a contract from developers or other organisations she'd met, or was known by. "It's down to people," she said, "I make sure I understand any initiatives, strategies, plans or policies that relate to different areas that I'm working in, but it always comes down to people, always."

This simultaneously articulates the requirements in Holden's assertion that cultural ecology connectors "have an intimate knowledge of the micro-operations of their field and they need strong and eclectic networks." (Holden, 2015:30) Re-iterating this she went on to list a handful of people she said were a vital network for her, which, Durrer and Miles (2009) suggest is an important consideration for cultural intermediaries when it comes to marketing.

As Fiona continued to talk about people she had worked with to bring projects together, she described using an existing and wide-ranging network of trusted contacts, but also giving opportunities to new or emerging artists, who became known to her through shared networks and their own professional practice. This shows the importance of connections within the cultural ecology along with the function of Fiona's role within in it, creating a space for new artists to emerge and flourish. She also detailed the importance of location, in terms of how it acted as a connector when working in a particular physical space, and bringing certain people or organisations together, demonstrating the interconnectedness and interacting roles Holden proposes exists.

Focusing on the connections within a cultural ecology model shows how the approach can be used as a one way to understand the complex networks at play and the interactions between individuals, organisations and places which result in cultural production. This ability to focus on interconnectedness which cuts across the

public/private, institution/individual divides arguably demonstrates a strength of the ecological approach compared to some more economic-based alternatives.

Identity and motivation

By separating the function and performance of the role of art administrator from an economy-centric approach, it also allows a deeper probing of the motivation for carrying out the role. When questioned about why she felt it was important that public art mattered to people, Fiona said it was an inherent belief of hers that engaging public art could benefit people and communities. Indeed, throughout the interview, she repeatedly referred to herself as 'idealistic', 'passionate', and stated she was motivated to do what she does because it is her "absolute belief, complete belief" that public art can have meaning and bring benefits to local communities.

As observed with other cultural workers (McRobbie, 2011), Fiona insisted she was not primarily motivated by personal income and discussed projects where she had put her own money in to ensure they happened, something that had not gone down too well at home "I've very idealistic. My partner didn't (look at it positively) It's just because I had the belief that this was a practice opportunity that could eventually really change something, and that's where I'm at." She also added that she was aware she could earn more money by not being so idealistic, "There's the stupidity; otherwise I'd be loaded." That said, there were frequent references to money and funding, so while Fiona did not see it as being her primary motivation, she was very aware of its importance in enabling things to be done. This highlights that while an ecological approach to culture de-centres economic value, it cannot, and should not, ignore it.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the way in which Holden's vision of culture as an ecology allows the examination of specific roles which are removed from an economic hierarchy. As Maguire and Matthews suggest (2014) focusing on the "narratives, identities and emotions" (p 11) of cultural intermediaries, can help make it possible to

investigate the “intersections between production and consumption, and economy and culture”. However, this paper has attempted to go one step further in suggesting examining such roles removed from an economic hierarchical approach, and instead from an ecology viewpoint where financial value is one of many, makes it better to understand the whole cultural ecology and how it operates. This is in no way to suggest that economic issues are not important, but that by focusing on issues beyond those of the economy allows us to better explore the wide range of contributing factors and connections at play, which can, in turn, lead to a better understanding of a wider gamut of issues, including economic considerations.

In exploring the role of arts administrator within the cultural ecology of public art production, it has been seen they can play dual roles of connector and guardian. The connector role is enabled by their networking ability, or translation skills, which means they are able to move and negotiate between different groups, making connections to enable cultural production. However, in acting as a guardian they can also prioritise certain types of public art which they deem to have social value, refusing other contracts and encouraging developers to act beyond policy in their creation of public art. It was also observed that the arts administrator could act to enable others to grow or develop, such as giving emerging artists space and opportunity to flourish. This once again reiterates the importance of recognising how the motivations and identity of the arts administrators can impact on the cultural production of public art, and the networks and interdependences which exist within the cultural ecology.

As stated, the interview suggests arts administrators can play a more critical role in these intersections than the cultural policy documents would imply, and that much of what is done, is not primarily motivated by finance. The study suggests arts administrators can (although do not always) position themselves within the gaps of policy and seek to influence what public art is produced, and equally importantly how it is produced. I would argue that it is only by exploring the passion and motivation that a certain breed of art administrator claims to have, that we can attempt to discover the importance of their roles in influencing the actions of developers or

commissioners and directing the process of creating public art to engage with a population, community or heritage.

With Belfiore (2009) asserting that unproven statements about the social impacts of the arts are commonly used by policymakers, it is interesting to think about how policymakers see the role of art administrators within the cultural ecology. It could be the lack of specific instructions is a recognition of the difficulty of measuring such outcomes. However, another interpretation would be that policymakers believe such connectors and intermediaries are better positioned within the cultural ecology and skilled to achieve these social impacts and have intentionally not been given a tight framework to abide by. If this is the case, Holden's call for a cultural ecology approach to be used to analyse roles and not business models is even more critical and can, in fact, lead to a better-informed understanding of the process as a whole, including the economic outcomes.

References

Birmingham City Council (2015) Birmingham's Public Art Strategy 2015 to 2019. Online. http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/6768/birminghams_public_art_strategy_2015_to_2019

Bennett, O. and Belfiore, E. (2007) Rethinking the social impacts of the arts. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 13:2, pp 135-151

Bennett, O. and Belfiore, E. (2009) Researching the social impact of the arts: literature, fiction and the novel. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 15:1 pp 17-33

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction - A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Routledge.

Durrer, V and Miles, S. (2009) New perspectives on the role of cultural intermediaries in social inclusion in the UK. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. 12:3. pp 225-241

Hewitt, A. (2011) Privatizing the public: Three rhetorics of art's public good in 'Third Way' cultural policy. *Art & the Public Sphere* 1:1 pp 19-36

Holden, J (2015) *The Ecology of Culture*. Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Jordan, M. and Santomauro, A. (2017) The very small public of public art. *Art & the Public Sphere*. 6:1 pp. 3-5

Kuipers, G (2014) *Ethnographic Research and Cultural Intermediaries*. In Maguire, J and Matthews, J (eds.) *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*. Sage, pp. 52-63

Maguire and Matthews (2012) - Are we all cultural intermediaries now? An introduction to cultural intermediaries in context. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 15:5. pp 551-562

Maguire, J and Matthews, J (eds.) (2014) *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*. Sage.

McRobbie, A (1998) *British Fashion Design*. Routledge

McRobbie, A (2011) 'Re-Thinking Creative Economy as Radical Social Enterprise', Online. <http://www.variant.org.uk/>

Mellor, N. (2008) Arab Journalists as Cultural Intermediaries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 13:4. pp 465-483.

Negus, K (1992) *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*. Arnold.

Nixon, S and Du Gay, P (2002) Who Needs Cultural Intermediaries. *Cultural Studies*, 16:4, 495-500.

Pollock, V. and Paddison, R. (2010) Embedding Public Art: Practice, Policy and Problems, *Journal of Urban Design*, 15:3, 335-356,

Potts, J (2011) *Creative Industries and Economic Evolution*. Edward Elgar Publishing

Vickery, J. (2007) *The Emergence of Culture-led Regeneration: A policy concept and its discontents*

Bio

Simon Crisp is a PhD student at Birmingham City University researching the mediation and cultural translation of modern yoga practices into Britain and the USA.

ENDS