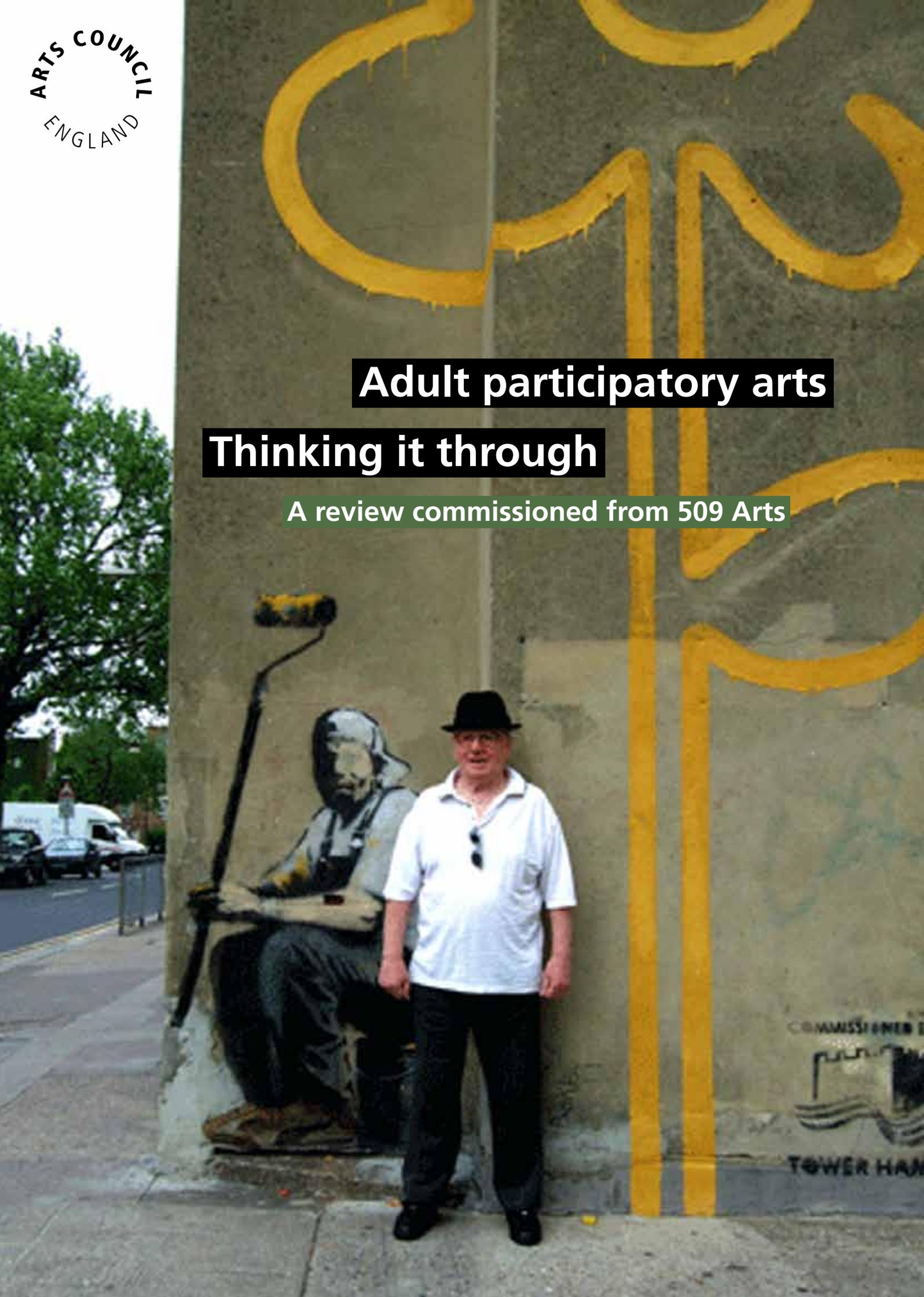
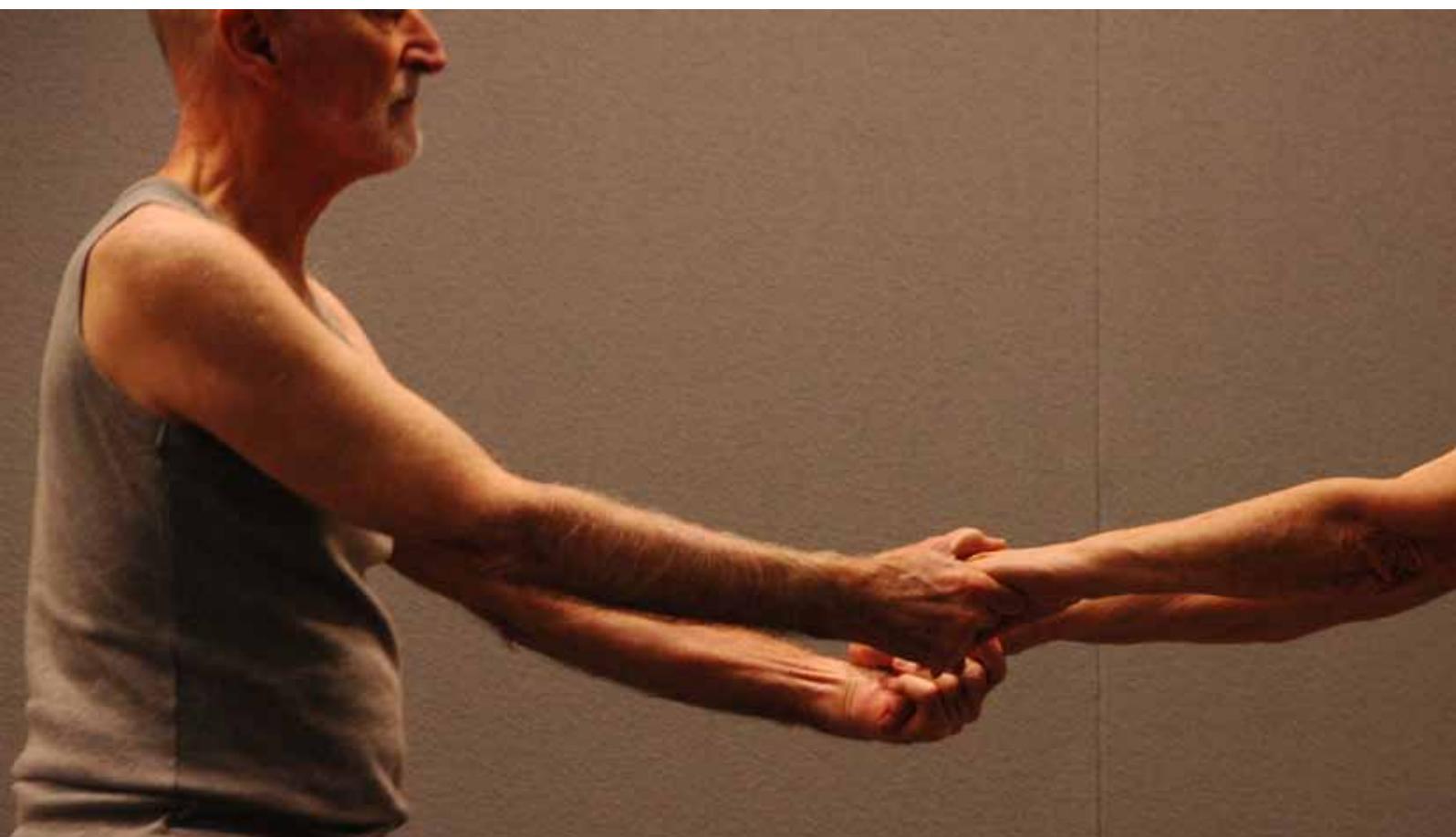


Adult participatory arts

Thinking it through

A review commissioned from 509 Arts





Cover image: *Magic Me* participant in front of Banksy artwork, From *This is My Life project*, 2008
Photographer: Marysia Lachowicz

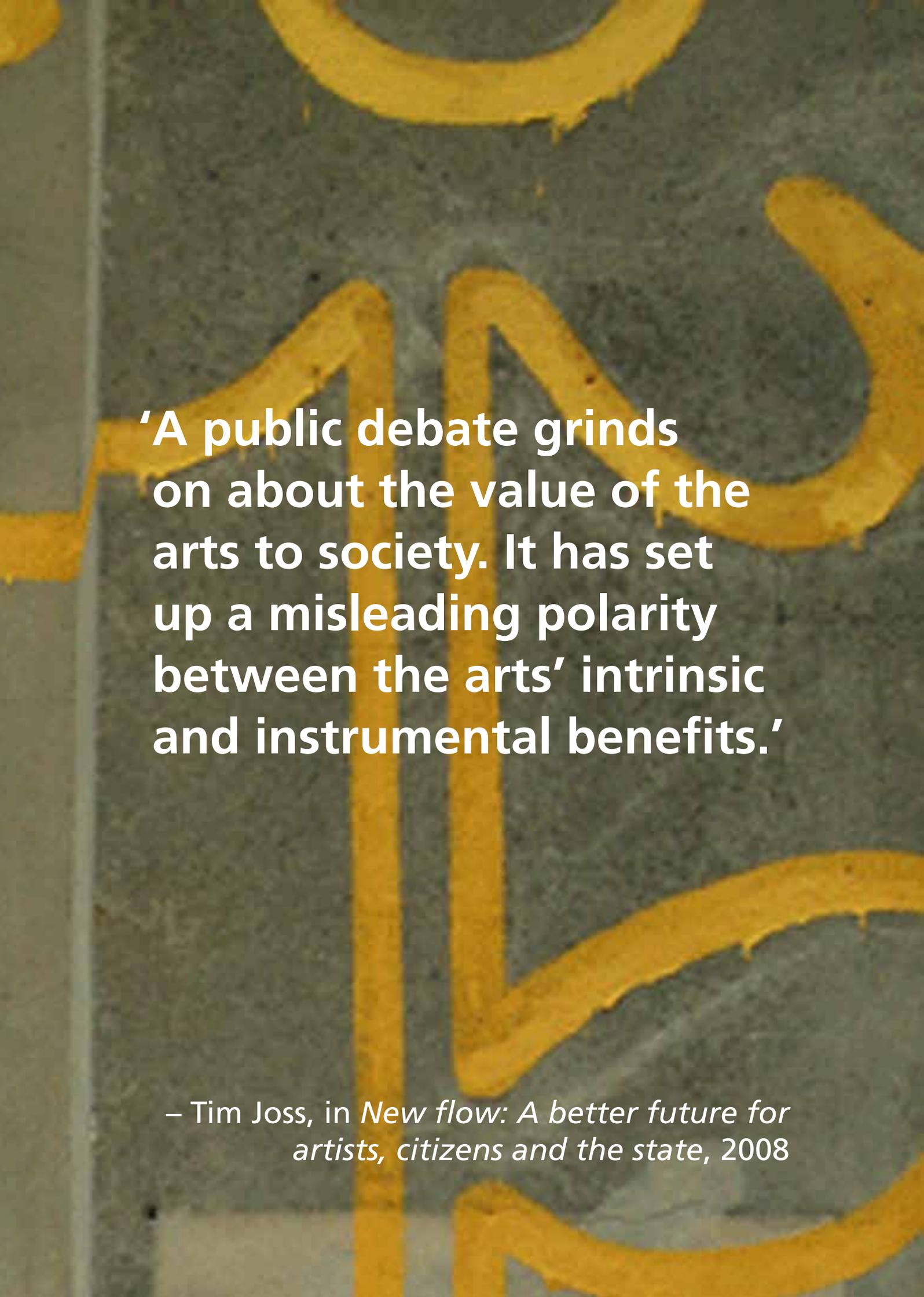
Above: Entelechy Arts, *Crosscurrents*, 2009
Photographer: Shelly Ammamamm



Arts Council England works to get great art to everyone by championing, developing and investing in artistic experiences that enrich people's lives.

As the national development agency for the arts, we support a range of artistic activities from theatre to music, literature to dance, photography to digital art, carnival to crafts. Great art inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better.

Between 2008 and 2011 we'll invest in excess of £1.6 billion of public money from the government and the National Lottery to create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country.

The background is a textured grey surface with thick, expressive yellow brushstrokes. The strokes are somewhat irregular and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

**'A public debate grinds
on about the value of the
arts to society. It has set
up a misleading polarity
between the arts' intrinsic
and instrumental benefits.'**

– Tim Joss, in *New flow: A better future for
artists, citizens and the state*, 2008

Foreword

Our 2008–11 Arts Council plan for London states our aim of supporting arts organisations to overcome barriers to engagement and participation in the arts, focusing in particular on reaching those who at present rarely or never attend or take part in the arts.

Left: Detail from *Magic Me* participant in front of Banksy artwork, From *This is My Life* project, 2008
Photographer: Marysia Lachowicz

In London we are fortunate to have an extraordinary level of expertise, among arts organisations, local authorities and other partners, in engaging a wide range of participants and audiences. We fund a broad spectrum of organisations that are key to our work in reaching out to Londoners who have little or no opportunity to take part in or attend the arts. We know that, in order to continue to reach these groups in the community, we need to sustain a high level of excellent artists and organisations, able to produce high-quality artistic experiences in many different settings.

The analysis that follows is based on a review that Arts Council England, London commissioned in early 2009. The review set out to gain a better understanding of the work of a range of organisations that have participation and engagement at their heart. It involved organisations that work in some of the most challenging circumstances possible in London – in prisons, in hostels for homeless people, in healthcare settings, in daycare centres for people affected by dementia, for example.

We are confident the review will contribute towards us having a better overview of this work and a greater understanding of its value and its impact. It provides a powerful basis for the growth and development of participatory arts in London, and beyond.

Moira Sinclair
Executive Director
Arts Council England, London

Right: Spare Tyre production, *Feeble Minds*, 2009
Photographer: Patrick Baldwin

Introduction

1 Matarasso François,
*Use or ornament?
The social impact
of participation in the
arts*, Comedia, 1997

2 Joss, Tim, *New flow
– a better future for
artists, citizens and the
state*, Mission Models
Money, 2008

In 1997 François Matarasso published *Use or Ornament*¹, which identified over 50 different positive outcomes from participation in the arts. More recently Tim Joss in *New flow*² has described the value of arts activity as being *intrinsic* and *instrumental*, with the intrinsic being personal and individual, and the instrumental delivering a broad realm of benefits to society and civil life.

A complex view of participatory arts prevails today. Participation is a malleable dialogue that informs the work of the artist, builds and develops audiences, engages with communities, promotes learning and forges routes into active experience and artistic creation of many kinds. Participatory arts are now mainstream and are central to the core programme of many large arts organisations, producing remarkable outcomes and at times sparking passionate debate.

Access to the arts has been increasingly democratised in recent years and the notion that arts organisations exist for the benefit of an elite few soundly discredited. The National Lottery, whatever you may think of it, has broadened access to the arts. The Disability Discrimination Act has written strands of access into law. The principle of inclusion has affected how we build audiences, train artists, cast plays, make art and creatively describe 21st-century Britain. And behind all this sits an understanding that personal creativity is an asset to us as individuals, to our families and neighbourhoods and in the workplace. Creativity has value – for the economy, for our wellbeing and for civil society.



Arts Council England has a long history of funding participatory arts work with vulnerable adults and there are a number of companies in London that specialise in this area. Some of them have been 'in business' for over 20 years, delivering specialist programmes in many different settings. Frail older people, offenders in the justice system, people with mental health issues and homeless people – all feature in this context and many of the companies that work with them have built up a body of knowledge and expertise that is outstanding. Although much has been written about participatory arts with children and young people, work with adults has, in comparison, been given only limited profile.

Background

In March 2009 Arts Council England, London commissioned 509 Arts to research and review 13 London based arts organisations working with vulnerable and disadvantaged adults. This report analyses the findings of the review, and makes recommendations for the future development of this area of work. The full review report is available from www.artscouncil.org.uk/adult-participatory-arts.

The policies and ambition of Arts Council England and the twin aspirations of access and excellence upon which these are built are described in *Great art for everyone* (available from www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/great-art-for-everyone-2008-2011). The realm of adult participatory arts presents a challenge to these aspirations. It is often specialised, involving practice that has been developed for specific individuals with specific backgrounds, histories or experiences. While often achieving the outcomes of excellence, engagement, reach, diversity and innovation described in *Great art*

for everyone, these can take place in contexts that are not accessible. Adult participatory arts can sometimes be a rather private process, managed and delivered by companies and individuals with a wealth of experience. It is not always readily accessible to (or maybe understood) by those who make funding and resource decisions.

Nationally, Arts Council England is required to make clear assessments as to relevance, quality and value of the work it supports. Its funding decisions are in theory based upon its capacity to apply standards that can be applied across the board. It relies upon the capacity of Arts Council officers and assessors to make informed decisions based upon detailed intelligence. Few would deny that this is an imperfect science, and for adult participatory arts there seems to be a greater than usual degree of uncertainty.

Process

Our brief has been to review 13 companies working in the field of adult participatory arts and scrutinise their practice, their organisation, their effectiveness and contribution to the wider creative landscape in London. The companies were either regularly funded organisations or receiving Grants for the arts. They were: Age Exchange, Cardboard Citizens, Clean Break, Clod Ensemble, Creative Routes, Dance United, Entelechy, Green Candle, Magic Me, Music in Prisons, Spare Tyre, Streetwise Opera and Survivors Poetry. Despite their many and varied differences they all work with marginalised or vulnerable groups. The outcome may be a low-key sharing or a high-profile public performance. The venue might be a community centre, a major theatre or a hospital ward.

Figure 1: The review companies and their main areas of work

(Many of the companies also work with young people. While this is not an area for consideration within the review, young people will have participated in some aspects of the work.)

Company	Older People	People in the Justice System	People with Mental Health Issues	People with Learning Disabilities	Homeless People	People with Physical Health Issues
Age Exchange	Priority					Additional
Cardboard Citizens			Additional		Priority	
Clean Break		Priority	Additional			
Clod Ensemble	Priority					Priority
Creative Routes			Priority			
Dance United	Additional	Priority				
Entelechy	Priority		Priority	Priority		
Green Candle	Priority					Priority
Magic Me	Priority					
Music in Prisons		Priority				
Spare Tyre	Priority		Additional	Priority		Additional
Streetwise Opera					Priority	
Survivors Poetry		Additional	Priority		Additional	

Priority
Additional

The companies span a very diverse field and produce work in many different ways and across a range of artforms. So what attributes do they share? They are considerable and some are listed below. They are not at all unique to adult participatory arts but they are attributes shared by the companies in this review:

- their practice is refined over time and is designed to meet the needs of specific groups
- much of the work is of low visibility, sometimes because of its location (in prisons, hospitals or hostels) and sometimes because of the nature of the groups that are being worked with (the terminally ill, people with learning difficulties, the frail elderly)
- they have complex funding arrangements, with substantial levels from non-arts sources
- programmes of creative work are often delivered in institutional or non-arts settings
- the companies have very strong non-arts partnerships, clients and stakeholders

The review companies have a difficult task – they must address the need for a high-value aesthetic as expected by their peers and arts funders while at the same time delivering social outcomes and outputs of many kinds. The fact that this is achieved with such consistency is a testament to the experience and capabilities of the review companies and it brings some significant benefits.

Their capacity to connect to social agendas gives them great leverage in certain non-arts settings. Their capacity to build long-term relationships both with funders and delivery partners is exemplary. Their need to explain their creative decisions to a world that is looking for solutions to complex social problems is an imaginative act in itself. The ambiguity of the artistic process and its language of metaphor and symbol does not always sit easily alongside the pragmatics of output and outcome, targets and milestones.



Left: Spare Tyre production, *Feeble Minds*, 2009

Photographer: Patrick Baldwin

Great art or good intentions?

Participatory arts are by their very nature collaborative. The professional skills of the artist combine with the creative energy of the participants to produce an event or an experience that is in many ways more than the sum of its parts.

It is this unique relationship between artists, participants and stakeholders that defines each company in this review. Between them they describe the process of participation in a number of different ways. For Spare Tyre it is, 'unleashing the creative impulse'; for Age Exchange it is, 'bringing memories to life'; Entelechy describe their work as, 'making possibilities real'; Music in Prisons see their work as, 'raising life aspirations through music'; Magic Me talk about, 'taking people on a journey' while Survivors Poetry talk about, 'an individual therapeutic process'.

These are not just fine-sounding aspirational phrases. They are the foundations of the creative process. The significant presence of an artist within this medium changes the dynamic and affects the outcome. And the quality of the artist will inform the quality of the outcome. The review companies frequently expressed the belief that they are often not afforded appropriate status within the arts community for the work they do. They sometimes feel like second-class citizens. Interestingly, this is the same for many of their participants. So what is happening here? Is the work inferior? Or is there a prejudicial attitude at large?



Above: Scene from *To Care For*, 2009

Photographer: Age Exchange

Why bother?

'I would like to see the benefits of participation in the arts recognised more widely by health and social care professionals... Access and participation in the arts are an essential part of our everyday well-being and quality of life.'

– Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Health, 2008

If access and participation are to be addressed in a meaningful way we must look at why vulnerable and marginalised people are treated as if they inhabit a separate space in society. The sense of otherness generated by such thinking has a direct relationship to the value and relevance we place upon their creativity and their work with artists. Why should we place this world of participatory arts in a different context? To do so challenges our shared humanity.

At a macroscopic level, we are all part of a changing social and demographic map of England. We are an ageing population and the proportion of people over 60 is set to rise dramatically. More of us are likely to have a disability or health problem. The economic downturn will probably result in higher levels of homelessness and offending. The numbers of single occupancy households are on the increase. These mainstream issues affect us all and government investment on health, justice, an ageing population and housing take up huge proportions of the national budget. Much of the investment is still responsive rather than remedial or preventative and very little of it finds its way into arts projects and programmes, which are increasingly shown to contribute to improving outcomes in health and homelessness, social care and justice.

Right: The Irene Taylor Trust, *Inside Out*, 2008
Photographer: Lizzie Coombes

Added value

The 13 review companies are experts in their field. They can demonstrate by example and through evaluation the impact of their work on the lives of their participants. Some of them use sophisticated tools to measure progress, outcomes and achievement. But their ability to address government priorities and provide cost-effective responses to what are sometimes seen as intractable social problems is not widely acknowledged and often not capitalised upon. This is because:

- the companies are too small to be able to make their views heard in the national programmes in which they operate
- there is little joined-up national advocacy for the work they do, and advocacy at government departmental and ministerial levels is intermittent
- the evidence that confirms the value of adult participatory arts is dispersed and not widely accessible
- some parts of the arts sector remain sceptical about the value or quality of the work





Artistic merit?

There is an anxiety among those delivering participatory arts work that success in delivering valuable social outcomes can undermine the basic premise of Arts Council funding. After all, runs the argument, should not the Home Office or the Department of Work and Pensions or the Department of Health be paying for this? Does such work have true artistic merit?

The thinking behind such questioning goes to the heart of a debate around the process and the product and, probably more importantly, to the tension between the notion of artistic excellence as classic and timeless and the more contemporary view that art has a social purpose and its values are relative.

Left: Green Candle Dance Company Senior Dancers, 2009

Photographer: Sonia Illescas

Making sense of the aesthetics of participation is not easy. All of the companies we spoke to consider themselves to be arts organisations first and foremost. They engage in creative discourse and explore aesthetic. There is considerable sensitivity towards negative external perceptions of the participatory artist. High standards are often a necessary requirement of participation, and the learning involved can be rigorous. The complex relationship between the artist and the adult participant is a rich seam of experience that informs and adds to creative practice and one which is increasingly relevant to the mainstream.

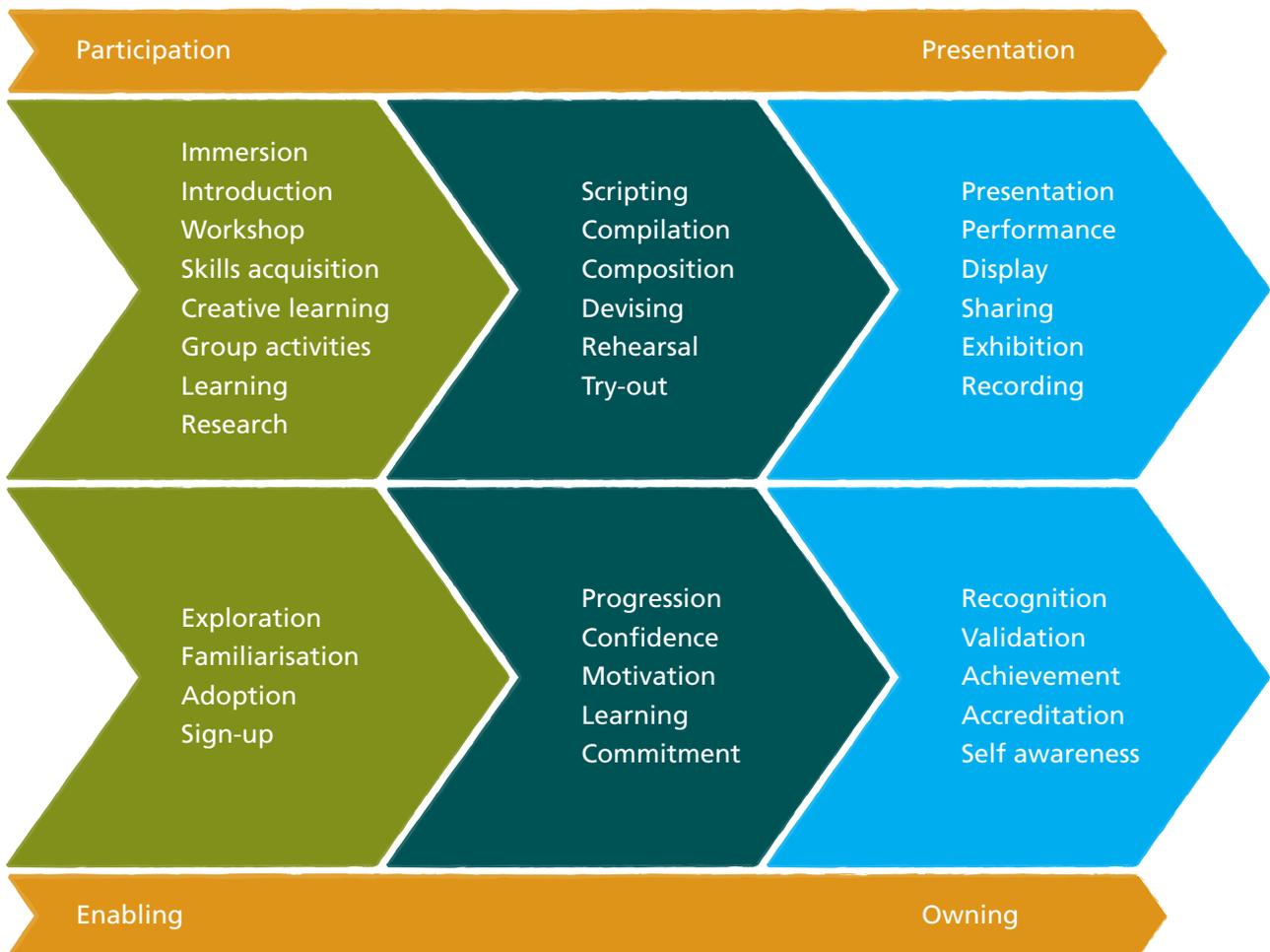
As boundaries between artforms become more permeable, as classical assumptions about high and low art appear less intractable and as new technology places production within reach of an increasingly sophisticated audience, participation becomes more of an accepted component of creation.

It is the very particular relationship between artist and participant that creates a difference, but the process is not always that easy to describe. Our 13 companies work with organisations where the words 'workshop', 'participation' and 'access' can mean many things, and in a non-arts setting can be easily misconstrued.

Figure 2, on the next page, attempts to describe in a simple form the journey that both artist and participant can take. The timescale can vary from days to months and the creative inputs and outcomes are hugely variable. What we have tried to make clear is that process and product are entangled and must be understood as a whole. While a final presentation or event must be artistically credible it is also informed by the process that created it.

Figure 2: Elements of process and product

We looked for ways of mapping the relationship between process and product, between doing and delivering. It looks like this:



Presentation takes many forms within the 13 companies. For some it is a high point in the process of participation while for others, such as Entelechy and Magic Me, the connection to an end product is more tenuous and often leads to a low key 'sharing' with an

informed or invited audience. In some instances – Green Candle’s work with people with dementia, for instance – the outcomes of the work are measured through improvements in the participants’ quality of life.

While the working methodologies of the companies vary considerably, their approach to adult participatory work is typified in a number of ways, including:

- their creative practice is in part a response to the issues of the participant group
- they are led by artists with a detailed understanding of those issues faced by the participants
- the work is personalised to maximise the benefit to the individual participant
- the participatory processes are able to develop the capabilities and skills of the participant
- projects and programmes are undertaken in partnership with non-arts workers and/or organisations
- the work takes place over a timescale that is appropriate to the capabilities of the participants and the requirements of the partner organisations

What would help?

So what areas should be strengthened, consolidated and made more visible? What actions could benefit this area of work?

Connected intelligence

The reservoir of knowledge and experience represented by the organisations within this review is substantial and it connects to the work of other organisations and other institutions working in the field. But the knowledge base is fragmented, dispersed and often inaccessible. A number of the review organisations have working relationships with higher education institutions in Manchester, Cambridge, London and elsewhere. Let's make use of this valuable data by building a knowledge base that is accessible to all.

High-level advocacy

The inequalities of scale that exist between government departments and the small arts organisations place enormous strains upon their capacity to influence policy and planning. Arts Council England, London can act as the agent in this area to ensure effective communication from companies to Arts Council regional offices and then on to the National Office. The next two steps in the chain are crucial – from National Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and from the DCMS to other government departments. Alternatively Arts Council England, London could bring together DCMS and departments into a shared conversation. There is a precedent for this in the mechanisms established by the Arts Council to support creative work through the regional youth justice boards.



Above: Bobby Baker's
Give Peas a Chance
at Bonkersfest 2008
Photographer: Nuala
Hamilton

Arts Council England, London has strong relationships with London's 33 local authorities, and many of the review companies receive significant funding either directly or through London Councils. With local authorities increasingly charged to meet government targets through national indicators and priorities, Arts Council England, London can play a valuable role in brokering new partnerships and building a more coherent, region-wide consensus as to the value of adult participatory arts.

3 Ken Bartlett, *Quality Benchmarks*, 2008

Effective assessment and evaluation

In order to compete and tender for contracts, effectively obtain access to funding and build a robust case for adult participatory arts nationally, a more coherent and strategic approach to evaluation and assessment is required. As a starting point the companies in the review have the opportunity to develop a set of shared criteria for evaluation and to empirically describe the outcomes of their work, which might then be shared more widely.

There are a number of innovative approaches used by the review companies that would benefit from wider dissemination. Streetwise Opera's novel 'evaluation tree', is a tool for measuring participant progress and Dance United has worked with an anthropologist from Manchester University to provide a new perspective when evaluating the impact of their work.

Common approaches to assessment are required that can be applied by all and which are backed up by appropriate information sharing and training. We have proposed that, as a starting point, Arts Council England, London could consider Ken Bartlett's short paper³ on quality benchmarks produced for the Foundation for Community Dance and from this build an assessment framework in consultation with the review companies. Ken identifies quality of purpose, quality of engagement, quality of communication and quality of practice and process as a connected set of criteria that generate measurable outcomes. As many of the review companies collect and interpret data for funders and stakeholders, there is the potential to build a comprehensive picture of achievement across the landscape of adult participatory arts.

Sharing practice

The 13 review companies are constantly producing new work of many kinds. Whether it is Russell Maliphant at Sadlers Wells, the Big Chair Dance on the South Bank, Lucy Kirkwood at the Arcola or an open mic night at the Poetry Café, new work among the companies is constantly in development and under production. Sharing such experience and practice between companies and with other arts organisations will serve to embed the value of adult participatory arts in a wider context, encourage the exchange of artists and raise the profile of the work.

The review companies know how to work with the charitable sector. Their relationships are developmental and progressive, with funding as an outcome of a dialogue that furthers the ambition and vision of the charity. This maturity of approach contrasts with the cut-and-paste approach to funding development adopted by other less experienced organisations. There is an opportunity for further exploration of such partnerships that is able to describe the benefits of long-term relationships between charities and arts organisations.



The future

Above: Streetwise
Opera, *My Secret
Heart*, 2009
Photographer:
Asa Westerlund

Adult participatory arts is not a science. It is not a sector. It is not bounded. It was difficult to decide what constituted this sprawling area of activity. Arts Council England, London wanted an examination of participatory arts that was not focused on young people, but so many of the companies work in cross-generational contexts. In the end we took a pragmatic view and drew in as many companies as could be accommodated and signed them up to a club they did not know existed.

Adult participatory arts as a term is not common currency and it may never be so, but for the purposes of the review it was



useful. It was made possible because Arts Council England, London recognised that without a long hard look at what was going on in this difficult to define area it may become a victim of inadvertent neglect. Arts organisations thrive when there is support for what they do, and that support has to be built upon knowledge and understanding. Until now both have been in rather short supply when it comes to assessing the work and describing future potential. We have proposed a number of possible actions that could change the landscape from one of disconnection to reconnection. It is not the job of any single organisation to take responsibility for their implementation, but improvement will only happen if there is strategic leadership supported by many coherent voices. Let us hope that such things are possible.

Summary of recommendations

Connected intelligence:

- that the 13 companies share expertise and intelligence on their work within the charitable and third sectors and disseminate this to a wider audience
- that an evidence base for participatory work is developed, to be shared between the 13 review companies, similar arts organisations and Arts Council England, so that they may respond more easily to government policies and targets
- that a widely accessible and effectively managed participatory arts knowledge base is developed in partnership with an appropriate organisation, such as an higher education institution

High-level advocacy:

- that Arts Council England plays a leading role as a key advocate for adult participatory arts
- that Arts Council England, London works with other regions and the National Office to gain a national perspective and deliver high level policy that can be endorsed by government departments and national institutions
- that Arts Council England, London plays a role in brokering relationships between the funded arts organisations and local authority partners through the local authority engagement programme, as set out in Arts Council England, London's public engagement plan for 2008-11

Effective assessment and evaluation:

- that the 13 companies work together to develop a shared approach to evaluation and a robust assessment framework using agreed quality benchmarks, with support from Arts Council England, London
- that a broader range of Arts Council officers attend workshops as part of assessment or review to gain a more comprehensive overview of working process and the journey taken by participants

Sharing practice:

- that Arts Council England, London initiates a dialogue with the 13 companies to explore mechanisms for the sharing of practice, exploring professional development and enabling future collaborations
- that an ongoing dialogue between artists working in adult participatory arts is facilitated to explore the skills base of participatory work, the creative directions this offers and the benefits it can bring to the mainstream

Arts Council England, London

14 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 3NQ

www.artscouncil.org.uk

Email: enquiries@artscouncil.org.uk

Phone: 0845 300 6200

Textphone: 020 7973 6564

Charity registration no 1036733

You can get this publication in Braille, in large print, on audio CD and in electronic formats. Please contact us if you need any of these formats.

To download this publication, or for the full list of Arts Council England publications, see www.artscouncil.org.uk

ISBN: 978-0-7287-1477-9

© Arts Council England, February 2010

We are committed to being open and accessible. We welcome all comments on our work. Please send these to Alison Cole, Executive Director, Advocacy & Communications, at the Arts Council England address above

Review commissioned from 509 Arts

Report authors: Alan Dix and Tracey Gregory

www.509arts.co.uk

Designed by Andrew Clare: www.andrewclare.com