

Search Party LAUK response

<http://www.searchpartyperformance.org.uk/>

Five years ago Pete and I leave London (where we are living at the time) and drive to Exeter to take part in the Exeter Phoenix scratch Programme. On route we get stuck in traffic, it takes a lot longer to drive to Exeter than we had imagined, we argue the whole way that we should have left earlier, that we shouldn't of got caught up in self doubt, that what we were going to show would or wouldn't be ok. We drive for over six hours, we miss our tech, we arrive just in time a little embarrassed to go on stage and perform.

The performance lasts a total of 7 mins.

At the time it all feels a little ridiculous. Perhaps this wouldn't have seemed so ridiculous if we hadn't have stretched the truth to the Exeter Phoenix and pretended we lived in Bristol, just so we could be accepted as an artist practicing in the south west and be eligible to show our work. Or maybe if we were getting paid to show what we had made, the time we had spent on it or for travelling all that way.

After our 7 or so minutes are up we have a nice drink in the bar with the three or four people who have turned up to watch and head home. Getting back just in time to have a few hours sleep before the office job at 7 am.

Onstage that night at the Exeter Phoenix we invite the audience to choose between handmade badges reading either optimist or pessimist. Considering in that very moment the future of both our performance and their wider perspective on life. We chose the optimist badges. It turns out that it was a good decision to go to Exeter. That this is the start of Search party.

We often think now about what our lives would be like if we hadn't of put in the effort that night. We often think now about whether we'd ever put in that much effort again.

So, In beginning to think about our experience as an artist practising in the South West, about the strengths and risks of practising as a live artist in this region, we wanted to respond to the case study 'artist led activities' and 'professional development' although inevitably speaking of concerns which dip in and out of

many of the other studies, applying our response very specifically to our individual practice in the hope that some of what we say might resonate with other people here in this room.

Three years ago Pete and I move to Bristol very specifically because we want to be part of Residence a newly formed artist led group who have just found a space to share in an old police station. We also want to use the support Theatre Bristol offers, which we can't seem to access at the time from Exeter with our made up Bristol postcode. It seems we were destined to be here.

Artist-led

Residence has changed a lot since we first joined; it's even changed significantly since the Live Art case studies we're responding to went to print. To demonstrate the momentum of this particular artist-led activity and its impact on our practice I thought it might be useful to present an update in relation to its feature in the case study.

Residence has moved into a new space, The Milk Bar – and whilst we insist that Residence is more than just a building, having a comfortable, usable, heated building is a great help. Residence is now more autonomous – we share The Milk Bar with another group as equal partners, rather than the tenant/landlord arrangement we had at our previous space. Residence has new members and new events in the Residence calendar – for example How We Collaborate. Residence is starting to have a presence at other art events, hosting coffee morning discussions during Mayfest and a post-forest fringe microfestival party. One of our members has set up a workshop “offering advice on how to set up your own artist led space”. We've invited artists in to give us workshops. We've started hosting events off-site – Residence in Residence at the Tobacco Factory, was a weekend long sleepover event made up of performances, discussions, breakfasts and dinners. An invitation to other artist-led projects around the UK to open up discussions, to find out what we are all doing. We have begun conversations with artist led organisations in Spain and Germany, with the hope that all of the great sharing of resources that goes on at Residence might be something that can happen across cities and country. So that if you come to Bristol to perform you can have a sofa to sleep on, that we will email out our artist/and audiences mailing lists to promote your work. And that these other artist led groups will do the same for us when we are

touring. And I suppose most importantly its members are continuing to create good work and support one another in our attempt to do so. All of these activities, the informal collaborations that happen when you least expect, the Residence reading group-book club, the discussion events, the work in progress showings for one another, the helping each other out with writing applications, the constant contact with other artists or friends has enriched, challenged, and invigorated our practice.

To quote Andre Stitt speaking of his artist-led project trace:

“In my experience most artist led initiatives grow, develop, and fold quite organically. Knowing when to change and evolve is a good thing.”

We are aware that Residence is not the right model for all artists, and that in fact it might not be the right model for current Residence artists throughout their whole career but that there is a hope that something has started that will evolve and change and develop and that if we leave other artists might take our place and continue to move Residence forward. That it will continually respond to the needs of its members.

Although Residence now has heating its members still need lots of patience, effort and energy, Residence is still not anyone's first priority. Even though it exists outside of the bureaucracy of institutions and funding bodies. It can still take a long time to get stuff done. The support of places like Theatre Bristol and New Work Network are crucial in continuing Residence development. The future for Residence as an artist led activity in the south west is to find a way to become more self-sufficient and sustainable. We have already had to move to three different spaces and are not sure how long we might stay in this one. We would like to be able to afford a more 'fit-for-purpose' space with better facilities. We envisage being able to invite national and international artists to come to live and work in our space so that we can share and develop our practice in both formal and informal ways. It is the informal collaborations, the unexpected collaborations, the over a cup of tea or over a failed application that Residence for us brings artists together to support one another. And yet we are aware of the delicate balance between Residence reaching its full potential, and the difficulty in that in it becoming a bigger commitment than our practice.

Perhaps it is partly our responsibility as artists practising in the South West to make things happen so that we can make work, to support each others work and to recognise the other kinds of value that being part of an artists led initiative brings. I don't get paid, in fact I pay money to be a part of this but in fact it's a good deal. And that Residence just like our practice is constantly evolving and learning from its failures along the way.

And so if Residence has moved on already this much since the case studies were written, without any funding, perhaps Residence and other artist-activities in the south west can be optimistic about the future. As least as long as its members have the energy and effort to put into it.

Professional Development

Manick Govinda from Arts Admin starts the Professional Development case study by saying:

“Time, space and money: three simple words that can make a difference to an artist's professional development and creative growth”

I wanted to reiterate the importance of time, space and money that Manick outlines in the professional development case study, the genuine support of experimentation and creativity is essential if live artists are going to continue to operate on the edges of things, and keep up when the edges move – but crucially I'd like to spend a little bit of time focussing on the other peripheral components of professional development that Manick describes, and to underline their importance. Although a blank cheque, state-of-the-art rehearsal space and all the time in the world would be nice; in my experience it's the bits around the edges of these programmes that enhance the usefulness of the time, space and money on offer.

Artistic mentoring: we need the advice of people who've done this before, who are further down the line than us. In practical terms Rules & Regs provides a separate budget for this purpose, so you have the freedom to choose who offers the advice and a financial structure to make sure it happens and the money doesn't get sucked up by other costs.

Peer mentoring: we've already lauded the benefits of Residence, but we've also been involved in professional development opportunities that put artists together – not as collaborators but as

informal supporters. At R&R we shared gallery space with two other artists, all working independently but from the same rules, and much like at Residence the cups of tea, the 10mins of fresh air, the evening drinks proved vital arenas for debate and development.

Shoulders to lean on: our now legitimate relationship with Theatre Bristol provides this vital support – our meetings with Tanuja provide us with direction, determination, confidence, fresh approaches and crucially an environment where you can ask anything and there are no stupid questions. Theatre Bristol is a great source of information, practical advice, and a canny producer of artist development discussions, seminars and workshops, with their fingers firmly on the pulse.

These peripheral components are essential in getting value out of time, space and money. The Inspiration week residency at BAC is a great example of how professional development time is well constructed to present great value for the modest fee. A group of like minded artists, always a good start, spend a week together – their mornings are programmed (attending discussions and lectures, watching performances and presentations) – the afternoons are free for each artist to formulate their responses. Lunch is provided on site, keeping the group together for the useful informal collaborations – and the week ends in loose, informal sharings.

Space, time and money are fundamental to artist development – but they can be enhanced by other kinds of value. Andy Field is keen to provide “other kinds of value” for forest fringe artists who perform for free. So I’ve been thinking of a few things Search Party needs – things we value:

- places to show our work at every stage of its development
- people to fight our corner, to recommend us to other festivals and events, not because I cornered them after a show and force fed them my business card, but because they’ve seen my work and think it has value and they’ve met me, they got to know me and they know I’m worth the risk
- almost constant contact with my peers for informal collaborations, problem sharing, hopeful cups of tea and miserable pints of lager

- situations where I can extend my network of friends, where we can share stories of this same boat that we're all in – and for these events to be varied and engaging
- we need to see lots of work, live full and varied lives
- sometimes we need deadlines and sometimes we need freedom
- we need the help and advice of people who've been doing this for longer than us
- we need people who fund us, support us, employ us to be sensitive to our personal circumstances, our childcare needs – or this could all end very soon for us

This is not an exhaustive list, and something we might return to when we open the floor to discussion.

For us professional development programs are unique opportunities to push at the boundaries of our practice, to genuinely experiment and create work that would have been difficult without the support these schemes offer. This has however, presented an interesting challenge for us – what do we do with this work when the residency is over? We've spent a great deal of our time in the past couple of years undertaking a range of Professional Development programs, and we now find ourselves with a couple of performances that are really difficult to place. The use of time, or space or materials make it hard to find the right context for these works or we end up performing in inappropriate contexts and no-one comes. Performances that have been developed for specific sites, that require the right type of weather, that require the venue to build a giant corridor, that require the right type of bus routes, and that maybe because the audience can stay for as long as they like, maybe only a very few people will get to see this.

So, the downside of this time we've spent developing our practice, is that we've made two or three interesting new works that not many people have seen – creating the illusion that we've gone off the radar. It's crucial for us to maintain our profile, to keep the opportunities coming, to keep moving forward, to maintain momentum.

And occasionally in our more pessimistic moments we worry about how we can continue to do this, financially, to make work, project to project. About the sustainability of this, about our desire, whilst

waiting for the result of an ACE grant, or not knowing what we might do when that money runs out, about how we might pay the rent, or how we might have the time to make work if we can't afford the childcare. About how much effort we want to put in. I guess you just keep going. Events like this help, moments when not only the Bristol artist community, but the South West Artist community and the wider Live Art community come together. The lines of communication need to be kept open, we need to nurture what the south west is doing well, we need to learn from initiatives we encounter on our travels, Inspiration week at BAC and Rules & Regs – not to replicate but to inspire activities and initiatives that are appropriate to the needs and challenges of artists here in the south west. I guess you just keep going, do what you can to maintain momentum - a little like our journey to Exeter. And it seems appropriate to re-create a moment from that night in Exeter at this point, when we are all gathered – discussing the future. So we've made you some stickers, some of them say Optimist and some of them say Pessimist, you can choose which one you think you are.