

20



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21

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Arts Connect Leadership Convention:
Leading in this moment with energy and fairness
for a healthy cultural ecology

Arts and Culture: Vital signs in the cultural eco-system

How we are using physical and digital spaces
- new frontiers for space and audiences?

V I T A L S I G N S

The leadership convention gathers leaders from across the cultural sector from individual freelancers, social enterprises, to micro-businesses and national portfolio funded Organisations.

Connecting over shared priorities, sharing leadership learning at this time and establishing collective points of small change and action builds a leadership community.

The vital signs session invited John Holden to create a prompt for attendees to reflect against and share their own leadership journeys across the last 12 months.

IS THERE LIFE ON MARS?

'What are the vital signs of a healthy arts and cultural ecology and how do leaders in the sector respond?'

'Here are some thoughts on what cultural leaders and their organisations need to be doing right now in response to the threats to life that parts of the cultural world face:

1. The long-term survival and health of whatever you do depends upon a kind of cultural homeostasis, meaning that cultural life in its present form has to self-regulate, and regulate its own environment, in order to survive. Practically this means lobbying, influencing, marketing, and putting energy into the maintenance of relationships with funders, audiences, artists and so on because those in turn enable the organization or activity to continue.
2. Think through the long-term aspects of survival, the most important of which is the continuation of cultural education (no education = no audience and no artists = no culture as we know it). There are many other long-term issues: building audiences, finding money to invest in buildings, people, technology and so on.
3. The input of energy through innovation and creativity. One important job for cultural organisations right now is to enable and encourage creative work during a time that is particularly difficult for artists.
4. Experimentation with new interfaces. If you can't travel in one direction, you have to set off in another. Covid has really speeded up a shift to trying out new ways of building the bridge between performer and audience.
5. Develop antennae to spot the stresses, strains and weak links in your current way of doing things. Where are you, or your people, or your income streams most vulnerable? What can you do about it?'

-Excerpt from John Holden's Paper

John Holden, who wrote The Ecology of Culture A Report commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Cultural Value Project in 2015, was invited to comment on What are the Vital Signs of a Healthy Arts and Cultural Ecology and how do leaders in the sector respond? His paper in response IS THERE LIFE ON MARS? inspired and informed the session.

Oliver Scott led this session with support from David Durant and additional leadership alumni group facilitation. It presented the provocations of the John Holden paper. It invited attendees to explore them in the context of their own goals, reality, options and willingness to identify an action of small change to take.

Q. What is important to cultural leaders right now?

It enabled attendees to connect over a year of getting things done, building bridges, listening, non-hierarchical approaches, experimentation and a return to the DIY movement of the 70s and 80s. This time armed with digital platforms as a resource for communication and connection and not just paper and photo copiers.

Three areas emerged as priorities; how we were leading, the means of engaging audiences effectively and the role of culture in the education of young people.

Young People

- Talent Pipelines
- Putting arts back on the curriculum
- Support young people to enjoy learning again
- How do we support teachers?

Audiences

- Hybrid models
- Increase public confidence in being in back in venues
- Increase engagement and accessibility
- Grow a national and international audience through digital reach
- Digital access and confidence

Leadership

- WHY?
- Legacy and sustainability
- Collaborating
- Representation in staff, role models, content
- Refocus, re-emergence after this period of reflection
- Being open to change
- Funding opportunities
- Partnerships working
- Creating safe, innovative and welcome spaces
- Leading with innovation, humility, clarity
- Climate change and our environmental contribution
- Being responsive to opportunities
- Training in digital delivery

This session provided an opportunity for attendees to connect about their leadership realities and challenges.

Q. How do we address these themes?

Through identifying their realities and priorities, the attendees highlighted binding actions, but not always small. With a priority focus on audiences and the willingness to engage in peer learning undertaking an action research approach to programming, delivery and organisational change could increase the innovation and collaboration across the sector locally. Having identified how the ecosystem has shifted, the need to bring lasting change and achieve these actions has been flagged as the biggest challenge.

Actions

Arts Ecology

- Support freelancers as well as audiences

Audiences

- Identifying the best model for engagement- the balance of quality, access, integrity, meaningful connections.
- Being prepared to let go of old models of engagement
- Offer a hybrid model of engagement
- Audience led programming
- Co-creation

Leadership

- Capture the energy of the last year
- Reemergence
- Rebuilding relationships
- Seek broader funding opportunities
- Equity and access
- Training
- Rewrite the future
- Dream Bigger
- Stay Focussed

This session was an action-focused discussion providing a structure for attendees to consider how to break down current goals into achievable tasks.

Restore more equitable Roles that Reopens a Reconnected Revolution (with a hint of artistic Rioting) to build a fairer ecology!
- Jerrel Jackson

ATTENDEES:

"I have a better understanding of the landscape and it was great to see how supportive everyone was"

"The event gave me a strong sense of what I was doing right and how to lead with kindness over the things I am still learning about"

"Increasingly part of a community as I'm figuring out how I fit into it all. Still waiting for things to align to step up into a role which matches my aspirations."

"Encouraged me to consider pulling work together into a coherent strategy/narrative and build a team with ecology in mind. Also, consider how I can innovate."

"Reconnecting with peers at this time in lockdown was much needed. The day has reignited my confidence in what I do and enabled me to believe in myself and what I do. Lockdown has depleted this confidence and built a sense of self-doubt whilst not being able to engage personally with colleagues in the sector."

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