Shaping artists' spaces
The Networking Artists' Networks initiative and the reshaping and enabling of cultural space

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www.a-n.co.uk>networking

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Working and creative space awareness

Concept
This paper looks at the distribution of networks as shared space for creativity and artistic representation. It also considers how networking has enabled the artists who took part in the Networking Artists' Networks initiative (NAN) to shape and challenge local and international space through cultural initiatives.

Artists and the changing space: self-perception

According to the British Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS*)* the United Kingdom represents Europe's largest art market and is second only to New York worldwide.
The UK is also home to as many as 90,000 artists and more than 180 established artists' groups and networks according to a-n The Artists Information Company.[1]

Because of its size and its close connection to the world's art market, the UK artists' population is a very interesting specimen for a study of artists' relationships to their working environment, considered both in a spatial and interpersonal sense.

Are contemporary professional artists still fitting in the stereotype of being predominantly studio-based and gallery-represented?

How have artists responded so far to the communication technology revolution of recent years in terms of peer debate, organisational interface and the context of their own practice?

Early research by a-n identified that 78% of surveyed UK artists recognised the professional value of networking and saw it as a vital aspect of progressing their careers[2].

In an Arts Council England 2005 report about arts organisations of the 21st Century, Charles Leadbeater reflects about how artists, arts organisations and audiences could work in synergy towards a re-thinking of institutions from space-based to concept-based:

"In an increasingly democratic and demanding age, artists have to establish the value of what they do through conversation with their audiences, peers and stakeholders. […] arts organizations will be as creative as the culture around them encourages them to be. [Artists' working spaces should be] low cost, easy to use, self-service, built around communities of interest…[…] Various aspects of networking should be encouraged, [such as] developing partnerships to access global markets, a strategy that requires seeing arts organizations not as buildings but as brands.[3]

The relationship between an artist and the space where they work is one of identification and contextualisation.
In the immediate, a working space can be perceived as the gathering place of all the tools and inspirational sources that make up the creative process. At a wider angle, it consists of all the political, social, cultural and architectural environments that surround and influence artists' perception of the context in which their work comes to exist.
A third dimension of this relationship is the virtual space in which an artist operates, in the form of e-communication and remote participation to forums, discussion lists, and other dissemination tools such as blogs, real-time news feeds and sector or peer websites.
But this virtual space is not only an electronic one: rising property costs mean that many artists work from their own home; the changing nature of their work often means that a studio is not always necessary or possible. Furthermore, different models of practice encourage artists' mobility and make for a different way of perceiving their work environment, for example by taking part in residencies and using third-party facilities, effectively becoming their own self-contained resources, mobile entities who take their professional practice to any place it needs to operate from.
The increasingly varied portfolio of roles an artist assumes and type of activities they are involved in, creates a much more varied landscape that is far removed from the traditional stereotype of a predominantly studio-based or socially isolated artist. Artists group together in various ways, such as studio groups, artist led organisations and initiatives, interest groups, project groups, artists' collectives, movement type groups, web-based virtual and hybrid networks. Through all of these, artists meet, discuss, debate and exchange views and ways of working.

A report commissioned in 2002 by Northern Arts from a-n The Artists Information Company highlighted this and the communication challenges it implies*: "With no 'office hours', often no fixed address nor central telephone number, outside communication with artists' groups is also often informal and ad hoc, although the use of email and mobile phones is rapidly overcoming this problem, with the substitution of the office with the virtual office".*[4]
Trust, privacy and art practice were identified as the three basic conditions for effective networking.

NAN event, "Close Proximity", Greenham Common, May 2005,exploring the changing identity of areas in the shadow of London's 'commuter belt' in relation to artists' practice. Organised in collaboration with the SCAN arts organisation network. Do you have to be in London to be a successful artist? How does the place where you live influence your practice? – Photo: Jonathan Swain

Being your own art world: self-determination

A 2006 UK government study[5] revealed the financial vulnerability of the UK's young professionals, with 66% in debt, 24% overdrawn and only 2% with any kind of savings or pension. Every year, some 3,700 art and design graduate from UK colleges, often running up debt producing their final-year shows as a prologue to joining the visual arts profession. At the same time, the longer a new graduate spends ignoring the dynamics of their profession, the more frustrating it will be to pursue the idea of making a living within the subject of their studies. If at this point they also stop interacting with their peers once the college environment disappears and start working in isolation, further problems can arise.

Isolation breeds ignorance and fear of the unknown. It also distorts one's own perception of value and place in society. It creates negative assumptions and discrimination. It fosters asphyxiating behaviour and closure to change. For artists, cultural and peer isolation stops them from interacting with each other in a professional way and creates enemies out of colleagues. It stops them from using resources that are available already

and through lack of sharing, finding information becomes a struggle, which in turn saps the time to be devoted to creation.

An artist's perception of their environment is strongly influenced by the exchanges that he or she has with their peers in the form of informal and formal networking, dialogue and exchange. Without these, an artist's view of their working context is incomplete and abstracted from real engagement with contextual information and feedback about their practice.

Artist and curator Susannah Silver describes the art world as "a network of three overlapping elements: resources, practitioners, appreciators. If one element is weak, then the network will not necessarily sustain the practitioners within it." Most importantly, she adds "On a micro level, one's own practice is a mini- art world. What kind of resources can you access? What opportunities do you have to present your work? Do you have a peer group?" [6]

In this respect, not only arts organisations can be seen as brands, as Charles Leadbeater wrote in the previously cited report, but artists themselves can be their own brand and can –or should aim to- represent a microcosm of self-determination.

Artists living in countries where there is a centralised state support system for the arts such as Britain's Arts Councils (present in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) often fail to realise their self-sufficiency potential fully. They come to depend on what is perceived to be readily available and lose some perception of their own worth in terms of skills and wider contribution to society, especially if they are not aware of the dynamics between state funding and the arts.

Encouraging and enabling people to think differently about their use of space and their interaction with the space in which they move is increasingly possible in a wireless age. *"The space, the social network, thinking tools and the network [all] interface in the same field of view. The boundaries between what is interior and what is exterior [are] intersecting tangibly in front of your eyes."[7]*
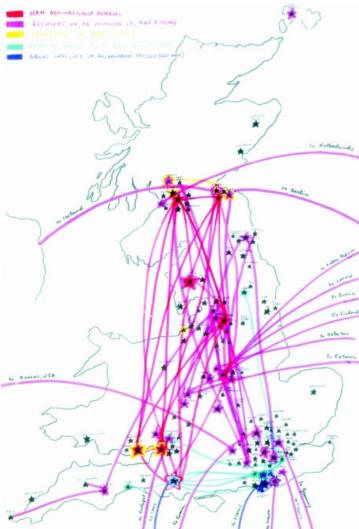
'Import/Export', a two day NAN event in early December 2005 which took place in Newcastle upon Tyne, focused on the cross-cultural mobility and interrelations of artists' practice and projects. Organised in collaboration with Normalife artists' collective. Thirty artists from across the UK were invited to take part in the investigation, which also marked one year of NAN events and formed part of a-n's 25 year celebrations Photo: Mark Pinder

The NAN initiative towards artists' self-determination

Since its inception in 2002, the NAN initiative has made a major contribution to thinking around 21st Century cultural space and to enable artists to be in control of their own development.

NAN encourages self-determination and mobility amongst artists' through its peer-assessed artists' networks bursaries and collaborative artist led events. In 2004/6, NAN funded 54 artists' groups to a total of £27,000 and has staged over 14 events throughout the United Kingdom. Initial distribution of funds and events' response showed they were supporting clusters of activity throughout the UK with certain geographical areas multiplying their networking activity as a consequence. Furthermore, nearly 50% of bursaries went to artists networking outside of the UK, to places as far away as Kansas and Estonia.

A map drawn from the first two years of NAN activity highlighted geographical clusters of networking activity within the UK representing a further key to the development of artists' communication patterns:

NAN map by Emilia Telese, 2005

Interestingly, only 6 out of the 54 artists' groups recipients of a NAN bursary were from a studio collective, little more than 10%.
This reflects the changing constituency of artists' working environments and reflects a more varied, less unilateral approach to the ways in which artists work together in a collaborative way.

An example of this is The Springhill Institute, a Birmingham based artists' group that received a NAN Go and See bursary in 2004 to establish a residency exchange with Tallinn, Estonia. Opened in 2003 by Reuben Henry and Karin Kihlberg, The Springhill Institute is a combination of gallery, studio and living areas, and explores the idea of arts organisation in its wider sense and questions the possibilities of what an institution can be. Concentrating on the production of projects, events, critical discourse and showcases rather than exhibitions, the Institute utilises its position as a personal residential place to encourage conversation and new thinking within a relaxed yet serious atmosphere. (www.springhillinstitute.org)

The Springhill Institute, Birmingham

Another example, in this case an individual artist, is "non-studio-based" Dinu Li, awarded a NAN Review bursary thanks to funds from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to a-n. Li made the case for resources to create a formal connection with curator Lisa Le Feuvre, to support development of his own work and that of his Manchester network NAG (Necessary Artist Group).

Dinu Li, Age of Transition, installation using archive film/sound/photography, BCA gallery, Bedford

Because NAN bursaries are assessed, reviewed and awarded by artists forming the NAN Advisory Group (fifteen artists of all career stages, from all regions of the UK), their existence favours a transparency and democracy of funding to artists, and also provides the artists involved with an insight into the dynamics of good professional practice and exchange.

During the past few years of artists' networking events and bursary awarding activity since 2003, NAN has influenced and affected the lives and careers of thousands of artists.

This is what some of them said to Jane Watt, in Reflections on Networking, the first of two reports on NAN and its impact on the artist community in the UK and beyond:

"The NAN events have enabled me to place myself in a wider context and in turn be

more accurately aware of the potential that exists for my work/role. I have a new

collaborative work with a contact from the NAN Greenham Common event in progress."

Caroline Wright, artist based in Suffolk.

"The Cove Park event was inspirational in that it was the first talk I'd given about Arran and my work, so it gave me confidence. Really the best thing to come out of it was an attitude of mind; positive, confident, no longer insular and apologetic."
Alison F. Bell, artist based on the island of Arran.

"As a result of being involved in NAN, it's taken networking for me to a new level. I've co-curated [an art event] Transit Station … [which] will go to Krakow, Poland. The bursary has allowed me to establish new links and partnerships in my own practice, as well as bringing other artists on board. It has provided some sustainability in [exhibition] programming [for our artist group]… and it has expanded the way the group works. We have more confidence with the knowledge we have."
Aaron McCloskey, artist based in Edinburgh and member of the Forest and TotalKunst

NAN event "60 Degrees North", Shetland, March 2006, exploring the work of artists working in rural/remote areas of Scotland – organized in collaboration with Scottish artists' network Veer North – photo: Emilia Telese

The NAN initiative is championing and encouraging trust among artists and knowledge through exchange of experiences and models.

Artists going to visit peer organisations and groups elsewhere are gaining insights in the variety of solutions to shared problems.

The space where artists' work always represents an interface for their professional practice, but through sustaining and encouraging the ever-changing working and communication dynamics, far from being a vacuum or a self-contained cultural bubble, is increasingly representing a four-dimensional environment where architecture, human interaction, peer exchange and cultural context all contribute to shape the artist of the 21st Century.

Emilia Telese, Artists' Networks Coordinator, a-n The Artists Information Company

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About the NAN initiative
a-n The Artists Information Company has researched, championed, assisted and informed ways that UK based artists have been working for over 25 years.

It is in effect the professional body for visual artists, representing the practices and interests of thousands of artists across the UK, at all stages of development and public recognition, and including current art & design students and their tutors. They are also recognised as a trusted mediator between artists and employers, and through their publications and events, they expose and analyse the diversity of what contemporary artists make and do.

As part of its on-going concerns about artists' professional practice and environments, a-n has, since 2002, sought ways in which to identify, facilitate and develop networking as a key component of artists' practical and professional practice. Networking Artists' networks (NAN), run by, and for, artists, is a major initiative within this.

Informed by this, the Networking artists' networks initiative was developed in 2003 by artists' advisory groups in England and Scotland who identified NAN's scope and functions.
Core programme includes:
• events and activities developed in collaboration with artists' networks and groups across the UK
• peer-assessed bursaries to support research, review and new projects
• mapping and networking UK artists' initiatives to increase their visibility and highlight their value
• Special publications and research projects

At the heart of NAN is an ethos of allowing and fostering creative thinking and openness to new approaches for artists to meet, exchange and develop experiences, information and ideas. See NAN publications, research and artists' networks listings on www.a-n.co.uk >Networking

NAN is enabled through revenue funding from Arts Council England and a-n's earned income streams. Financial support also comes from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (Artists' bursaries), European Union (Artists' bursaries North East England, Northern Rock Foundation (Artists' day research), Scottish Arts Council (Artists' events and visits.

Notes

[1] The UK Parliament, Sixth Report of the Committee for DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport) http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmcumeds/414/41405.htm

and also a-n magazine, a-n The Artists' Information Company, March 2005

[2] *Networking the networks* commissioned from a-n by Northern Arts, April 2002 and *Strengthening the artists' infrastructure: strategies and mechanisms* commissioned from a-n by Scottish Arts Council, August 2002

[3] *Arts organisations in the 21st century: Ten challenges*, Charles Leadbeater, Arts Council England, May 2005, ISBN: 0 7287 1103 6

[4] a-n (2004) *Networking artists' networks: strategic approaches to artists' coordination and collective action. Report on research and pilot programmes 02-04*, Newcastle: a-n The Artists Information Company.

[5] FSA and Bristol University, March 2006

[6] Susannah Silver, "Creative Connections", report from the first NAN Scotland event at Cove Park, 2004, first published on a-n Collections March 2006

[7] headmap manifesto first release [SF : London : NYC] 1999 http://www.headmap.org/

For further information about artists, spaces and networking, see also:
Arts Council England (2006) *Artist Time Space Money*, London: Arts Council England.

Isociety (2003) *You don't know me but…Social Capital and Social Software*, London?: Isociety

Shaw, Becky and Ramsden, Mark (2005) 'Institutions with Fringes: on 'independence', 'alternatives' and the Liverpool Biennial', *The Internationaler*, pilot issue.

McCarthy, Helen, Miller, Paul and Skidmore, Paul (eds.) (2004) *Network Logic: who governs in an interconnected world?*, London: DEMOS

About Emilia Telese
Emilia Telese is a cross-disciplinary artist who combines her arts practice with her role as Artists' Networks Coordinator for a-n The Artists' Information Company within the Networking Artists' Networks initiative (NAN) and work with other arts organizations.
Trained at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence, her practice often engages with electronic media, in the form of interactive and body-responsive technology, film, audio and net-based art, but also makes use of low-tech media such as live art, drawing and printmaking.
Emilia Telese's practice deals with non-verbal communication and the questioning and deconstruction of social clichés.
She has exhibited worldwide since 1994, including work at Ars Electronica, ZKM, the 2005 Venice Biennale and the 2005 Rio de Janeiro Multimedia Art Festival. Forthcoming work includes exhibitions at the Freud Museum, London, Leeds City Gallery and Focal Point Gallery, Southend on Sea. She is an independent artists' trainer specialized in professional development advice, fundraising and proposal writing for artists and works for Artquest, Fabrica, Persistence Works, SPACE and Suffolk County Council among others.
For more information about her work, visit www.emiliatelese.com

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