

Taking Up Space¹ Manifesto

We are a group of artists and producers advocating the positive role of the participatory arts with a focus on creativity, engaging people at a local level and strengthening a sense of belonging and place. As a concept with more precision, we adopt the term Relational Art practice. This practice is grounded in human relations and their social context² and the central role of collaboration. It offers, we believe, opportunities to be seized in a society facing economic and environmental challenge.

Relational Art practice bridges areas of social and cultural policy: education, health and wellbeing, environment, the arts and urban design. It transcends the boundaries between artforms, and the roles of artists and participants, so they become fluid and interchangeable. It reclaims public space, re-energises the role of the active citizen³ and helps to recalibrate the relationship between global and local. We ourselves act as participants in the daily life of our local communities, bringing to it multiple roles – as producers, inventors, co-creators, activists, brokers, enablers and translators.

This work demands broad skills: we know how to work across social, cultural and intergenerational differences to bring people together and build community, how to engage with people in power; negotiate with institutions; build networks in local places; organise volunteers; fund-raise; open roads and make celebratory spaces. We work in neighbourhoods, and high streets, on rooftops, allotments, bandstands, bridges, at hospital bedsides, in prisons, boardrooms and kitchens.

Relational Art practice is based on artistic vision and is not directly instrumental in its aim. From our own experience and from research we know that it can: →Activate the imagination →Create a sense of belonging and a keen awareness of history, the natural world, location and place →Encourage collective rather than competitive working →Develop empathy →Promote wellbeing →Create or enhance a sense of community →Explore and transcend difference →Sharpen intellectual curiosity →Transform a sense of our own capacities, individually and collectively →Shape new dialogues between traditionally separate areas of policy and practice →Speak to our moral agency, values and ethical sense →Develop civic engagement →Create opportunities for joy.

We draw on and acknowledge a broad landscape of earlier and current practitioners, and jointly offer skills, visions and experience that are realisable and crucial for the present time. We are living through a particular moment in history, as we better comprehend the scale of our impact on the world and the natural limits we are breaching. Specific issues affecting our daily lives and futures are well documented: social fragmentation, existing side by side with deprivation and alienation. Established modes of engagement and organisation fail to tackle them, whilst research has consistently underlined the need for society to learn how to participate, collaborate, and develop the capacity for empathy.⁴ All are qualities that make the collaborative approach of Relational Art practice uniquely valuable. We recognise a new stirring of engagement with change – an ongoing movement to which we connect.⁵ Relational Art is a new formulation with old roots and a distinctly contemporary relevance. It requires recognition in policy and practice at a time of systemic change in society and we intend to work towards this. We propose that present challenges can be reframed as opportunities to re-imagine and re-make the world the way we would like it to be: creative, connected, happier and more resilient.

We call for collaborators to join us.

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Notes: 1) Taking Up Space, a group of 8 practitioners, supported by the Cultural Leadership Programme, was formed in September 2010. 2) Nicolas Bourriaud defines it as- 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context rather than an independent and private space'. Bourriaud, Nicolas, (1998) Relational Aesthetics p.113. Joseph Beuys' 'social sculpture' is also an influence. 3) 'To be a citizen, one not only has to formally belong somewhere, one has also to feel that this belonging is real.' Stephen Frosh in 'Culture and Citizenship' ed Nick Stevenson. 4) Mulgan, G. (1998) Connexity: responsibility, freedom, business and power in the new century, London: Vintage; Amartya Sen (2006) 'Identity & Violence: the Illusion of Destiny' 5) In 'Blessed Unrest' Paul Hawken describes a growing movement in every city, town and culture, fostering social justice and restoring the environment. People-led from the 'bottom up', it encompasses a creative expression of people's needs worldwide, to reimagine our relationship with the environment and one another. Hawken, Paul (2007) Blessed Unrest, Viking.