

You Can Play my Guitar

Imaginative local authorities

*"You cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that caused the problem."
Albert Einstein*

I work for a local authority. We are in the business of supporting the development of safer and stronger communities. Communities are important. We live in a fractured society where people generally don't trust each other very much anymore and yet the environmental and economic challenges we face collectively are huge. Our work in arts development is about stimulating peoples' creativity, creating positive shared experiences, developing trust, finding new solutions for the difficulties we face and transforming our neighbourhoods into communities.

'You can play my guitar / See where it goes' invites Neil Young on his recent *Fork in the Road* album. 'Sing a song to a distant star / Let the rhythm explode / But singing a song won't change the world'. Is that really true? Surely a good song can impact on us in a surprising or profound manner and perhaps inspire us to change the world. A good song can provide a rallying cry, enhance a sense of common identity around an issue, connect you to a particular tribe and even inspire you to dress in particular way. A really good song can help us express feelings that are difficult to process in other ways and bring about a degree of healing. And it's not just songs that do this, but every art form has a similar potential. As a life long fan, Neil Young's art has had transformative influence in my life. It started way back when I spent my paper round money on his *After the Gold Rush* album in 1972 from a now long gone record shop in Woking. Since then, it's been a cumulative thing: it's not one song, one album, one concert, performance or film, but rather all of those things together. It's his idea to trust the muse and to go where she calls, to have that singular focus and not to be side tracked by fashion, public opinion or popularity that I aspire to and admire. I wish more artists across all art forms were like him. We need original thinkers and mavericks to become leaders with integrity and vision. Perhaps we should pay closer attention to these people because it is very likely they will provide us with the solutions for the seemingly insurmountable problems we face. As Albert Einstein famously said, 'you cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that caused the problem'. I like Neil Young's invitation to 'play my guitar' too. This isn't a creative journey he wants to take alone, but rather an adventure he wants to share.

'There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing' my Swedish mother used to say to me. I was reminded of that on 2 February this year, when we were woken not by the usual mix of bird song and traffic noise outside our house but by an eerie silence. Opening the blinds revealed a thick velvety whiteness that invited further exploration. A few minutes later my young daughters were out of bed, dressed in record time (in good clothing of course) and playing outside. The generous dump of snow that fell over night was an unexpected treat. It was obvious that travel to work was going to be impossible and so after a series of phone calls and text messages to clear diary appointments, we rummaged through the garage to find anything that we could use to slide downhill on. We then headed for the nearby woods, along with all of our neighbours. We spent a great day sharing flasks of coffee and pulling each other's weary children up the slope for their hundredth turn on the toboggan run. The unexpected overnight snowfall forced us together in a spirit of celebration, and it was great. As the day drew to a close we made snow lanterns in our garden; flickering candlelight reflecting off the white snow was one of the most beautiful pieces of site-specific art you will ever see.

One of the things I find especially magical about snow is how it transforms a familiar landscape. In really cold climates, lakes and rivers freeze over enabling you to walk to the islands that in the summer you can only reach by boat. On that February day, the normally busy main road outside our house became a play park in which skiers and tobogganists had right of way and where the few cars that were abandoned half way up the hill turned the slope into a slalom run for the more advanced skiers.

A few years ago I was involved in a contemporary art in the landscape project called *Garden Journeys*. A selected group of artists were invited to make new work in response to Surrey gardens. The final display of work was held in the grounds of the National Trust's Polesdon Lacey. One of the participating artists, Ulrike Stevens, invited people to send her jpeg images of their gardens. Working from those images she digitally redesigned each garden for a different purpose. It was striking to see such familiar patches of ground transformed in this way; in the case of our garden, the lawn was replaced by a meadow for grazing sheep and cows. Her approach challenged our thinking about how we view and use land and she brought a new perspective on familiar surroundings. I think this is one of the most useful purposes of art: it helps us to see the familiar from a different angle. Art presents us with an alien's eye view of our world and can help redefine beauty or present a new aesthetic. This is important when engaging

with current environment concerns. Rather than constantly upgrading and replacing old with new, it helps to see what we already have and to value it in a new way. For this reason I want artists across all art-forms to provoke, challenge, encourage and to make me believe that things are possible. I want them to tell me stories that energise and help me to articulate my own stories and I want new visions that provoke or develop my own viewpoints. When they are not an elitist thing, the arts, like the snow, can bring people together in unique ways.

As a practising artist myself, I am aware that thinking creatively and making art helps me to keep in good mental health. People who suffer with mental illness often find themselves locked within a poisonous set of circumstances and struggle to see or think their way out. They feel caged and spiral into depression. Organisations such as Farnham-based Creative Response provide people with the opportunity to use creative practice as a map to direct weary travellers to a place of rest and safety. Artist Kwei Eden describes how through obsessively making large and colourful abstract drawings she 'reconnected with parts of me that had been long buried and forgotten'. What I found interesting about Kwei's beautiful drawings is how they actually resemble maps, or at least a cross between a map and a topographical view of a landscape. Seen in a chronological sequence the drawings give you a clear sense of Kwei's journey from inner turmoil to connectedness, communication and health. She describes 'nights when I was so anxious I could not sleep and getting colour onto paper was the most effective way of releasing tension in my mind'. It has been an essential part of Kwei's healing process to be able to express her 'inner world'. Creative Response employs artists to work alongside people like Kwei, to provide time and space and a nurturing, supportive environment. Creative Response are clear that what they provide is not art therapy in the medical sense, but rather that the strong therapeutic and transformative nature of art and creative practice brings good things when people are enabled to embark on a creative journey, no matter how small or timid to begin with.

Mental illness is expensive in lost months from work, broken relationships, hospital stays and medication. Compared to medical intervention, the Creative Response approach is very cheap and while it may not be a solution for everyone, it is a vital support for many. If extended, could be offered to many more people like Kwei.

When asked in a recent survey 'Do you trust most people?' a majority of people in the UK said no. Sadly it seems that we have lost a presumption of trust and now trust is something to be

earned. Beyond being warm and well nourished, our quality of life is linked to belonging, having a secure sense of identity and living in communities where people know and trust each other. Local authorities have an important role to play in fostering strong, healthy communities and I passionately believe that the arts can and should play an important role in bringing people together to develop understanding. The arts are part of the DNA of a community, the means by which we express ourselves and make ourselves known to others. Sharing is important.

Sadly (in my view) deep snow only falls once in every eighteen years in the UK. Do we really need to wait that long before speaking to our neighbours again or seeing the familiar in a new way? I hope not. In her forward to the Campaign for the Arts manifesto, Joan Bakewell declares: 'There is now a widespread belief that the power of the arts and culture can and does affect and change lives'¹. Of course those of us who make art or have been regularly involved in the arts as participants, makers or consumers instinctively know this to be true. Arts leaders are learning to use the power of the arts and culture to affect and change lives in positive and constructive ways by connecting with health, social, environmental and education agendas. This is the challenge for those of us working in the arts within a local authority context. I believe we have largely won the advocacy argument, but we now need to make a strong case for the arts in business terms. I see this as critical if we are to see the continuing growth and development of arts in the UK.

I wonder though how Neil Young would work within a community arts context. I wonder whether he would welcome working to an imposed agenda in the same way we often ask our artists to do; I suspect he would struggle. I guess it wouldn't fit well with his idea that the muse is all, his singular focus and his 'it's better to burn out / than fade away (because rust never sleeps)' spirit, which are the very things that fans like me find so inspiring.

We need to be very careful that we aren't being so prescriptive about our health, education or social outcomes, that we destroy the creative energy and spark that is, or should be, the stock and trade of artists. It is important that we act as guardians of the creative space and that we don't expect artists to fit too neatly into our boxes. The creative spirit is a very generous one and one to be nurtured. In my experience artists usually give a lot more than their fee's worth and we don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs by being overly prescriptive.

¹ <http://www.artscampaign.org.uk/news/artsmanifesto.html>

Painting by numbers is for clock-watchers and not for those with an adventurous, creative spirit. Perhaps the struggle we face when we measure and value the arts solely in terms of prescribed outcomes is that we don't value the truly valuable thing about art – the totally unexpected and wonderful adventure it brings.

By Karl Newman²



² Karl Newman works for Surrey County Council as Community Arts Manager at Surrey Arts. In 2002, when working for Adult Social Care, Karl was instrumental in establishing the Surrey Integrated Arts Consortium and remains a keen advocate of disability arts. Since graduating from Chelsea School of Art in the early 1980s Karl has continued to practice as a visual artist and has work in private and public collections throughout the world. In recent years he has taken part in Surrey Artists Open Studios. This has provided both a useful focus to complete work and a good incentive to tidy his work space.