

ARTISTS MAKE CHANGE

Discussion Event #2

Making Change through Political Representation

Facilitated by Ross Jardine

Discussion Report

Wednesday 10th June 2020

In response to the 5 video case study presentations, we are holding a series of group discussions to explore the themes of the presentations in more detail. Making Change through Political Representation was a discussion facilitated by Ross Jardine, an artist with an interest in administrative and policy-making structures.

Outset - The aims and intended areas to cover were:

- how art and politics mix
- how to become a political representative
- how artists can benefit the political process
- how can you mix an art practice with being a political representative
- what are the different ways that artists can make change locally?
- how do we find time?
- what skills do artists have to make change?
- how do mainstream politics and grassroots campaigns intersect?
- deliberative politics - how can people be involved?

Thoughts emanating -

The first half of the discussion centred around the presence of **Lena Šimić and Tim Jeeves** - both artists and elected local government councillors in Liverpool, who had presented their work and experiences in one of the 5 Artists Make Change video case studies. This gave attendees the chance to get some real life experiential information.

We started by considering an opening question around the idea of how art/the artist and mainstream politics and grassroots activism interchange.

What are the problems of challenges facing the artist and activist as elected councillor?

Lena Šimić related the difficulty in entering mainstream politics from an arts background:-

- In order to become a councillor, you need to be nominated by the local branch of a political party. Means you have to be a very active member of that party - earning trust otherwise to get a nomination to stand for election. That's the most difficult part.
- The completely different contexts - coming across different people with different opinions and motivations, and the challenge of navigating different context (eg working as an academic, working as a local councillor)
- As an elected councillor, there is more public focus on you than you would ever have as an artist - you have to watch your behaviour and consider your (and your political party's) reputation. As a councillor there are an extra set of rules to consider.
- This is particularly difficult if your art practice is activist in nature / approach - once you become a representative of the people, there is an impact on your behaviour (what you can / can't do).

Autonomy - or non-alignment/affiliation (especially with a political party) - allows more freedom to act / be activist in approach -> once affiliated your activities are compromised

Funding becomes an issue - even outside the representative area, once you get funded you are often compromised to some extent - with a need to 'please' the funder.

Campaigning on a voluntary basis - because you really care about the issues, is very different to being a paid campaigner.

Q. How does activism touch or meet mainstream politics?

- **Lobbying & observing local council meetings** -it's possible for members of the public (artists) to watch council procedures / meetings . A chance to hold elected officials to account. Ellie Harrison shared the example in her own experiences of going to Glasgow Council's committee meetings as an observer.

ISSUE - Artists have the quality of thinking in different ways about issues (due to their arts training) - the ability to find creative solutions for problems - but

- non artists/politicians and artists find it hard to talk to each other
- non artists/politicians tend not to know much about / understand the arts and artists
- the introduction of artists to non-art environments eg Councils - is a positive - it offers artists a bridge into policy making
- it's a way of changing things from the top rather than the bottom

Q. - Is there an issue with the Partisan element of UK Politics ?

Q. - How does being affiliated to one particular party affect your independence as an artist / artist activities?

Q. - Would it be better to stand as an independent?

Q. - Can you get elected as an independent in a 2 party system?

The group were interested in this **extra scrutiny** that falls on you once you've been elected and suddenly have responsibilities for constituents and your party affiliation.

Q. - What do you give up as an artist once you've been elected?

Q. - Can you maintain your artist's expression?

Q. - Do you have to constantly 'police' your actions ?

An answer came that maybe it means a **reconfiguring** of what an artist's practice is in this situation - eg - a maiden speech in political chamber could be seen as an artwork - a piece of political performance or Live Art.

The context changes - but the art can remain:

- **example** - Jeeves and Šimić have a "Ward Artists" project which enables arts activity in their ward/ constituency.
- **example** - Šimić sees her role as councillor as a time-limited activity - a 1 term period which can be seen as an art project in itself - can/does inform future artwork.

The conversation turned to whether a move into politics for artists is a strategic decision to inform an arts practice, or whether it is out of societal necessity.

A response came about an idea of necessity -

- when you are working as an artist in community contexts , you are exposed to political issues and then ideas of integrity lead you to want to do more? To try to make change?

The conversation turned to specifics of work of a local government councillor - the duties you're faced with as a councillor that might get in the way of your intended activism?

Q. What is it like being a Councillor? It's meant to be a 'part-time' role isn't it... can you be 'free' in your practice outside that?

- time-wise, you can do as much or as little work in the role as you like. Some do full time and others do not do much.
- the processes involved in being a councillor might be prosaic or mundane?
- there is a lot of 'Town Hall' work - formal / procedural things eg committees which are very **time consuming**
- Ward & casework duties involve looking at everyday issues such as 'bins , rats, skips, pubs being open' - **time consuming** and **frustrating**

Q. Who is your audience when you're an artist - councillor?

- the community and community groups - this becomes your working realm due to your council responsibilities being towards your ward constituents.
- if you're an artist/ councillor in a deprived ward, you have to be careful about how you spend money - there might be resistance to 'spending money on art when there's people going hungry' or basic needs not being met.
- the way through the resistance is to make sure the community/ward inhabitants are involved in the whole process - from selection to delivery. So, it's not art done to people but with people.
- very similar to community arts practice
- for Šimić - she cites her audience as - her political party members , families , people who come to rallies she speaks at. Interesting thing here was that this was a new audience - a political audience listening to a speech about "The Power of Art".

Q. Do artists in the city / local area see artist - councillors as allies - their "voice" in the halls of power?

Do artist - councillors receive lobbying from artists they know?

- Functionally - Councillors can only really respond to their ward residents . So if your residents are artists - example given here was **Dead Pigeon Gallery** in Anfield - then there can be crossover between council duty and arts activity.
- Councillors can respond to issues brought to committees they're sitting on - so if you were on the culture committee, then you might be in a position to respond to any issues raised by artists.

Questions after the break from the group include:

Q. - What are the ethics of artist-politician?

Q. - Does the artist 'use' their activism to gain 'Brownie Points' as an artist? Does it make the artist look more 'authentic' or that they 'care about the world more'?

Q. - Is there something megalomaniacal about wanting to change the world?

Q. - How does the artist 'use' the outcome of their delving into the political world?

Maybe a term of office as a councillor can almost be seen as an artist's residency, creating a bank of material for future work?

Q. - How do people get to engage with the experience of artist-councillors? What happens to that knowledge/experience after a 3 year term?

Q. - More broadly for an artist - in terms of the research we do - how do we effectively make that public for the benefit of others? what does/s should happen to the research we do?

Thoughts turned to aspects of negativity - and **the problems facing artists in mainstream politics**

- Public reaction to you
- negative press and attention you receive - particularly for women - and the effect this can have on your private life and mental health. "Life ripped apart"
- Politics can be "nasty" - There's lots of nastiness and a lot of paranoia about nastiness that might not necessarily be accurate but then it justifies retaliatory nastiness . That is a difficult thing to negotiate.

Q. How do we actually MAKE change via local government?

- acting as **an observer & 'scrutineer'** - often the media don't really scrutinise the processes of local councils (maybe due to funding cuts in the media) - particularly local councils - so individuals have an important role to play.
- a problem is that there is **no training or explanation** of a lot of very complicated inscrutable processes - a non-trained individual will find it very hard to understand what's going on
- **individuals have some power** - all the questions brought by the public (via their local councillors) have to be answered by the cabinet member in advance

- executive power in a council is held by a small number of people (cabinet)
- **artists are particularly good 'scrutineers'** - used to undertaking deep research. When consultation documents are published - artists have a research role to play at that stage - collecting evidence, monitoring, applying pressure.

Q. Is a potential problem for artists becoming elected is that they will be viewed with suspicion?

Will political colleagues or constituents be wary of the artist councillor as they might end up being represented in future art work?

- Is there a broader issue that artists are **generally misunderstood** in wider society - the general public are suspicious of artists generally - through not understanding them? Does the assumption that 'all artists are middle class' alienate artists from their neighbours in working class areas or contexts?
- A solution here is **not to mention the art!**
- The position of **artist - as - councillor is a bit of a 'novelty'** which can work in your favour - maybe the artist isn't seen as a threat?
- **Artists skills can help** eg Šimić says her background as a performer helps her chair meetings. Her artist training allows empathy skills to be utilised

Closing thoughts:

At times it can feel like walking **two different worlds** - art and politics and there are bridges, differences in languages, different approaches and exposures - but it feels like there are ways the two can interact.

Perhaps we need a bigger conversation on how we can find more ways of interacting? Perhaps changing the way we think about art, or how we think about politics (eg more municipalist ways of running government, more bottom up say) which give artists and all citizens a bigger say in the running of our society.