

Helen Marriage
Director, Artichoke

The power of cultural disruption

Summary

Helen Marriage is the Director of Artichoke, described as ‘a creative company that works with artists to invade our public spaces and put on extraordinary and ambitious events that live in the memory forever’. She founded the company with her partner Nicky Webb in 2006. Before this they had worked together for 20 years always striving to showcase art forms in a context that told an inclusive story and offered an invitation to a very broad public to come and see what the artist’s imagination had created. In this seminar Helen describes her journey from the London International Festival at Canary Wharf, to the Arts Festival at Salisbury and finally to setting up Artichoke, initially for the sole purpose of bringing the ‘[Sultan’s Elephant](#)’ to London. She outlines the things she has learnt along the way about how to make these events happen, about the power of the artist’s imagination and cultural disruption in public spaces, about ‘joy, delight and magic’ and the profound effects these events can have on people’s feelings of wellbeing and commitment to their own place.

Canary Wharf

For many years Helen worked at the London International Festival (LIF). She was invited to start the arts festival at Canary Wharf, which at that time was the largest corporate development in London. The sponsors wanted the arts programme to serve the new office population who were being moved from central London to the East End which was seen as a much less desirable place to work. Helen however saw the job as an interesting possibility to experiment with the way in which arts can move whole communities. It seemed to her that the programme could do much more than entertain the office tenants: it could be used to build bridges with the very mixed, disenfranchised community in this poorest part of London; it could support and resource artists, many of whom lived in the area; it could make Canary Wharf a cultural destination on a London-wide culture map. It was here that Helen started to play with outdoor spaces. There were no indoor spaces as it was a building site. There was water, docks, bits of new paving areas, half-built buildings. Her challenge to the artists was: ‘what can you do with this?’ There were no real boundaries; the only boundary was the nature of the imagination – how to entertain and accommodate an audience in these very strange half finished corporate spaces.

Salisbury

In 1992 the company who was sponsoring the programme at Canary Wharf went bust in the most spectacular way and Helen was handed her P45. Helen’s next challenge was running the arts festival in Salisbury. Salisbury is a beautiful cathedral city and the festival had been established for 20 years. It had a very eminent reputation for classical music and poetry but in Helen’s view, it played only to a particular part of the population. Her challenge to herself (because the festival Board was happy with the way things were) was to see if they could evolve a programme

that invited a much broader public. So they started to do things such as flying people off the cathedral spire, creating work in a water meadow, greening a long-dead oak tree in the middle of a park. They did things that put the work of living artists' right in front of the population. Sometimes it was a success and at other times it was a complete disaster. Helen told the story of a gentleman who rang to complain about what she thought was a rather beautiful bronze statue in the market place called 'man with arms wide open'. The man's complaint was that if he hadn't been looking he would have walked into the statue!

What Helen learnt to do in both Canary Wharf and in Salisbury was to disrupt people's expectations; to put things in the public domain that were not expected, and were not even really announced, and to see what happened. She never sets out to annoy or alienate people. Her view is that if you are working in the public realm, you can be challenging but you shouldn't horrify. The work she did in Salisbury endlessly challenged this very conservative, middle-of-the-road audience who had not had much of a connection with contemporary art forms. But on the other hand, 95% of the population had not previously had much to do with the festival. These people were extraordinary in the way they welcomed new ideas and things happening in the places they lived and worked. The festival managed to engineer a cross-over between the two different audiences with the historic audience being tempted to try the things they 'knew' they didn't like, and the new audience being tempted to try more traditional festival fare, such as classical concerts.

A story which illustrates this cross-over concerns the opening concert of the festival which always took place in the cathedral. Helen wanted there to be something else alongside this for a wider audience, and so she decided to put on a piece of fantastic French pyrotechnic street theatre called 'mephistomania'. Firstly she had to get the performance and parade past the local police force and various council regulations, but the biggest and most interesting problem was The Church. Helen wanted the piece to start outside the cathedral doors so that there might be the outside chance that when the doors opened at the end of the opening concert, some of the cathedral audience would encounter a performance that they 'knew' they weren't interested in, and perhaps might risk staying to watch. However for this to happen, she had to convince the Dean, which involved conversations over tea about whether it was legitimate to have Mephistopheles, or the devil, on the doorstep of the cathedral. But through this conversation she began to understand the opposing point of view, and her work from then on has been about listening and understanding other people's concerns. In the end, an agreement was reached for the performance and parade to take place. More wonderful than that, at the beginning of the concert, the Dean stood up to make a few announcements regarding the practicalities of the event, when completely unbidden, he added: '...and in fact you might even join it, I certainly will be.' The result of this was that many people did join the procession. Helen discovered that the endorsement of the Dean had made people feel safe, someone they trusted saying: 'this is OK and you might like it'. Since then this has been a guiding principle that informs Artichoke's work.

The Sultan's Elephant

It was when they left Salisbury that Helen and Nicky decided that after 20 years of experience, they would set up their own company. The reason they did this was for one production: 'The Sultan's Elephant'. Helen had been watching the work of the French Company 'Royale De Luxe' for 20 years and had endlessly wondered why no one in Britain had invited them to perform in the UK. Founded in the late 1960s, this street company has toured the world. They specialise in huge sagas which tell stories with giant puppets. She had watched this remarkable work and waited for someone who knew how to put on a production like this such as the Edinburgh Festival or the National Theatre to invite them to Britain. But nobody did. So eventually Helen wrote and invited them. Their initial response was 'no thanks', saying that the British were terrible in terms of licensing regulations and health and safety rules, and that they didn't understand the French sensibility.

But Helen persisted and founded Artichoke with the sole focus of making this event happen. Then she set about trying to close down central London for four days. Helen explained that she wasn't the National Theatre or an established company, it was just herself asking if she could use the streets to tell a story with a giant elephant and a little girl. And the resounding answer was of course 'no'. Along with 'why would we do this?' and 'why would anyone let you do this?' This is a really interesting question: what Helen came to realise over the five years it took to make it happen was that there isn't an 'anyone' and there isn't a 'let you'. The truth is that these are *our* streets, *our* public spaces and *our* public services. Nothing Artichoke were attempting to do was illegal; it was just very unorthodox. To shut the streets of London, and say, for these four days these streets are not dedicated to shopping and traffic, they are public spaces where people can come and play and enjoy themselves, and see things that they will marvel at for the rest of their lives and that will change them. This is a very hard argument to have with the diplomatic service or the bomb squad, or London Underground or Westminster City Council or any of the many agencies Artichoke had to negotiate with to make this happen.

To understand more fully what she was talking about, Helen showed a film of the event [The Sultan's Elephant](#). There are many things to say about this project. Every little detail had to be negotiated and fought for. It was a big structural effort to make London accommodate the show as opposed to forcing the show to go where it was 'convenient' for it to be. It wouldn't have been right just to put the show on in a park, where only a limited audience would have access to it. The point of the event is the disruption and the surprise. The delight in finding that a world city can turn itself upside down to accommodate, in the words of the Culture Minister: 'joy, delight and magic'. That in itself was an extraordinary achievement.

Artichoke

Artichoke's work started with this show and has continued in this vein. They realised that their previous work at Canary Wharf and Salisbury had been leading to this style of work where you insert an event into the DNA of a city or a town. They weren't interested in producing work that happens in dedicated spaces such as theatres or art galleries, however lovely they are. What they wanted to do was engage and work with audiences who absolutely 'know' they are *not* interested until the moment they

see the show, when they absolutely know that they *are!* This has meant that over the last eight years they have worked in many different places (see slide show).

The work of Artichoke is often talked about in terms of being spectacular and huge but this belies its serious purpose. They take personal risks both financial and physical to enable these productions to happen. They also take responsibility for all the people who attend (the BBC estimated that one million people attended the Sultan's Elephant). At times this is terrifying, especially when they have persuaded all the authorities, against their better judgements, to run the shows for example without physical barriers or visible crowd control or anything that interferes with the enjoyment of the public. What the shows have revealed is that if you trust people, they can be trusted. Too often we are encouraged to believe that people can't be trusted and that they have to be protected. Helen and her colleagues always fight the battles to allow things to be as free flowing as possible.

Following on from the initial production of the 'Sultan's Elephant', Artichoke has organised a number of projects and the stories that accompany them are profound and moving. One event, involved the overnight 'discovery' of a Victorian tunnel that linked Britain and the USA. Into this tunnel had been inserted a [telectroscope](#), an optical device that enabled people in Brooklyn and London to see each other. The set up was left in place to see what happened. One group of school children from Deptford established a connection with a school in Brooklyn whereby the children explained their lives to each other, via the telectroscope, without using words. But the really moving and humbling thing for Helen was the realisation that these British children had never seen the river Thames before, despite only living three miles away.

Another big show took place in Liverpool as part of the Capital of Culture celebrations in 2008. This included a [giant spider](#) that climbed a building that was about to be demolished, wandered the streets, played with people, gathered huge crowds and then eventually disappeared in a puff of smoke down the Mersey tunnel, creating new local mythology as it did so. These shows cause real delight and it is tempting to see them only as ephemeral and spectacular. Helen however argues that there is real meaning here and profound emotion. People feel something extraordinary when they are invited to witness the unimaginable. Who would ever have thought that a giant spider would end up in Liverpool and who would ever have thought that so many people would desperately want to see it? Artichoke's work is determinedly the antithesis to a screen-based experience. With any movie you could make this happen and look entirely real, but you would know that it is just on a screen somewhere. Standing watching this in your own town is a completely different experience. It is a live moment, and you are really part of something, even if you are just witnessing it. And it is something that you will remember for the rest of your life as people who came to the elephant or saw the spider do.

Another infamous production was Antony Gormley's piece ['One and other'](#) on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. Again, people who were there or heard about it remember this 100-day event, but who can name the figures on the other three plinths in Trafalgar Square, that are there all the time? This was a controversial piece, but for the 2,400 'plinthers' who took part, and for the nine million people who

visited the website, this was an interesting way of engaging in the debate about the use of public spaces.

More recently, Artichoke has just finished a festival of light, or [Lumiere](#), in Derry/Londonderry and they hold a similar festival in Durham every two years where artists are invited to explore the power of light in ways that you can't really imagine until you have seen it. They work over the long-term with prisoners and schools but also with artists who want to come and do one-off, extraordinary pieces. The spectacular is easy to achieve in the winter darkness when you have a great canvas like the lovely city of Durham to play with. But the festival has also made profound and lasting changes to the city, such as the way the city council now manages its roads. These legacies continue. Durham City Council has recently been voted council of the year, and they would say that this in part due to the investments they have made in culture.

Cultural events like 'Lumiere' and others have allowed people to feel a sense of pride in their town or city, when they see reviews in the local and international papers. But also, people themselves are part of the event that brings great joy. In a recent economic impact assessment, 97% of people said the festival was good for the city and it made them happy. These feelings of wellbeing and the commitment to their own place are hard things to achieve. Artichoke understands that there are always choices to be made about issues such as public health, education and the arts, particularly in times like these when social and other public services are being cut. Helen would argue though that the arts and culture should not be seen as the easy thing to sacrifice because the impact and the changes that can be wrought through events like these are profound.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.