

A Space for Ideas

Tom Trevor

“Arnolfini is one of a handful of the most significant contemporary cultural centres in Europe.”

Sir Nicholas Serota, Director, Tate

2011 is the year of Arnolfini's 50th anniversary. Since its foundation in 1961, this independent, not-for-profit arts organisation has built an international reputation for commissioning and presenting innovative, risk-taking work. Its mission is “to foster artistic experiment and engagement across the contemporary arts”. Through a visual arts-led, multidisciplinary programme of exhibitions, live art, dance, music, film, poetry and literature, with a strong emphasis upon learning and participation, Arnolfini provides Bristol and the West of England with a centre for the contemporary arts of international significance. Arnolfini is dedicated to championing new art and new ideas, and to making artistic excellence and innovation accessible for all.

Arnolfini is a space where artists, art works and audiences come into contact. Broadening and deepening engagement with the contemporary arts has always been a central concern. Arnolfini's first Chair, Peter Barker-Mill, said, “art programmes must be made

ever more accessible, not diluted in terms of popularity, but rather presented with intent to provide introduction, to foster comprehension, to evoke appreciation and thus enrich the experience and enjoyment of those who come through our doors.” Likewise founding Director Jeremy Rees’ drive from the start was to show that the arts do not exist in a vacuum: “we are dedicated to putting them into a wider context.” Access and learning remain fundamental to all aspects of the programme, but 50 years on the emphasis has shifted towards far more active forms of engagement and participation, both within and beyond the building. It is vital that there should be many different ways for people to become involved and that they are able to tailor their own experience of Arnolfini, which currently receives in the region of half a million visitors per year.

Throughout its history, Arnolfini’s founding principles have held true. It is this combination of belief in supporting the most innovative, risk-taking art and in making this available to as many people as possible, together with the extraordinary foresight and generosity of the Barker-Mill family, that has laid the foundations for the future of the organisation.

As one of the ‘flagship’ cultural centres in the UK, Arnolfini is crucial to the future direction of the contemporary arts in this country and to demonstrating the vital role of public-funded organisations in supporting experimental arts practice. Many thousands of artists and arts professionals have been involved with Arnolfini over the last half-century, and this wealth of creativity has been appreciated and enjoyed by consistently large audiences. Arnolfini is also unique in its mix of art forms and its ability to create dialogues across the disciplines. The responsibility that comes with such a legacy is not only to build upon the high critical standard of the programme and to increase its influence, but also to develop and adapt to the changing conditions of contemporary culture. In order to genuinely lead the way forward, in terms of emerging practices and ideas, we need to start by challenging our own assumptions around the production, consumption and distribution of art.

The model of a building-based mixed arts centre originally developed as a hybrid of the Modernist ‘white cube’, the ‘black box’ of art-house cinema and the experimental stage of avant-garde theatre. In very different ways, these spaces developed as

bastions of ‘high art’, fortresses for resisting the ‘corruption’ of mass culture. Over the past 50 years this paradigm has been thoroughly deconstructed by artists and art theorists alike. There has been a shift away from a focus purely on the artist’s monologue towards an understanding that art exists within a wider cultural context, and that making meaning is a social process of dialogue and exchange. The challenge for the future, therefore, is how to open up the art institution, to radically change its perceived sense of limited ownership, and to make it genuinely porous and accessible to all.

First and foremost Arnolfini remains a platform for artists. The artist is at the heart of everything we do, and the irreducible particularity of an artist’s ideas is the ‘grit’ at the core of the programme. At the same time, audience engagement and interaction must be recognised as fundamental to all our activities. An arts organisation’s role is no longer simply to display and interpret the artist’s intentions for their work to a ‘general public’ but to facilitate a wider conversation, with two-way exchange and the ‘co-production’ of meaning. Arnolfini provides a space for experimentation across the disciplines and for emerging practice of international significance, and this interdisciplinary mix is a vital ingredient in generating new art and new ideas. Cross-pollination of ideas is also fostered through collaboration beyond the institution, with a wide range of different partners, both within and outside the art world. Openness, transparency and the free exchange of ideas must be the guiding principles for such a porous institution. Rather than a ‘fortress’ for defending art, Arnolfini is an open arena for dialogue, a platform for critical debate, a ‘social space’.

The new reality of digital convergence and pervasive media has also radically changed the way we lead our daily lives and negotiate our relationships with the world. It has become commonplace to assert that the internet has transformed the world of business and commerce. The question is, how are these same forces transforming the arts and their institutions? It is in the radically different expectations of the generation that has grown up ‘digital’ that we can see the future. They increasingly understand culture as something that they make, or remix and recreate using the tools of digital technology. Culture for them is not delivered in final form but experienced through active

participation, or 'co-production'. Social media and network culture are increasingly defining our relationships and reshaping the social space we inhabit.

Rather than conceiving of a singular, homogenised and essentially passive 'public', which demands a populist programme of mass appeal, progressive institutions must therefore seek to actively 'produce' multiple and diverse communities of interest. The public sphere is a space structured by diversity, in which different conflicting interests exist in parallel. Within this public realm, contemporary art is a privileged space for self-questioning, for challenging assumptions and for valuing difference. With the recognition of dissonance as a productive force, critical art institutions must therefore seek to create a democratic, 'poly-vocal' space in which the public takes an active role as producer. The institution once more must be reconceived as a social rather than a physical space, a point of convergence in wider knowledge-sharing networks, shaped and produced by the people who participate in it.

Our vision today for Arnolfini is 'A Space for Ideas', an interruption in the everyday, media-saturated flow of knowledge and information, giving room to reflect, to ask questions and to challenge assumptions. It is a space for dialogue, enabling artists and audiences to engage in critical debate around issues of contemporary culture. At the same time, it is a space for contemplation and for subjective experience, for pleasure and for strong emotions. Whilst allowing room for personal reflection, it is also a space to reflect upon our individual relationship to wider social conventions and events, how our experience is translated and represented in the wider world, and how this interplays with concerns for social justice. It is a space for creativity and active participation, for the exchange of ideas and for meaningful engagement.

Within this framework, there are five priorities for the programme: Experimentation, supporting emerging artists alongside internationally renowned figures in developing new art through a culture of research, residencies and process-led working; Collaboration, championing interdisciplinary work across the art forms as well as collaborations beyond the arts through networks, partnerships, dialogue and debate; Interaction, placing audience engagement at the core of everything we do, enabling two-way

dialogue and participation for the widest possible range of people; Social Context, rooting Arnolfini in its local milieu and developing projects specifically in relation to different groups, networks and communities; and Internationalism, building partnerships beyond the UK as a bridge between the local and the international, recognising the increasingly globalised context for making art.

The 'Space for Ideas' strategy is delivered through a project-led approach, arising out of a process of research and partnership. This way of working focuses on shared, ideas-led 'seasons', with broad project themes, so as to enable interdisciplinary exchange across the art forms, sometimes involving external associate curators and partner organisations, and often creating dialogues beyond the arts. Examples of project themes to date include *Concept Store* (exploring the experience economy and relations between art, design and consumerism), *Futurology* (a cultural investigation into how representations of the future affect the present) and *Artist/Activist* (a forum for debate around the relationship between artists and activists). Seasons have ranged between six months and a year in duration, but in future, longer-term research-led projects might take the form of an ongoing series or emergent network, with milestones presented as part of the programme over a period of years. Sustaining such long-term working will depend upon genuine stakeholder partnerships and sharing of resources.

At the same time, the Interaction strategy places the interests of audiences, or 'participants', at the heart of the programme, and so the 'proof of concept' for a project proposal, at the earliest stage, must address issues of engagement as well as the quality of its ideas and how it will be resourced. Of course, a project-led approach to the programme need not solely work within the conventional spaces of art. Context-based practice reflects upon every aspect of the cultural frame in which it is presented, whether within the art institution or in everyday locations. In future, the centre of gravity for Arnolfini could shift quite radically beyond its building to a wider social context, with site-specific projects responding to particular communities, places and practices, reflecting upon the everyday conditions that shape our meanings and values.

*Tom Trevor, Director, Arnolfini
July 2011*

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