Social Artery: Some Context

It seems right now we have two choices – as a sector and a planet - to hope for a return to 'normal' or to press the reset button and focus on what is really important.

Let us suppose there are no hierarchies and artists are given the space and the platform to define the rules... Perhaps then new solutions and approaches might occur that wouldn’t have previously.

We believe everyone is responsible for caring for one another. Our role as caretakers is to open up digital spaces to support an artist-led ecosystem. By providing ethical, alternative digital spaces we can collectively build resilience in the face of disruption.

What does this mean?
Our process is based on the belief in the agency of artists to affect and influence what comes next. We are piloting the Social ARTery as a collaborative networking platform for artists to share, connect and support each other.

The Social ARTery has the potential to be a hub that brings together artists, projects, communities, capturing and sharing learning, building stronger safer networks. The space will be open, encourage diversity of influences and experiences to challenge and define, shape and develop.

Some History

Axis had traditionally represented and supported gallery artists by providing virtual space to profile their work. Our support for artists working in the social sector comes from years of research asking our members and other artists what they are doing and what they need. Through conversations with artists we have created Social ARTery as a place to share best participatory practice and showcase artists.

The journey began in 2015 when we realised that increasing numbers of Axis artists were making work in social settings. To understand more about the growing field of social practice we commissioned our first piece of research, ‘Beyond the Gallery’, in collaboration with Professor Amanda Ravetz from Manchester Metropolitan University and later the ‘Models of Validation’ project—also known as Social Works?. These projects, which involved more than 100 artists in total, helped us learn more about the challenges facing social practitioners, and culminated in a new journal, Social Works? Open (which premiered at SAN’s Social Art Summit, the first national review...
of collaborative arts practice), a report, *From Network to Meshwork* and a festival of social practice, held in April 2019 at Manchester School of Art.

In 2020 we were successful in gaining funding from ACE emergency fund to collaborate with SAN to repurpose the digital participation framework we had been designing for our members into the current Social Artery as a platform to help artists who work with community build resources, interact with each other and with participants, and archive their response work to the current crisis.

Social ARTery was launched in November 2020, creating 20 commissions for SAN artists to bring their public engagement work onto the platform. Each artist brought the community participants they were working with to create shared documents, upload media, create and share events, have forum and live chat conversations and connect with the other artists producing work. The ARTery has become a vital space of care, helping to create adaptive resilience amongst practitioners working on the frontline with communities at this turbulent time. Central to this was the importance of sharing work in a data safe space, free from data extraction for profit. As the current lockdown measures have continued to remove communities from participatory arts, the ARTery has become a lifeline to meaningful engagement.

**Why do we need this right now?**

The uptake and feedback from artists shows how much the Social ARTery is much needed and provides vital support to the sector, but also reveals how much we still need to do.

Supporting livelihoods and wellbeing of artists means to effect change directly to the participating audiences of their practice.

For Axis, this support not only helps retain those SAN members who are also paying Axis members but also attracts new artists. By offering a space of care for artists working on the front line of public engagement during the current crisis, the ARTery helps mitigate the impact of loss of earnings, loss of practice and participation spaces, and closure of museums and galleries whose education and community programming had been central to social artists livelihoods. Recognising the current resistance to data harvesting on social
media, the ARTery becomes a safe haven to share meaningful participation work free from profit extraction techniques of the large tech sector. Already the platform has been able to address accessibility issues that have been identified pre-Covid and that were intensified by lockdown by creating an artist-driven platform for participation.
Helping Social Artists

Socially engaged artists have long been overlooked and underrepresented/undersupported in the arts sector yet, drive and deliver the UKs rich public arts programmes. Even before Covid hit socially engaged artists were asking for support and representation, due to Covid we are at risk of losing important knowledge and experience from the sector as many participatory artists retrain and move to other sectors.

Feedback from the evaluation demonstrates:

- It’s important as a way to reach more people to potentially collaborate with - this is hard to do alone and I can't think of any other artist networking organisations who have come close to doing this on a digital platform.

- I feel uncomfortable reaching out to other artists that I have not personally met before on other social platforms because they are not set up for that and I don't want to come across as pushy.

- I don't meet anyone through exhibition openings etc because of Covid but also because I have to be home in the evenings for my child.

- My expectation.. was certainly met. It is refreshing to use a site where collaboration and conversation are at the fore, rather than selling things or simply spreading information (for better or worse). I can't wait to see the ARTery move forward!
Quotes by artists evaluation: After joining/using

- valuable tool for finding friends, sharing events

- provided a motivational focus for our specific group of artists during the pandemic and lockdowns

- knowledge of the ways in which digital working can benefit my practice

- great to be able to collaborate with other artists who held similar values and are interested in the same sort of community based work

- ARTery is important for online sharing of projects and online of making connections in a safe way (without having data mined etc). I don't use facebook, but would use Artery because of its ethical stance on these issues.

- I have great admiration for the ethical stance of this platform and wish it every success. If you use social media as an artist, a platform like this is essential and long overdue?

- It is also a super space to use as a reflective tool and to see the way social art is used, managed and practiced.

- It will concentrate on connecting creatives together rather than having to use many other platforms. There are not enough sharing portals where others are happy to support and provide activities which are diverse in set up and allow more scope to connect in a safer space.

- Pretty much everyone I work alongside is desperate for a safe, ethical, creative, open social platform. I would love to use this instead of any of the other social platforms I use at the moment!