**Leading through Art: An Interview with Vicki Heywood CBE, Chair, Royal Society of Arts**

**Introduction**

These are unprecedented times where threats of international attack are rocking global stability and issues like Brexit and devolution are impacting on Europe and further afield into international markets. These are all reminders that the global society is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). Indeed, wicked problems don’t just define global society but also define how notions of leadership are constructed (Grint, 2005; 2008). The usual culturally-based response from world leadership has been too etic – globally constructed and too general (see Schedlitzki, Ahonen, Edwards, Gaggiotti & Wankhade, 2017 for a critique). Yet in this interview Vicki Heywood from the Royal Society of the Arts (RSA) reminds us of the importance of a more culturally nuanced approach to tackling these important issues in our society. She emphasizes the importance of drawing on context and culture to heighten appreciation of how we might lead change through art in such circumstances.

In this paper we draw out three interconnected themes on leadership - culture, art and place – to elucidate key messages from Vicki’s interview.

**Culture.**Culture has for some time had a link with leadership (e.g. Schein, 1992), but recently there have been calls for leadership scholars to take a closer look at leadership in a cultural context through a more emic approach, whereby more detailed contextual elements of how we see leadership are taken into consideration (Schedlitzki et al., 2017). This means getting close in on context and the meaning derived from cultural interaction. One particularly important aspect to this is the role of language and how the meaning of leadership is constructed through each individual language (see Jepson, 2009, 2010).

**Art.** For some time now the literature has described leadership as an art (e.g. Grint, 2000; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Springborg, 2010) or as artistic practice (e.g. Adler, 2011; 2017; Berthoin Antal, Debucquet & Frémeaux, 2017; Ladkin 2006; 2008). The literature has also suggested that leadership should be researched (Latham, 2014) and developed (Berthoin Antal et al., 2017; Edwards, Elliott, Iszatt-White & Schedlitzki, 2015) through artistic means. The focus of the interview analysis, whilst being connected to these points, does not necessarily look at the artistic role of leaders but the role of artists and art as leadership (Adler, 2006; Edwards, 2017).

**Place.** Lastly, leadership is also linked to community (Edwards, 2011; 2015) where it is linked contextually to place. Place-based leadership is starting to become prominent in the literature (Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara, 2013; Ropo, Salovaara, Sauer & De Paoli, 2015), particularly in the public sector and governance literatures (see Hambleton, 2014; 2017) whereby leadership is socially constructed within a finite contextual space. We also use this place-based notion of leadership as a basis for our analysis of the interview.

**The Interview**

The interview starts by setting the scene of international political developments that have created interesting and uncertain times and suggests that thinking about creativity and culture are keys to addressing these changes. It goes on to explain why creativity and culture are important and explores possible risks to the creative sector in the face of international politics such as Brexit and the UK’s spilt from the EU. The interview then goes on to discuss the role of the RSA in the changing society and looks at specific issues relating to context. Finally it looks at some projects that the RSA are involved with and explores how creativity, heritage and culture is key to education, especially in business, management and the economy. Each question and response in the interview are detailed below:

**Do you think that political developments are leading to too much uncertainty?** Yes, we are living in interesting times, while some may say worrying times or indeed exciting times. The most interesting thing about these times is the glass half full and glass half empty dichotomy. I would suggest that both perspectives were vigorously promoted, debated, refuted, perhaps obsessively so this summer. Many did not see the changes coming – and for some the ‘unthinkable’ was unthinkable. Reflecting on this I would contend that it is beneficial to consider the context that we are in now, through the lens of culture and creativity.

**Why is culture and creativity important?** One can’t examine the influence of arts and creativity in our lives without considering the cultural context within which it exists. What is our UK culture now that we are leaving the European Union? Has it altered? And might this new world order influence our creativity and our arts? I think we can all agree that the UK remaining engaged and influential as a creative and open society in a European and a global space is more vital post Brexit than it was before. What remains important about being culturally European? What remains important about being culturally British? The creative sector is uniquely placed to open up discussions and find opportunities for reflection. This provides a rich context for our work as artists. For example, The National Theatre has announced a heroic mass verbatim project, to tell the story of modern Britain called Missing Conversations and I am sure they are not alone in thinking about this and not alone in thinking of ways to meet the challenge.

**Are there risks for the creative sector in leaving the EU?** The risk for the British creative sector if we do not grasp this agenda is that we might slowly cease to be in the mind space of our fellow citizens and our fellow Europeans. And if our cultural and creative offer is not relevant in the UK - not relevant where we currently lead the world, it will not continue to be our fastest growing industry and contribute over £77 billion a year to our economy. In addition if we overt our gaze and our engagement in Europe’s deep challenges from refugees to unemployment to nationalism we will miss out on any influence on the big trends that impact socially on us just as forcibly as they do on our neighbours.

The reality is that the UK in or out of the EU is deeply connected to Europe both politically, culturally and economically. The responsibility of the UK creative industries is to continue as we have before perhaps with an even louder voice. Our job as artists therefore remains to ensure that our interests, our dialogues, our content and our creative impact reflects our European and our rich, diverse British cultural heritage. We need to keep all possible channels of exchange open and maintain our European cultural connections and influence. After the Brexit vote, we now need to understand what it means and why, and this means accepting a couple of cold realisations about the state of the UKs society today. To understand we have to accept that the economic barriers have become cultural, political and civic barriers too. If the vote was about people becoming more powerful, why did they feel powerless and what would change that. A more self-critical view of the cultural sector alone would conclude that we have been ineffective in helping to resolve social and cultural chasms that influenced the Brexit vote and the challenge remains in our own sector as much as anywhere else. And that’s a deep wound for us involved in the cultural and creative realm. Whole areas of life in the UK are skewered towards elites and elite driven. Not just business, politics, media, employment, education, health but the creative industry is part of that too. They can’t and they don’t exist in a vacuum.

**What is the RSA doing about the changing society?** We are in an era of searching for answers and challenging the status quo including the social challenges of access to a creative life and the creative arts. The RSA is conducting an inclusive growth commission tackling this issue head on recognising that an inclusive and creative society is totally interdependent with an inclusive and creative economy. In addition Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA has been invited by the Government to chair a commission and report on employment and equality in the UK. This matters particularly at a time of a north and south divide, a feeling that we have two different worlds. How has this sense of separation of haves and have nots, of nations that don’t care about other nations occurred with such a stark sense of injustice in one small island?

**Can the creative sector help in the North-South divide?** We need to harness Britain’s exceptional and widespread talents and creative approaches to reverse the southern drift. To reverse the desire for not just devolution but separation. The key message from the Warwick Commission on the future of cultural values in 2015, is that the government and the cultural and creative industries need to take a united and coherent approach that guarantees equal access for everyone to a rich cultural education and the opportunity to live a creative life. There are barriers and inequalities in Britain today that prevents this from being a universal human right. This is bad for business and it is bad for society.

**What specific focus could the arts and culture take?** If social divides are increasing, if fears about cohesion and anxieties about excessive immigration are on the increase, we are justified in asking ‘what is our role in helping to fix it’? We need creative programmes to bridge the divide we are experiencing in British society, in class, in race, in religions and in between the UK nations. More partnerships, more lateral thinking, more generosity to share resources and new approaches across institutions, across towns and cities, across nations and countries, across business, communities, educational institutions and governments. If you can’t live generously yourself, if you can’t see how together we are stronger, how on earth can you expect it of others. You will be aware if the React Report [a collaboration between UWE Bristol, Bristol Watershed and Universities of Bath, Bristol and Exeter], that concluded universities can play a pivotal role in the growth of multi-disciplinary partnerships. This will only work with partnerships that are based on values such as generosity and diversity rather than corporate. We need to increase our confidence in demonstrating common cultural experiences and fostering a shared national and local identity, civic pride, a set of values we hold in common.

**What is your view on education departments in cultural sector organizations?** 30 years ago education departments were small, if indeed, they existed at all in cultural organizations. Now they are mainstream, they are integrated and they are vital. I think I can see signs already of a creeping new revolution. The nature of the connection by cultural organizations with their local communities is changing. They provide a focus and an identity, they are helping to build a new sense of place, of inclusion for many communities. We need to go further and faster now. In the new Post-Brexit landscape, we need to help citizens to link culturally to the wider world outside the UK, to understand the influences in the world that we are part of and never can be separated from. We must consider how artists help communities to harness their creativity, to unlock a greater sense of belonging, a voice, a united, a cohesive, joined up, welcoming place. To do this we need to continue to recognise the vital importance of Britain as a creative nation. We need to maintain levels of subsidy in our culture and our cultural heritage, to see them as renewable resources that can be nourished and expanded with investment. Heritage, cultural influences and creative traditions from culture, to dance, to music, to story, to celebration of place are particularly powerful to all. They are ways in to engage people with the unique qualities and traditions which make the place that they live in distinct. Their sense of self, their sense of belonging, these are things that can never be lost or off shored.

**Are there any examples of recent heritage activities?** I chair a unique organization, 14 18 now. It exists from 2014 to 2018 only, with a remit to commemorate the centenary of the First World War through art commissions in all art forms, dance, music, fine arts, poetry, film, games, apps, theatre, photography. After 2018, the art works will remain as well as the memories and stories of participants in projects in galleries, repertoires, books and digital media. From small and local to large scale, from touring the sea of poppies to the tower, from ghost soldiers in unexpected places all-round the country, a living memorial to the soldiers that lost their lives on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. No other Nation in Europe is doing this. The UK leads the way in our approach in partnership and in investment. Remember the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, we celebrated out United Kingdom, our pride in our culture and our heritage and our history by celebrating our creativity in a mass community engagement event. A common sense of heritage, identity and place really matters.

**Britain has many historic battlefields – how can you generate a greater interest in such aspects of history?** There are 46 historic battlefields that have been given the highest order of protection under the law, and no doubt shaped our history. The most recent battle given this status was Sedgemoor near Bridgewater near Somerset in 1685. What if citizens had greater power to define and protect the heritage that was important to them, to their streets, to their neighbourhood, to their city? Bristol has led the way here with Know Your Place enabling citizens to discover and contribute to the official historic records of their city through digital maps. What might become more important to recognise than an ancient battlefield site. The common thread to these examples is that connecting people to their communities is vital. It means citizens being confident in sharing between them the story of their lives and their place. It’s the transformities rather than the instrumental value of the arts and the creative industries as a whole. Alone it won’t maintain social cohesion but it can and it does play a significant part in making our streets safer, our chances of employment higher, our economy stronger, our lives more fulfilled, engaged and having meaning. And of course we come back as ever to the need to maintain and increase access to creative and cultural education for our young people.

**How does the creative sector influence the economy?** We want a creative, employable and competitive workforce. The RSA academies provide creative opportunities and enrichment for all our students. At its core is a teacher training programme that focuses on addressing the social and cultural challenges they face in their classrooms every day. The RSA is also focusing on putting learning at the heart of citizenship, civic identity and community life. This means thinking about how arts and culture can create a more connected world, a more joined up world, a better informed world where our differences are celebrated and transcended and where creativity plays its full heart in making our world a better place. All industries need creativity – and most business leaders are seeking to unlock peoples’ creativity, to all work together as part of a team, to really inspire each other to be the best company. We need people who really want to engage with the challenges of the world and think about how they can make their place in addressing them.

**Finally how can business tap into creative thinking, the ideas and the insights of heritage and culture?** The first step is to find cultural and heritage organizations and talk to them about why and how they are engaging with their local communities – they also need businesses to join in with that conversation. It is often difficult to engage businesses in a conversation about the value of creativity and culture in the UK, with many avoiding that conversation. Because if you look at Bristol as a classic example of this everything thrives because - everything thrives. It doesn’t work just because there is one thing or another and you can take this example and look at many, many other cities across the country. Where commerce, the arts, education establishments, are working together and in harmony for common cause it’s a better place to live. You recruit more easily, people want to come and work for you, you can attract the best teachers in to your universities etc., That is why I believe that we need to work together with business and in turn businesses need to discuss this engagement in their board rooms. I would encourage business leaders to think about the enormous power potential that is not far away from them, in the creative sector.

**Commentary**

The interview gives some insight into the importance of leading through art. For example, the following response to a question at the end of the interview encapsulates this insight:

“Our job as artists therefore remains to ensure that our interests, our dialogues, our content and our creative impact reflects our European and our rich, diverse British cultural heritage.”

Here the importance of artists being seen as leaders (c.f. Adler, 2006; Edwards, 2017) can been seen as well as the inherent link to cultural issues within a certain context. The interview also alludes to issues of complexity in taking this view as it focuses on two contexts – European and British – but also talks of the internationally-based diversity within these cultures. This shows how we need to take a more emic approach to understanding how leadership is constructed in context (c.f. Schedlitzki et al., 2017) as this will naturally pick up on the underlying complexities within cultural categories. This is elaborated more when the interview discusses the north/south divide in the UK (which is a divide evident in other nations around the world, for example, America and Korea) whereby there is a feeling of ‘different worlds’. Deep immersion into the contexts of each of these categories would help to develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of these categories and hence how leadership is constructed as a phenomenon. By doing so, research and practice in social challenges will have greater impact. Some additional points show an extra level of interaction with place is also important:

“The nature of connection by cultural organizations with their local communities is changing. They provide a focus and an identity, they are helping to build a new sense of place, of inclusion for many communities…In the new Post-Brexit landscape, we need to help citizens to link culturally to the wider world outside the UK, to understand the influences in the world that are part of and never can be separated from. We must consider how artists help communities to harness their creativity, to unlock a greater sense of belonging, a voice, a united, a cohesive, joined up, welcoming place.”

Here it can be seen firstly how the interview positions the artist in a central role in the pulling together of culture, context and identity that develops a sense of belonging – something that has been identified as an important dimension in understanding community-based leadership (Edwards, 2015). Edwards adds to this view and suggests that by understanding our multiple identities (Ford, Harding & Learmonth, 2008) this then helps to develop a greater understanding of how we have multiple senses of belonging. Hence views on the self are linked to many identities, whether they are European, British-based or from further afield or closer to home. The interview suggests that an important role art and artists can play is in helping individuals discover the multiple-ness of their identity, and hence belonging, to show that we can identify with many selves at the same time.

Further to this, the interview underlines the connection to place which is paramount and which the artist can help society to reconcile:

“The common thread to these examples [given in the interview] is that connecting people to their communities is vital. It means citizens being confident in sharing between them the story of their lives and their place.”

To return to the opening statement in this article, what we are seeing in the current resurgence of nationalism across Europe and, arguably, other key areas of the globe, is a sense of nation that has lost its links to communities. Communities are the building blocks of a connected society and hence a national sense of self. The interview suggests that delving deeper into these communities through stories of people lives, which artists intrinsically portray, can help in reconciling the differences that fervent Nationalism promote in their political messages. The global society, therefore, may need to keep in mind the following quote from the interview:

“Heritage, cultural influences and creative traditions from culture, to dance, to music, to story, to celebration of place are particularly powerful to all. They are ways in to engage people with the unique qualities and traditions which make the place that they live in distinct. Their sense of self, their sense of belonging, these are things that can never be lost.”

What the recent literature on leadership (e.g. Edwards, 2015; Ford et al., 2008; Schedlitzki et al., 2017) helps to add to this message is that this is multiple; individuals are not only represented by one community, society or nation, identity is built up of an amalgam of various aspects of self that are drawn from many cultures and contexts. Leading through art, helps to reinforce that artists can help uncover and discover these complex intricacies which can then help to problematize large scale generalisations which have become the epitome of serious global issues.

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