

Production lines

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This a-n Collection provides a guide to the various pathways dedicated organisations are forging in the production of inter-disciplinary visual arts. The introductory essay, by Charlotte Frost, indicates the types of activities involved, art forms which respond well to this style of collaboration and some of the difficulties experienced by production agencies in working in this way. The full publication held on www.a-n.co.uk/production_lines works alongside this printed publication as a map for further research into the realm of arts production.

Cover image: Sean Dower.
Automaton, production still, 2006. Commissioned by: Film and Video Umbrella as part of Single Shot



Production lines

In March 2007 I attended an untitled collaborative performance by musician Christian Fennesz and film-maker Charles Atlas. It was a lavish production which, despite being the first VJing-style event I had ever attended, was very accessible to newcomers given its seamless combination of recognised talents and smooth audio and aesthetic. As well as inviting profuse applause for the performers, the compere also indicated that project producers, the art production agency/organisation Forma, should share the limelight. When the performance was over I realised that not only had the hypnotic visuals on the expansive IMAX screen often made me forget that Fennesz and Atlas were actually there, literally weaving their work together in front of me, but recognising the nature of the input of a production organisation had also been beyond me. I wondered: what exactly was this line of arts 'production' work Forma were in?

In the introduction to the 2007 Arts Council England and Jerwood Charitable Foundation publication *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible*, Kate Tyndall describes the role of the producer:

"The job these people do involves an all-encompassing, interwoven set of responsibilities necessary to make great ideas and projects happen. The producer might be the chief executive of a well-developed organisation with specialist teams focusing on particular aspects of the producing task, or they might function solo or lead a small or medium-sized team. As producer, however, they hold the full picture, and are responsible for the successful intersection of all the forces at work in order to realise the idea in the most brilliant way possible."¹

As a result of this all-pervasive position, a producer's daily tasks can be extremely varied. They might be at the library with an artist doing primary research one minute, and re-carpeting a gallery space the next. They instigate copious amounts of creative brainstorming, but are forced to fight their way through a comparable amount of tedious form-filling. And as each producer operates with their carefully cultivated (and constantly expanding) network of experts and contacts, they each work in their own – sometimes idiosyncratic – fashion.

From the production agencies I spoke to (Artangel, Artsadmin, Electra, Film and Video Umbrella, Forma and Furtherfield.org), a range of organisational models became apparent too. Artangel and Film and Video Umbrella (FVU) have a strong focus on commissioning, but FVU mount work almost exclusively in gallery space, while Artangel almost exclusively work outside of galleries. Artsadmin, and net art producers Furtherfield.org, have a strong line in providing artists with creative spaces to work in/from. Forma and Electra foreground the unique (sometimes one-off, sometimes ongoing), interdisciplinary, collaborative partnerships they 'broker'. Artsadmin and Forma have stables of artists they regularly work with, while Artangel and FVU tend to work with artists only once. Having said all that, Artsadmin and Forma have also commissioned pieces and do work with many artists beyond their affiliated ones, and Electra's Her Noise Archive provides artists with a space in which to research women's sound art, so none of these models are immutable. Summing up their practice in an appropriately loose way, Tyndall says a producer "...leads in navigating between a bold vision of an idea, and how feasibly – and brilliantly – to deliver it..."² That is, however they do it, producers endeavour to originate innovative art projects.

Although production organisations are not united by a singular, clear operational model, there are several key functions they usually perform. The first of these is matchmaking collaborative relationships. This might mean combining artists – perhaps from different disciplines – in order to capture distinct approaches and generate highly original artworks. An example of this would be the forementioned Atlas/Fennesz partnering, or Electra's grouping of Sonic Youth guitarist Kim Gordon, video artist Tony Oursler and filmmaker Phil Morrison, in *Perfect Partner* (2005), an eighty-minute 'road movie' and live, improvised musical performance exploring Western society's ongoing attachment to automobiles.

In addition or sometimes in place of this more outwardly-apparent collaboration, a production organisation might also assemble a team of experts to work at what could be described as the 'back end' of a project, behind the scenes as it were, in order to help an artist stage a piece they might not personally have the skills to produce alone. Forma have dedicated in-house technical and marketing teams to support artists, while Artangel, for example, will source the experts needed for any work they produce on a case-by-case basis.

Production organisations also bring together projects and venues, funders or other supporters. When staging *Play on Earth* (2006), an epic global performance piece by Station House Opera, of perhaps equally grand proportions was the grouping of facilitators who, alongside Artsadmin and Station House Opera, helped produce this work. These included funders such as the Arts Council England and the

¹ Kate Tyndall, *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible*, Arts Council England and The Jerwood Charitable Foundation, London, 2007, p1.

² Kate Tyndall, *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible*, Arts Council England and The Jerwood Charitable Foundation, London, 2007, p1.

Anne Bean, *Toynbee Studios Launch Event*, 2007. Photo: Hugo Glendinning



British Council, as well as NewcastleGateshead Initiative, Northern Stage, Singapore Arts Festival, TheatreWorks, Philharmonia Brasileira and Bonito & Compri.

Another production agency function is the provision of the necessary time, and sometimes space, for the creative process to take place. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than at Artsadmin where, at their developmental HQ, Toynbee Studios, which boasts five artist rehearsal spaces, a roof-top dance studio, the Arts Bar and Café and a theatre, they provide actual room for artists to rehearse, perform, meet and think. Furtherfield.org, on the other hand, specialise in the construction and population of online platforms for net art collaboration. Known as 'artware', this type of software provides an arena and the right tools for any web-surfer to engage in a collaborative artistic project. Specifically through projects such as FurtherStudio and VisitorsStudio, respectively an online artist's residency programme and an open arena for 'real-time internet jamming', Furtherfield.org, like Artsadmin, literally give artists their own laboratories.

Yet despite being office-based, Electra, Forma, FVU and Artangel all stress that a huge part of what they do is give artists and artworks time and space to breathe. Caroline Smith, Administrative Director at FVU, described how work on projects can continue (or take place) over a number of years, much longer than anyone would think, because the work is not primarily driven by an exhibition deadline but rather by the artist's *own* creative schedule. Indeed, this is something all producers confirm as a core component of their practice and something which galleries, with their packed programmes, can rarely offer on their own. Rob Bowman, Head of Programmes and Production at Artangel, emphasised that the necessary but often lengthy phase of thinking is essential to "getting it right". In fact he opined that the reason Artangel have such strong branding, in terms of being one of only a few production organisations who are highly recognisable from a public perspective, is less to do with large amounts of money invested in marketing than with their commitment to the durational process of production.

A third universal responsibility of production organisations is, as Steven Bode Director of FVU puts it: "to be the risk absorber". While there is the obvious thrill of working unlimited by some of the boundaries associated with programming work from within an institution, conversely, there is the precariousness of working from outside of an institution to deal with too. As Electra Co-Founder and Director Lina Dzuverovic pointed out, every project starts from square-one in terms of the producer having to find creative partners, a venue and, usually, funders. Also, in supporting new, ambitious and exploratory work, it is the producers who are taking the gamble, resting their reputations, man-power, time, and in some cases money, on its successful outcome. However, producers are very proud and protective of this aspect of their work. Bowman explains:

“Organisations like ours, Artsadmin, Electra and Forma etc have to continue to fight the case for what we are doing, despite not being able to fit it into the normal categories or tick the boxes form-filling requires. We need to resist the somewhat confining project assessment systems already in place, and push for the value of what is essentially a risky activity undertaken to produce solid new work. There are lots of safer things we could do than produce a film of a high-wire walk with Catherine Yass, but they are not as effective.”

Judith Knight, Co-Founder and Director of Artsadmin, echoes his sentiments:

“Its very important that all of us, Artsadmin, Artangel, Forma, and everyone else... keep encouraging new work to happen, if we don't, everything will get very stagnant. That is, what is inspiring and compelling for us, and it is something that I would reiterate to Arts Council England, this experimental work influences the mainstream and feeds everything else.”

And it is perhaps this fundamental element of production that inspired Tyndall to dramatically describe producers as ‘alchemists of the impossible’.

Given that the very nature of visual arts production organisations like Artangel, Artsadmin, Electra, Forma, FVU and Furtherfield.org involves working outside the box – the box here referring to all the physical and bureaucratic constraints of a white cube gallery/museum space/system – the art these organisations germinate is regularly inter-disciplinary. Even FVU, which is distinct in producing projects only when a venue has been secured and then working closely with this (usually) gallery space to ensure a tight fit between creation and context, operate in order to allow artists a much freer way of working, precipitating many interesting artistic fusions.

In some instances, it was the desire to support emergent and often indefinable art forms which brought these organisations into being in the first place. Dzuverovic describes Electra's origin:

“At the time we founded Electra we were trying to get sound into visual arts organisations, but there was a reluctance on the part of the organisations to deal with such work, and it was difficult for us being on the outside, because as soon as you looked into producing something that wasn't necessarily primarily visual – media art, sound, performance and types of collaborative work – you hit a wall. And then we realised that there was a gap surrounding this type of work. It wasn't as well funded and the resources weren't there. But we could see a lot of exciting work going on and we decided, pretty much out of desperation, that we wanted to start an organisation as a vehicle to make this type of work happen, and happen well.”



Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether.
Reverse Karaoke, MAK, Vienna, 2007.



Catherine Yass, *High Wire*, 2008.
 Commissioned and produced by Artangel;
 Photo: Angie Catlin

Many producers found that there was a proliferation of work which could clearly benefit from a more bespoke support system, as targeted expertises didn't exist within institutions. Knight explains Artsadmin's comparable inception:

"There was an explosion of experimental theatre in the seventies, and although the work which was taking place was exciting, it was not taken very seriously and was often very short-lived. There was very little support or management, even though there was some project funding available. In the beginning, although we didn't have a written artistic policy, we were very clear on the type of work we wanted to support, which was work we liked and felt we could do something for. It tended to be a cross between performance and theatre and dance and it was new and risky and innovative, and all those words I don't like that get over used, but it gave us an artistic identity."

For Electra, generating work which consciously fuses media, methods and makers to strong effect, is a driving force. They describe their technique as involving "cross-contextualisation", which they define as a practice where an established visual art audience, for example, is introduced to sound art (and indeed vice versa) via a work which melds the two (or more) media. Their group exhibition 'Her Noise', held at the South London Gallery in 2005 in association with Forma, did precisely that as musicians were brought to a gallery space to perform in works such as *Reverse Karaoke*, by Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether. Indeed, Forma are also proponents of this approach to procuring audiences, as shown by projects such as the Charles Atlas and Anthony and the Johnsons collaboration *Turning* (2006). And while at Artangel such inter-disciplinarity isn't overtly signalled, with projects such as the current *Stifter's Dinge* (2008), by Heiner Goebbels, their abiding interest in multi-media work is clear.

Nonetheless, for Dzuverovic, and for Marc Garret and Ruth Catlow (the Co-Founders and Directors of Furtherfield.org), it is a lamentable fact that as an arts producer your practice is often little understood or recognised beyond your sphere of associates. Dzuverovic described the time Electra had a stand at the Zoo Art Fair and were constantly bombarded with questions less about

the work they were representing, than the concept of 'production'. Dzuverovic also noted, however, that the degree to which the presence of a producer/production organisation is made manifest in the presentation of a project is a tricky balance to strike. As Knight explained to me, in many cases a producer's input might be indicated simply by an additional billing on a leaflet or gallery wall, and that the citing of their logo on contextual materials is something producers can agonise over as for them, it is the artist who must always have the top spot.

For FVU and Forma, professional recognition is a priority. David Metcalfe, Chief Executive of Forma, put it:

"We don't *need* to be visible to the general public. Other organisations, curators, venues and artists constitute the network we work within and it is these people we need to know who we are. It is first about having professional visibility, to enable new opportunities and collaborations to develop."

Although he went on to describe how Forma are expanding their expertise in audience development, and that their involvement in the Digital North and Audiences Yorkshire scheme Media Mates was a part of this. While Bode, also less worried as far as the general public is concerned whether FVU's practice appears overt or more covert, stated that despite working in an itinerant way, the signature or programme of a production organisation is always there, if people want to find it.

The most problematic part of production, however, is funding. Most of the production agencies discussed have some level of core funding from Arts Council England. This is certainly true of Artsadmin, Electra, Forma, Furtherfield.org and FVU, for example, while Artangel are lucky enough to be supported, in part, by so-called 'Angels', or rather, patrons. Beyond this, the agencies have to apply to other funding bodies and organisations for support, juggling the aims of these organisations within each project. But whatever amount of funding they have, it is never enough and Knight made the charge that the recent Arts Council England funding cuts, including the Grants for the Arts budget reduction, were going to be sorely felt.

Despite the fact a producer's credit on a project pamphlet can barely begin to underscore the volume and sheer variety of work that goes into producing a new artwork or event or installation or performance or screening, it seems that there is one final characteristic shared by production organisations. That is, production is often precisely about working undetected – on some levels at least. Interestingly, in an article published in *The Guardian's* G2 supplement in 2007 (timed to coincide with the Barbican's 25th anniversary celebrations)³, the Barbican was praised for its 'genre-busting' productions, several of which – though the article didn't state this – were produced by Forma. Like Atlas' ambient images of whirling dancers and posturing strong-men fading in and out of various other entities (in his forementioned audio-visual concert with Fennesz), in any work they have been involved with, a producer/production organisation is omnipresent and yet what they have actually done is regularly – and arguably always should be – imperceptible. It is the quality of the artworks, which are manufactured as a result of this special collaborative line in production, that does all the talking.

Charlotte Frost is a writer/researcher in the field of new media art. She is currently in the writing-up year of her thesis which demonstrates how emergent technologies impact the archiving and, thereby, the experience of art, through an analysis of the way in which online platforms for art reception develop the net art encounter. She regularly writes new media art criticism online and off, and was formerly one of four writers (alongside Sean Dodson, Simon Tait and Patrick Kelly) selected for an art-organisation-and-journalism partnership scheme called Media Mates (co-managed by Digital North and Audiences Yorkshire), where she was employed to cover the activities of several new media arts organisations in the northern region. Prior to this she was the Commissioning Editor of Furtherfield.org sister site Furthertext.org.

³ Feargus O'Sullivan, 'Inside Art: Crossing Boundaries', in G2, *Guardian*, 2 March 2007, p31. Republished by kind permission on www.a-n.co.uk/production_lines

Artsadmin

a-n.co.uk April 2008

A brief account by Charlotte Frost of the variety of support systems run by Artsadmin, including information about its head of operations: Toynbee Studios, and examples of several projects it has produced with the likes of: Graeme Miller, Station House Opera and Gary Stevens.

Battle of Orgreave

a-n Magazine September 2001

David Butler gives an insider account of Jeremy Deller's ambitious Artangel Times Open commission, and refers to Deller's relationship with Artangel and to the valuable skills Artangel brought to the project.

Do It With Others (DIWO):

Participatory Media in the Furtherfield Neighbourhood

Republished with kind permission of Furtherfield.org

An article by Furtherfield.org founders and Directors: Marc Garrett and Ruth Catlow, from *Coding Cultures: A Handbook*, commissioned by Francesca da Rimini and d/lux/MediaArts in 2007. This text gives an idea of the origin and mission of Furtherfield.org, and more cogently conveys the way in which its participatory platforms are art production tools.

Eating grass

a-n Magazine March 2004

Edith-Marie Pasquier talks to inIVA Director Gilane Tawadros and artist Alia Syed about their experience of working together, providing some insight into the way inIVA produce work with artists.

Electra

a-n.co.uk April 2008

An introduction by Charlotte Frost to the different projects Electra has instigated utilising its own brand of 'cross-contextualisation' to co-opt audiences from existing genres. Examples of this approach include the exhibition 'Her Noise' and the collaborative work *Perfect Partner* (2005).

Forma

a-n.co.uk April 2008

A report by Charlotte Frost on some of the production activities of the Newcastle- and London-based Forma, drawing out different strands of its programme including curation, representation, initiation, distribution and public art and some of the artists they work with, such as Charles Atlas, Gina Czarnecki, Christian Fennesz and Lynette Wallworth.

Forma Annual Review 2005/2006

Republished with kind permission of Forma.

This detailed report on its own work, by Forma, highlights the many ways in which its practice has expanded over recent years and describes the different strands of what it does. It gives a strong overview of the diverse ways in which production agencies work.

Furtherfield

a-n.co.uk April 2008

Charlotte Frost delves into the on and offline world of Furtherfield.org, where web surfers are encouraged and enabled to become co-producers in art making/situating via platforms such as VisitorsStudio and projects like DIWO (Do It With Others).

In it for the duration

a-n Magazine July 2004

Paul Glinkowski talks to artist Jem Finer about his ongoing project Longplayer, and to his collaborator James Lingwood, Co-Director of Artangel, providing an excellent example of how artists and production organisations work together.

Inside Art: Crossing Boundaries

Republished with kind permission *The Guardian* and Feargus O'Sullivan.

An article by Feargus O'Sullivan first published in *The Guardian's G2* supplement, ostensibly about the Barbican's 'genre-busting' programming which, rather unwittingly, praises the work of Forma, producers of two of the events mentioned. Timed to coincide with the Barbican's 25th anniversary, it provides the perfect example of the skill and invisibility of production organisations.

Now & then

a-n Magazine February 2005

Interview between Edith-Marie Pasquier and Motiroti's Ali Zaidi which uncovers elements of Motiroti's approach to 'identity' in their production work, and introduces yet another organisation innovating art in the role of producer.

a-n Collections: Playing up

a-n Collections March 2007

Gillian Nicol explores the nature of collaborative and creative processes involved in making artwork in the public realm and discusses the types of relationships brokered by production organisations.

Featured production organisations:

www.artangel.org.uk

Website with information on the Artangel team, projects past, present and future, the Artangel Open, and an insight into who some of those so-called 'angels' are.

www.artsadmin.co.uk

Online platform for all Artsadmin's activities and advisory programmes, with a huge archive of its work so far.

www.electra-productions.com

Central portal for Electra's practice with a programme of both up-coming and past projects, and details on available resources.

www.fvumbrella.com

FVU activity hub, with data on all its projects, equipment they hire out and information on making a proposal.

www.forma.org.uk

Web-based overview of Forma's expanding programme reporting previous as well as present practice.

www.furtherfield.org

Cyber-gateway to the vast Furtherfield.org community and collection of off-shoot projects.

Further relevant organisations:

www.artprojx.com

Marketing, event production, fundraising, audience development and creative strategic consulting agency.

www.iniva.org

Production organisation focused on producing work by artists from culturally diverse backgrounds.

www.motiroti.com

Interdisciplinary arts production organisation.

www.performa-arts.org

Critically acclaimed and much emulated New York-based production organisation.

www.publicartfund.org

Well-known New York-based public art production organisation.

www.tba21.org

Production organisation tending towards 'unconventional' projects.

www.thisisliveart.co.uk

Agency with production capacities which focuses on live art activities.

Research references:

The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible

Arts Council England and The Jerwood Charitable Foundation, London, 2007. Recent book by Kate Tyndall comprising interviews and brief articles on a range of key figures in arts production including Judith Knight (Artsadmin) and Ritsaert ten Cate (the Mickery), and Michael Morris (Artangel).