

THE CODE

of practice
for the
visual arts

FOR ARTISTS

CREDITS

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Publisher Louise Wirz
Design www.axisgraphicdesign.co.uk
© writer and a-n The Artists Information
Company 2009

ISBN 0 9077 30 67 1

Published by
a-n The Artists Information Company
Registered in England
Company No 1626331

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INTRODUCTION

The Code of Practice for the Visual Arts was researched and written in 2003 by Lee Corner and was informed by the contemporary cultural and economic climate for visual artists and their practice, reflecting collaborative approaches and interdisciplinarity.

It was informed by a Strategic Advisory Group including Arts Council England Visual Arts Officer Sara Bowler, artist and consultant Jason E Bowman, Artquest Programme Manager Stephen Beddoe, artist and curator Eddie Chambers, Kate Hainsworth and Kay Pallister from Axis, Cornerhouse Visual Arts Programmer Kathy Rae Huffman, Business Design Centre Development Manager Sarah Lee, University of Wolverhampton Associate Dean Antonia Payne and BALTIC Education and Public Programme Manager Emma Thomas.

The research was supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England in 2003. a-n The Artists Information is committed to maintaining awareness of good practices in the visual arts through promotion of the code and associated publications to artists and arts employers.

Lee Corner has worked in the creative and cultural sectors for many years, specialising in organisational development and human resource management. Over the recent period, she has devised training and professional development programmes that she now runs for individual artists and groups across the UK. She researched and wrote the first Code of Practice for the Visual Arts as a commission from the National Artists' Association in 1992.

"I've already used the code to negotiate with a teacher in a school I was working in. I said I needed it back, but he's kept it."

Artist in education Sheffield

A text-only version of this publication is available on www.a-n.co.uk

WHAT IS A CODE OF PRACTICE?

A code of practice takes commonly-agreed principles of good practice and demonstrates why and how they should be applied. The code of practice for the visual arts, published by a-n the artists information company, draws from the experiences of practising artists along with those of commissioners, curators and others with whom artists work. It looks at the principles that underpin good practice, and makes connections with examples to show how they work in practice.

BEST PRACTICE

Artists' training and experience gives them a range of skills that can be applied to any number of professional situations. Creative thinking is increasingly prized. Artists who have confidence in, and assert, the creative problem-solving and lateral thinking that underpins their artistic practice are more likely to get to where they want to be.

PRINCIPLES

Good practice prevails where artists

- CONTRIBUTE CONFIDENTLY
- PREPARE THOROUGHLY
- COLLABORATE CREATIVELY
- AIM HIGH

FIRST PRINCIPLE

good practice prevails
where artists

CONTRIBUTE CONFIDENTLY...

...by engaging with the development of ideas, and solution of problems; by refusing to pigeonhole and to be pigeonholed; by challenging stereotypes and assumptions about who knows what; by being generous with their knowledge and their skills; by knowing their worth.

Contributing confidently is demonstrated by recognising that each individual has a combination of skills and knowledge that come from training and experience, and not assuming that someone with a specialist role has a monopoly in that area. It requires considering the value of all the resources that are brought to the project, independent of their genesis. For Graham Fagen:

“The starting point is knowing how you function as an artist, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, knowing how you can do the job – how what you do can make sense of a particular context.”

Talking about artists and self-employment, Linda Ball calls it “the intangible portfolio”, the hidden skills that come from practising as an artist: creative thinking, developing new ideas, solving problems, wondering ‘what if...?’. These attributes are “continually growing and refining, are highly transferable and have lifetime value”.

Being aware of these highly transferable attributes, and using them effectively, opens the artist up to wider earning and creative opportunities. Ben Coode Adams’ move into new media was a step into the unknown, but he relied on his existing skills:

“I have a good eye, and looking into the camera is just like using a paintbrush.”

“The versatility of the contemporary artist” is evidenced by Johanne Mills who, from college days, seized opportunities to work with other disciplines and build her confidence in experimentation and investigation. She can now employ her skills in trend prediction, curating and consultancy, art direction, styling and design, making her highly attractive to fashion houses, press and media.

Richard Layzell was a “visionaire” at software company AIT:

“My involvement has contributed to the company’s success through staff morale, retention and brand... they see me as adding another dimension to the working life of the organisation... it broadens the dimensions of what being a software developer means.”

SECOND PRINCIPLE

good practice prevails
where artists

PREPARE THOROUGHLY...

...by finding out
about where, with
whom and how they
will be working;
by researching
context, legislative
implications,
location,
environmental
concerns, potential
impact, and interests
of partners and
colleagues.

Research underpins the effectiveness of a project's every aspect. It strengthens relationships, clarifies ideas, and informs planning, providing a platform for winning respect and earning trust. It protects against ignorance and bullying. Above all, it demonstrates professionalism and instils confidence among partners.

The value of research to artists' practice is well acknowledged as the progressive thinking of the Arts and Humanities Research Council has illustrated. But taking time to learn about other worlds and practices can be every bit as valuable.

Ceramic artist Kate Schuricht says:

"I spend time building relationships with galleries and I have a lot of sympathy for their financial situation. But I do draw up clear agreements that come from my experience of what can go wrong. When this happens I want to make sure the same mistake is not repeated."

Equally, in the complex environments of special schools and hospitals, understanding how to negotiate relationships and responsibilities can be key to the quality of the experience – for artist, institution and participants. As an artist, research is the crucial ingredient to understanding your place in the market, how best to promote yourself and how to place a financial value on your products or services.

Finding out in advance of making contact whether a gallery shows your kind of work can save you time and resources. It might also save your reputation: gallery owners and curators have long memories for people who they feel have wasted their time. 'Cold calling' isn't a good move.

Cross-disciplinary group Blast Theory's advice is:

"Invest time in understanding all aspects of establishing and running a company (or project), from legal issues to health and safety and meeting funding criteria."

THIRD PRINCIPLE

good practice prevails
where artists

COLLABORATE CREATIVELY...

...by establishing mutual respect and recognition: through identifying shared goals, encouraging the views of others, welcoming open and informed discussion, valuing complementary skills, cooperating and collaborating in achieving a vision without losing sight of their own identity and integrity.

Genuine partnership working is often difficult, always rewarding. It demands commitment. It involves knowledge, trust and respect. It challenges partners to acknowledge and to value the contribution that each can make. At best, it strengthens creativity and supports risk.

Whether selling, exhibiting, in residence or under commission, an artist is working with others who are specialists in their own area. Understanding what each expects of the other is critical to the success of the project.

Graham Fagen begins all his encounters with sessions that allow for “knocking preconceptions on the head”.

“I need professional regard from all the people I’m working with to make the job work. Professionalism is about trust in both directions and trust as part of a team. Building confidence in each other opens up more and more opportunities.”

In his work with Glasgow City Council’s Development & Regeneration Services, Maurice O’Connell recognised that even though projects he devised were never realised they focused discussion:

“The key element was to find a space where host and artist might find common ground – to reach a position of mutual engagement not simply motivated by a desire for equality but by a shared need for serious critical dialogue.”

When the purpose is less clear achieving mutual respect is trickier. For their residency at Pfizer, Soda had a clear brief and purpose: using their experience in change management and their understanding of technical research issues to bring together biologists and chemists working side by side for the first time. However Carey Young approaches residencies with a clear sense of what she has to give:

“The more you are seen as an independent specialist, the more respect you will get. Avoid the notion that you may be a ‘useful’ individual. Do not let anyone think of you as an employee.”

FOURTH PRINCIPLE

good practice prevails
where artists

AIM HIGH...

...by aspiring to
bring quality to
everything they do,
whether presenting
ideas, managing
professional
relationships,
negotiating, or
producing the work.

Quality relates to everything. It is found in the clarity of the brief, precision of the design, standard of the construction, calibre of the materials, sensitivity to context, attention to detail and overall fitness for purpose.

It is as crucial in the relationships between partners as it is in the handling of concepts and inanimate materials.

“I’m confident and I do what I say I’m going to do. I know my work is strong intellectually and visually.”

Ben Coode-Adams’ confidence in the quality of his work is one of the reasons he gives for his success in securing commissions and making a living. Tanya Axford says that in the beginning, “things just seemed to happen really quickly”. But through support from a mentoring scheme, she started to take control, realising the value of being more strategic about what she does.

Attention to the organisational detail is “part of the art-making” for Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie. Their project TV Swansong employed a business planning process to ensure that they had anticipated and addressed all the aspects of realising a complex project.

US-based artists agency Artisan, commits time and effort to ensuring the quality of its brokerage:

“we consider ourselves to be artists’ advocates. we communicate with our artists on a daily basis, help them with getting the best price for a project and make sure they get what they are worth in the market place. we check in with artists on every job, making sure that it was a good fit, the work was satisfactory and that they felt comfortable working in that environment.”

Making or buying time to develop the quality of the work is a constant challenge for artists. Awards, fellowships and bursaries at key junctures in an artist’s development provide a critical environment or space, as Colin Andrews confirms from his EMARE residency, to “conduct a thorough and timely re-evaluation” of the work.