

A Thriving Arts & Health Practice?

Clive Parkinson

I think what I'm feeling is anxiety.

Just a few weeks ago, I stood amongst so many maskless people, dizzy with a feeling not dissimilar to standing on a precipice. So strange was this sensation, that I stooped, both hands on my knees, and took some deep breaths. Morrissey singing through my headphones, my mask is clawing at my face, my nose and mouth are damp, but I regain something of my composure. No one noticed, or if they did, they averted their eyes.

There are threads of anxiety running through all of us these days, stretching beyond an Instagram-induced angst and rather an enforced strangeness; alienation from each other and the transubstantiation of all we know about that virus into a monstrous televised war-machine, with its threat of finite action. It seems that the things we have taken for granted are constantly shifting. This abused and over-heated world has changed, and we are changing with it. Still...

Standing in an exhibition of Derek Jarman's work at Manchester Art Gallery, I'm overwhelmed by the trajectory of this artist's work, from cradle to grave; paintings and photographs, journals and film - and protest. This is a body of work. A physical body and a presence that - even though the artist is dead - continues to shine. A story of lived experience and sexual politics, of HIV/AIDS and prejudice which the arts and health community might learn from and where there's a joyous and dark beating heart to an exhibition that vibrates with joy, anger and rage, and in my mind I hear John Lydon caterwauling "anger is an energy".



Derek Jarman *Sowers and Reapers*, 1987, oil and mixed media on canvas, 35.6 x 30.5 cm, Courtesy of Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson Gallery, London

How can I focus down to 800 words or so, about our community, our region and its thriving arts and health practice? I know it's thriving - I see it, hear it, experience it first hand. I'll won't highlight examples of good practice, or dwell on the well-served city-regions, nor will I tell you what you already know about funders turning to creativity and wellbeing more readily than they used to. We know too, that social prescribing has become politically *de rigueur*, yet, its mechanisms need funding as well as oiling, and I'll won't ruminate too much on

dead-eyed civil servants not able to understand the arts beyond cost efficiencies to the NHS.

But how can I not ruminate when in truth, our NHS is struggling under the weight of all that's thrown at it, and we continue to be governed by privileged primates who fiddle while the system burns and people die. Yet there are hospital arts projects who seem to be thriving and I applaud them from the rooftops. However, now that the impact of participating in the arts on public health and wellbeing has evidence behind it, the arts run the risk of being offered up as part of some cheap and glossy quick fix - culture by government decree.

In my darkest moments, I shudder at the thought of participatory artists (and yes, this means all the varieties of practice you'd imagine) somehow taking up the mantle of nurse or social worker, as those professions are progressively ground down and routinely demonised for their failings, but rarely celebrated or remunerated appropriately for their invisible successes. Nevertheless artists who are subsumed into these roles are often expected to offer their 'cost effective' services at even lower rates, or for free. There is interesting research emerging, around how we might understand and address inequities across the UK, but work focused on the social determinants of health will inevitably require deeper and longer-term thinking and is less appealing to those politicians focused purely on surface.

Just like larger arts organisations, universities have their eyes on the cash prize too. For all their proclaimed ambition to work collegiately, it's inevitable that each applicant organisation wants to play host and lead a well-funded, high-profile research project. The researchers become the rock-stars and the artists a vehicle to their fame. Funding equals esteem, esteem equals more funding and the very subjects being scrutinised by the researchers are invited on board to 'co-design' elements of the research. You don't need to dig too deeply to see that including participants input in the process ticks yet another box in securing the award, when what we need is a radical imaginative shift in what research looks and feels like.

THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR

Clive Parkinson 2014 Still from ['A Recoverist Manifesto'](#)

So, how do we move beyond tokenism in both arts projects and research, and why might this be particularly relevant to our region? How might people, however they define themselves - but particularly people who are excluded for the reasons we know only too well - be central and not subservient to these agendas? In terms of lived experience - and allied to the [Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance](#) - is the [Lived Experience Network](#), which puts diverse voices at the heart of this creative health community. Beyond regional boundaries, there is a real appetite to connect across the broader North.

In 2011, I had the pleasure of working with people across the North West and Yorkshire who took part in collective sessions developing a Manifesto for Arts & Health. The manifesto itself was a gutsy reflection of the widest range of people; people with lived experience, artists and even the odd policy person. In the collective aspirations set out in that manifesto "art is an expression of the imagination and a powerful vehicle for social change."

Standing in front of a Jarman film, I am acutely aware that our work should have social justice at its heart. How on earth would you measure his output, the body of his work? It would be idiotic to try. His work captures what it is to be human, to be vital, alive and driven to collectively combat social injustice. A shiver passes through me watching Jarman's pop videos - these markers of time. Then there's a blue screen - an intoxicating life and powerful connection between art, health and social justice.

Oh - the things we might achieve if we weren't constantly competing for funds and restrained by research that pursues reductive fiscal dreams. Through his unfettered imagination and desire to affect social change, Derek Jarman shows us here and now, how we might channel our anxieties and outrage into a collective power into our thinking and action.

"There is a light that never goes out."

Some more about Clive Parkinson...

Clive is driven by a conviction that the arts - in all their forms - might contribute to social change. Working collectively with people affected by substance use across Europe, he published the [Recoverist Manifesto](#) in 2014.

His work [dis/ordered](#) explored mental difference and was performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as part of The Big Anxiety Festival in 2017. His short film, [A Gentle Haunting](#) (2020) utilised mobile phone footage while walking out during lock-down as an 'extremely clinically vulnerable' person living with cancer, and is a contemplation on the present tense. For further information see <http://cliveparkinson.org/>