Manifestos for Optimism

14 interviews with cultural leaders

FUTURE CONNECTED

About Future Connected

The Future Connected Programme brings together cultural leaders to develop skills and build connections locally, nationally and internationally to make a collective contribution to the vibrancy of our communities. It is a values-led leadership development programme that gives directors of grass-roots and smaller-scale organisations the tools to grow dynamic businesses. Over two years, cultural leaders are awarded a fully funded place on Future Connected's 12-month intensive programme. With first-hand inspiration offered by national and international experts, the Fellows refine and imagine new models for their businesses. A panel of independent judges selects the most compelling business plan to win the Future Connected Award. The programme was supported by the London Borough of Lambeth's Economic Resilience Fund.

Future Connected is a collaboration between

A-I-R ARTS IDEAS REALISED

Lambeth

Media partner

CULTURESHOCK

Manifestos for Optimism

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ISBN 978-1-7385035-0-6

Published by Cultureshock
27B Tradescant Road
London SW8 1XD
cultureshock.com

Printed by Swallowtail

Cultureshock

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Foreword

Councillor Jacqui Dyer MBE, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Equalities

Creativity is an essential part of Lambeth's spirit, allowing us to truly express who we are.

At Lambeth Council, we believe in the importance of a strong culture and creative industries sector to ensure we become a healthier, safer, more equitable borough. Culture touches all of our lives and makes our communities a more vibrant and exciting place to live, work and visit.

Lambeth's cultural organisations are one of our greatest assets in both providing opportunity for our communities and tackling inequity across the borough. But we also understand that there has never been a tougher time to be a cultural leader. There are challenging decisions that need to be made daily to ensure a business can survive and thrive. We are committed to supporting our cultural leaders to meet the growing demands of the sector, so that together we can face the future with optimism.

Future Connected has been a game-changer for Lambeth. Over the past two years, thanks to the dedicated work of the Future Connected Fellows, we have moved closer to our shared vision of Lambeth becoming a place that we can all call home.

The words of optimism and hope across this book provide an insight into the thoughts and reflections from some of the sector's most celebrated leaders. But we also know there is a diverse range of dedicated and hard-working leaders making a real difference to the lives of Lambeth's communities. It is thanks to these leaders that we can be, and should be, optimistic for Lambeth's bright and brilliant creative future.

Introduction

Louise McKinney, director of Future Connected and founder of Arts Ideas Realised (A-I-R)

It is all about the challenge. Lambeth Council, our challenger, wanted a business training programme for grassroots, community-led cultural organisations. One that would build their business resilience and develop Lambeth's cultural economy.

For 25 years at A-I-R, we've supported cultural organisations through times of transformation and growth. So we were up for the challenge. But creating a year-long training programme for a varied group of cultural leaders – the Future Connected Fellows – was a huge task. A hyper-local leadership development programme required a new response. We were keen to stretch the Fellows' expertise, to help them to improve their businesses by providing them with useful skills, and we knew that in order to create the right programme, a lot of research was required.

Through Lambeth Council, socially engaged organisations across a range of art forms were invited to submit applications. Eleven Fellows were selected in year one, 12 in year two. All needed a step change in their businesses. All wished to move from one-off 'projectitis' to develop multi-year business planning with diversified income streams, designed for and with their communities.

The plans were developed through intensive research and consultation. We surveyed nearly 50 organisations to identify the key business challenges. The obstacles boiled down to a lack of resources (particularly financing, which can be distributed inequitably); organisations' pre-conceptions about their counterparts' willingness to collaborate; and a lack of business planning experience.

Every organisation, big and small, was under economic and resourcing pressure, compounded by the long tail of Covid-19, rising inflation, the cost

of living and fuel crisis. Alongside this, organisations were introducing systemic changes to raise ethical, environmental and employment standards, to ensure their practices reflect the values they wish to uphold in an increasingly polarised world. Few directors come into the sector with business expertise: their experience and delight comes through their work as activists, artists, community managers, curators, fundraisers and practitioners.

So, the challenge was defined. Create a practical programme for directors who have a constant need to do more with less, when competition is fiercer than ever.

Optimism emerged as a key underlying factor to build business resilience. Effective optimism, linked to an ability to see the brutal facts as they are and to deal with them. The optimism that leans into a challenge, building resilience to survive.

With this in mind, we selected cultural leaders for our Inspirational Interviews who have demonstrated resilience throughout their careers. Leaders with in-depth experience running organisations, from internationally acclaimed multi-art-form cultural institutions to those focused on single art forms. Plus those who shape cultural policy: pioneering action on climate change, mentoring and new technology in culture.

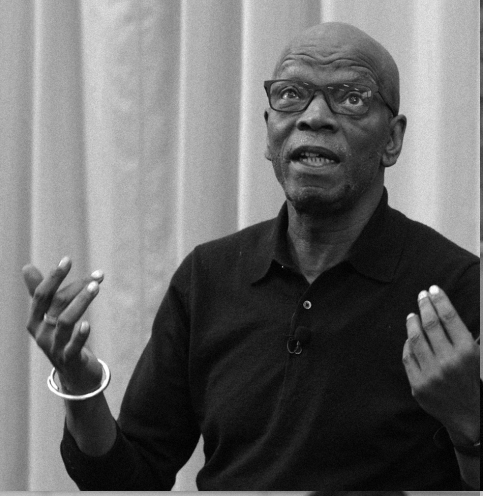
Their remarkable interviews, collected here in *Manifestos for Optimism,* reveal what it takes to truly lead a cultural organisation. The structural factors that can get in the way of realising a collective vision. How cooperation, shared values and persistence can enable organisations' ambitions to be realised and exceeded.

Our Fellows engaged first-hand with our Inspirational Interviewees, and with the leadership of our cultural partners in our series of roundtable *Lunch with...* discussions. Other specialist experts on audience development, branding, marketing and finance shared their knowledge through our *Masterclass with...* meet-ups, contributing to our day-long sessions of practical work. Having voice and agency across differing scales of organisations was a central aim and our annual Cultural Ecology Conversation between the Fellows and the Lambeth team proved invaluable for this. Plus, we held evening get-togethers – our Future Connected Gatherings – a place for Fellows to explore mutual cooperation across organisations of differing scales.

And then there was the *Future Connected Awards Ceremony*, kindly hosted by the Southbank Centre, our cultural partner. A moment to celebrate all the Fellows' achievements, to share the judges' decision on the business plan they found the most compelling and to announce the winner of the Award.

The Award is just the start of the journey. The main prize – the true reward for everyone involved – is each organisation's completion of a realistic three-year business plan, true to their distinctive values and vision, and designed to enable the Fellows and their teams to deliver their mission and succeed in the future.

The programme is inspired by the real-life experience of leading experts, known for their dynamic approach to building their cultural organisations. We are indebted to them and to the fantastic team of people who have worked together to realise Future Connected, especially Rebecca King Lassman of Act IV, Renée Trumpet, Tilly Leris and Cultureshock, our media partner. Most of all, thank you to the Future Connected Fellows for coming on this journey of optimism together, and the team at Lambeth Council.






Top row, from left:
Dr Errol Francis; Fellow Roger Hartley at Kwame Kwei-Armah's interview; Year 2 Fellows engaging during Dr Ali Hossaini's interview

Middle row, from left:
Fellow Marsha Lowe at Dr Errol Francis' interview; Fellows Joseph Lynch, Marc Boothe and Natasha Preville; Year 1 Fellow Binki Taylor; Inspirational Interviewee Farooq Chaudhry OBE

Bottom row, from left:
Year 2 Fellow Chris Taylor; Year 1 Fellow Mary McCarthy; Alice Edwards, Head of Culture and Creative Economy; Cllr Jacqui Dyer, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Equalities

Top row, from left:
Fellows Marsha Lowe and Adam Gray; Inspirational Interviewee Anne Torreggiani; Fellow Lisa Anderson; Erica Whyman OBE Inspirational Interviewee

Middle row, from left:
Year 1 Fellows in conversation with Erica Whyman OBE at the National Theatre; Inspirational Interviewee Ekow Eshun at AlixPartners; Fellow Jahmar Bennett; Fellow Rachel Nelken

Bottom row, from left:
Victoria Siddall Inspirational Interview at Battersea Arts Centre; Dr Ali Hossaini, Inspirational Interview at Somerset House; Year 2 Fellow Tamara Barton-Campbell in conversation with Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE at the Young Vic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RØDE


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Top row, from left:
Year 2 Fellow Joseph Lynch; Inspirational Interviewee and Judge Karen Napier MBE at the Southbank Centre; Year 1 Fellow Marsha Lowe at Rambert; Tori Sherwin at Brixton House

Middle row, from left:
Inspirational Interviewee Suhair Kahn; Year 2 Fellows Tamara Barton-Campbell and Ben Cross; Joshua McTaggart, Cultural Development Manager, Lambeth Council; Inspirational Interviewee Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE at the Young Vic

Bottom row, from left:
Nic Durston, Karen Napier MBE and Dean Ricketts, judges; Inspirational Interviewee Alex Beard CBE in conversation with Fellows at Lambeth Town Hall; Year 2 Fellow Victoria Ijeh at Battersea Arts Centre

Mark Ball

Artistic director of the Southbank Centre

Joining the Southbank Centre as artistic director in 2021, Mark Ball is responsible for the delivery of the entire artistic programme, working with the Southbank Centre's artistic and creative engagement teams and extensive creative networks to produce a dynamic and world class programme at the heart of London. Prior to the Southbank Centre, Mark was creative director at Manchester International Festival (now Factory International), where he led the artistic programme for the newly opened Aviva Studios and has also held positions as artistic director and chief executive of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), head of events and exhibitions at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and artistic director of Fierce!. Mark is chair of Belarus Free Theatre.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

Very simply, that the arts are transformational. I've always been quite evangelical about that, because it was access to the arts that changed my life. I grew up in a household in north Manchester where the arts were not really part of our lives. I played in the local jazz band, but the arts were mostly something that other people did.

I had a couple of pivotal moments where the penny dropped and the world started to make sense to me, through the arts. Firstly, when I was 14, I was aware that I was gay and felt very conflicted about that. I was quite introverted and shy. In about 1982 or 1983, I remember turning the radio on and hearing *Hand in Glove* by The Smiths. Morrissey is a very difficult character now, but he was such an incredible lyricist, and his words really spoke to me. I listened to that record over and over again, and found real solace through that great poetry.

Then, a couple of years later, we were taken by school to see the Royal Shakespeare Company. This shows the power of arts in schools. I didn't want to go, I thought, "It'll be three-and-a-half hours, I won't understand what's going on; it'll be in this strange environment; it'll be very boring." But fortune struck, because I got to see a legendary production. It was the actor Antony Sher performing *Richard III*, probably the greatest piece of Shakespearean theatre created in the 1980s. He played Richard III as this very "othered" character; an outsider who was pushed to the margins, misunderstood, alienated and writhing in self-consciousness and insecurity. Something about his characterisation floored me. Even though it was in this strange language, it hit me in the gut in a very profound way. I was unable to process the power of what was unfolding in front of me.

After both of those, but particularly the Royal Shakespeare Company experience, I immediately dropped all my science subjects [at school] and took up drama and art, and found a world of self-expression and understanding on a very personal level. If the arts changed an insecure queer kid growing up in Manchester in the 1980s, they can change everybody. I think there is a fundamental power to that. I've seen it over and over again. When I was working in prisons in the early 1990s,

the arts gave a voice to people who'd never had one. The arts were an opportunity to give self-expression – a self-understanding – to people who'd never been through that process.

So many projects that I've done have tried to embody that. We did an incredible project with an Argentinian theatre director at LIFT called *Minefield*, which brought together six soldiers: three Argentinians and three British, who had fought against each other in the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. It was a pretty fraught rehearsal process at the beginning. There was an enormous amount of tension, of unresolved history, in that space. It has been touring for seven years now, and they are six of the closest people you could possibly meet. Their collective understanding of the terrors of wars and their exploitation by both of their governments – that they were pawns in a game – and that, underneath their different uniforms, they are fundamentally the same people, is transmitted to a global audience. It shows that despite all these differences, there's a really deep common humanity. The arts can show that. The arts can inspire change in people and in communities. They can bring people together, they can make us see the world differently. So I am quite evangelical about the arts, and that's what makes me optimistic about them. Yes, they can entertain and take you out of your everyday life, but they can also change you fundamentally and they can affect social change for the better.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

There's an agenda or an assumption behind this question I disagree with, which is that the arts industries are somehow not quite good enough, and that we need to be looking at other sectors to be better. All [arts leaders] will be incredibly entrepreneurial, working with tiny resources to make exceptional things happen. They will have a business model which is resilient, and be driven by a vision. I think we have a huge amount to celebrate about our own sector and the things that we do. Sometimes we put other sectors on a pedestal, and think we should be more like the corporate world. We have corporate members on our board, and I say to them: "You can learn a lot from the arts. Rather than just assuming this is one-way traffic, you can learn a lot from us: about how to build teams and communities, about how to be values-driven, about how to be empathetic in what you do."

However, one of the sectors that I think does things differently to the arts is tech. It learns endlessly by failure. It consistently invests in research and development (R&D), and it beta tests everything. It tries things, it fails, it tries again, it fails better, tries again – and gets to a point where it's ready to go. We give ourselves very high expectations [in the arts] that we're always going to achieve great things, with great outcomes, on very small resources. We don't invest enough in R&D. We don't understand the impact of what we do. We don't do enough evaluation. We don't have the narratives. Art can drive transformational change, but we don't necessarily have the data and the stories to back that up in a coherent way. I know it's hard to invest in R&D when you have no money, but I think it's very important to re-conceive how we organise our budgets and find time to experiment and play and get things wrong. I'm a great believer in the need to have real humility and accept the fact that we get a lot of things wrong. I do as a leader. And I hope that I learn from that.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

Having a clearly articulated vision, whether you're a big or a small organisation. It's easier in a small organisation, because there's often one creative lead who articulates the vision, and a small number of people who get behind it. In a bigger organisation it's harder, because the vision is more dispersed and people will often have different interpretations. But I think it's really important to have clarity of purpose. It's also really important to build that clarity of purpose by consensus and cooperation, and not by a kind of heroic leadership.

Before I joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, I had set up a great festival that was doing really dynamic things, called Fierce!. There were eight of us, and I had all the ideas and everybody followed me. It was super fun and I achieved a lot. But there was always a glass ceiling. You can never really deliver that at scale because of the size of your organisation – we couldn't have the impact that we wanted to. So when I went into the Royal Shakespeare Company to set up a new department at the invitation of the artistic director, I quickly came up with a vision: democratise your work. Go out and work much more deeply with communities in the places that surround you –

“You have to hold the vision dearly to your heart. That’s the thing that makes you get up in the morning, because you have that fundamental belief that you’re doing something to make change”

in Coventry, for example, where people don't engage with Shakespeare. And invest in more dynamic, experimental work to refresh the cultural life of the Royal Shakespeare Company. All of which is pretty sensible. But I didn't speak to anyone else in the organisation about that vision. I didn't take anyone with me on that. That was quite threatening to the way the organisation worked, and the organisation essentially stopped me from doing it. It was able to close that ambition down through endless adherence to very long processes, or someone else would say: "My departmental interests supersede that."

What I learned – and actually the thing that the brilliant artistic director Michael Boyd, who sadly died recently, taught me – is that you can't make change without building consensus. You can't spend time being the maverick who has the heroic, independent vision. [You] need to build that vision collectively by talking to people, thinking about shared values and aspirations and which projects might manifest that.

So collective leadership is the most important thing for me as artistic director at the Southbank Centre. I've worked collectively with the organisation to try to create a coherent vision and a very clear set of priorities. We want to be the country's most culturally democratic institution, and we want to be a creative engine for the most exceptional new work that defines the future of creative practice. I spent a year working across the teams to get everybody engaged with that. It's not actually my job to deliver the vision. My job is to support my heads of art form to be as brilliant as they can be. My job in a big organisation is not to have all the ideas, but to give people the time, the space, the support and the energy to have brilliant ideas as well. The Southbank Centre will only be successful if all of my art form heads and many of the other people in the organisation do a really wonderful job.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Yes. I can't necessarily remember the words that Antony Sher said – I know half a dozen lines from *Richard III* – but I can vividly remember the feelings that he evoked. That is the huge power of

the arts: they hardwire emotional connections into our synapses. How you feel is what you remember. Similarly, within an organisation, you don't remember the organogram or the policies. You remember the culture; what it felt like to go to work there. I am a big proponent of fun and joy. We've got to find joy in what we do and have a laugh. There has got to be a really strong element of fun; I really try to encourage that within my teams. What we do can be transformative and it's super important, but we'll do it much better when we're enjoying it, [are] at ease, and feeling like we're connected as a family. I know that sounds a bit utopian, and sometimes it's quite hard to achieve, but I think it's really important.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

A couple, and they're very different, but perhaps they both indicate the same thing. When I was running Fierce! in 2002 and 2003, we wanted to do a project with Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck. I'd seen his work in Brussels, and I was utterly captivated, but it was – in terms of describing it – pretty batshit crazy. Benjamin wanted to do his installation in Birmingham on the Rotunda, which is a big round tower block and quite an iconic building, around 35m up into the air. He wanted to build a giant swallows' nest and live in it for a week, coming out on a perch every day to perform a piece about one man's futile attempt to try and take flight. I remember saying this to the city council and they were like, "You're having a laugh. That's never going to happen." They gave me a whole series of reasons why: it wouldn't be safe, it might cause public disorder. But what I'd seen in Belgium was that piece of work attract an everyday audience. They were not regular arts attenders, these were people in the local community, who came back every day to see Benjamin transform through that journey.

The Rotunda, for those of you who know Birmingham, is at the apex of the High Street and Market Street, so around 300,000 people, I think, go through there every weekend. I was determined, because I felt this could be a piece of public art for the city and a piece of art that everybody could engage with. These weren't people that would go into theatres or galleries. I was determined to make it happen, so I sold the vision to structural engineers, to the property company

that owned the Rotunda, to the city council, to the fire service – who were trying to say it wouldn't be possible because how would they evacuate this guy should the nest set on fire? We probably spent six weeks producing health and safety reports, structural engineers reports, endless risk assessments, to prove it was safe. I built this collaborative team of a property developer, the fire service, the city council and the city centre management company who, in the end, were all really excited by it.

And it was an enormous success. I think in the course of the seven days, half a million people came to see it. It got covered on *Midlands Today*: every day there was a five-minute section on what Benjamin was doing that day. Those images got syndicated worldwide and put Birmingham on the map. Benjamin did a daily dive for the *Guardian*. It got massive amounts of cut-through. It was the thing that probably propelled Fierce! as a festival and put it on the map in the public consciousness in Birmingham, and for the city's leaders. It was a real catalyst for the growth of that festival.

I refuse to hear the word "no" to some extent. Panning forward many years later, I worked on The Factory [now Aviva Studios] in Manchester, which was quite a controversial development. It was a £50m investment from the city, which has subsequently gone up quite significantly because the building was delayed by Covid-19. There was a narrative in the city: Why do we need it? What's it for? Aren't you just replacing other arts activities? Again, it was about trying to communicate the vision that this incredible building, designed by a brilliant architect called Ellen Van Loon, can determine the way art is made because of its flexibility. I've never seen an arts venue do that before: both transform how art is made at scale and to change the lives of the local communities around it through employment, training, opportunities and community engagement. We had to sell that vision to almost every stakeholder in the city and coalesce them around it, whether it was the business or finance sector, the police – who spent three years saying, "It'll be a terrorist target, you can't do it." With both of those examples it was about building a sense of consensus around a vision across a disparate, multidisciplinary set of agencies and articulating the greater good.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

Some of you probably know the history of the South Bank. In 1951, the Labour government organised the Festival of Britain, to create a moment in the aftermath of the Second World War where the country could look at its future through the lens of arts and culture – a blast of optimism for the nation. So optimism was very important then, as it is now. This huge festival happened with many temporary structures and venues, and one permanent structure: a Royal Festival Hall, which is now the centre of the Southbank Centre. In the following decade, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery were built. The organisation then united and became the Southbank Centre.

It started from that moment in 1951. I think it was the first genuinely culturally democratic moment of the 20th century. Everybody came to that festival. I remember when I got this job, people would say: "My grandparents drove down from Wrexham or Pontefract to the Festival of Britain because they were excited about the optimism that it communicated." They wanted to be a part of the future and everybody engaged with the artistic activity there. It wasn't a well-heeled audience going to classical music events. It was an incredibly democratic programme. And that sense of cultural democracy, I think, that sense that we are London's greatest village hall, or the people's palace, is hardwired into our DNA.

But the challenge for us is that we're a series of bricks and mortar venues, and we're still reliant on people coming to that space to engage in arts and culture. I want to move the Southbank Centre from thinking about itself as a series of venues to thinking about itself as a series of spaces. The obvious space that we need to be inhabiting is the digital space, so we're particularly starting to think about how we create Southbank Centre experiences in an entirely virtual world. We're just about to develop a major project with *Roblox*, the gaming platform, to put part of our big children's festival, Imagine, into its platform and gamify the experience. *Roblox* has more than 43 million users a day. It's a way of taking the Southbank Centre into people's living rooms – onto people's screens. We're working with the musician YolanDa Brown to create a game which enables musical composition.

I think it's really important that we are taking the opportunities to experience arts and culture outside of a bricks and mortar environment. These are today's democratic spaces, actually. So those are the partnerships I want to create.

I rather shamelessly nicked the idea from something I'd done in Manchester, when The Factory was delayed and we knew we were going to open two or three years late. We'd always conceived of The Factory as a space, rather than a venue. So we decided: we'll just open in the digital space. We developed a partnership with *Fortnite* and built an architectural render of The Factory inside *Fortnite*. We commissioned the virtual artist LaTurbo Avedon to create a playable game that took people through all of the spaces and launched it on Fortnite Creative. It cost us £25,000, which is a tiny amount of money, really, in the context of the reach: 1.5 million people played the game in the first week. And because there's the ability for people to buy tools in *Fortnite* that help them in the game, it has earned Manchester International Festival about £100,000 in secondary sales. Those are the spaces that we need to be inhabiting in the future.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Yes, you have to hold the vision dearly to your heart. That's the thing that makes you get up in the morning, because you have that fundamental belief that you're doing something to make a change. That's the thing that drives persistence – not to be persistent for the sake of it, because that can be stubbornness or being argumentative – but in holding the vision at the core of everything that you do. Having that driving a sense of resilience is really, really important.

Patience, as well. One of the things I noticed at Southbank when I got there was that there were a thousand cottage industries springing up all over the place, partly because the organisation was very siloed – the art form teams never spoke to each other. I'm trying to address that by bringing the teams together and creating more collaboration. There were lots of great projects that the organisation did, but they had very small outcomes for quite high levels of time and investment. And they showed no demonstrable impact because it wasn't being measured.

“By bringing together a series of parties around an idea that has scale and impact, you can achieve much bigger things than rushing to set up 10 projects a year that reach 10 people each”

So I'm also trying to encourage a sense of patience to take a step back, think about the things that you're doing and projects that you can develop. That might take a couple of years, but by bringing together a series of parties around a particular idea that has scale and impact, you can achieve much bigger things than rushing to set up 10 projects a year that reach 10 people each. I get why people want to do that; it gives them a sense of purpose. But I'm also trying to get people to sit back and say, "With the resources of an institution like the Southbank behind us, we've got an opportunity to develop bigger projects over longer periods of time, have a bigger impact, and we should be measuring those."

And perspective. I've been guilty of this. I remember when I was at Fierce! and we were growing as an organisation. I'd read something about psychometric testing, so we all did the Belbin psychometric test. We were all exactly the same. None of us were "completer finishers". We all went from one idea to finishing the project, no evaluation, and then on to the next project. That is one of the things that I really noticed: the desire to just move on and not reflect, to not pause to think about the impact that we're having, and to not properly invest in evaluation. I think that's really important. It's against my type because I'm not naturally that person. I get bored with the evaluation stuff but I do also know it is important.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

It has been quite instrumental for a couple of jobs that I went into: never waste a good crisis. By which I mean that a crisis can be a point of change for the better. I went into the London International Festival of Theatre at a time when it was apparent that the organisation was a scintilla away from insolvency. The accounts that had been presented to me during the application process were very healthy, but were completely wrong. So I got there and within four weeks, the acting executive director said, "We can't pay the wages next month." The balance sheet is showing £2m, but it's a capitalisation of a physical structure that has no actual value. I had my first board meeting and the board said to me, "What are you going to do, Mark?" I went, "I think we need to close down, because we can't afford to pay the wages." It was a kind of deliberate tactic, because

it was an opportunity in the midst of that financial crisis to remake the organisation. We sadly had to make a lot of people redundant. We went down from 14 people to three people because there was no money. But I was then gradually able to hire people who I thought were really great for the role, great for the potential of the organisation and able to strike out and develop entirely new programmes and projects, because we weren't able to continue the things that I'd inherited.

It was similar to some extent at the Southbank Centre, which had gone through a period of crisis through the pandemic – it was enormously debilitating. Not only did it lose all box office income, but also a huge economic driver are [the onsite] restaurants and bars, for which it is the landlord and takes a revenue share. We actually earn more through commercial activity than we do through box office. So £25m worth of income just dropped off overnight, with a very high cost base to maintain. So the Southbank Centre went through a similarly difficult process of redundancies.

I came in not long after that, when staff were starting to build up again, and it was an opportunity to say: "We can't continue to do the things that we've always done. The world's changed. We have to have a new vision. We have to operate differently internally. We can't be siloed, because it's very inefficient." So in a sense that crisis has given me an opportunity to think about how we collectively remake this organisation – and the board and the chief executive have been very good in saying it is a blank piece of paper.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

You're under the magnifying glass as a leader, so it's important to model good and positive behaviour. There's also a lot of time in nurturing, supporting and creating that sense of joy, because that's a way of working very positively. Leadership is about supporting other people to be the best that they can be.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

I think it's very simple: we have an incredible gift in our hands, which is arts and culture. And that gift is currently distributed unevenly. If we can distribute it more equally, we can change the lives of more people for the better. And that is a hugely optimistic thing.

Alex Beard CBE

Chief executive of the Royal Opera House

Alex was appointed as the chief executive of the Royal Opera House in 2013. He is a lifelong lover of opera and ballet. During his tenure, the ROH has enjoyed seat occupancy of more than 95% and launched acclaimed education and outreach programmes. Prior to joining ROH, he spent 19 years at Tate, including 11 as deputy director, during which time he oversaw the business plan for the creation of Tate Modern in Bankside, and capital developments for Tate Britain and Tate St Ives. He was appointed a CBE for his services to the arts in 2012.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

First of all, I'm optimistic because the state of humanity today – how we interact, how violent society is – is just massively more connected, more peaceful, more fulfilled and healthier than at any other time in the life of the species. There's a wonderful book by Steven Pinker called *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which charts the decline of violence over the life of the species through the archaeological, cultural and historical record.

The second is that optimism is absolutely fundamental to progress. If you combine an inquiring mind, good memory, learning and listening with an optimistic belief, that is how progress happens. It's not the same with happiness. The secret to happiness is a bad memory and an optimistic outlook. The secret to progress is a really, really good memory and an optimistic outlook. The space that we're in is real life – the inner cultural life, the expressive – that's what makes humans human. I hate people who say, "The arts, get real." This is actually what being human is fundamentally about. The ability to imagine, to reflect and to do so through narrative. It's essential to life, as opposed to existence. In the arts, we all in our different ways create environments where artists and storytellers reflect on what we share; what makes us tick, is at the heart of life. It is unbelievably important and doing it in a way that is transformative, that connects, is an important cause. Being part of that process and doing it with a view to effecting change, it fires me up.

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

I'm a magpie in terms of the way I think. I'm not a brilliant original thinker, but I'm not bad at going, "Oh, if you take that and that and put it together, that could make something interesting." At the ROH we did a project called *Current, Rising*, which was trying to do the world's first opera experience with hyper-reality. We worked with an extraordinary creative team led by [the director and designer] Netia Jones, but also this tech company that invented a new way of doing virtual reality called Hyphen. Putting those together was a brilliant idea. Apple obviously is pretty impressive, and I love them,

particularly because arguably they are perceived as the leading innovator – but they've almost never done a product from scratch. The whole graphic user interface was inspired by Xerox. The iPods were again second hand ideas. They just did them better, and they did it with a view to elegance, simplicity and intuitive use. That's quite powerful because I guess I try to look at other people's ideas and go: how can we do them really fantastically?

Then there are much smaller scale, more disruptive enterprises, such as GlobalGiving, which was set up by a couple of World Bank staffers who were disillusioned with the whole structure of development aid: how little of it actually got to the frontline and how corrupt and bureaucratic the whole process was. And, in fact, the constructs through which the World Bank saw development. So they said, "Well what we're going to do is connect individual philanthropists with individual grassroots projects and do it online." They crowdsourced and outsourced the whole process of development aid and did it brilliantly. I was involved in bringing that to the UK some years ago. I just thought, "That's brilliant, the way you use technology to get to the heart of effecting change."

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

The first is a clear mission. And I don't mean the stuff that corporations invent. Like Honda's, which is "to build a better car". Come on, who wants to build a worse one? But I do think having a clear sense of mission is important. Actually, in the Tate's case, it was kind of non-negotiable because it was set out in an Act of Parliament, which was very helpful. The way it was worded – I'll paraphrase – that what the Tate existed to do was "to promote public understanding and enjoyment of art". Those words were super important because it wasn't about just looking after a collection, or thinking about an audience, or putting on exhibitions. It was thinking about advancement. It was thinking about the public, not the audience. So how do you extend it more? It was about different levels of engagement, understanding and enjoyment; the depth of knowledge but also the brilliance of experience that both of those things require, and about something fundamental, which is art.

When I joined the Royal Opera House, I thought, "OK, we need to invent our equivalent of that," but to try and do it in a way that's non-negotiable. I looked at the governing document of the Royal Opera House going back to the 1950s – the two royal charters that we're custodians of – and did a paraphrase of that, which is that we exist to enrich lives through exceptional opera and ballet. Again, not just about the audience, but about advancement. I think the reason why I picked life in our case is that the 1950s mission had that incredible language. The Royal Opera House exists to improve the cultural life of the nation. But also what opera and ballet do distinctively is bring hundreds of artists together in an intense way that fast-forwards through the boring stuff and gets to hate, fear, love, despair, treachery, hope, death. Bang. That's what they do. And that's life.

So, one is a clear sense of mission, which you can communicate in a way that is distinctive and meaningful to who you are – even if the language initially is a little bit corporate.

The second thing is to have a clear view of what you stand for and what you, as opposed to anybody else, can do. It's a bit glib, but a catchphrase of mine is: "Do the things that only you can do, and then do them loads." I think that helps to work out the distinctive point of difference that you can make. It helps enormously in terms of how you construct collaborations and partnerships, one of the themes of today.

The third bit is to be clear about the values that you bring to both of those things. There are a lot of people who work at the Royal Opera House, just under 1,000. We got 140 people from all over the organisation – different departments, different lengths of time that they've been here, different budgets – a proper mix. There was front of house staff, people in the accounts department, etc, and they spent six months debating and discussing what values are distinctively true to the Royal Opera House.

They came up with a whole ton of stuff that gradually got refined and whittled down, and landed on three things. Respect, because at the heart of what we do, which is to make large-scale theatre, is really extraordinary teamwork. You have 300 people coming together, in the moment, to do something pretty well impossible:

“You can have the most extraordinarily rich, powerful, beautiful experiences through the darkest moments. If that’s not optimism, what is?”

to shine a bright new light on some of the greatest works of art ever, so that as an audience member, you leave the auditorium [feeling] differently about the world and your place in it than when you walked in. That's super difficult. It needs incredible skill and a range of perspectives, brought together with enormous precision. That cannot happen unless you are truly respectful. Respect has rigour and honesty. Behind all of that is the spirit of the rehearsal room, where you explore what you can bring to a role and you are open to the notes that you get in the moment. So respect is one.

The second was openness. This comes from the fact that we're the largest employer of artists in the country after the BBC: 322 on the payroll. At the heart of any artist's practice, I think, is openness: openness to advance my instrument, to what roles I might bring, but also, in the creative sense, openness in terms of practice. As a magpie, I wasn't not going to have openness in the picture.

The third is committing to the highest standard. If we're aspiring to do things at the very highest level, that is genuinely transformational. That, for me, is excellence. Some people get really defensive about excellence. I think it's absolutely fundamental that unless something is really good, it's not going to be transformational. Excellence is a process; it's never achieved, it's a habit. Hopefully those three things are distinctive to what we do and the space that we're in, as well as being useful things that we can think about: how we hold each other to account and how we try to use them for recruitment, for talking about the brand and so on.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

That's the business we're in. Kasper Holten, who was the director of opera when I first joined the Royal Opera House, is super bright. He's a Danish director who is now running the [Royal Danish Theatre] in Copenhagen. His description of an opera house was as an "emotional fitness centre". I love it. You exercise your love muscle. Or hate muscle. How brilliant. So yes, absolutely. I believe that fundamentally.

What's the collaboration that you're most grateful for?

I don't really like terms such as "best" or "most", because what's the yardstick? So I have a few examples. I mentioned the *Current, Rising* one. That's where you've got a brilliant theatre practitioner, a fabulously inventive tech company and then the Royal Opera House brought the platform of the literary theatre, the ambition, the scale and investment to try and do something interesting. The business of putting together a new production is a massively collaborative exercise. In our case, we've got a long-standing relationship with the Aix-en-Provence Festival in France, and we particularly focus on new commissions in the world of opera and ballet. They're hugely expensive. You can't do them very often. You've got to share the pain and the love. So that's a long-standing collaboration that we've been working on.

The next chapter of that is *Innocence*, which is a new opera by Kaija Saariaho, a wonderful Finnish composer. [Saariaho died in June 2023]. It's a reflection on a school shooting, and it's deeply moving. The text is extraordinary. The musical language is fabulous.

We also have an extensive learning and participation programme, and we've honed down into trying to do the things that only we can do. We don't do that much small-scale workshop work because loads of people can do that absolutely brilliantly. We obviously do our bit of community engagement work. But most of our work is through national learning programmes, where we use our scale to invest in teaching materials, digital content and teacher training at scale, so that we can reach thousands of kids rather than just 30 in the room.

That is by definition collaborative, because we work with local education hubs, academy chains, in music hubs and so on, in order to effect that. We won a gold [award] for our collaboration with Coventry schools, Coventry Culture and Coventry Council for a series of programmes around our creative and learning programmes. Then we opened the 2022 Royal Ballet season, not with a gala performance in Covent Garden, but with a couple of shows in Doncaster, which showcased 300 young people making a dance piece that was the culmination of a three-year learning project. I can go on and on and on: collaboration and partnerships are totally fundamental to what

we do. We always try and think, "What are we bringing to the table that is distinctive that others couldn't? Who are the really interesting people to get in the room?" Whether that's a bit of tech innovation trying to keep the repertoire fresh, or extending insight to 10-year-olds across the country. It's a broad menu of stuff.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

There are various ideas kicking around. Any one of them would lead to a huge change. I'm also a bit more incremental than that; let's work out what we stand for and have the right steps and relationships. We've got this archive which goes back to 1732, which was when the first theatre was built in Covent Garden. Among that are the diaries of one of my predecessors, the general manager in 1850, Frederick Gye – he happened to be the boss when the House burnt down for the second time. His diaries chart this movingly: the moment of crisis, with smoke in the building, through to rebuilding the theatre and all points in between. It's really rich stuff. We thought, "Wouldn't that make a great costume drama?" I'm not mad keen on fly on the wall, not least because of *The House* TV programme [made in 1996 by the BBC] – if people want a great example of car crash TV, it's all available on YouTube. But anyway, wouldn't that be fantastic? It would require a global streaming platform and a substantial budget – we couldn't possibly do anything other than bring the location, a few ideas and Gye's diaries to the party. But that's one slightly more out-there thought.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Totally. That was brought home to me by the person I worked with for years at the Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota, CH, who exemplifies that. What's extraordinary about Nick is that he has the sensibility of an artist, and you can tell that in his handwriting. It's ridiculously beautiful and done with this extraordinary pen. But he also has the attitude of an activist. He really wants to affect change. In fact, long before he became the director of the Tate, he was the chairman of the Young Friends of the Tate and held demonstrations outside the old Tate Gallery because of what he perceived to be their institutional rigidity and lack of vision.

Nick would gnaw away at an idea until he'd got it nailed from 360 degrees. He did this one side of A4 thing for his interview [for the Tate directorship] called Grasping the Nettle, which basically described his early manifesto for the institution and Tate Modern. It was a really deeply thought-through process. That's one definition of perspective. He combined enormous depth of thought, boldness, but also insecurity, which is that on some level you have to be confident enough to do it, but also be self-questioning, scratching away at stuff: is this really as good as it needs to be? And making some quite difficult changes along the way when it doesn't quite stand up. And persistence? Well, the journey to Tate Modern was an absolute nightmare. It really was. The steel contractor went bust. We found asbestos in the building. All sorts of things that really require you to go, "No, we're going to stick with it." Through that, and through his example, I learned an enormous amount about perspective and persistence. The persistence was also from my experience at the Arts Council and generally of bureaucracy, which is that all bureaucracies are fundamentally weak – you can do whatever the hell you want so long as you just keep pushing.

What is the best piece of advice you've been given?

Make friends and keep them.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

Well, I think I'll just go back to respect, openness and higher standards. That's it. I'm not saying I'm always great, but being self-critical and open about that, admitting where you fall short. Did anyone in the room do Speakers for Schools? If not, you really should. It's brilliant. It's set up by Robert Peston. It's going to schools that don't have glittering alumni programmes or huge resources to talk about your life journey, what you do and why it's important. I had a pretty privileged upbringing and I find it enormously enriching to share that stuff.

There's also a wonderful artwork by Peter Fischli & David Weiss called *How to Work Better*. The back story to the artwork is that

they were in Thailand on holiday and visited a ceramics factory. There, they discovered this 10-point mantra on the wall that had just been put up for all of the employees to observe. They thought how brilliant and fantastic it was, and actually true. But also that it was the antidote to corporate mantras. It is very ironic and artist-led, a little bit glib. So the way they made the artwork was to paint it on the side of a massive great tower block in Zurich, which the commuter lines went past. So all of the bankers going into central Zurich passed this 10-point thing. Of course, it wasn't a corporate mantra; it was nicked from the ceramics factory in Thailand. We printed it out on the wall at Tate Modern in the reception as a slight joke: "1. Do one thing at a time. 2. Know the problem. 3. Learn to listen. 4. Learn to ask questions. 5. [Nowhere near enough people do this] Distinguish sense from nonsense. 6. Accept change as inevitable. 7. Admit mistakes. 8. Say it simple. 9. Be calm. 10. Smile." That advice was just brilliant.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

I don't have a manifesto for optimism. I think we've covered aspects of it. I think optimism is a more nuanced and deeper thing. My own source of it, fundamentally, apart from all the stuff that we've talked about, comes from my relatively early life. My father died when I was 17 and I never knew him really until [just before] he died because he was a doctor. He was working the whole time and he died relatively young at 42. So he was definitely in the proving phase of his career. He had cancer and it was during his treatment that we got to know each other, which was about a 10-month process. It was an incredibly rich and powerful experience, slightly weird, in that it was framed by death, but incredibly precious.

That process also brought me and my brother incredibly close together – we tried to kill each other until we were 13 – in true friendship through that shared loss. It brought the three of us – my mum, my brother and me – incredibly close. That just made me feel that you can have the most extraordinarily rich, powerful, beautiful experiences through the darkest moments. If that's not optimism, what is?

Farooq Chaudhry OBE

Producing director of Akram Khan Company and artistic director of Fengling Productions

Farooq Chaudhry is best known as the co-founder and executive producer of the internationally acclaimed Akram Khan Company.

He is recognised as a global cultural leader, having worked as creative producer with companies such as English National Ballet, PCDC (Yang Liping) and impacted the global artistic community. In 2019, Chaudhry was awarded an OBE for his services to Dance.

In 2021, Farooq founded Fengling Productions, a company fuelled by a profound curiosity for Asian artists, narratives and aesthetics. The company's vision is to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary worlds, presenting works in dance, music and theatre that exude integrity, grace, and inventiveness.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

This is such a great question. There are people who are optimistic by nature – and I am one of them – but optimism is also the capacity to deal with failures, crises and mistakes, and to know there is a solution. That if you come through it, there is hope. Someone said to me once, "What you want is always on the other side of fear." You can tread through a very treacherous, fragile, vulnerable space for a while. Optimism is knowing you will come through it without being destroyed by it.

What do I need? Well, first and foremost, creativity. When you're trying to deal with things, to build a story and build a business, there are a multitude of priorities. It's about working out which are the most important at a given moment in time – we can overwhelm ourselves with tasks and objectives. It's a tango: coming from a dance background, you have to know when to lead and when to follow. It's that fluidity, movement and creativity which is such a fundamental part of the values and process of achieving things.

What kind of growth do you want? A revolutionary growth? An evolutionary growth? Or do you want just passive growth, which isn't really growth, just the notion something's changing but it's not. Can you embrace risk? Can risk be something you build into your arsenal, into your mindset – not just your skillset – and allow you to navigate your way towards an objective? Not necessarily what I call "success" or "achievement", but an objective.

I'm a bridge builder. My goal is always to connect people. Here's my strapline: beautiful things happen when different worlds meet. That's what I'm looking for in my work. I think the best way to achieve that is often not to keep people camped in their different worlds, but to create a new world in which you can coexist, which is jointly created with a new set of rules and new vision. It's that ability which makes me very excited and drives me.

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

Football. I thought a lot about this. I know people think, "Oh, the overpaid footballers, they're spoiled and petulant and don't really care about people." But I'm an Arsenal fan, and we had 10 years of stagnation: no movement, no success. The culture was completely depleted when fans went to the stadium. There was no sense of value and commitment from any side, and it was just completely dying away. Then, [Mikel] Arteta comes in, a young manager with new ideas and patience from the owners to allow him to transform the club. [Suddenly], it's about young players. The financial discipline is extraordinary – they're not going out and spending huge sums of money like Chelsea, they're investing in their community; they're investing in their academies. They've created a unified sense of culture where they can all thrive, and now the fans are part of that. Within a matter of two or three years, this club has gone from something that was lost in the wilderness to something utterly exciting, dynamic and moving forward, and taking everyone with them.

In football, they deal with failure every week. I remember Graham Taylor [England manager 1990–93] talking about leadership. He says: "On Saturday afternoon, when my team has lost, I've got 60,000 people calling me all kinds of horrific names. I have to go home and face my family, and I feel like a complete loser. Then I have to get through Sunday. And then Monday morning, these 22 young men who play for me, I have to pick them up and make them believe they can win again." That requires an extraordinary amount of mental fortitude and emotional resilience, to bring people back from a losing scenario. Football is binary that way. You're out if you lose, you're in if you win.

What I'm focusing on here is not the competitive element. It's culturally taking so many people on a journey – the clubs that really invest, not just in what happens on the pitch but what happens off it: in the boardroom, the people who work in the stadium, the academies, the community, their global relationships. There's a lot of moving parts. If those things are all telling the same story, then a football club is a huge success. Aside from all this football, like the performing arts, is such an extraordinary trigger of powerful emotions and drama.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

There are common ones like resilience, ambition, independence, self-reliance, enterprise. It depends on where you sit; whether you're risk-averse, risk-tolerant, things like that. But in our company, Akram Khan, we have five really important values: connection, curiosity, caring, collaboration and courage. We see those as integral to our success and our sense of purpose. When you're working with funding institutions, sometimes you want to modify what you truly believe because you think that's going to make them happy. It requires a real sense of conviction and self-belief to stand on the ground you believe in. We did the usual vision statement in the early days: "We make artworks that improve society and blah, blah, blah..." And then we thought, no, we're much more humanistic, and dealing with the improvement of people, the way they live, engage, the quality of their lives, the way they see themselves. So we changed it. The vision now says that "we invite people to see, dream and reflect on the beauty and complexity of what it means to be human." We haven't used the word "dance" in there, or the word "arts", because that's essentially the DNA of what we're trying to achieve.

I remember, back in 2003, when we were asked to write our business plan for the Arts Council – I went, "Oh, no, really? I have to sit there and go through these tedious numbers?" Then I started getting involved and I thought, "Oh my God, this is a novel. This is a way to tell a story and to understand our story, our voice, our identity and language." A way to understand our process, the obstacles, the barriers.

A British Council finance officer said, "If you do a really good budget, people don't need to read anything else, because it will tell them what kind of character you are, how you work, what kind of risks you take, how you prioritise." The budget itself is also a story; your story. It's not just a set of markers that tells you how responsible you're going to be with your resources. A business plan starts with a vision and goes backwards. You know where you want to go, so how do you want to get it? Who do you need to get there? Financial and commercial discipline are essential for anchoring the freedom and boldness of the vision.

“You can fall into an easy trap: ‘We’re pure and want to protect our ideals. We don’t want to get contaminated by the idea of chasing money and wealth.’ That’s not true”

With all organisations, I come back to risk and the capacity to embrace change, because the world is fluid. We obsess with this idea of a fixed outcome, but that doesn't really exist, and it can torment us. When Akram and I first met – he was my co-founder – I'd just retired from dancing. He was a 23-year-old virtual unknown with student debt. I thought: "He has the most extraordinary language and I feel if we work together, we will grow together." One of the characteristics of our company is that everyone grows, not just one person. It's essential for the development of a working culture to understand that a company, and the people in it, are like a garden: there are tall trees and small plants, but they all work in an ecosystem and everyone needs a certain sun, rain and fertile earth.

But there is always risk. So after Akram and I met, he went away on a course and came back six months later, after being exposed to a richness of creative ideas. I sat down with him and said, "Tell me your dream." He said, "But we won't be able to afford it." I said, "Forget the money. Just tell me the dream. How do you want to do it?" He said, "Well, I want to have a new work, with lighting commissions, new costumes, music composition…" My dad was an accountant, so I must have inherited some kind of love for numbers, and this inbuilt computer of mine worked out that that would be about £60,000. I'd just retired from dancing and went back to my wife – we had a three-month-old – and said to her: "We've got to move out." She asked me why, and I answered, "I need to sell the flat to pay for Akram's first production."

I believed this was absolutely the right thing to do. I wasn't doing it for him. I was doing it for us. It was the "we" thinking that was essential. And I knew [doing it at] that particular moment in time would have saved us 10 years of trouble. It's very easy for an artist to scramble around for £2,000 here, £3,000 there, £5,000 there until 10 years later, they've kind of got somewhere, but their confidence and energy is sapped. I felt very strongly that showing potential with the right resources at a critical moment of time was the right way to do it. So you think, "Well, we can't find £60,000 now, we're never going to, but maybe that's when you need it most." Thereafter we were able to secure money from co-producers and festival directors who saw our potential – because that's what they want, to see your potential for scaling up, for growth, for reach. The quicker that can be felt and

people can believe in it, the more you're going to get money from other investors and co-producers and sponsors, and so on and so forth.

I'm big on targets. It's good to have financial, operational, human resource targets; the kind of territorial reach you would like. It's important to have a goal otherwise you sail blind. I work very closely with my finance director. They are the most important person in the organisation to me. Don't tell my artistic director that! But they are integral to telling our story. It's the underpinning – we optimise our art by having extraordinary commercial and financial discipline; ignore it at your peril. You can fall into an easy trap: "We're pure and want to protect our ideals. We don't want to get contaminated by the idea of chasing money and wealth." That's not true, but, in the early days, I heard that a lot: "Oh, we're not going to contaminate ourselves with business thinking," but it was professionalisation that transformed the artistic sector beyond recognition. And social businesses also began to recognise this as essential; taking the time not just to look at a budget and say, "that's good", but really understand what it means, how it's constructed, what its purpose is. That's very much who we are.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

One million, zillion percent. That is what it's all about: people believing in people. It's very easy to put up a PowerPoint, go through the facts and information and have people say, "That sounds good. I'll write it down." Then they've forgotten about it. We need to resonate, to connect, and the most powerful way to do that is to tell stories. I think there's a line in *Game of Thrones* about that: "There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story." So is allowing a story to become so fluid and creative that people become characters, become part of the narrative. The plot is essential. That's when people start to feel.

Years ago, a road construction company from France called Colas wrote to our company. I was travelling at the time and my general manager picked it up: road construction? Dance? No connection;

binned the letter. I came back, and said, “Did you not wonder why they would be interested?” I phoned them and I said, “Look, I’d love to come and meet you.” I’m a real believer in the eye-to-eye connection, being in the room, feeling the energy of other people. I went to Paris, met the CEO and asked, “What do you do?” He was telling me, “We build roads in Mozambique, Africa, India, Canada and France. We’re using new technologies, where the road can generate power. It’s really important for us to connect people and everything.” I’m listening to their story and thinking: “That’s exactly our story as an arts organisation.” We’re trying to connect people. We want to take people on journeys. And the moment we recognise that commonality, things start to fire up.

He went to the studio and met Akram Khan, and after that we had more than €1m of sponsorship, over six productions. Out of that conversation, I said, “Look, you’re not our sponsor. We are collaborators. Rather than giving us a logo that we put on our stuff, why don’t we create a brand new logo that reflects our commonality?” So we created a new logo. And then on top of that, we said, “Why don’t we cross-fertilise our mindsets and skill sets?” So Akram and I gave talks to their intern engineers about the need for creativity, to think outside of the box. Their engineers came to us and talked about the need for precision and thinking thoroughly about the parameters of construction. It became a very enriching process. When we won an Olivier Award for one of our projects, I actually said, “First, don’t send it to us, put it on Colas’ reception desk in Paris.” So for six months, when people walk past, they go, “What’s that?” That feeling is what triggers people’s belief and their connection with you.

When you go to a business lunch with someone for two hours, the first 100-110 minutes are: family, where you went to school, what football club you like, how bad the weather is today. And then the last 10 minutes, you’ll talk about the business if you feel it’s right. What we’re doing for that first 110 minutes is working out: can I trust this person? Have they got what it takes? Would I enjoy working with them? That’s your feeling subconsciously working away, and you have a conversation about the business, or you don’t, based on subconscious signalling. So the feeling is absolutely critical. If you don’t feel something with someone that makes you feel like you’re expanding... It’s like when my daughter asked me,

"How do I know when I'm in love?" I said, "I think it's two things. When you're in love with someone, you expand. When you are with someone you're not in love with, or that you feel threatened by, you contract. And if you're liking who *you* are in connection with that human being, that's a good signal to move forward."

What's the collaboration that you're most grateful for?

Desh is one, a solo work that Akram and I created back in 2010. It's not autobiographical but he takes this journey of going back to Bangladesh, going home, and finding out what it means to him and what he fears, and feeling lost between two worlds. It's extraordinary. I remember him coming to me and saying, "Do we have to think about touring it? Do we have to think about the money, how many dates we're going to get? About the technical complexity of it?" I said, "No, Akram, we won't this time, because we've earned it from the years before." This was going to be a revolutionary moment in our transformation. We decided not to consider the outcomes, just explore being in the playground for long enough to find things that mattered.

It went on to do very well, and liberating ourselves from the outcome gave us a certain kind of creative freedom we'd never had before. Before this we were getting used to making shows people wanted and we knew the formula. This was breaking that pattern. Creativity is not an act of making things so much as an act of destroying things; often, you're taking away what you don't need. When asked about the difficulty of making his masterpiece, *David*, Michelangelo said: "It's very simple, you just remove the pieces of stone that don't look like David." It's about taking the bits away that aren't relevant to what you want to say, do and create.

I've recently directed for the first time after 20 years as a producer – maybe my next 20 years will be as director, who knows? The piece is called *Nine Songs*, and I really threw myself into unfamiliar territory. It was both exhilarating and terrifying to be in the front seat, to harness everyone's skills, get the best out of people, filter that through me and find a way to make it align with something I believed in, rather than trying to make everyone happy. I learned a lot about being a person, working as a leader, as a team, being a parent. A bunch

of new skills, and I'm now almost 63. I was really insecure. I've never been so insecure for ages. There were moments I'd walk in and say, "I haven't got a clue about what I'm doing. Why am I doing this?" But I kept trying. I eliminated that narrative from my head and said, "keep playing, exploring, searching, be rigorous about certain things, explore them and detach yourself from the outcome." We performed in Newcastle and I got a very favourable response. But I didn't want to talk to anyone and face someone coming up to me after the performance and saying, "It's all right; the costumes were nice".

Desh was transformative for the Akram Khan Company in terms of breaking all our sets of rules to create new ones. *Nine Songs* is all about me finding a new identity for myself. I knew the director and producer could not live in the same room together in my head; I had to make Fridays my director days. If I did one producer task, he contaminated my brain, and I'd get really annoyed and say, "Stay out of the room or sit in the corner and leave me alone." You need that kind of discipline to transform your way of thinking about things. The director needs to immerse themselves in and get lost in the idea, and find their own attachment to it. The producer's rushing it along into the market, thinking about the practicalities, improvising their way through. The producer moves at the speed of solutions; the director moves at the speed of questions. They both move at the speed of trust but they are not the same speeds. So I have to learn to be two people now.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

My unfamiliar self. There's always part of us that is untapped. I could say I'd like to work with certain companies, but actually... we explore the moon, and we explore the bottom of the sea, but, what about the imagination? There's tons of it which has been untapped and unexplored. So I know it sounds very philosophical and theoretical, but to create the space to explore the most unfamiliar parts of myself is my dream. Perhaps I would also like to work with certain organisations. My new company, Fengling Productions, is all about creating collaborations between East Asia and the rest of the world. Connecting with that region more is important for me in terms of finding stories and inspiration and partnerships. I'm keen to challenge

the idea of western universalism and that there is a single truth. But the truth is, the self that I don't know, the self I fear, the self I think is not good enough... I'm going to have to sacrifice the current self to be that self. That is where I want to go next.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Absolutely. You need the vision, the ambition, the dream, the creativity; that's the engine. But someone has to drive it, you know? There are values that need to keep moving it forward. I come back to discipline: commercial and financial discipline; thinking very precisely as well as thinking imaginatively. They need to coexist: the instinct needs to dance with the intellect. I'm not that brilliant but I'm a hard worker and I'm consistent. Consistency is really, really important because you can have waves of determination: Monday morning, you're feeling euphoric, hopeful, bang, you have a load of energy; by Wednesday, it's all gone, right? It is really critical, working at it bit by bit, every single day. You have to have the discipline of setting yourself certain tasks and knowing you won't muddle it up into some kind of spaghetti. Some mornings you think, "I'm just going to focus on finance and business planning. The afternoon, I focus more on the visionary conversation or on people." Just don't muddle them up all in one; find ways to reconnect them later.

As a producer, I have this strange kind of contradiction where I'm a fluid improviser, but then I'm obsessed with structural and financial discipline. It's a bit like trying to fly a kite. The kite can go to amazing places if you anchor it; someone's holding onto the end, so it doesn't just fly off and go anywhere. That's why at Akram Khan we have three business models. When we started, we were encouraged to be a charity, but I decided not to because it jarred with my values of enterprise, independence and self-reliance. And the fact is, I put my own money on the table, so I didn't want to start being accountable every second while spending.

We first created a company limited by guarantee without charitable status, and once we started making money, we then created a charity. That was because we weren't working with dancers on permanent

“The word ‘optimism’ suggests that if you’re optimistic, it will be easier. But it’s not, it’s going to be harder, because you’re going to fight for things you believe in more”

contracts, because we didn't want to have our artistic ideas dictated by resources. If you're a dance company making a piece with 20 people every year, that's not being very creative; it's nice if we can do a duet, or a solo, or a piece with 50 people. We needed a fluid, creative process. So we created a charity for the dancers we worked with. The profits we were making with Gift Aid, some of that money went to the charity and it supported those dancers on their own projects and development. I'm proud to say we supported about 20 artists over the years.

Then, when our reputation grew, we created Khan Chaudhry Productions, which was a company limited by shares. So we had an ecosystem of three companies: one was making money, one was taking risks and one was giving back. But we made them work together. When Khan Chaudhry wanted to create a work, it would use Akram Khan Company, the publicly funded organisation, to produce it. So it made revenue for that. When Khan Chaudhry made profits, it would give some of the profits to the charity. When Akram Khan Company, which does experimental work, does make money, it gives it to the charity, and sometimes it needs the resources of Khan Chaudhry Productions to work for it. So keeping them separate then allows you to create a very dynamic ecosystem of connectivity, rather than trying to think about all those things in one pot: I want to make money, I want to take risks and I want to give back. They need time to live alone before they can be connected to each other, that's the way I think.

What is the best piece of advice you've been given?

I came into dance late and I used to think a lot when I was dancing. It took me a long time to stop; you only become something when you stop thinking about it and it becomes so innate that there's something else taking over – you're no longer consciously, actively thinking how you're going to do it. I was at a barre, doing ballet every day, and we had this great teacher who would say, "Farooq, you're trying to fix 10 things at one time. I suggest for the next six months you just fix one thing. It doesn't have to be the most important thing, but it's one thing that you fix." I said, "Great, I'll just work on my grand plié" – that's up and down, without equivocation and keeping it very fluid. I just worked on that every day, and after four or five months, all these other things started to get fixed as well. You realise we're not broken into

pieces: you fix one thing, the other things come with them; they're sitting in its slipstream. The obsession of fixing so many things can actually stop you doing something meaningful. It transformed me as a dancer, beyond recognition.

So even though I have many roles, many different jobs, I only do one thing at one time. Being totally immersed in that thing when you're doing it is so important to understanding what it is and why you're doing it, and what it means to you and the positive impact of that.

Another thing is: reward yourself. You work so damn hard. We take a lot of risks, we're exhausted, we're working for others. As leaders, you're going to take people with you, you're giving; sometimes you're going to feel like you're not being given back [to]. So there's going to be a time when you're going to feel very empty; lonely. I had a mentor who said, "When those [feelings] happen, or when you've done something well, go to an amazing dinner with your family or your partner; go on a little holiday or buy yourself something; ensure that your effort is equated to some kind of reward that you've given yourself." Those were two bits of advice that were really, really valuable to me.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I've got the list. What do I need to be a better version of myself? Passion, conviction, being a dreamer. To work unbelievably hard, to take risks and to enjoy them. Be enthusiastic about change. Endurance, willpower, strength, grace. Rebelliousness, patience, flexibility, consistency, optimism. The need for high achievement. The ability to recognise and admit to mistakes. A good listener. A good communicator. A fighter. Resilience, charm, luck, vulnerability, good taste, precision, good instincts, good judgement, honesty, sense of fairness, integrity, generosity, clarity, humility, sense of humour. Not to panic in a crisis. Authenticity, pride, openness. A good imagination, curiosity, eloquence, a sense of adventure, fearlessness, empathy, gratitude. And finally, avoid saying, "It's mine."

“Thinking very precisely as well as thinking imaginatively need to coexist: the instinct needs to dance with the intellect”

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

This is such a tough one. I'm going to be honest; I don't know if this is a part... maybe it's the beginning of a manifesto: you become what you think, and if you think optimistically, you will become that. Really, it's such a simple thing, but if you start creating a narrative in your head, you become that. You're always going to be at war between the person you think you should be and the person you think you could be. Understanding that battle within yourself is part of the manifesto for optimism; knowing that it's not going to be easy or smooth. The word "optimism" suggests that if you're just optimistic, it will be easier. But it's not, it's going to be harder, because you're going to fight for things you really believe in more. You can actually give in and quit when things are less optimistic. If you want something and you care about it; if you think you're going to get it, it's going to be harder to get it because it's going to involve greater investment and sacrifice. Like I said, what you want is always on the other side of fear, so that's part of my manifesto.

And money is not the objective; it's just a series of markers that allows you to understand you're reaching your goals. The entrepreneur Jack Ma has joked that he had no education. He said: "A master's degree or a doctorate is just a receipt for tuition." There is something about rethinking the way things are constructed in the conventional world we are so caught up in. I think the education system is really about trying to set out a clear pathway for us; it's always about knowing what you want to do before you do it; that this gets this, or takes you here. We are obsessed with this notion of almost predictive outcome. I don't believe that's the way we live. I fundamentally believe we move in chaos, and in chaos there are an immense amount of beautiful accidents waiting to happen; an infinite source of new possibilities and ideas and optimism and extraordinary human beings and ideas that can find collisions and connections with each other. So I think optimism means having no defined space around it; keeping it as an energy that flows and morphs and is fluid as it moves through our lives and our souls to make us a better version of ourselves.

Ekow Eshun

Writer, curator, broadcaster and chairman of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group

Ekow Eshun was appointed chairman of Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group by the Mayor of London in 2008. Alongside this role, Eshun curates exhibitions including *The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure* at the National Portrait Gallery and *In the Black Fantastic* at the Hayward Gallery, both in London. In 2005 he joined the Institute of Contemporary Arts, becoming the first Black director of a major UK arts organisation. He contributes to the *Guardian*, *Independent on Sunday*, *The Face* and the *Observer* and has authored books including *Africa State of Mind* and the Orwell Prize-nominated *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in England and Africa*. He has written and directed documentaries for the BBC and is a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's *Saturday Review* and *Front Row*.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I am an optimist, but that doesn't mean I don't recognise there are many structural factors in the way of realising one's own optimistic dreams, visions, plans and ambitions. Ultimately, I believe in myself; and I'm saying that deliberately, crudely, and I'll continue [to do] that. One of the things that really motivates me is tending to feel that unless I'm saying or doing something, or holding some space, then someone else will who doesn't necessarily subscribe to the same world-view or values that I do. There's a survival thing there where, unless I'm holding that space, or someone else I have an affinity with [is], I, or we, are potentially getting written out of a story. We're getting excluded from the space we need to be sharing and holding, and as far as possible, owning or embodying. The optimism I come from, [that] I live with, is that I have something to say. I would rather be the person in the room saying that than the person in the room listening to someone else I don't necessarily agree with. That's what gets me moving, why I say I believe in myself – not because I'm perfect but because I would rather be sitting here than someone else.

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

All the things I look at and think about and believe in tend to be the work of different creative people or groups. One can think about the work that organisations do. One can think about the work that individual artists do. But also I'm thinking about music, architecture, different areas of culture – the things that really, genuinely inspire me – and that's why I can't necessarily think outside that. I'm really fascinated by the ways people build ideas and propositions and explore ways of living, ways of moving through space, ways of seeing. These things feel significant to me because, for my personal position, I spend a lot of my time looking at the work and the ideas of people from or who belong to the African diaspora and wider sense of that term. I'm fascinated every day by the ways people create and reimagine themselves in the world around them.

We all had a strange experience during lockdown when we were thrown back upon ourselves. I spent a lot of that time thinking about art, but also reading poetry and walking in the park. I found these immensely generative activities. They gave me a lot in terms not necessarily of what I wanted to do, but how I wanted to do it, which is to say I wanted to connect with work and ideas and propositions that had humanness and aliveness at their heart. When I'm in a challenging situation, with existential threats in all sorts of ways, I don't particularly look outside these environments because I get so much from those worlds. It's actually hard to keep up [with], to be honest.

Understanding how to go about things usually gets dressed up in large questions about vision and mission and so on, and some of those things tend to end up feeling quite abstract, I think. You end up trying to remember what your vision is supposed to be, and what the words are and so on. Does it feel like there's a purpose to the endeavour? Does it feel like there's a meaning involved in what you are personally doing, and how that relates to how you do that within the organisation, and how that relates to what the organisation does in the world? Are you there for a reason? Are you there solely for the maintenance of that organisation, not there purely for process? Can you be there for purpose? Can that purpose be about how you understand transformation, which is not necessarily about changing the world? And so on. It's about changing your world as you see it.

It's a really fascinating thing about smaller organisations, because there's so much more challenge, so much more exposure but also so much more opportunity to say "I", to say "we" within smaller groups. To say: "This is how we want to work in the world." Those then don't become abstract things. Those become quite vital things. There has to be a reason, otherwise you could just do something else. I guess the bottom line I always come to is, if I'm working somewhere, I have to feel I am doing this job better than someone else could be. Otherwise someone else should be doing that job. So you have to be in the place where you're contributing enough, such that you understand your place and the possibilities that lie in front of you as an individual and as a collective. Otherwise someone else could be doing that. And that's fine, but you want to be in the place that matters for you, where you can matter to others.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

I work a lot with visual art, curating shows, and one of the things I've found really interesting (in fact, this runs across whole areas of the arts), is that artists aren't necessarily people who use words. Painting, which as a medium has no words to it, can still convey, as with any successful work of art, immense feeling. The power in a thing isn't what it says, it's where it takes you. It's where it takes you to, within and with each other. And I think if we're working in creative organisations, that too needs to be part of the value system we work with. I'm always trying to think about how you can show, not tell; how you can connect; how you can not use words to get to a place.

This creates an interesting dichotomous situation, where the culture sector places immense value on words. It's very difficult to work in this world unless you have a facility with language. At the same time, that language is also potentially obfuscating because you can easily get caught up in the words used in the cultural sector, in grant applications and all of these other things. Then you begin to lose the feeling, or the feeling becomes removed. I think the really interesting challenge is how you work with feeling; how you go beyond words to an understanding that what you're trying to do is connect emotionally and empathically and aesthetically with people; and understanding that the success, in part anyway, comes from the experience and the feeling that people have within and after they encounter whatever project they work with. It's hard to put down in words. It's hard to put down in metrics, but it has to matter.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Genuinely. As an independent curator, I have to propose projects to an institution. If that's for somewhere like the Hayward Gallery, it can't just be a solo show because they can do that internally. It has to be something they can't do themselves. As a consequence, I'm dealing with group shows, which have a complexity to them and have to have

“The interesting challenge is how you work with feeling; how you go beyond words to an understanding that what you’re trying to do is connect with people”

an intellectual thoroughness. I can also have the most glorious premise in the world for a show, but it falls apart instantly if I can't bring on board the artists involved. So the core of what I do is trying to connect with artists and share my vision, which at the beginning of the process is a paragraph or two on paper. They have to be able to see themselves in that, and then agree to travel with me for potentially the next couple of years, sight unseen to an end point.

As an example, in this show I did at the Hayward Gallery [*In the Black Fantastic*, which ran until September 2022], I worked with 11 different artists, all international. They had agreed [to participate] – a couple of people at the beginning didn't, and that's fine because you can't necessarily get everyone – but even up until the date we installed the show, the artists had not seen what the others were doing in the space. They had to trust me and the team at the Hayward Gallery to deliver something that made them look good in situ and in relation to everything else. That's a collaborative act. It's an act of trust that I have to hopefully deliver on by the end. I have that in my head the entire time: can I get to a place where I'm doing justice to the work? And that's not even just necessarily on a respect or pride level.

The whole point, from my perspective, in making an exhibition in the first place is because I'm motivated by the work itself – the work they already do. I'm trying to connect to the feeling I have in relation to that work. So there's a double layer going on: can I go on this journey of collaboration and achieve that successfully? And, can the whole project then deliver on my own initial aims and ambitions? All of this boils down to whether I can have a conversation at the beginning with several artists that clearly says: "This is what I see. Can we work on that and try to reach something that hopefully delivers for you and for the audience?" It's an unknown process, entirely founded on trying to build a relationship of trust and possibility.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

Partly I have something of an imposter syndrome in that I tend to think, if I succeed at something, then surely it's because it's straightforward. Surely that can't be all there is to it, there has

to be something more complicated or more difficult going on. I haven't really done it. Perhaps I've faked it or something. As a consequence of that, in part, I'm always also thinking: should I, or can I, be doing something else? Or something more? It's great being able to edit a magazine or run an arts institution and curate exhibitions. But is that all? That's not a complacent thing. It's more like, surely if I've done it then other people can too, and perhaps there's something more.

There's a bunch of stuff I want to do. Fundamentally, it comes down to thinking about the experience, the world-view and the subjective exploration within the world of Black diasporic peoples. I want to work with more moving image stuff in terms of TV or film or documentaries. But it's not really about moving to a different place radically. It's more about how I can actually go deeper into the areas that I'm interested in and how I can potentially explore those through other means.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

The really hard thing can be working very hard, and then suddenly you find that somehow you've done something that was not the intended goal. The rules, as it were, are utterly unwritten. No one tells you what to do, but they let you know when you have failed or somehow transgressed. It's about trying to understand what the codes are, how to negotiate those in ways that allow you to have some space to be able to think and have conversations of parity and connection that start to open up space and opportunity for you. But also beyond that, trying to form connections and map individually or collectively the territory is really important. Understanding that there are ways through, which are not just down to individual "bootstrap" notions of persistence. It's not just about working hard and getting there. I think it's also about how you can put together a way of moving forward that understands potentially that, yes, it's possible to work with others. You basically have to become a student of the territory, I would say.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

I've never had a mentor or many situations where I've had people looking out for me or giving me advice. The thing I actually fall

back on, as a personal mantra, is Eric B. & Rakim [in their song *In the Ghetto*, 1990]: "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at." I think about that a great deal. That's partly to do with negotiating space as a person of colour, but more fundamentally it's that you have to keep making space, defining territory on your own terms. You never really arrive. It's always a process of making, being and constructing. That's an "in process" set of activities. So the "where you're at" for me becomes really important, because it's a position of potential. It's also an acknowledgment of the provisional nature of that thing – you have to keep moving, you have to keep inventing because, where do you get to? There's no finite point.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I think you have to have some faith in people to be able to work with them, but at the same time, they can be quite difficult. It's hard work. One of the people I genuinely admired a lot, in terms of how he worked and what he did, was the great Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, who sadly passed away [in 2019]. Okwui was very influential: he curated Documenta [in 2002] and the Venice Biennale [in 2015], a wide range of things. He's really credited, in fact, for bringing a whole generation of African diasporic artists into the mainstream of the art world. But more than anything, I was very, very struck by the way Okwui worked. He brought deep scholarship to what he did as a curator. If you look at what he wrote or how he talked, he spent a great deal of time talking, with real depth and seriousness, about the work of the artists he engaged with, and how one could read and understand that work. What I took from that was that it's really important to honour the potential, the depth and the seriousness of the people one chooses to work with.

Whenever I'm embarking on a project or working with an artist or a colleague, I try to think about what we are trying to do. What is the weight and gravity of that? It sounds potentially grand, but especially, though not exclusively, when you deal with Black culture, a lot of the time what you're actually dealing with is life and death: how Black people can thrive in a world that often doesn't want them to; that

“It’s about trying to understand what the codes are, how to negotiate those in ways that allow you to have conversations of parity and connection that start to open up opportunity for you”

doesn't want to hear them; that insists they remain within prescribed circumstances. A world that, at worst, is hostile – psychologically, emotionally, physically – to their presence in the world. A lot of what you end up doing, whether it's an exhibition or a conversation with an artist, boils down to finding how we [as Black people] can assert our humanness and be seen as fully alive. How can we matter in a world that doesn't want us to? I take those things and the proposition of the person who's standing in front of me very seriously. I try to respect them as people who have something to say. I try to believe in the potential of myself and someone else and whoever "we" is. This endeavour can help us create a world that's better, safer, more open.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

The novelist Sylvia Wynter spends a lot of time talking about Black aliveness [existing as a Black person outside anti-Black violence], and it's an area that I believe in very strongly. For example, trying to reach a point where the simple proposition that Black Lives Matter is not taken as a controversial statement, but is rather taken as a simple description of a world that we might share.

Another music reference [I believe in]: Soul II Soul, *Keep On Movin'* [1989]. The diasporic experience is one where we find ourselves in aspects of the world where, historically and generationally, we have not necessarily anticipated being. My parents came to Britain from Ghana in the early 1960s. They thought they'd be going back in a few years' time, like many other immigrants. That turned out not to be the case. But even before that, we can go back generations, to the encounters that my parents had with white Europeans from Britain or from the Netherlands. These turned them and their forebears into dramatically different people with outlooks on the world that are not singular, but are multiple, hybrid, cosmopolitan. The diasporic experience is one of being in travel, of holding these collected histories as embodied experience. I'm interested in that process of encounter and continued travel, in its complexity, its pain, its possibility. And therefore, I would suggest the obligation is even towards invention, imagining, articulation of being, towards investment in space, towards acts of creation.

Dr Errol Francis

Artistic director and CEO of Culture&

As artistic director and CEO of Culture&, Errol works with arts and heritage organisations to promote diversity in the cultural workforce and expand audiences. He is also a visiting lecturer at the University of Greenwich, Goldsmiths University of London and at Sotheby's Institute of Art. He has a background in mental health activism and past roles include head of arts at the Mental Health Foundation and director of the Anxiety Arts Festival in 2014. He curated a Cyborgs events series at the Wellcome Collection in 2019 and contributes to the curatorial research group PS/Y, exploring the arts and sciences. Errol studied photography and fine art, and his doctoral research at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, focused on post-colonial artistic responses to museums.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I'm inspired by history, and how art has been part of this way of changing things in the past. There are certain artists that really inspire me in that way: [Dmitri] Shostakovich, the composer and [Andrei] Tarkovsky, the filmmaker. I find them particularly interesting people because they were working in this really difficult political situation. I mean, Shostakovich nearly got done in by Stalin and the kind of music he was composing was very challenging to the status quo. I still can't believe that Tarkovsky managed to make those films during that period in the Soviet Union. There's this idea that, actually, oppressive regimes can produce great art or inspirational ideas; things that challenge. That inspires me in a way that, however bad things might get, if we think of the right strategies and we work with the right people, we can come through. So that's what keeps me going. Especially now, the period that we're in at the moment, which seems so bleak. It does remind me of the Thatcher period in the 1980s – things were really, really bad. But actually a lot of interesting cultural activity took place during that period because people had to think: "How are we going to get out of this? How are we going to make life better?"

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

It's probably aviation, because when I was a kid, I wanted to fly aeroplanes. I even joined something called the air training corps. I thought: "Well if you join this thing, you're going to fly aeroplanes," only to discover that it was really like the army and was a bit too regimented. But I still continued this interest in the history and different models of aeroplanes that we've used. I'm interested in how quickly the technology of aviation, after the Wright Brothers invented powered flight, got to a stage where they were being used for war. I think probably within 10 years or so, by the First World War, aeroplanes are being used for the wrong reasons, for killing people. And then we get passenger flights and then jet propulsion and rockets. Aeroplanes are just incredible machines that challenge our sense of what is real – that we can defy gravity. I find flying very exciting. I remember the first time I went on the A380 to Australia, and I was just so excited about this aeroplane, which unfortunately

isn't being made anymore. But there's something about the combination of perfection, innovation and risk in there. That is what is inspiring.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

When I worked in the mental health services, I came across a writer called Franco Basaglia. He's an Italian psychiatrist, who had this movement called *Psichiatria Democratica* [Democratic Psychiatry], which really challenged the way that psychiatric patients were being treated. He had this idea, this notion called "inside out". He was very much an establishment figure; being a consultant psychiatrist or a senior clinician is quite an elitist position in a sense. You might say he's "inside" the system. But what he was trying to explain is that, in order to change the status quo, which was very oppressive for psychiatric patients being locked up and given lots of drugs, you also have to be outside at the same time in order to challenge it. I think this notion is really interesting.

The organisation that I run, Culture&, we're inside the system in that we work with some pretty big names like the Southbank Centre, Royal Academy, Magnum Photos. When I was working on the Anxiety Arts Festival, we composed a new piece of music and it premiered at the Wigmore Hall, which is the most established music venue you can probably think of. And yet we were trying to challenge what classical music is, and challenge from the inside. There's certain things you can only do if you're inside. There's this idea, and I'm not sure if this is a Marxist idea, of incorporation; a notion of being inside, where you get overtaken by the state, you become the establishment. What Franco Basaglia was saying is that you can be inside but *not* become incorporated by the values and norms of the system. And there's only certain things that you can do from the inside; if you're outside, you're completely outside. You can't do it, you don't have access. So this sense, almost, of infiltration; getting into the system and becoming accepted by the system, but not accepting its norms. That's the idea.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Well, you probably notice I keep coming back to the subject of mental health. I've been interested in psychiatry and psychoanalysis for many years, and it's influenced my practice and also the practice of my organisation. This idea of feeling or emotion is something that I'm quite conscious of also in relation to making art: how does it make people feel? If one were to describe modern art in general, the difference between the art of the classical period before modernism is the shift from representation to experience. Certainly in visual arts; that shift from trying to represent the world as it looks and the shift to representing the world as it feels. So we get this breakdown of representational systems – there's a book by somebody called Gemma Blackshaw called *Madness and Modernity*, where she talks about the advent of psychoanalysis and Vienna and all that activity at the turn of the century. Freud's work emerging creates this incredible shift in the way that artists see the world and relate to it. Going back to Maya Angelou, I would say that she's right, in the sense that one remembers the best art, or some of the best experiences are to do with tapping into how people feel. And one might say, "I'm trying to negotiate with that or to change that." But certainly how one feels is one of the criteria by which successful cultural work could be judged.

What's the collaboration that you're most grateful for?

It's probably universities. I'm sort of drawn to them in my work. I mean, it's partly because of a bias in my own practice, which is that I do academic work. I did quite a long period of postgraduate study at the Slade School of Fine Art, where I did my PhD. But certainly at Culture&, we're quite close with universities, two in particular: Exeter and Leicester. At Leicester University, we do a postgraduate programme for young, diverse people to get them through an MA in museum studies so they can move forward in their careers in the cultural sector, in museums and galleries. That's a practical thing where we're helping people. But I value academic collaborations. I suppose it's going back to this

“However bad things might get, if we think of the right strategies and we work with the right people, we can come through. So that’s what keeps me going”

"inside, outside" thing where you can question what you're doing. Research is a really great way of interrogating that, but also testing new ideas. I think having a sense of the progression of history, of things that have happened before, in the discipline that we're working with the academic environment really helps with that.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

So it's to do with the private sector. We work with museums and galleries and arts organisations, and the ecosystem that we work in is, I guess you could call it, the publicly funded sector. All of our funding and collaborations are with this particular sector. My dream is that we should be working with the private sector as well, because our mission is to open up who works in the arts and heritage sector, but also who enjoys the offer. I go to the private sector – big names like Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth and White Cube – and there is a connection between the private and the public sector, but it's a really tricky one to negotiate, if you're in one or the other. Do you see what I mean? If I'm in a publicly funded organisation, how could I have a relationship with an auction house, for example? And I know that they get involved, because when I worked at the Arts Council, I did learn how private sector galleries represent artists. We were doing a show at the National Gallery and I was quite fascinated. We were working with Yinka Shonibare CBE RA and his gallery, Stephen Friedman; it was quite interesting how Stephen Friedman worked in terms of financing the show, and then the thing gets shown at the National Gallery, but then Stephen Friedman takes it and it goes into the private art market. So how do we fit into that?

My dream is that we could be doing some kind of collaboration with a private sector-type organisation as a publicly funded charity. It's really tricky; we've been trying to do it for two years, to negotiate with a particular private sector organisation, and the conversation is going well. But one of the difficulties with it is that some of the funders don't like this relationship. Because when you go into private sector galleries, it's even more white and middle class than the public sector. So I really want to get in there, but it's tricky to finance it.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Yeah, definitely. Well, what I've just been talking about needs persistence. If we didn't have it, we'd just give up, you know? I think it was my second year in my current job; I tried to go for the National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding and we didn't make it. So it was like, OK, right, how persistent are you going to be? And I was determined. I really think this is part of this "inside outside" thing, being an NPO. We really had to focus on how we work: how were we different? What is our unique offer? Who do we relate to? Who are our partners? The quality of our work and really just keeping at it; just really straight down the line. And it has actually worked in that sense.

That persistence and belief doesn't come from nowhere. You need to have support to do that as well to keep going. It has been really difficult. But I think consistency [is important]. One of the pieces of work we did with Louise [McKinney, founder of A-I-R and director of Future Connected] was to come up with a mantra, this phrase, which was how to describe our work without using the usual kind of language. It's quite easy with our mission to start using words like "diversity", which is really annoying, and "minorities" – all of that. It took us several days to come up with this strapline, which was: "Opening up who makes and enjoys arts and heritage." And we repeat it for five years. We just don't stop. You can compare that with the way an artist works; how we get to know a particular artist or their trademark, persistently delivering this particular way of doing things.

Yinka Shonibare is a really good example. He's of Nigerian heritage. He studied painting at the Royal Academy and he became fascinated very early on in his practice with this fabric called Dutch wax print. So everybody thinks that this fabric is uniquely African, right? It's a sort of batik type of print. But he's really fascinated by the fact that it's actually produced in Holland for the African market, so it embodies cultural hybridity. He has made this trademark, and does all sorts of things with it. He dresses [sculpture] in Rococo costumes and recreates 18th century sculptures with it. He does a ship in the bottle and the sails are made with this fabric. And he curated the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2021 and used it. When you go

into the Royal Academy, there's a statue of Joshua Reynolds, and Shonibare just put this sash around it with this African waxed print and it makes this statement. But the thing I'm trying to stress is this sort of persistence. You know, he just keeps on doing it and finding new ways of applying this fabric. So that's this idea of persistence, but each time being somewhat different and improvising.

What is the best piece of advice you've been given?

The work that I do, or we do, in small organisations that are challenging the status quo is that you very often get provoked by things that are going on that are just awful and sometimes scandalous. In my work, there's so many provocative situations where you can get into a public spat with somebody, or the publicity about you is to do with a conflict between you and somebody else. I was working in Birmingham for the NHS a few years ago, and there was a really terrible scandal there that I wanted to go to the media to talk about. I was just like: "I can't cope with this." But I had this mentor and he said to me: "Don't do it. You shouldn't become the story for the wrong reason."

He was saying that there's a way to do the work without getting into a particular one-to-one conflict with somebody that is creating negative stories. I think that's one of the best pieces of advice that I've been given, because – as I said – there's so many opportunities, honestly. On a weekly basis, I'm coming across injustices every day. I could be talking about it in that way, but I try to keep it this way, which is that anything, any story that is coming out, is productive and positive. It's not to do with me fighting with anybody. And that sounds as if I'm shrinking back from challenging the system. But I try to challenge the system without it becoming personal.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

What it makes me think of is music. And it does follow on from the previous question, which is about whether you're going to be a negative or positive thing. I really love music and jazz in

particular, and the way that musicians – I mean, particularly African American musicians – have dealt with really painful things. The blues, for example, being about really painful experiences, but they managed to convey this with a certain amount of elegance. And it's a bit contradictory in a way. The first thing that comes to my head with a piece of music like Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*: it's a really searing piece of music, describing lynching and terrible violence, but it has majesty and dignity, and it doesn't resort to abuse or itself become violent, if you like. It's a very redemptive experience to listen to it. It's difficult to listen to, but she's dealing with a very difficult subject matter and keeping that sense of dignity and, being music – because I think that music has this sort of almost transformative potential – it gives you the strength to kind of carry on. That's what we need to do.

I don't think you need to make people feel worse by describing something or conveying negativity or desperation. I feel a responsibility to convey optimism. And when I do confront the system, there's a certain amount of elegance in doing that. You don't want to get ugly with it, to come down to the level of the thing that is troubling you. But yeah, some kind of redemptive and positive way of moving forward.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

Nothing lasts forever. I mean, the period we're in at the moment; I remember watching the American midterm elections on TV and a lot of anxiety about the rise of the right, in English speaking countries especially – the culture wars and all of that – and how that relates to our own situation. I don't want to get too politically partisan, but we have a political administration that's been in power for over 12 years, and we're going through a very difficult period at the moment. I just have to keep holding on to this fact that it's temporary.

I'm sure you all know about what happened in the summer of 2020; Black Lives Matter and how that affected the arts in particular. I work in heritage as well, so, museums and statues. Just going back to Joshua Reynolds, actually, and what Yinka did – the possible sentence for damaging a statue is more serious than rape. You know, it's really crazy.

And yet these statues, some of them I really find totally offensive. I mean, we're working at the moment with a particular one in the Guildhall [in the City of London], and it's a guy called William Beckford, the previous Lord Mayor of London, but he made his money in the slave trade. The place where he had his plantations is very close to where my family is from in Jamaica. Originally, that statue was going to get removed. [Now], I'm on the project to reinterpret it, and I'm thinking: "This thing has been there since 1770 and I don't think it should be there anymore."

I just have to keep thinking this is all temporary. He's been there 200 years and I might not live to see the day when it comes down, but I think it will. I think future generations will not tolerate celebrating these awful people. And so, the optimism is to do with recognising the temporality of history. In the work that we do; we can contribute to bits of it. The optimism needs to be almost outside of our lifetime, to think of the ways in which things might change in the future and what we are contributing to it. And working with things like these statues is a great example of that, because at the moment we're very limited in what we can do, but I think future generations are going to do much more.

Laia Gasch

Director of World Cities Culture Forum

Laia is director of the World Cities Culture Forum, the leading global network of civic leaders from over 40 creative cities across six continents sharing ideas and solutions to build a world where culture is at the heart of thriving cities.

She was previously senior advisor for culture at the Mayor of London's office, where she played a central role in creating innovative policies including: the world's first Creative Enterprise Zones, a new Culture at Risk Office protecting grassroots venues and London's most pro-culture urban plan with the first ever Cultural Infrastructure Plan. Laia shaped the development of East Bank in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the most ambitious culture and education district in London for over 150 years and led the establishment of the UK's first Night Czar and a new London Borough of Culture Award.

Previously, Laia led high profile and award winning creative programmes including for the BBC, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and Tate Modern.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I'm originally from Barcelona and came to London more than 25 years ago. I'm one of the many EU nationals who came to study [at Goldsmiths, University of London], then stayed. I've always worked in organisations where I think we can make a difference in public life, and always worked on projects that are about improving my city, my neighbourhood, my world. Often it's been small-scale.

I consider myself a cultural activist. I am active in my neighbourhood in Hackney and set up a local parent-run nursery when my son was born that still exists 23 years on. We got some funding to make it better and to involve more people in the area. I was also a founding member of our local Chatsworth Road market, which we brought back, setting up an organisation with the residents and business association. I want my neighbourhood to be better. I want my childcare to be better. And I carry that into my profession and my professional life.

I've worked in small organisations, but also large ones: at the BBC, the Olympics, Tate Modern, the Mayor of London and now in the World Cities Culture Forum. So, I'm in city government, but it's always about public service. How can I be of service to society? Those are my values. I don't think I will ever work in a commercial organisation. One never knows, but if making money is what I wanted to do, then I've chosen the wrong path. My interest is in making my city better. That's the undercurrent I find when I look at my CV – and also doing new things, innovating. I'm now running this city network of 44 cities across six continents, including Tokyo, Paris, New York, Buenos Aires and Lagos. Together, we represent 245 million people and 60 Unesco sites. We share common challenges and help each other. Our aim is to make our cities better places.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

Usually we look very much to other people in the culture and creative industries but at the moment, I am looking very closely at the World Economic Forum. What it's doing now with Instagram Stories is telling

stories about individuals, grassroots organisations and different initiatives that are making an impact and making change. What I like is what they're recognising: that change happens at the individual and grassroots level. They're telling these stories to themselves, I guess, and to the world. It's recognition that storytelling is very important and that, actually, change often happens in a very small-scale way that can then be expanded. I really like what they're doing with a very simple tool – we can all do it. So I'm looking at them with envy and saying to our communications team: "Let's do something that looks like this, that feels like this. What are the stories of change we can tell?"

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

We started in 2012, when London was hosting the Olympics, and brought together eight cities. The impetus was to do a bit of benchmarking on cultural infrastructure and cultural use. How does London compare to Tokyo, Paris, Milan, New York? How many theatres? How many cinemas, museums, libraries? How many people go to art galleries? Of course, the temptation was to do a ranking. Everyone loves a ranking. But I remember we looked into each other's eyes and we went: "Nah, let's not compete, let's collaborate."

As city governments, we're always trying to make the argument and case for investment in culture in our cities, and usually we are quite down the priority order, of course. Safety, transport, housing – there's all these priorities that a city government needs to look at. Often when budgets are cut, culture is something seen as a "nice to have" but that's not the case. We need to convince our politicians that it is good to invest in. Culture is good for the economy, regeneration, health, education... So as a group of cities, we said: "Why don't we help each other get those arguments together? Why don't we make the cake bigger? And why don't we get more cities to join that journey of making culture an important part of city growth and city policy?" Fast forward 10 years, and now we've grown to a group of 44 cities. We've never done a ranking. It's all about collaboration. Being generous with ideas is in our DNA.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I'm from Barcelona – I'm all about the feelings! We recently hosted this big summit with 140 leaders from around the world. We had deep discussions, but I know that what they'll remember is those moments – and it might be over a coffee break – where they connected with people. Feeling is about connection. You have to connect. And once you connect, then things flow.

Kyiv in Ukraine is now one of our city partners, and we had one of our best sessions in conversation with the city leader on culture in Kyiv. She was telling us how, when the full-scale invasion from Russia started, they activated people to get the paintings off the walls of the museums, wrapping them, putting them in the basements; how they were gathering sacks of sand to protect their monuments. She was talking about the culture front. And we could all visualise those people, gathering sacks and protecting the statues and art. She said: "What are we fighting for? We're fighting for our culture and our identity." And it was so moving, so touching. We connected at that point, we could see it in her eyes. So, it's connection, storytelling – those moments that sometimes don't feel very formal but when you feel that special connection... I agree with Maya Angelou.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

When you work in city government, it's very easy to go into it as "the bureaucrat". I'd like to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs inside the bureaucracy. We have to create new ideas, to have this social entrepreneurship. I've learned a lot from social entrepreneurs and hope I'm bringing that into the bureaucracy. And likewise, I think the bureaucrat's job is also to help the social entrepreneurs. What are the steps and processes needed to work in collaboration and to provide funding and support?

“Courage is about staying close to your heart... to stay true to your beliefs, to your values, to what you believe is right”

We work a lot with grassroots music venues, for example. They're small businesses – how can they be helped within City Hall? We've worked on setting up and helping coalitions, support on licensing, on taxing, on all these different aspects. We created a project called Culture at Risk, which we call the "Bat Phone", for music venues and grassroots organisations. If you have a problem, you can call the Bat Phone, tell us what your problem is and we will try to help.

When you are a small organisation, a lot of the time, your team is made up of only a few people. You depend on funding. But when you're the bureaucrat, you need certain evidence and data to make the argument [for that funding]. So I think this collaboration between social entrepreneurship and creative bureaucrats is a good one. I'm all for it. Sometimes I call myself "the bureaucracy hacker". I'm working from *inside* to help my people, the people who work in the creative industries *outside*.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

At the moment, we're doing a lot of work around expanding our network in areas that are a bit underrepresented. For example, we have one African city, Lagos, and we want more because we want that voice in the network. We have about four Latin American cities, but we'd like more. Our first Indian city joined this year, Bengaluru, but we want more because we know India is a full continent. So, we're working with Africa, India, Latin America to get more cities involved, to have those other voices and to be able to say we are a truly global organisation. We've just done some work with the British Council and 12 sub-Saharan African cities and the energy there is incredible. So much innovation, so much entrepreneurship. We're looking at ways of involving that voice, because they've got really good ideas that other people can learn from.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

All of them. For example, I think of Brixton. Brixton has a creative enterprise zone and it's great. I was working at City Hall when we

came up with this idea: “Why don’t we transfer the idea of a business enterprise zone, but for creatives?” One that is adapted to the needs of creative industries – ie, small businesses, often micro businesses – and for local authorities to be able to offer incentives for creatives to put down roots in the areas. The problem it was trying to solve was that artsy and creative people move to cheap areas, help regenerate an area, and then they’ve been asked to move because they cannot afford to stay. How could we allow creatives to really put down roots? It’s a story of persistence, because at the beginning when we started looking at creative enterprise, it wasn’t getting any traction. I think it took three years until someone was like: “Oh yeah, that’s a good idea.” Then Sadiq [Khan, Mayor of London] put it in his manifesto. Once he did that, we knew we were onto something.

We knew we had to then deliver it. It took a lot of convincing of my colleagues across business development and the planning and different departments that this was a good idea. Likewise, the London Borough of Culture took a while to get across the line, and for a long time, we were saying: “We think we need a Culture at Risk office.” That took years. So I think in policy terms, it’s always good to not despair, to persevere and know that it takes time. Just build the alliances who can help and then don’t give up. We did Creative Enterprise Zones by stealth. Don’t quote me on this – because now it’s very successful, now everyone wants a Creative Enterprise Zone, so it’s brilliant – but I would say the beginning is always tough. Then the snowball gets rolling and people want it.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

Take no as a question. When someone says no to you, that’s a question. I also remember my boss at the BBC, who was a very inspirational boss. It was one of my first jobs when I arrived in London and I was trying to fit in, trying to be quite British in my ways, you know, trying to adapt. He said to me: “Laia, you are from Barcelona. Own it. Don’t lose your passion. Be yourself. Be authentic. Don’t try to be someone else that you’re not. That’s who you are.” That helped me a lot. I just thought: “Yeah, I am who I am. I am from Barcelona. Do things a bit differently from the British way of doing them.” That brings something new to the table and I need to be proud of it. Be authentic. Be yourself.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

At the summit we did recently, our theme was courage and culture. I was reflecting a bit on the word "courage". When we think of courage, it's someone running to the fire, saving against all the odds or driving a fast car. But when you look at the origin of the word, it comes from the French word *coeur*, which means heart. So it's not something external. Courage is about staying close to your heart. I thought that was a good insight. Being courageous is not doing things outside that you think are going to get you medals and monuments. It's actually to stay true to your beliefs, to your values, to what you believe is right.

A lot of the time in my work, I doubt myself, but my core question is: is this better for my city? If the answer is yes, I'm going to do it. Even though I get a lot of opposition, I'm going to push. I'm not doing it for glory. If the answer is yes, then it's worth fighting for. So I think this new – or old– definition of courage is staying true to your heart. And then maybe when you look back, you recognise it as courage.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

I love manifestos. We've just launched a manifesto in São Paulo to request and campaign for culture to become a dedicated, sustainable development goal in the UN, post-2030, which is when the sustainable development goals will be reviewed. And it's been great that we've already got 20 cities signed up to the manifesto. But on the optimism manifesto, I'm going to go back to my origins and use a phrase that was used in the Spanish Civil War. It's the sentence: "*¡No pasarán!*" – they shall not pass. It was used by a woman revolutionary [Dolores Ibárruri] called *La Pasionaria*, which means the passionate woman, and she was amazing. She used that logo and mantra – "*¡no pasarán!*" – for the Republicans to stop the Fascists coming into Madrid and taking over the city. So *"¡no pasarán!"* is optimism said in a negative way; I think *"¡no pasarán!"* is resilience, resistance and determination.

Dr Ali Hossaini

Artist and co-director of National Gallery X

Ali Hossaini works at the cutting edge of art, technology and science. His artworks have shown in museums, theatres, galleries and festivals around the world, winning acclaim from *Vanity Fair*, *Cool Hunting* and others, including *The New York Times*, which calls him “a biochemist turned philosopher turned television producer turned visual poet.” He has worked with iconic talent, and his art has been presented by BAM, the Barbican, the Humboldt Forum, Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and other global venues. He is a senior research fellow in the Department of Engineering at King’s College London, co-founder of National Gallery X, a trustee of the Young Vic, and a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study of Nantes.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

Fundamentally, we can look at the world and see there are a lot of problems. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. Two things came to the fore in that era: one was ecological disaster. There was a growing awareness of humanity's impact on the world. At the time, we couldn't conceive just how great that would be, but we knew it was growing. The other was diversity – and with it bigotry and racism. My family and I were very involved in what was called "desegregation" at the time. I suppose, even now, the lessons from then resonate with me, because I never would have dreamt the world would have made so little progress in the last half century. We really need to address diversity. It comes in two forms here, really, but they ultimately merge. One is ecological diversity: the diversity of life on the planet. The other is social and cultural diversity, which is the diversity of human life. And they're intimately connected. So this value drives everything I do. It might seem like I'm a polymath, but everything boils down to the value of preserving life and [my commitment to] helping life to thrive and flourish.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

When I got out of school, I went into television. I spent a good 15 years or so there and even more using the lessons [it taught me]. The thing I love about TV – and theatre, too – is that you really have to get things done. I run into people who have been in TV or theatre in other walks of life, and they tend to be really creative doers, because you have to be. You know, when you have an opening, whether it's a TV series or theatre, people get enraged if it starts late. People take their entertainment seriously, so it falls back on to a kind of discipline and a can-do attitude that I just love.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

One thing a mentor told me when I first wanted to move into what you might call fine arts or culture, as opposed to television, which is broadly culture (I've been involved in news and other things like that)

was that aesthetics is critical. Even down to your letterhead – or your website now that people aren't using paper – everything you do should reflect the aesthetic of your organisation. At a big company, you can have a user interface that's sort of clunky, but you can't do that with a cultural organisation. Aesthetics represent a kind of value. We often think of aesthetics as being shallow, but they're not. It shows care.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I don't. I hate to disagree with Maya Angelou, but I found from [working in] TV that people can remember *one* thing. Let me tell the parable of a lion tamer. Someone said to me, the reason you take a chair [in] when you're taming a lion – let's leave aside the cruelty of that right now – is because when the lion sees you, they just see one thing and they're going to attack it. But when you lift the chair, it goes from being one thing to four – the four legs of the chair. Lions are fierce, but they can't focus on more than one thing. So, then, when you raise a chair, they look around and calm down. Humans are much the same way. I think if you stay on one message, they can remember it.

That said, making people feel is very important, particularly in culture. So, if you do say something, I guess it's memorable because you've made them feel. The feeling, no doubt, is what lingers, even if you can't take it with you after someone passes away. Did somebody make a lot of people feel good? They probably left a good sensation in the air.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

I shouldn't pick one because I've collaborated with so many people. I'm grateful to all of them. Let me put this in slightly different terms: "What mentors am I grateful for?" I've gone through a lot of stages in life, and I've had a lot of great teachers. What I want to emphasise is that it is important to have a mentor in your life. I always seek out people who are doing things to which I aspire or [which I] admire, and I try to get myself under their wing, or perform some useful service and then in turn get coaching from them, because we always have to be learning.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

The person I want to deal with is the public personified. I work in some esoteric fields, and I think to really make change, the public needs to become [more] aware. I would like to just quote Margaret Mead, who said: "Don't think that a small, committed group can't effect change." In fact, a small, committed group is the only way of effecting change. That might be a paraphrase rather than a quote, but I think having more people absorb [this] message is what's important for me at this point.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Persistence and practice, absolutely. We can always refine our practice, and persistence is necessary. We're going to experience a lot of bumps in the road. We're going to experience failures. Failure is simply a learning experience. That's a truism, but I've actually never learned from success. In fact, success can calcify and ossify your personality. You start thinking: "I'm successful. I'm not going to learn any more." Whereas when you fail, you soften up and become more of that inner child. I don't know if this is true, but I heard Microsoft was only hiring people from failed businesses because they had something to offer.

We always need to be changing our perspective. I truly feel there's something to be learned from everyone. Everybody you encounter can act as an opportunity to learn. And it's remarkable what people will say and the kind of insights they have, if you give them the context for self-expression.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

The best piece of advice I was ever given, when I was a crass youth, was to listen. I was caring for an Alzheimer's patient, and he wanted me to read his diaries. At some point he had noted in his diary that he read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which I never would have picked up because the title is kind of off-putting. Actually, it's a very humane book. What Carnegie says is:

> “Success can calcify and ossify your personality. Whereas when you fail, you soften up and become more of that inner child”

“Listen to people.” I always thought I had to impress people. When I was 19, I thought: “I have to show how much I know.” Actually, listening is a much more powerful technique for many reasons. For one thing, it makes people feel wanted. For another, you learn. You grow through listening, never through talking – as I’m doing right now.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

We can start with that last point, which is about listening. I am always a reluctant leader – I’m really not comfortable with managing or directing, but I have to do it periodically. So, I try to listen to people. The reason you listen is because you have a project at hand

with certain objectives and goals. And to get a project to move along successfully and happily, I think it's important to have a humane work environment, even if it's stressful and you're working long hours and being really demanding. That means aligning the project with an individual's values and ambitions.

We want to have a through line, starting with those values we talked about at the very beginning, which is everybody flourishing in all life – including bacteria. An alignment straight through the project and your organisation, to every individual working on it and the individuals whom they impact, requires listening. Sometimes you have to swap the agenda, move people around or change assignments. Optimism comes out of it, because people are all working towards a common goal but also towards their individual goals. The individual agenda is as important as the social agenda. And in fact, it's the only thing you can influence. You can make one life better. It gets really abstract when you're trying to change the world.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

My manifesto for optimism is to make sure everybody thrives, in order to create a healthy organisation. That's one where everybody can fulfil their personal ambitions and express their values in the context of the wider project, or the wider project adjusts to meet those needs and resource constraints. A place where creativity can thrive.
This might sound counterintuitive, but it's not a matter of having sufficient resources. It's a matter of having some resources. Where there is a difference between the ambitions of the project and the resources of the project – that's where creativity jumps in.

Creativity for me is a spark that jumps between resource and ambition. That's why I like to take on ambitious but somewhat under-resourced projects, because we need to prove ourselves: what difference can we make? I think justifying oneself to oneself, to one's own values, to the people around you and whomever is supporting you is very important. So what I would pass on is: "If you don't feel like you have enough resources, be optimistic, because that's your chance to be creative."

Suhair Khan

Technology entrepreneur and founder of open-ended design

Suhair is a technology entrepreneur and creative leader. She is the founder of open-ended, a platform and incubator for impact-driven work at the intersection of design, culture and future-facing technology. Her work is at the intersection of design with cross-disciplinary innovation in AI and future-facing technology. In over a decade at Google, Suhair led global initiatives which merged cutting-edge technology with culture, arts, education, autonomous vehicles, and environmental sustainability. She is chair of the board of trustees of dance choreography company Studio Wayne McGregor, and is on the board of trustees and/or advisory committees of the Design Museum, British Library, Sadler's Wells, London Design Biennale and the Art Fund Museum of the Year prize. A graduate of Cornell and Harvard University, she is a visiting lecturer at Central Saint Martins.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I've always worked mostly in technology and I think, at its core, technology should be seen as hopeful because it is about innovation and growth. Of course, it can be defined in so many different ways.

I've worked in digital tech and I feel that because we live in a moment where it's been quite destructive to many of us, we forget that it has also generated connection, community, economic access and creativity. And something I think about a lot is: how do we make technology more hopeful and how do we bring optimism into it?

I think the creative and cultural sector is one of the strongest ways of doing this, because you strip away what the incentives are – the idea that a product needs to be better or more efficient – and you really think about what makes people feel good. That's where I think about optimism a lot. How do we make technology, or leverage it in a way where it drives towards more optimism and more hope, and is expansive, rather than creating these areas where we fall into these vortexes where it actually brings us down? That's very general, but it's always on my mind.

I think my beliefs are evolving all the time. I don't think I have one set of core beliefs, but authenticity is the thing I've been thinking about a lot in the last few years. Coming back to: "What is your core truth?" and "What is the core truth of those who you're working with?" matters.

I think it's really easy to feel pressure to have an opinion because we're so overwhelmed by noise and information, so we lose sight of what we actually believe in and where to find a voice in that. That's something that can't really be taught. It's about creating space for yourself and then also being around people who teach you and inspire you. It's always harder because you're trying to fight against all the noise to find what feels true to you. So I'd say that, for me, the biggest thing right now is to try to be true to yourself.

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

I think there are many models that work, but we're in this moment where there is an opportunity to do more interdisciplinary thinking. Taking bits and bobs from other organisations will help. Technology companies inherently move very quickly; they do things as experiments and then they leave them, they move on, they iterate and they build and that's how they think. I think the cultural sector needs a lot more flexibility and fluidity. In the last few years, we've seen people being a bit less attached to old manifestos or mandates, because to survive you have to be a lot more fluid and flexible.

I also think, in terms of the model of community engagement, that the world is going to shift. I mean, it is shifting, right? We have these infrastructures of power and everybody sort of floating around at the bottom. Now, in order to evolve and to build new positive outcomes, we need to engage with communities. They could be large or small, but I think connecting outside of your own world and people you work with right now, partnerships, however you think about it, is going to be the best model in terms of innovation.

This new model might be a bit more inefficient. It takes more time and it's harder, because when you're working with organisations that come from a very different perspective, you often struggle to come to a shared place. But for me that kind of model is going to be more and more prevalent, particularly for small organisations.

Sometimes we feel this pressure to change an organisation that exists. It's not necessarily the only way to do things, because sometimes it can break things. But I think keeping an open mind is probably the biggest way of improving how an organisation works.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

I think that's also evolving. Two years ago, I was a judge on the Art Fund Museum of the Year prize, which has typically gone to the biggest museums in the country. I was part of a jury judging museums after two years of the pandemic, so there were no exhibitions on show.

We ended up with a shortlist of five tiny institutions in different parts of the UK and eventually the one that won was Firstsite in Colchester, Essex. We judged on community engagement, empathy, sharing space, connecting with conversations and questions that were very political, often controversial, and finding a bridge in narrating stories of real culture, real depth, real quality.

Each of these smaller institutions worked with historical experts, critical thinkers and contemporary artists at the top of their field, all of them asking questions. It was this reminder that you can work with the very best, but you don't have to have all of the money in the world. You don't necessarily have to be the best at something, but you're there as a channel or a vehicle for telling stories that engage with the people around you.

The second thing that really manifested in that work was: how do they impact the people around them? Did people come? Do they care? Do they feel [they are in] a safe space? If we had to revisit that list, I don't know if they would win a prize today or not because it was such a different moment in time. But I think this idea of creating spaces for empathy and inspiration will really resonate for all of us now.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I quit my job in February [2022]. I was at Google, a very big company, for a very long time and it really defined how I saw myself, how people saw me, how I approached work, my ethos around how to engage with people. And then I left and I didn't have a plan, I just knew that I had to step away. Obviously, I was scared in a lot of ways but I knew it was the thing I had to do.

The one thing that everybody tells you is that people don't pick up the phone when you leave your job, right? If you're at *Vogue* or Google, that sounds good, [but] no one will call you up. No one. I thought to myself: "I don't want them in my life. If they're not going to pick up my call, it's fine. I have to let that go." But what I realised is that it's

“Technology companies inherently move very quickly; they do things as experiments and then they move on. I think the cultural sector needs a lot more flexibility and fluidity”

about the people; it's not about the work you did together, the big project or the fancy moment. It's relationships that you build over time that do come back to you. Now I have conversations with people that I would never have had before. It's the same people, but we just connect in a different way.

I do think there's an exchange in ways that you don't always realise when your head is down and you think your life or work is defined by an infrastructure around you. Someone once told me: if you're upset in a meeting, remember you might bump into that person on the tube – what are you going to do if they're standing in front of you? It's a small thing, but I just think you don't really gain much from having negative relations. You have to be somebody who people want to be around, who they feel is coming with the right values and honesty. So do I believe everything Maya Angelou said? I think it's probably correct.

What's the collaboration that you're most grateful for?

That's a tough one. I just did one recently with the London Design Festival that I'm really excited by, and this was the first project I did by myself with the new platform I set up called open-ended design. We're creating a space where people from tech and the creative industries can come together to work on generating new ideas and creating shared spaces. We hosted a conference platforming artists, architects and designers with people from Amazon, Apple, Google, WeTransfer and TikTok, as well as coders and technologists, to see if they could engage around issues defined around critical thinking. So, how do we question things like bias and artificial intelligence, or where do we set the rules for the metaverse and how we build in it? It was a very serious and quite nerdy day, and I was really grateful for the London Design Festival, which was really supportive.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

A thing I'm really interested in right now was something I was talking about with a woman from TikTok Canada. In terms of not just design but also culture, a lot of us have lost any kind of connection to communities that remain Indigenous, where they're working

with their own traditions and craft culture in ways we're disconnected from. That's something I want to explore a lot further.

I grew up in Pakistan and spent a lot of time wandering around, working on conservation projects. That's a kind of collaboration where you're constantly surprised because you operate in very different ecosystems, but also you realise how much we're losing out on, not just for ourselves but for young people. And it's where community engagement really matters. Because if you can go a lot deeper into somebody's life and practice, it might seem completely antithetical to have a work collaboration with them, but something might manifest out of it, or you might see the world very differently.

Obviously, we are now having these conversations a lot more in the art world and similarly in other sectors. How do you really push into a place that feels uncomfortable or foreign? And of course [it's important] you're respectful and you're not appropriating ideas or culture in a way that is damaging or destructive, but I think that needs to happen a lot more.

The other thing I'm really interested in is conversations around interspecies harmony; how we connect across species. A lot of amazing artists and architects and scientists are working on this: how we consider partnering with nature in a way that creates an empathy we don't necessarily always have in the way we live, because we're just thinking about humans or mostly thinking about ourselves and then thinking about other humans.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Yes. I've had many different kinds of jobs and sometimes you work on something really hard and then it never happens or it breaks. In tech, this happens all the time. When I was in Singapore, I worked on emerging markets and we were creating new products for people around the world as they were getting access to the smartphone. Their first experience of the internet was on a phone and 90% of what I worked on never existed in the real world.

My first job, actually, when I joined Google in California, was working on the self-driving car, which also still doesn't exist as a thing in the world. You get really used to just letting things go and cutting things off, but you never know where that comes back in your life. I think if you do something, even if you know it might not last, if you do it with all of your heart and do it seriously and put the energy and the effort into it, that will always come back around. So that's one thing I really believe in.

The other thing is that I don't think anything happens without effort. Maybe I'm wrong – you see ballet dancers and of course they look effortless on the stage, because their entire life is making themselves as perfect as they can be in that moment. And in this era of social media, everyone has a story that they can edit and tweak to look like it's effortless. [But] that doesn't actually result in long-term impact, and I think that's really important.

And finally, precision. You know, I was talking about this with India Mahdavi recently, this incredible designer based in Paris. She works a lot with fabric, textile and interiors and we discussed this idea of precision not just in her work, but also the people she works with – every detail will always matter. Often organisations confuse micro-managing with detail orientation. They are two different things. You have to consider the details. Messing anything up today is a small thing, like a social media post that's a bit wonky. Doesn't matter. But of course it matters – it's a story of a business, your organisation, the narrative you're putting out, and that adds up.

So I think that's something that we should be talking about a lot in all of our own work, even if the stakes are low, because it does translate. And if anything, you pass that on to somebody else. My first job was investment banking in New York. That really smashes any ego out of anyone. You never forget a full stop at the end of a sentence and that's probably not a healthy way of learning. But I do think it's important to consider that people who strive for excellence in their field, whatever they are doing, will be considering that every last detail does matter.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

Ask for help. Always ask for help. It doesn't matter if people say no. I ask people for help all the time, every day. If they have time and energy, if they want to share and give, they will. Most people are just happy you asked them. In my work, it's always been people, rather than "job stuff". I've moved teams with people, following a boss or somebody I was inspired by, and that's what lifts you up. That's what takes you forward and what expands your role. And always, I think, asking is the best thing.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I think it really varies by personality type, but the best leaders I've had have created some structure and boundaries and then allowed their teams to have freedom within that. It allows for creativity. It allows for spontaneity, serendipity and it allows for people to find their own voice. You're taking a risk then, because you're not controlling every single action.

I was at a company where it got bigger and bigger and everybody's roles were more and more siloed. Then it stops being as fun, because you have a much more structured life and work. So I think leadership from the very top can help define that and how organisations are run, and it can happen in the smallest of circumstances.

This is hard sometimes and I think it's very fraught right now. There are so many issues and so much pressure on leaders of organisations, big or small. The cultural sector has had this fear of not messing up. I think leaders are shrinking away from engaging and don't understand what it means to create cultures of respect, because everybody now feels they have something to challenge them about. Leaders who can do that successfully, who can create organisations and teams where people feel respected and respect each other, I think there's some magic to it. I don't think there's any one way of achieving that; it should vary by context. It should vary by whether you're in

> “The best leaders I’ve had have created boundaries, then allowed their teams to have freedom within that”

Vauxhall or King’s Cross, it should vary by industry or sector, by the size of your organisation. It’s really more about intuition and understanding people and probably building empathy, which, you know, everybody can do.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

Oh wow, well, what did everyone else say? I think my manifesto is really believing that you can do something. We’re always held back by all of the restraints and constrictions around us. Once I have something to work towards, I can really put my head down and work very hard and make things happen and be really intense, which isn’t always healthy. But the thing that I have the hardest time doing is believing that I can do something.

I think until you create space for that, you’re not actually going to be expansive in your work or your ideas, and you should just expect that you will be corrected if you’re wrong or if it’s not possible; you will be corrected along the way. But there’s nothing worse than being held back by this idea that you can’t, because you can. It just might end up in a different direction than you might have wanted or planned for.

Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE

Artistic director of the Young Vic

Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE is a British playwright and director. He has been artistic director of the Young Vic since 2018. Prior to that, he was artistic director of Baltimore Centre Stage, USA. His 2003 play for the National Theatre, *Elmina's Kitchen*, was shortlisted for an Olivier Award and won the Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright Award. He was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the 2012 Birthday Honours for services to drama. From 2010 to 2015, he was chancellor of the University of the Arts, London.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I didn't come into the arts to serve the 5% or 10% who [normally] walk into a theatre either here or in the US. I came in because I believe that this art form is transformative. It can ask the right question and have you arrive at an answer that can change your environment. I do this because I want to incrementally lead an audience to a space where change is possible. Change can mean many things. I fundamentally believe in the ability of human beings to affect their community and their environment in the most positive of fashions.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

Social work and law. My mother wanted me to be a lawyer. I've let her down profoundly in that regard. But I say social work because I think that what we do in the arts is quintessentially to care for people; we look after their mental health. We saw that during lockdown: how many people signed up for a streaming company because we longed to see ourselves reflected? We perform a social service in the arts – like in law – because it's the forum, the tip of that spear, where you can help create legislation for change, represent the underrepresented, fight for those who can fight for themselves – but also for those who cannot. I think the arts are a beautiful conflation of reflection and advocacy.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

Thank you for deeming us a success. Someone asked me a question yesterday about failure, and I think that no matter how successful something may seem on the outside – you might produce a play that wins loads of awards and has great audiences – I tend to concentrate on what we did not achieve. I enjoy and celebrate all of the things that are successful, but the ability of an organisation to listen is what deems it successful: our ability to listen and then act on our listening, to bring it into the belly of the organisation, discuss it, and then try and find how you might respond.

I fundamentally believe you don't have to be quiet to listen. I think, because of the way we're structured, we sometimes act or we react before we even know it. I often ask a question, and in asking that question, it is not the answer I'm reading: it is that pre-cellular reaction. Your eyes go up sometimes when you're asked a question you were not expecting, and that tells me something. We can't train our subconscious reactions. So speaking to listen is a thing I do often, and I know sometimes that feels really weird [so] I'll just explain that some more. As I'm speaking right now, as my gaze lands on you, you feel instinctively that you must react, that you must shake your head or smile. That's what we all do, because we've been trained to. And if you don't, that also tells me something about you.

When I landed in Baltimore [at the Center Stage Theater], I was a bit: "Yo, I'm from London. They want me for my marvellous taste. Of course they do." We started programming the first season and it was great. All of a sudden, we started getting extra coverage in the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. PBS came and wanted to do a documentary about us. We got lots of that energy. I got to the end of that season and we had lost 900 subscribed members. That was a symptom of the fact that I did not listen. I was doing me, not listening to what they needed in that specific community. When I realised this was happening, I would have staff listening to people who might have left, or to people who loved it. I cared equally about those who enjoyed [a show], and why, and those who did not. It was just a recce, it was having ears on the ground to tell me things that I might not hear in my immediate circle.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I do. At the moment I'm really interested in philosophers that are speaking about what we broadcast as human beings. We are frequencies, we are energy. Your energy walks into a room; it says to someone, "this is who I am, this is how I feel about this environment". When someone walks into the room and they are filled with joy, we feel it, we know it, and it does something for us. Most importantly,

when someone brings in a very heavy energy, the whole room changes. It's a little bit like if you're on stage and a thousand people jump up and start applauding, but the one person that doesn't catches your eye. You go: "what did they see that no one else did?" And we start to obsess on that one person. We are 70% water and, like water, we remember. Broadcast well; broadcast joy; broadcast optimism. And people – even at a cellular level – will remember.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

Wow, that's a great question, and it's quite hard to answer succinctly. I'm really overjoyed and grateful for the collaboration that I had with my mother. Yoruba culture says that if you are really good in your last life, you get to choose the vessel by which you come into this world. So I must have been really great in my last life to have come through my mother. My parents raised me in a collaborative fashion, where I had ownership over parts of my destiny and my training. I'm really grateful for that, and for the collaboration I have with my family and my children. They help and they guide me. And they matter.

Professionally, I'm really overjoyed at the collaboration that I have with my management team, both at the Young Vic and my personal team. My team here at the Young Vic is really important to me. What we do is not just try to put on shows, but try to be a centre for our environment – a community centre, as it were. That means listening. The team has to work really hard to listen and respond. I'm tremendously grateful for that collaboration.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

The answer to that is: I don't know yet. There are multiple different groups of people that can make a huge change to the organisation. I'm audience-led, so what audience can we dance with that can change and impact us in a way that makes us think about the direction of travel? Financially, what entrepreneur sees the Young Vic as something that they want to invest in? And when I mean invest, of course it's not stocks and shares, I mean that they say: "We see you and we want to help underwrite more of what you do." That becomes

really important. And then, which artists walk through the door and say: "We want to dance with you, Young Vic"? That can help drive change, because change is a daily thing.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

I do, but I also think some of that is overrated. I think good fortune should always be mixed in, because you can do all of those things and the ball still doesn't hit the back of the net – or, more importantly, the ball hits the crossbar. It's a little bit of why I was speaking about energy – I believe that we can create our own good fortune to a degree. Creating the environment, so that when good fortune wants to knock at your door, you're able to open it, is also important. Let me just expand on that slightly. What is the energetic mark of your company? What is the energetic mark of the leadership of that company? I particularly look at music. For me, it is the most magnificent art form. It finds a way into your system without you even knowing it. But it does it by hitting a certain energy. And then you go: "Oh, I can feel it". "Feel" is very important in leadership. We underestimate the amount of brains we actually have in our body, around our hearts, around different organs. When you say, "I'm following my gut", you're not somehow bypassing your cerebral cortex. You're actually listening to another cerebral part of your system. That feels really important to me. You cannot get by without any of the three Ps that you've spoken about. But let's not forget that sometimes we need the wind of good fortune behind us.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

It's very hard to answer that. You always want to answer this question with some great, profound answer that everybody will scribble down and put on their Instagram page. But I honestly think it is from my mother [when I was] at my lowest point. I was about 19 and I'd been given this opportunity to possibly get a publishing deal as a singer-songwriter. The publishing house linked me up with the most famous band of that time. And I went: "Oh, my God, I'm there. It's going to happen. I'm working with X, they're brilliant. I'm going to have my three songs that I can go into the record company with now,

“My optimism relies on my history of resilience, of negotiating with problems, but most importantly, knowing that if I do not have the answer, someone out there does”

backed by some of the best producers." And they kept me waiting for about a year, just promising me that we'd hook up, have a session. And I went into what I, or actually what my mother, would describe as a depression. At the time, I didn't think I was depressed. I remember having a conversation with myself, it wasn't suicidal, but I was like: "Yo, if the Almighty wants to call me up now, at this point, I'm all good. I've had a great life at 19. I've experienced the world." At times like that, my mother would always say to me: "I believe you will achieve the thing you were sent here to achieve." I remembered that as my fortunes changed. Those moments of belief really helped me, even if not at that exact moment, then later on in life.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I'd like to concentrate on the optimistic part of that. Everything else in that question, which is brilliant, is relative to the lens of whoever is looking at you at that time. But optimism is undeniable, it is a thing that says: "Here is this problem. I believe that I, and those around me, have the ability to solve it. And if we do not, we have a network of others that can help us solve it." Ultimately, every day in arts leadership, we are faced with fundamental problems that can knock us over and we might not be able to bounce back up from. But my optimism, I think, relies on my history of resilience, of negotiating with problems, but most importantly, knowing that if I do not have the answer, someone out there does. My job is just to get to them and seek their advice. I think leadership is all about optimism, and not the performative optimism of, "I have to tick a box and act in a certain way". The only demand of this job is that there are people who are relying on you to pay their rent or their mortgage next week. And then there are the 110,000 audience members that come through the Young Vic annually, who are not relying on you, but have faith that you will provide them with something of substance. If you've got people placing that hope in you, then that's the fuel for optimism. Go find the answer.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

I don't know if I have a manifesto, but I do have a mantra. That is that I let my spirit lead me. I look at every opportunity through the lens of: do I have the energy to deal with you? Do I have the resilience? Do I have the strength to lead others? I ask that of almost every interaction. If my spirit or my gut says, "yes, you can handle it, even if they're dysfunctional", then that allows me to walk into every gig. Really, that's a long way round of saying my mantra for optimism is: Yes, I can. Yes, I can handle the thing; the dance with whoever it is will be the best that it can be, because I believe in them and I believe in my ability to help it fulfil its potential.

Karen Napier MBE

Chief executive officer, The Reading Agency

Karen Napier is CEO of The Reading Agency, a UK charity that aims to empower people of all ages to read. As director of development at the Southbank Centre, she led a £111m transformation of the Royal Festival Hall which was completed in 2007 and later became first associate dean of advancement at London Business School. Other roles include executive director of the Swarovski Foundation, chief executive of English National Ballet and chief executive of Wac Arts, a creative community hub in north London. Karen originally trained and worked as a dancer and was development director at Rambert Dance Company in Christopher Bruce's tenure and a founding trustee of Hofesh Shechter Company. She also chaired Greenbelt Festival and is currently a trustee of Kiln Theatre and Go Live Theatre Projects. She has an MA in philanthropic studies (her research was on philanthropy in musical theatre), and was awarded an MBE in 2022.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I have a real sense of "can do". There is a quote by [spiritual leader] Sri Chinmoy about optimism: "Optimism is the secret of self-resilience. Self-resilience is the secret of dynamic power. And dynamic power is the secret of immediate action." I have an inbuilt awareness of the possibilities of change – not that it's always going to be fine and rosy, but that I have agency, that I can make change through my own actions and values. One of the things I love about optimism is the energy it gives you. If we take this building [Southbank Centre] as an example, it was once thought by many to be in a hard to get to location. Coming over the river was seen as a challenge. It was dark, often dirty, and finding your way in was seen as difficult. For those of us who were working on the redevelopment, we had this huge vision that felt way beyond possible. I walk around today with real excitement and see the reality of the drawings we did, the conversations we had, it's all here – you're here, I'm here, millions of people come here and it's theirs. That inbuilt sense of "we can do this. We can change something for the greater good of London." I think it's baked in my DNA.

What business outside the cultural sector inspires you?

When I left the Southbank Centre after 10 years, I thought I would probably go into other arts and cultural organisations. That was my background: I'd arrived from the English National Opera and been at Rambert Dance Company before that. It was what mattered to me. One of the major donors here, Sir John Ritblat, kept saying, "Look at London Business School, look at education." I didn't go to university. I did a performing arts course and only fairly recently have done my Master's degree. I didn't think a business school was where I wanted to go. But I spent six months getting to know the faculty and was really inspired by what I learned, so I joined the team as associate dean and had a wonderful and inspiring time. I swapped great artists for great academics and learned that, actually, they were very similar. Real passion, real commitment, real focus to the change they were bringing. What I also learned within the business school environment was that data is so important. It gives you power. Where you bring the extraordinariness of art and culture and connect it with that rigour

and discipline and academic thinking, where you get those concentric circles together, it is incredibly exciting and dynamic. Those two worlds really inspire and interest me.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

Success is subjective in so many ways. You could say the success of the Southbank Centre and the campaign we led was manifest in the whole redevelopment and the £111m we raised. That was a massive public measure of success. But for me, the success was the people, the team and the privilege of working with extraordinary colleagues who remain very good friends years later. It is about the people I get to spend time with who I've learned from, and who I continue to learn from; it's the sense of where we start and where those possibilities might take us.

At The Reading Agency, we had a very significant financial gift during Covid-19 from the government's Loneliness Engagement Fund to make a massive difference all over the country around mental health, isolation and loneliness. There is success and exhilaration that comes from those big injections of support and endorsement. But the things that stay in my heart when I look back, are the people who were going beyond themselves to make a real difference through their work in delivering this important initiative. We learnt so many things that we did not think were possible at the beginning of those adventures.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Yes, I absolutely agree. Thinking about people who have inspired and supported me, I often can't remember what they said to me, years later, but I know those people were there with me. I also have a memory of 20-odd years ago when I worked in an amazing organisation and I felt disenfranchised by somebody who I felt should have known me in a different way. I'd worked incredibly hard, I was really committed, and the CEO and board all felt I was doing a really good job. However, they wanted to completely re-orientate the organisation's structure and

the CEO didn't tell me my reporting line was changing significantly. There was just a big internal announcement. I think it was the right decision for the company, but it made me feel like I didn't want to be part of that organisation for the next bit of the adventure. I really try to think about that in my own leadership. When somebody comes and asks me something, I want to know, "What do you think? What are the options?" I think that really stems from that earlier personal experience. If that CEO had said to me, "We are here, and we want to get to *here*, what do you think?", I would probably have got to the same answer they got to: the restructure. But it was the fact that I had no agency and no voice in that situation that stuck with me.

What's the collaboration that you're most grateful for?

I've had such joy with so many inspiring collaborations over the years. At The Reading Agency, our vision is a world where everybody is reading their way to a better life. Our mission is to get more people fired up about reading, for all its benefits on wellbeing, life chances and social connectivity. We collaborate on absolutely everything. Whether that's with every public library across the country, with publishers, with artists and authors, with government – it's baked into the model. That makes it really exciting, because we're a small charity of 30 people that in some ways have been under the radar, and we have decided to get bold and more public to have even greater impact through our work. I've had the opportunity to work with some really fantastic partners in all the roles I have been involved with, people who had insight and experience or funding from corporate partners, individuals or trusts and foundations. Though wonderfully, it's always been more than the money – fantastic impact and relationships that have lasted over many years.

At The Reading Agency, we are currently working with BBC Arts and *Blue Peter* and it's a really, really fun partnership. Fun because everybody wants to affect positive change for young people: how do we get reading and writing of stories to more children beyond those who do this easily? I've not worked with the BBC and *Blue Peter* in this way before – they are bringing their absolute best selves to this, and their resources and their convening power and commitment to inspiring children and families, is inspiring. We are so appreciative,

it's like "two plus two is way beyond five" on this one. The amount of brilliant competition entries that we're seeing from children has been incredible, with every one of the 8,000 short stories being read!

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

I've thought a lot about how we could scale the work we're doing. We're a national charity. We work with around two million people a year and one of the programmes we run is the Summer Reading Challenge. It's the largest of its kind in Europe and we work with about 700,000 young people of primary school age each year, which is amazing. But that's only a small percentage of the primary school-aged children in this country, of whom one in four haven't reached the expected level of reading by the age of 11, which is shocking. We have all the evidence of its inspiring impact and the brilliant partnership with public libraries to deliver it. For children who don't read over the long summer holidays, it has such a negative and cumulative impact. We know during the first term back after the holidays teachers are spending a disproportionate amount of time getting children back in the positive habit of reading. If you are not a child who has access to reading, accessing the Summer Reading Challenge through the library and getting wonderful incentives like medals and certificates makes such a difference. Every primary school child in this country should have the opportunity to take part in the Summer Reading Challenge.

We have 20 years of amazing data about this. DCMS [Department for Culture, Media & Sport] and Arts Council England are very supportive of our work and the positive impact we can demonstrate. It's also fantastic to have many advocates across all parties in government for reading and libraries, such as Lord Parkinson [Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries], who we know is a card-carrying library user and really passionate about the power of reading to change and transform your life chances.

If we are serious as a country about changing life chances and mental health for the better, for a pound a child we could make this intervention. In the grand scheme of things, that's not a lot of money. It's about getting key decision-makers to see what we're doing.

We have been building a stakeholder engagement plan for the last three years, demonstrating that if you join up as a local authority with health and education, as well as the library service, the investment has a greater benefit for council money. Again, it's collaboration, partnership working and building a sense of optimism and resilience. Bringing the people, the team, the work and the data all into our business plan has really moved those conversations forward.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Yes, I do. Going back to the first question, optimism isn't about it all being rosy and easy. Optimism is about resilience. It is about persistence. It is about digging in. If it doesn't go the way you think it's going to go, how do you build different options? How do you come out of the situation knowing you can move forward or assess and completely change your plan if you need to? I feel resilience is part of who I am and what I do; it's something I grew up with. My mum might have called it stubbornness at times, but I've got two children and one of the things my kids think we have as a family is resilience.

Part of what we're trying to do [at The Reading Agency] is to support people who are struggling to feel resilient or who are experiencing low mental health and wellbeing. For those who struggle to read, those who face barriers to reading, and those who are really poor with time, the power of reading is absolutely transformational. We've all got so many things to do, yet reading can be an escape. It gives us insight into other perspectives and experiences. The pre-determinants of earning power are more influenced by the reading that goes on around a young person's home life – whatever home is – than whether your parent has gone to university. The power of reading is extraordinary and we see it as something we need to share with everybody across the country. But it's also something that I feel very personally as well.

What is the best piece of advice you've been given?

I've had all sorts, but the best was really personal and came from Dame Vivien Duffield [when she was a trustee of the Southbank Centre board]. I was pregnant with my first daughter, and it was very

simple. She just said to me: "What's your childcare plan?" She wasn't undermining or questioning me. I think she was actually reminding me to feel happy in my home life, in my total self as who I am – somebody who was about to be a mum when this place was already "my baby". I was deeply passionate about the redevelopment campaign and the opportunity I had been given. What that advice was about – and I try to bring this to my own leadership – is my own authenticity. I am a mum. I have two great kids, a husband, friends and things I like to do. These are things I get a lot of joy from and are important to me. There was a whole tranche of my career where I wouldn't have talked about that because it felt it wasn't the right thing to do or say.

I think her advice was not to interfere or to demean, but to give me agency and power. And to remind me that putting a support structure around myself to take care of those little people meant that I could really be here and love it and give my 110%. That I could really celebrate and value that whole person I was becoming as a mum. And, 18 years later, I still regard that advice highly, because it really made me think that we can be authentic leaders; we can have all those different bits of us.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

It does take energy to bring that sense of positivity all the time. But I think it's a practice you can adopt as well. I feel leadership is not about the person who's got the job title. Leadership is everybody. Whatever you do, whatever your role, I'm really excited by people leading. My favourite job is to be less in the public eye and see other people there instead. I get a lot of joy out of that. I'm very excited to see colleagues who perhaps came in as first jobbers in organisations and are now doing extraordinary things, making fantastic impacts in arts and cultural organisations. I don't think I've got all the answers. I know I haven't. I love recruiting and building fantastic teams. Always employ people who are better than you, was a piece of very good advice I was given many years ago, then everything in the organisation rises.

> “Leadership is not about the person who’s got the job title. Whatever you do, whatever your role, I’m excited by people leading ”

I have a theory that people come to you with issues and they have the answers themselves. What they often don’t have is the permission within themselves to articulate it. The structure doesn’t give them permission, or they don’t feel they’ve got it. What we’re looking for is a sort of checking in, a repositioning. I always want to know: how do you think we do this? What’s your answer? I am really interested in how you empower people to lead and to have the floor and shine. That matters enormously to me while of course being there if they need any support. That does go with the territory – to make sure you are absolutely ready to be the one in front of the problem if need be.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

Believe in yourself. I just think it comes from within you. That’s not conceitedness or an over-inflation of pride. It’s none of those in-your-face big things, it’s deep within yourself. It’s knowing that whatever the outcome, you can find agency and you can see your way through it, even if it’s difficult or not where you thought. It’s not being afraid to trust your own judgments and to take soundings. That is definitely part of my personal manifesto around optimism.

Ben Rawlingson Plant FRSA

Deputy director of global public affairs and communications at the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation

Ben Rawlingson Plant joined the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation in April 2020, where he directs global communications and reputation management. He previously spent 19 years with Brunswick Group, an international strategic advisory firm, developing the agency's cultural business in Asia, the Middle East and the US. He has overseen crisis management and strategy development for the Brooklyn Museum and the Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles, and supervised communications campaigns for the V&A's British Galleries, Art Dubai, the Saadiyat Island Cultural District in Abu Dhabi and Louvre Abu Dhabi. He lectures on cultural strategy at Sotheby's Institute of Art in London and New York, and has also held positions at the Edinburgh International Festival, Dulwich Picture Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and Tate. He earned a Masters in art history from University of St Andrews.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

We've just been through an extraordinary process at the Guggenheim Foundation. I've been going across the constellation [of museum sites] for the first time, evaluating what the Guggenheim means to us – the staff who work here – and to the outside world. We brought in an agency that is based in London, Jane Wentworth Associates. They conducted a series of interviews across the constellation. What we came up with was a set of four values that we live by, which we have begun the process of rolling out. They are: being experimental, accountable, collaborative and open.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

That's a really good question; it's really interesting to think beyond the cultural sector. Anything to do with sustainability is absolutely essential. So any businesses that are out in the world trying to rectify the damage that we're doing. I have a son who recently left university and is trying to set up a business in Brazil to stop the deforestation of the Amazon. Businesses, large or small, like these are the most crucial to the world that we live in.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

I would say resilience, which became particularly central in the face of a global pandemic. Like many cultural organisations in the UK, the Guggenheim Foundation closed in March 2020, and we didn't reopen until October 2020. We rely very, very heavily on ticket sales: 30% of our revenue comes from visitors and we ended up with a deficit of $11m at the end of 2020. We're still trying to recover from that. We also had to let staff go. Many people were furloughed. This has happened around the world. And we had to put ourselves back together. It was resilience, and being open and adaptable – able to change in the moment – that was key to our organisation.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Yes. In terms of the team that I lead here at the Guggenheim Foundation and across this constellation, the positive dynamic of working within an organisation is really connecting with people and creating a good sense of trust, support and openness with the people that you work with.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

During the first year of the pandemic, there were a bunch of expats like me who were stuck in New York – mainly Europeans, but also people from other parts of the world. We set up this very informal, fun, social but also networking moment in Fort Greene in Brooklyn. We used to meet in the park and people would bring bottles of wine and snacks along, and we'd sit there and chat. It was people from the cultural sector who came together, and all sorts of interesting things came out of that, including a partnership that I'm super proud of: between the Guggenheim Foundation and an arts organisation called The World Around. It was set up by an English woman who also lives in Brooklyn, called Beatrice Galilee. She was the curator of [contemporary] architecture at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and then she left to set up this think tank for design and architecture. She'd run really successful conferences at the Met and she wanted to find a host and a home for The World Around after she left there.

The result of one of these "Greene Fridays", as we called them, was that The World Around came to the Guggenheim Foundation, and that's now [in 2022] in its third year. We stream events live. We had a hybrid version this year, where we have a few people in our auditorium and lots of people around the world watching it. I'd really encourage everyone to go online and look at some of these conversations, because they're some of the most interesting thinkers in terms of design and architecture around the world. I'm really pleased with that particular partnership.

> “It was resilience, and being open and adaptable, that was key to our organisation”

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

One of the things that shocked me when I first joined the Guggenheim Foundation back in April 2020 was the conversation around audiences. I remember having a Zoom with various people from across the museum in New York and talking about audiences, and someone turned to me and said: “What exactly do you mean by audience?” I said: “Well, the people who come to the museum and its publications, and engage with us online.” This person looked very confused. There’s a big difference, I think, between many arts organisations in places like the UK and arts organisations in the US, which tend to be privately funded. We have a board, and our board essentially underwrites the museum. We don’t have an Arts Council in America, so we don’t have to tick the boxes that arts organisations in the UK have to tick. I know this because I worked at Tate and I also sit on the board at the Camden Art Centre. How it plays out in the US is that there’s a lack of engagement in audience development. The challenge is that you’re answering to a board. The vast majority of people on our board, and this is probably an obvious thing to say, have a lot of money. So there’s quite a big gulf between our staff – the way that they think and feel – and our board and their expectations.

So I would like to connect more with audiences, and specifically audiences from diverse communities in New York City. Our audience is predominantly white and not representative of the makeup of New York. When we reopened in October 2020, we focused a lot on local audiences, which we've never really done before. The thing about the Guggenheim Foundation is that people come from all around the world to New York, and we have this iconic Frank Lloyd Wright building on Fifth Avenue: 50% of our visitors are tourists coming to look at the building. When you don't have that, you can't rely on that. You have to start digging deep into the audience that you have on your doorstep. So there's been a whole shift that's taken place at the museum in New York. I don't think it's just us. All the cultural organisations are, for the first time, properly considering audiences and valuing our visitors in a way that we haven't really done.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

I'm not sure I would say that. Resilience may tally with persistence. Perspective is important. I would say empathy as well; to have an organisation which has empathy for its employees and its visitors is really key.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

To listen to what people have to say. It's quite hard sometimes to listen, particularly when you're in a managerial role and you have deadlines to meet and things to roll out. But really listening – not just to senior staff but to everyone. I've learnt so much here from listening to young people who have a completely different perspective.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I would go back to the values that we've identified for the Guggenheim Foundation – particularly accountability. I don't think people within arts organisations are always held accountable and I think it's really

important that it's enforced. Also openness; a certain transparency in the way that you operate. When I first started here, there was a complaint: that the leadership wasn't transparent. People didn't understand why decisions were being made and who was making the decisions. It was frustrating and upsetting and detrimental to the organisation. The other value that is really crucial is being collaborative; working with everyone across the organisation, not working in silos and being open to new ideas.

Accountability is probably the toughest one for everyone because it's really saying: "If this doesn't happen, then the blame lands with me. I'm not to blame, but I take responsibility for this not happening." And I think holding oneself and one's colleagues and organisation accountable is hard. It's not always easy to cut people a bit of slack. Everyone's very busy, and we work in the arts so people aren't hugely well paid. But I think that is the most important, but the hardest one to live by.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

My star sign is Sagittarius – naturally positive, optimistic people. I feel like I have a natural, innate optimism within me. The key to optimism is gratitude. I feel that whatever terrible things are happening in the world, I step into that Frank Lloyd Wright building on Fifth Avenue, and it's so uplifting and beautiful. It was designed as the temple of the spirit. That gives me real optimism. I'm grateful for that.

Victoria Siddall

Trustee and co-founder of Gallery Climate Coalition and board director of Frieze

Victoria Siddall is a strategic advisor to museums and businesses, including Frieze where she was formerly global director, and an international advocate for a more sustainable art world. She is a co-founder and trustee of Gallery Climate Coalition – a charity and membership organisation for the art world which has more than 1,000 members, all of whom have committed to a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 – and a founding advisor to Murmur, which will launch in spring 2024. Victoria is a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, a trustee of the Ampersand Foundation, and chair of the board of Studio Voltaire.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I think driving towards and believing in a better future is something that unites everybody. Optimism is an important part of that; the starting point being, what can we do? One recent project I've been very involved with is Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC), a charity and membership organisation that aims to make the art world more environmentally responsible and sustainable. It can often be depressing when you read the news about climate change. So the premise of the project really was: what can we do to make the future better, to be more responsible as an industry and as individuals? That starting point of being positive and solutions-focused has been with me throughout my work with Frieze, Studio Voltaire and GCC. I try to see the problem and figure out how to solve it; looking to a better future, in which that problem no longer exists.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

I've always been rooted in the cultural sector, but I have been lucky enough to work with quite a few businesses and charities outside it as well. There's so much to learn by doing that. One charity I've helped raise money for after coming across its work and being blown away by what it does is ClientEarth. It comprises lawyers who take the Earth as their client. It holds governments and corporations to account and have even prevented new coal-fired power stations from being built. The charity's approach seems to be: "Where can we make the biggest difference and how can we use the law to achieve this?"

Another organisation I've worked with, through Studio Voltaire, is Loewe – a luxury fashion brand with Jonathan Anderson at the helm. He's not only done incredible work in design but also in the partnerships he's set up. Loewe came in as a sponsor of a programme at Studio Voltaire, which provides seven artists, who wouldn't otherwise have the means, with a rent-free studio space for two years, as well as professional development and support. It is an incredible thing to do for the next generation of talent. They're all extraordinary artists, who will no doubt go on to do great things. I think that shows real vision as a company to put money into something meaningful and impactful.

Another one I'd mention is Patagonia, a multi-billion-dollar company that's been given by the owner in its entirety to the planet. It's locked in now that any profits made from Patagonia not reinvested back into the company will go towards environmental causes. I was thinking of them around Thanksgiving, which is followed by Black Friday, a hellish festival of consumerism. The owner of Patagonia has always refused to participate in this and even ran a Black Friday ad in *The New York Times* in 2011 saying: "Don't Buy This Jacket".

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm slightly obsessed with the solutions-focused approach, but it's served me fairly well; putting energy into seeing the problem, finding a solution and using that to drive things forward. I also think being innovative and open to ideas and change is really important – as well as being aware that these can come from anywhere in the organisation. I definitely found at Frieze that often the best and most innovative ideas came from people across the entire company. I was with the GCC team of three, and Poppy, the newest member, came up with an amazing idea for fundraising. It was genius, and I believe that encouraging that mindset throughout an organisation is really important.

I also think an unshakeable belief in the direction that you're going in is important, because there will be things almost every day that try to sway you off that course: people who don't believe in what you're doing and try to talk you out of it, or pitfalls along the way. Unshakeable belief is vital in a leader because everyone will be looking to you to keep them on course. At Frieze, there were a lot of people pulling together on this big, challenging project. It was like steering a ship: you've just got to keep guiding it in the right direction and take everybody along. There's a steadiness involved; a determination not to be knocked off course.

I've always thought of Studio Voltaire as nimble and able to take on new, innovative models. For example, House of Voltaire, its fundraising arm we set up more than 10 years ago, has just been this absolutely vital resource in terms of sustaining the organisation and helping it

grow and improve. It was quite an innovative approach at the time and engaged artists in a different way, and fired imaginations as a result, internally and externally.

In other organisations that have thrived, I've also seen this sense of knowing your value. It comes back to an unshakeable belief in your mission and having people around you, like a board or mentors, who also know your value and can remind you of it when you need it.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I do, and I love that quote because it points to the importance of art and culture to us as a civilisation. It's because of what it makes us feel that these art forms thrive and survive over centuries and generations – that common thread throughout thousands of years of art history.

I also think about the importance of long-term relationships. I have always found an attitude of "long term-ism" really helpful in businesses and non-profits that I've worked with: approaching every new relationship or partnership as if it's going to last for 10 years, and trying to make that happen. There's so much work involved in forging a new relationship. It's like with a friend or a lover – what goes into learning about each other, how each other works, what you want and how you can best coexist. So you want that to run for a long time. I was at Frieze for 18 years. When I started in 2004, I was running sponsorship and started various partnerships. Five are still running today. Every year you work together, it gets better, because you understand each other's needs, requirements and so on. Bearing in mind the needs of others – and investing in that so it is something that will be there for you in the future – is really important.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

Grateful is a good word. There have been a few recently. I mentioned ClientEarth, the amazing environmental law firm – I collaborated with a group of people these past two years to raise money for them.

Christie's, Thomas Dane – who has a gallery in London and came up with this idea initially – and a group of incredibly generous artists and galleries donated work to benefit ClientEarth. We raised about $6.5m, with donations from Cecily Brown, Antony Gormley, Nan Xing and others. The sale of a painting donated by Rashid Johnson enabled ClientEarth to open its first office in the US. The charity is now doing work in the Amazon because of a donation made by the Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes. It's one of the things I feel most proud of, and therefore most grateful for, because it was just such an extraordinary experience. To be able to work with artists and see the mind-boggling generosity on their part was really inspiring.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

Funnily enough, I had a conversation recently that was one of those "light bulb" moments where you're like: "Wow, this would be amazing." I was talking with GCC about education because we had a call with somebody who runs an art school in the US. One of the things we've been trying to do is change the way that galleries, museums and even artists approach sustainability and environmental responsibility. But there's a major aspect of retrofitting involved in that, and changing existing behaviours is quite challenging. It's happening, but it's tough. We had a conversation about creating a sustainability module to be taught at art schools as core to the syllabus. Everybody graduating from every art school would have this built into their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, and those people would go on to run all the museums and galleries of the future and be the artists of the future. There could be this huge step change. So that would be a good one.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

I do absolutely, and I'd add a fourth P, which is preparation (I'm the geek with the notes). Persistence is absolutely necessary. Nothing gets done without persistence – if you look back through history, women getting the right to vote happened thanks to serious persistence on behalf of some individuals. For me at Frieze, the biggest things were setting up new fairs from scratch. The first one I did was Frieze

Masters, and it was absolutely terrifying, I cannot tell you. Mainly because there were people who were initially sceptical of its success and of my ability to make it work, which was fair enough. I had a lot to prove and it took an enormous amount of persistence to get there, especially when many galleries' first reaction was: "We'll wait until year two and see how it turns out." But ultimately they stepped up and did it because I wouldn't leave them alone.

Practice – also vital. I will confess, it's probably my weakness because there's an aspect of practice that is repetitive; having to do things again and again and get incrementally better at them. I do sometimes lose patience with that. I will say, having done certain things for a long time, there's a real joy in realising you're an expert because you've done it so often that people come to ask you for advice. That's wonderful.

And the last one is perspective, vital in any leadership role because there will be crises. I have certainly faced various crises in my time, and keeping those in perspective is vital for your sanity and your team's morale. It's not saying "don't take things seriously", it's more about not taking things personally, and remembering that it's not your whole being that is impacted by a crisis. It's something you need to deal with as best you can, and there will be another side to it; you'll come out of it and learn from it. People move on much more quickly than you think they're going to, in my experience.

On that note, someone once told me, which I found very helpful: "Recognise the difference between urgent and important." We all have a tendency to deal with things that are urgent because they're right in front of your face and need doing right now. If we're talking about perspective and seeing into the future, the things that are important long-term can get pushed to the bottom of the list but it's vital to get them done. That's the long-term, future-focused aspect of perspective.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

One that's always stayed with me is to "only do what only you can do". There's often a temptation to do everything – I certainly have that instinct – because out of the big, hairy things that you need to do, there are others that are more fun or easier or more interesting. But those

“Optimism comes from knowing where we want to go and then just working out a route to get there”

could be done by somebody else, and you're the only person who can deal with the big, hairy thing. It works two ways: if you follow this principle it means you're doing the difficult leadership stuff, and it also makes the roles of the other people working with and for you much more interesting. If you're taking the slightly easier but interesting stuff away from them, that's quite disempowering. Reserving your own energy and time for just the things that only you can do – I'm not saying I always do it, but I try.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

Something I've been on the receiving end of is the leader's ability to elevate others; to allow them to shine. I took over running the Frieze fairs from the founders, Matthew [Slotover] and Amanda [Sharp]. They had done it from the beginning; it was their baby. They'd put everything into it and were the ones associated with it. And then, one day, they asked me to take over. I almost said no. I was thinking: "I don't know, it sounds incredibly challenging, and high pressure..." But also this idea of taking over – they were big shoes to fill. Being completely honest, I was also sceptical they'd be able to step back sufficiently to allow me to do it. I know how much work it took on their part to do that, to allow me to make decisions and to take the glory when it went well and to deal with it when it didn't. They were in the background when I needed advice, but didn't push that at me, or take the decision-making away. That's difficult to do, but vital to allow someone else to step into a senior role.

Allowing other people to make mistakes and to learn from them is maybe an obvious one. I have a young child, and if any of you have kids, you see this so clearly: if you jump in and do everything for a small child, they'll just carry on and let you do that and never figure out how to do it on their own. But that frustrating thing of sitting there watching them trying to tie their own shoelaces for half an hour in the morning when you're late for school, ultimately, is the only way to allow for any independence in the future. It comes back a little bit to only doing what only you can do, and not taking problems

away from people. It took me a while to figure this out, actually, when I was at Frieze. People would come to me with problems, and I knew what the answer was because I'd done it before. I really had to train myself not to give the answer – or take it off them and say: "Just let me do it" – but to say: "Go and figure it out on your own. Come back when you've got a solution and then I'll help you with that."

It also makes for a much, much nicer life if people are coming to you with solutions and not problems. Getting that mindset into an organisation makes everybody's life more pleasant. Oh, and not yelling as well. I'm very against yelling in the workplace. I will say that art fairs are a particularly high-octane environment and very stressful: it's going to open at 11am on Wednesday, whether it's ready or not, and a lot rides on it. You work all year on one event that lasts for five days, which is crazy, I know. But no one ever shouts.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

Manifesto is a big word, isn't it? But I do have some thoughts. It's the "eyes on the prize" approach; looking at the future that you want, asking: "What's going to get us there?" I'm a very practical person, as you can probably tell. And so my optimism comes from knowing where I want to go and then working out a route to get there.

At Studio Voltaire, I've been on the board for 11 years, which is a long time, but I love it so much. I will step down in the future because I have to. But when I joined, there were no locks on the front door, there was no heating, the roof leaked. The team, including Joe [Scotland], the director, was being paid to work three days a week, but in reality working six. It was so clear that Joe had this vision, and I felt my job as board chair was to support him to realise this. Like: "What do you need to get there?" Eleven years later, he has transformed the organisation. We went through a big capital redevelopment campaign last year and rebuilt the building. I'm not saying it was easy; it's been a phenomenal amount of work from the whole team and board, but there's been this consistent vision and optimism and belief that Studio Voltaire will one day be this thing, and now it is. There's a lot of power in that.

“I have found an attitude of ‘long term-ism’ really helpful in businesses and non-profits: approaching a new relationship as if it’s going to last for 10 years, and trying to make that happen”

Anne Torreggiani

Chief executive of The Audience Agency

Anne founded The Audience Agency in 2011 as a charity that helps cultural organisations across the world understand and engage audiences. She is a specialist in trends and patterns of public engagement, with a particular interest in cultural democracy and organisational change. She has worked as a facilitator and adviser for many organisations including Arts Council England, the British Council, local authorities and the European Commission, and trains cultural leaders in creating inclusive organisations. She is also a columnist for Arts Professional and a trustee of Tamasha Theatre Company and the EU's Europeana digital culture platform.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role, what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

Optimism. I grew up in southeast London, and I was really interested in arty things, but there weren't many art opportunities where I lived. I was a slightly stroppy teenager and I felt quite resentful about the fact that we'd been overlooked. My first job was for a local authority, a temp job organising somebody's office in what they called the "leisure and entertainment team" because they were proud to say they didn't spend one single pound on "arts" in the London Borough of Bexley! So I worked my way into the entertainment team. Before I worked there, I didn't know that jobs like that existed but once I was in, I loved it and thought: "This is fantastic, this is what I want to do." But I thought you could do so much more and I formed a youthful, messianic belief that we could and should change the way that institutions behave, that we should make them more "arty" and democratic. It's still what motivates me today. I'm interested in culture and democracy. My values are shaped by the idea that if we have publicly funded, supported and positioned arts and culture, that it should be for everyone and we need to work much harder at it.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

Not to sound too grandiose, but I'm very inspired by organisations that, despite their need for revenue, never lose sight of their real purpose. So, if I think of a big one, the *Guardian*. Not necessarily just because of the nature of its editorial, but if you think about it as a business, the paper has never lost sight of what it's there to do. The commitment to independent journalism and public interest always drive the organisation. The money side of it is secondary to the purpose at all times. But the thing I also admire the *Guardian* team for is that they saw the digital trends way before anybody else did. The newspaper's model has been so much better for it – and true to purpose. It invested very heavily in digital in the early days. Everyone thought the organisation was being a bit crazy because it spent a lot of money on it early on. Lots of the other newspapers were saying, "No way, this isn't important." The *Guardian* took a punt on it, but have never stopped adapting and experimenting with the model. It's this incredibly successful brand because it predicted the future very well.

I love the social enterprise model. That's the thing I'm most interested in. I'm most excited about people who are able to find a way of doing something important for society but in a sustainable model, in which people are paid proper wages.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

Well, of course I would say this, but I think you really need to know your audience. Understanding that you might have different audiences that need different things from you and being really clear about that. If you sell high-end jewellery, you probably have a very distinctive niche. Your market is just one group of people. You know them really well and you can make a business out of that. But most of us who work in the cultural sector have the ambition of serving a broad community. It's really important for us to understand many differentiated needs: you will need to do a range of different things to engage different people. That's also true in our own business. We try to understand the needs of different groups of organisations and cater differently for them.

The other big thing is to make sure that everyone across the organisation has shared values, that we share a common sense of purpose. Ultimately, I think, you can morph, adapt and find all sorts of solutions as long as you hold on to that purpose.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

Absolutely. We don't always get it right. The feeling that I hope we leave people with is that we worked *with* them. The greatest compliment is when people walk away and say: "We really enjoyed collaborating with you." I like to think that we walk alongside people. The Audience Agency is not commercial, we're a charity, so I think that although we do what lots of other commercial organisations do, we like to take the long view. We're there for people. For me, that's one of the marks of success; when people say that we were *with* them.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

I was thinking of three different kinds of collaboration. There's collaboration where you find somebody else who has a skillset you don't have or does something that you can't do but which complements your own work. That really works, doesn't it? (I think the collaborations that go badly are the ones where your skills and strengths are the same and you end up competing.)

Another is about reaching scale by working together. We've certainly had some of those, where you can just go further and make more noise by working with others. We've had some real successes with that.

And the third one – this is more subtle but is the one that has had the biggest impact for me personally – is where by working with others, you're just getting a different view. I love working in collaborative teams with other organisations, and the ones that make the most lasting impact are when we're widening our perspective. We work with a little group of organisations in Europe, for example, and I've just loved that. They're all doing similar practice to us but in a different context. It makes you question all the things you take for granted... It holds up a mirror and shows you how you can do things in other ways. Anything that gives you that extra perspective. I've also really enjoyed working in that collaboration, because it's a very safe group of leaders that I can hang out with and they don't necessarily know the shit that's going on at home!

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

I think we became a software company when we didn't really intend to be. The thing that we needed didn't exist, so we ended up with a tech development team and so on. We're quite small and obviously we have had to learn very fast how to become that. So I would definitely like to have an equitable partnership with some other tech companies.

But in other aspects of our work, I think the people I most want to connect with are those at the beginning of their careers – in the emergent environment, able to challenge some of our orthodoxies.

“One of the behaviours I really admire, and that I try to model, is to really listen to everybody. Active listening to divergent views is really important”

You need to be able to check and challenge yourself, because we're all enthusiasts, and we want to believe that what we're doing is great. Giving space to people with new and different perspectives is critical.

One of the things we can really see, having lots of audience data at our fingertips: is that the average age of audiences, particularly for classical music and theatre, is going up all the time. It's like the boiling frog, you know, we haven't noticed that there's a crisis coming. Many mid- and large-scale organisations are really successful at their marketing, so they continue to see more people coming through the doors. Their average ticket price goes up, they're doing a really good job. But what they're not quite noticing is the fact that the average age is creeping up all the time. There is definitely a problem coming along the line: audiences are not being replenished. Those younger audiences are not coming through the door. I think the idea that you suddenly get an interest in these things when you hit 45 is just not true. It might once have been true, but it seems that this is not what's happening now. I think there is an enthusiastic, fairly homogenised core group keeping those art forms alive. The big markers of likelihood to engage with public arts and culture are high levels of education and probably working in some sort of creative industry. How do we challenge that?

In more engaged projects, where organisations are embedded in their community, you do see people bucking that trend but it's undoubtedly a tall order. I think one of the things that's very difficult is not giving work space to get known. We whisk things off while they're still only [known by] a little group of people who are very culturally confident, so we don't let things become popular. There's a reason that everybody goes to see *The Nutcracker*: it's because they've heard of it. Similarly, popular things like panto actually have a very socially diverse audience because the form is so well-known. I think we got stuck between this rather boring repertoire that some people know but doesn't really serve everyone's needs – a few absolute stars everybody recognises – or really new work that people are a bit scared of.

This issue about an ever-narrowing, well-off baby boomer audience is that it isn't just about zhuzhing up the repertoire. I think it's about creating different kinds of experiences. For gen Zs and gen alpha, their experience of the world is so totally different. My kids, you

know, they're watching four screens at all times and they're also in the middle of their own dramas. I'm not saying all has to be digitised, but I think we have to anticipate that people need different kinds of experiences and we have to find ways to be more experimental in that.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

Completely. It's hard to disagree with that one. I guess perspective probably trumps the others for me. Not losing sight of what it is you're for. That helps with the others. When I'm having a really bad month, seeing the long view carries me through.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

Two things. One of them is quite banal but absolutely true. I had a boss early on, who I must admit I thought was a lazy old chap. I used to be a bit of a drama queen, lots of "Oh my god, we'll never make the deadline!" And he just sat me down one day, bought me a pint for lunch (as we did in those days!) and said: "Do you know this thing about swans? Swans glide along even though their feet are madly paddling underneath? You need to work more like a swan." I think it's probably become a total cliche, but it was really good advice. I now deliberately exercise levity when reacting more dramatically might feel more natural. You've got to keep it looking good while everything is seriously happening underneath. Make it look effortless.

But the one that my current chair always plugs away at, and I think is also absolutely true, is that you've got to have a great team around you. It's all about everybody else, it's never about you. It's absolutely obvious, isn't it? But there it is. And some good coffee, obviously.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

That's such an interesting question. I've been on a really long journey personally around this and, for me, it was a big revelation to understand

that people might do things in a different way to you – and their way might even be better! When I started my career, I'd sit somebody down and say: "Let's do this and this." When they did it in a different way, I'd be like: "No, no, no, I didn't say do *that*. I said to do *this*." Focusing too much on what they did rather than thinking about what the outcome was. I was thinking about the process that would work for me, with all my particularities. Learning to enable people to do things well in *their* way, that it's all about the outcome, has been really hard for me.

I interviewed the leaders of The Creative People and Places programme, who I felt were working successfully in a "cultural democracy" model, about how you lead from behind and leave space for other people's creativity. What impressed me most was their ability to listen to many voices without losing sight of what mattered. One of the behaviours I really admire, and that I try to model, is to really listen to everybody. When you're listening to someone say something that's not what you had in mind, it can be easy to stop listening because it gets confusing, particularly if you're trying to lead and you believe in your own vision. But I think that's just a kind of weakness. Active listening to divergent views is really important, and being able to do that with strength.

As an aside, The Creative People and Places programme is interesting. About 10 years ago, Arts Council England decided to make money available to the places that had the lowest levels of cultural engagement around the country. They were small pots of money, and the recipients had to be partnerships between organisations and the community. It's been a good model because the premise for funding forced people to collaborate, consult and involve the community. It has become a way of working that has been more recognised by the mainstream, and that's been amazing. I think it's the only large-scale project that has ever consistently reached a completely different demographic. This has actually worked, and it has worked over time and got better and better.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

There's always tomorrow – tomorrow's another day. I could say more but I think that's enough.

Erica Whyman OBE

Theatre maker and artistic leader, former acting artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company

Erica stepped down as acting artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2023. She joined the organisation as deputy artistic director in 2013 and led the reopening of its experimental theatre The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon. Before that, she served as the chief executive of Northern Stage in Newcastle upon Tyne, where she oversaw a redesign of its building and won critical acclaim for its programme, and was artistic director of Southwark Playhouse and The Gate Theatre, Notting Hill. In 2012, she was awarded an OBE for services to theatre and in 2016, she received the Peter Brook Empty Space Special Achievement Award in recognition of pioneering work in small theatre spaces with limited public funding. She studied French and philosophy at Oxford University, before attending the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School.

Optimism is about believing you can make the future better. In your role what beliefs drive you to make a better future?

I think it's important to be really honest. I was walking here, thinking: "You've got to really channel your optimism." Why was I thinking that? I'm a serial optimist; I've been the person who annoys people with my optimism for 20-something years, in different organisations. And my optimism hasn't been as challenged as it's been in the last three years. It feels like a really rich conversation, but I don't want to give you pat answers. There are new struggles for me with optimism. There's new weariness, there's new fears about what harm my optimism might do. But to try and answer the question, I continue to believe very strongly in my heart that the arts can genuinely shift how we feel about one another. I used to frame that slightly differently, that it can make a shift in how we think – it does do that sometimes – but I think it's not helpful to say that because the experience in the room is emotional. It's about connection: seeing and hearing one another and experiencing something that we might recognise, be that an appalling thing or a wonderful thing or everything in between. When we recognise that thing, then we're closer to being able to make change in our own lives, perhaps in a small circle around us or perhaps on a very big platform. We can't do it without that understanding of human beings. That belief has really stayed with me the whole way.

We live in such a transactional world and transactions don't require trust anymore. Changing things, really being able to express what that change is, and persuade someone of it, requires trust to get someone over the hurdle: to make it micro for a minute; to get someone over the hurdle of fearing change; fearing the loss that comes with change – the loss of identity, the loss of confidence, or the loss of competence that comes with realising you've got to do something differently. The strong belief, for me, is that you've got to put energy into trust.

The other thing is that, not at the beginning of my career but a long time ago, I understood that change is constant. There aren't moments of change or periods of change. Good leadership and good organisations are in change all the time; they're in horizon-scanning and responsiveness. That's what good looks like for me. If you know that, then it's much easier to be optimistic, because you're not saying:

“One day we’ll be at this magic spot.” You’re saying: “As long as forward is what’s happening, as long as we are responsive and our eyes are open to what the world is like and we acknowledge the fear that comes with going forward sometimes, then it’s possible to believe that it will always get a little better.”

Now, I started by saying I’ve had my optimism really challenged. One way in which it’s been challenged is the sense of going backwards that I’ve had in a number of moments – I think it was coming, for me, before the pandemic. The sense that I had to put markers in the sand. Just to name one: gender equality. I choose that because it’s personal, because I don’t think I had entirely believed we had in any sense reached a state of effective race equality or anti-racism, but I have in my life believed that we’ve reached something approaching gender equality – and then gone: “Oh God, we’re nowhere.” That sense of having gone back in time, the sense that the iterations of progress are big; the cycle seems to go a long way forward and then tugs you a long way back. Did you move forward at all? That’s when, for me, optimism is hard.

In those moments, recognising that the world has shifted is important. The thing you wanted hasn’t happened, but the world has shifted so the circumstances are better. There is greater understanding, there are new tools available to you. There are new humans available to collaborate with. So there really is progress. Progress has always been like that. It’s always gone in these circles and you pick up the things you missed the first time and you go again. We pick ourselves up, we make sure we learn, we make sure we listen and hear what we didn’t get right or we didn’t understand about the world. But we don’t let that knowledge prevent us from finding the energy to go again.

What businesses outside the cultural sector inspire you?

I found this question so hard and I’m ashamed. A life lived in a sheltered world! I’ve got a couple of answers. I’ve long been fascinated by cooperatives and mutuals. I’ve got a yearning to see if a theatre company could be led along the lines of a mutual: the people who make the work, own it. I think that’s what we’re yearning for in a rehearsal room; in any creative shared space. We talk about emotional belonging and we can create that in the arts quite swiftly. But can we

create a sense that the money belongs to us all? I used to work in Newcastle and it was a very important city in the founding of the Co-operative Society. So it's a very old-fashioned example, but I am inspired by that notion of how you might feel that you're persistently a member of something.

The other example is a cheat. A number of you may know the theatre company Improbable, and I've known Phelim [McDermott], one of the founding directors, for a long time. I'm collaborating with him now, so I'm having a moment of reflecting on my interest in his work and his practice over a very long time – I was his assistant director in a different century. It's only a little bit of a cheat – if you know Improbable's work, you'll know that it goes well beyond the theatre. I am inspired by the work that Phelim has led and Improbable has supported in open space technology, and in looking at something called World Work – a methodology for bringing conflict and heat in a debate to life, embodying it in a space in a way that allows us to see it, hold it, reflect on it and shift our position. It seems to me a way of expressing what creativity can offer the real world. I know that the theatre is the real world. I know that the music business is a real world and museums are real worlds. I know that. But can we have impact beyond our walls? That is, I suppose, not about the experience of creativity, but about creativity enabling a shift in our world beyond those walls. Improbable really inspires me in that regard.

What are the characteristics of a successful cultural organisation such as yours?

I'm very lucky in that I've worked at a lot of different scales. I started in Southwark, running a beautiful little theatre that is still here, but not here. It's moved a couple of times – it's in Elephant and Castle now. Then I worked at The Gate in Notting Hill. Then I was in Newcastle at a mid-scale theatre, a team of about 40-something; and then at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which is a bit different to that. I'm not sure I could at any time have said mine is a successful organisation. I was thinking this morning: "Why am I resisting that about the RSC?" Of course, it is partly about where I am right now but I think that's to do with embracing change. Successful organisations understand change or, to use a better word, flexibility.

“Leaders should help us imagine. It’s not about being right, smarter or faster. It’s about being the person who can enable everybody else to imagine”

I also continue to believe that there's something about being a happy workplace that is very profound. I've been in lots of organisations; you can't say that everybody is going to be happy every day. It's not possible to take responsibility for that. The workplace needs to be a place where everybody in it is inspired, excited [and] activated. So if they are grieving or frustrated or furious with the organisation, they are excited to be part of that dialogue, because there will be moments of unhappiness that are caused by tensions. That is unavoidable and part of healthy growth. But nonetheless the endeavour to say: "This must be a place where we're happy to be, even when it's tough" – that's really essential for me. Of course, the other thing is purpose. It's part of why people are excited to be in a space. It's not the whole story; it's partly about connection with others. But purpose is very, very key. Being clear what the purpose is. I use that word deliberately – you can talk about vision, mission; for me, they're all useful words but I'm trying to speak about what it might feel like on a tough morning when you want to stay under the duvet. For a leader or for somebody who doesn't have that level of power in the organisation, knowing what your purpose is within the greater purpose is essential.

I think that does come from having a dream; from having a sense that something will really change in the world as a result of what you do. One of the privileges of running a big and complex organisation is you have to have the humility to grasp that, for some people, trying to change the way that the world thinks about Shakespeare is not the reason to get out from under the duvet. To make really good theatre is. That's enough. Or to have a brilliant workshop in a classroom is enough. So [it's] how to translate the dream to a sense of purpose that makes meaning for every individual in the organisation.

When I ran smaller organisations, I found it considerably easier. It's easier to say: "There's one vision – here it is, we all can all be behind it." You can see everybody. You can see where they resist or whether they're sceptical or whether they're "in". And you can craft it and shape it until you're all in. The bigger it gets, you need to be able to say: "You caring about that workshop in that classroom or the state of the toilets is changing the way the world thinks about Shakespeare." No one might be able to tell you that with evidence on a graph, but it is doing that. That's enough.

The American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou noted that: "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Do you agree?

I really do. Some of you might know that this is an odd moment for me, in that we've appointed new artistic leaders of the Royal Shakespeare Company: two brilliant artists and two brilliant leaders. I'm still leading artistically and will do until June [2023]. Then I'm going to step down. I've been quite public about having wanted to continue leading the organisation, so it's a really interesting question because I have been reminded of its truth in the last few weeks. One puts so much energy into trying to construct the narrative about what the RSC is doing, or what our organisations are doing, and to back that narrative up with the right policies, strategies and procedures so that there's a solid machine that can say: "This is what we did and this is what we changed." I am really clear that there are things the organisation has done whilst I've been there that I'm proud of. But actually what's struck me very forcibly is having this weird public experience of people going: "Oh, you're not going to be there any more?"; whether you made someone feel that they belonged. I've had the amazing privilege of people saying: "Oh, I didn't feel like the RSC was me, but you have made me feel like that now." I haven't made them feel like that. But there's something about leaders embodying who belongs and who's invited.

Even the invitation is complicated, because then it's my "house" and I'm asking you to behave like a guest. That's not good enough, either. This is our space. We gather in it as equals. I think if you can embody that, if you can enable someone to feel that that is true, that it's sincere, then when things go wrong, or you don't make change fast enough, or projects aren't as you want them to be, that's what persists. It's unbearable that things haven't worked the way you wanted or you haven't moved fast enough, but what lasts is whether you meant it. I have been stunned by quite a lot of people going, "I knew you meant it." I know there'll be other people I've worked with where I haven't successfully communicated that, but it tells me that that is really essential to leadership; to put the energy into being present. It doesn't mean turning up, but you can feel whether somebody means it.

Which collaboration are you most grateful for?

Well, lucky me that this is hard. A project I did called *Faith*, which is a piece of work I did last year for the Coventry City of Culture festival. It started an unusually long time ago, because when we were bidding for Coventry to win City of Culture, I got excited by the potential in the city, and I recognised lots of things from other bits of my life: the RSC is in South Warwickshire, in a tiny market town that is quite white. It is quite a Brexit-voting town. I mean not by much, but it is. I found it a very unfamiliar environment to be in, having been in cities. In Coventry, I know this territory. I feel something exciting here. It's a city that's very youthful – the average age is much younger than [most other cities] in the country. And it's got a combination of real-world needs that all cities have, which are only getting harder, around mental health, extremes of poverty, safety on the streets. There's a fierce pride in the survival story around Second World War, but I discovered quite quickly that it's a much greater survival story through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, of communities arriving in Coventry very optimistic and discovering that life was hard. They're finding ways to nonetheless build resilience in those communities. There was a plan for us to be in some way part of the bid and make a big piece of work, and could we do Shakespeare? Could we do Henry VI? Because Henry VI visited Coventry. I said: "No, I don't think that's interesting to anyone in Coventry, but why don't we figure out what we might make on a scale in the city that means something?"

We started by looking at the story of [Coventry] cathedral. The cathedral tries hard to invite multiple faith groups to share that space and succeeds to some degree, but the stories of the faith groups beyond Christianity are not told. The arts don't tell the story of faith. We don't go there. So I made a piece of work by a whole raft of faith communities in Coventry. We did it very slowly and then, because of Covid-19, we had to do it online. I'm very proud of it because we survived. We replayed the story of Coventry in the project, found a way through it.

What feels important about it to me now is I learnt so much about what the struggle had been in those communities. And yet the human beings I met were so hopeful. That's why it struck me today; a huge proportion of the population of Coventry felt seen. The fact that

there is a piece of work called *Faith* that celebrates us in this city, held and made by us, really matters. It was big and complicated and a bit wonderful. I let go of some aspects of my leadership and I can't quite articulate it yet, as you can tell, but I'll give you an example. We started with a feast outdoors. We had hardly any money left, because both organisations had been so badly hit by Covid-19. So I'd said, no wet-weather plan. That's my strategy. It's not a very good one. I'm doing an outdoor 24-hour event, with no wet-weather plan. We're just going to hope it's going to be alright. So on the Friday, we started with a feast in the evening and it rained all day. It was just stopping drizzling as we started the feast. Everything was wet. My friend Deepak [Naik], who led the interfaith work and led the Hindu community's participation in the project, arrived. I said: "Deepak, it's raining." He said: "That is a blessing. I believe that is nature smiling on this event, so you'll be alright." I let something go. It was a more thoroughly co-created project than I've made before.

Who do you dream of connecting with in the future; a connection which would be a radical step change for your organisation?

This is only tricky because it might happen. So I might have to ask you to keep this one secret. We are looking into collaboration through interdisciplinary practice, by putting artists in rooms and not knowing what they're going to do or what discipline they're going to work in. It would be very exciting to effectively create an international interdisciplinary programme with a range of partners to enable us to think about form in different ways together across continents. That really excites me.

Persistence, practice and perspective are often considered key factors of business success. Do you agree?

I think so. I think there are probably others as well, of course. If perspective means being able to see how your organisation and you and your leadership sit within a wider world, then that is absolutely key. These jobs are insanely difficult, I think. We've made them very complex and very, very demanding. The emotional labour is huge, and then the labour that we might not describe as

“Purpose is very, very key. For a leader or for somebody who doesn’t have that level of power in the organisation, knowing what your purpose is within the greater purpose is essential”

emotional is huge. And so it's so easy to be just in it, isn't it? In your version of it. And then when we get our heads up, we meet lots of people like us, challenged by the same things. So perspective means getting beyond that to see how the challenges we each face are shared. There will be someone else facing it, finding other solutions or just able to be in empathy with you. But also there are other ways through it and dramatically different ways to do things. That seems, to me, the real goal of leadership: to bring a wholly different way of framing something. There's sort of nothing new in the world, but there is always a new way to frame it. You can imagine something differently.

Perspective means a particular thing in a rehearsal room. The director-artist bit of me thinks it really matters to pay attention to the process. Not always being focused on outcome, output, product, finding the space. The best things come eventually from the best practice; the practice that really embodies your values.

Of course there's craft in leadership. Of course there are things that I'm quicker at, or I can advise someone else on, because I've been doing it for so long. But actually the good days are not those days. The good days are when I can reinvent it. When I can be affected by someone who comes into my orbit with a whole new way of thinking about it. A good example for me is that I'm not sure I can write another Arts Council application. I'm really good at it. Of course I will help and contribute and find ways to help others to do it. But there is a bit of me that doesn't want to have to use those practised skills, because then I'm not in the space of what is fresh. That's my struggle.

I'm very persistent to the point of self-harm sometimes. You have to take care of yourself. So persistence is coming to mean something else to me, about renewing your energy. Someone said something super helpful to me in the middle of the pandemic. She said: "You get your energy from creative conversation, so that's what you need to be doing." For me, lying down works a bit, but it doesn't really work. And I was being deprived of a thing that gave me the energy to persist. I just wasn't having those conversations.

What is the best piece of advice you have been given?

When I was running The Gate, I was in my early 30s and having a real struggle with the board and with commentators that seemed to be agreeing with each other. Someone said to me, "Just refuse to go away. Let's see what happens." And it seemed like such a flippant thing at the time, but I have never forgotten it. It has actually sustained me in moments where I know I'm right. Ethically, my principles are in the right place. And I'm battling people who are not prepared to go there because it's going to cost them in one way or another in those moments. It's really helped me to persist in saying: "I can choose not to go away." You can choose what that means, of course.

Leaders exhibit consistently positive and constructive behaviours. What are the simple behaviours you, or one of your role models or colleagues, adopt to ensure you or they are seen as positive, constructive and optimistic colleagues and leaders?

I try to be simple. This may seem an odd thing to say, but I think taking the time to listen is the very best way to convince colleagues that your optimism is rooted in reality.

Optimism and positive thinking are core components of resilience. Given the power of optimism in creating a resilient mindset and organisation, what is your Manifesto for Optimism?

My manifesto starts with: artists know how to do this and we should trust them. Leaders should help us imagine. It's not about being right. It's not about being smarter. It's not about being faster. It's about being the person who can enable everybody else to imagine. The thing you bring, is how you get this team to imagine it.

Future Connected Fellows

The following cultural leaders were awarded a place on the Future Connected programmes

2022–2023

Lisa Anderson
Director, Black Cultural Archives

The home of Black British history, Black Cultural Archives grew from a community response to the negative impacts of racism against, and a lack of popular recognition of and representation by, people of African and Caribbean descent in the UK. Our founders came to the conclusion that what was needed was a space where members of the community could come and find positive representations of themselves in history and culture. This act of self-help expanded into the creation of an "archive museum"' that painted a more comprehensive picture of Black presence in Britain. Our mission is to collect, preserve and celebrate the histories of people of African and Caribbean descent in the UK and to inspire and give strength to individuals, communities and society.

BLACK CULTURAL ARCHIVES

Jahmar Bennett
Executive producer,
Neon Performing Arts

Neon is a home for creativity and production in combined and multidisciplinary arts, including performance and production.
Our vision is to illuminate opportunities. Breaking barriers in the arts for young talents to unlock their potential, we create opportunities and raise aspirations. Our mission is to empower young artists and performers.
We are creating a future generation of innovators with versatile talents that combine artistic partnerships across a range of arts and cultural organisations. Our work has often been described as bold and innovative. Our artists, teachers and mentors inspire and nurture, giving our students the confidence, as well as technical and soft skills, to not only become great artists, but also enhance their wellbeing.

NEON
PERFORMING
ARTS

Sophya Bonsu

Funding advisor and project lead, Vauxhall Gardens Community Centre

We are VGCC and we are here for good. The Vauxhall Gardens Community Centre aims to make life better for the community around us. VGCC adds value to the people we interact with, and we impact positive change for everyone we serve. VGCC is committed to building connections, encouraging creativity, and enhancing the lives of those around us. Our community spirit is unrivalled, and for over 30 years, we have strived to make Vauxhall a better place to live and work. Established in 1985, we moved to 5 Glass House Walk in 2012, which we now call home, and we are here for good.

VGCC
Vauxhall Gardens
Community Centre

Adam Gray

Executive director (former), VAULT

We create electrifying experiences for audiences by championing diverse artists telling unique stories. We cultivate thriving creative communities and provide unique platforms for artists to take risks and forge creative careers. Our flagship event is the critically acclaimed VAULT Festival, the UK's leading independent showcase of live performance, which has delivered 3,000 bold and brilliant shows to 465,000 audience members since 2012. This complements our creative development opportunities, like VAULT Young Company and VAULT New Writers, which we deliver throughout the year. We're also proprietors of The Glitch, a vibrant cafe, bar and creative space in Waterloo that provides space for artists and community-led groups to meet, work and share new material in comfort and safety.

Adam Gray left VAULT in 2023

VAULT
CREATIVE
ARTS

Laura Hensser
Managing director (former), Gasworks

Gasworks is an international community of artists. Working as a non-profit out of a renovated building near the Oval cricket ground in south London, the organisation offers subsidised artists' studios and programmes residencies, exhibitions and outreach activities that engage local communities and the general public in the processes and debates of the contemporary visual arts. Gasworks' vision is to foster the power of art to celebrate the creativity and diversity of our artists and our neighbourhood. We strive to create spaces for inclusivity through projects that challenge prejudices and open up opportunities for multiple ideas, people and identities to positively coexist and thrive.
Laura Hensser left Gasworks in September 2023 and is now Executive Director of Metal Culture

GASWORKS

Victoria Ijeh
Founder, Iconic Steps

Iconic Steps is more than just a media production agency. Our mission is simple: to produce with purpose by supporting young people to achieve their career aspirations and lead meaningful lives. We invest in young people (aged 16–35) experiencing barriers, providing them with skills and opportunities, and building their resilience and confidence as they take steps into the creative industries. We are purpose-driven to shake up the current dynamic in the creative industry and create a more inclusive, more equal environment, where everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

ICONIC STEPS
ELEVATING CONTENT. RAISING DIVERSE TALENT.

Marsha Lowe
Director, Oxygen Arts CIC

Creating art that ignites radical global exchange to redesign our world

Oxygen Arts is a creative agency that connects global majority communities across the "Black Atlantic" to create art that explores the issues that impact their lives, enables them to speak their truth and drives equity within the creative industries. Over the past three years, we have developed the landmark Black British Ballet project, produced the Windrush themed film *Two and a Half Questions*, and worked directly with over 200 young people in the UK and Grenada to help them to explore and share their stories.

Marie McCarthy
Artistic director, Omnibus Theatre

Omnibus Theatre is an award-winning theatre in Clapham, founded in 2013. Our vision is to reimagine the world with fearless, bold theatre that challenges perceptions, entertains, and inspires change. Our mission is to create a home for our community to play, learn, dream, and imagine; to champion and support diverse story tellers; to nurture new talent to develop skills and thrive; to offer affordable and accessible theatre to all. We create dynamic theatre to affect social and cultural change. We connect with more than 50 artists per year with development opportunities. We listen to and welcome people from low socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in more than 3,000 free arts activities per year.

OMNIBUS THEATRE

Rachel Nelken
CEO, Raw Material Music & Media Education

Raw Material Music and Media (Raw) is a creative community enterprise hub and registered charity. Our vision is of a world where everyone has access to the tools, training and technology they need to develop their creativity and wellbeing. Our mission is "Making a creative life a tangible reality". As an organisation, we are responsive, collaborative, enterprising, playful and reflective. Our purpose-built three-storey building in Brixton hosts industry standard studios and rehearsal facilities. Our specialism is music as a creative tool for self-expression, and we specialise in supporting young people and adults experiencing mental ill health to develop their creativity and wellbeing.

Rawmaterial

Victoria Sherwin
Director (former), Myatt's Fields Park Project

Myatt's Fields is a beautiful 14-acre Victorian park in an area between Camberwell, Brixton and Oval where communities suffer high levels of deprivation. Our purpose is to protect and develop the park as a haven of wellbeing for our local community. Our vision is that Myatt's is a place where community and nature grow together. At the heart of our work are our values: we are welcoming, removing barriers both seen and unseen to accessing the park. We empower people through programs that build skills, and we grow roots – celebrating heritage, promoting biodiversity and local sustainable food.

Victoria Sherwin is currently on a year's sabbatical at Incredible Edible Lambeth

PROJECT mfpp MYATT'S FIELDS PARK

Binki Taylor
CEO, The Brixton Project

The Brixton Project is a community placemaking organisation that uses creativity and culture to empower local people to shape places with their own story. Through cultural happenings and community inquiry, we nurture positive and expansive imagination to envision and plan for a healthy resilient future; working with care for each other and the planet, and in rich and authentic expression of heritage and culture.
At a time of complex and dynamic challenge, we feel creativity and culture are the tools to galvanise a transformative shift to the future rooted in freedom, equity, and peace and driven by the amplified voices of community.

Future Connected Fellows

2023–2024

Tamara Barton-Campbell

Founder and creative director, Renaissance Studios

Renaissance Studios is a production studio dedicated to creating innovative and inspiring content that connects with audiences around the world. We believe in the power of storytelling to transform lives, challenge perspectives, and inspire change. We have worked to bring our ideas to life, pushing the boundaries of what is possible through film, television, and talent. Renaissance denotes a revival, and we engage with contemporary individuals embodying a modern-day Renaissance spirit to advance cultural evolution. We do this through the arts paving the way for a world that transcends our perceptions. We amplify global voices through the arts, by revising the rules and shifting the narrative. Renaissance Studios inspires transformation through interactions. Boldly embrace your vision, and bang in what you do, infused with the spirit-led essence of Black creatives.

Renaissance Studios

Marc Boothe

Founder and CEO, B3 Media

B3 Media ignites a creative revolution, uniting emerging storytellers from diverse backgrounds in a dynamic, collaborative network. We're more than a platform; we're a catalyst for creativity and innovation, championing artists in theatre, film, visual and digital arts, literature, and music. Our mission is to connect Britain's multicultural talents with industry changemakers, fostering a wave of creativity and community impact. We don't just support careers; we spark transformative artistic movements. At B3 Media, we're actively reshaping the cultural landscape, empowering artists to create, innovate, and inspire. We're not just changing the game; we're defining it.

B3media™

Caroline Boury

Director, The Boury Academy

The Boury Academy CIC is a Performing Arts School, Rehearsal Studios and Professional Acting Agency. Our goal is to be a powerful catalyst for positive change, opportunity and connection for individual performers and groups within our community and the industry. Our vision is of a world where there are no barriers to the performing arts. Where young people feel represented, valued and empowered. Our mission is to increase access to professional performing arts for young people by providing affordable training and career opportunities from our rehearsal studios in Lambeth. To increase diversity in the arts through that access and to build confidence, creativity, community cohesion and provide a safe place to be.

The BOURY Academy

Ben Cross

Founder and creative director, Cloud X

Founded in 2018, Cloud X is a grassroots home for UK R&B, soul and alt-rap. Cloud X platforms communities, not just individual artists, via its record label, touring division and festival. Since 2018, notable highlights include releasing records by Santino Le Saint, Kwaku Asante, Kasien, 070 Shake and 070 Beheard, and partnering with Live Nation to tour rapper Lancey Foux around the UK and EU. After the pandemic, founders David Dabieh and Ben Cross set up the now annual Cloud X Festival. This yearly occasion prides itself on its gender-equal line up, its promotion of the extremely under-represented R&B genre in the UK, and bringing people together through good music, community and independent creatives. Cloud X Festival is an intimate home-grown music festival that represents everything Cloud X stands for: representation, diversity and championing pioneering creatives.

CLOUD X

Roger Hartley

Artistic director, Bureau of Silly Ideas

At the Bureau Of Silly Ideas (BOSI) we are very serious about the sensible business of silliness. We know that public art fosters a thriving, civil society and our playful disruptions elicit smiles, thoughts, and participation - imagine art that tickles society's funny bone, stirring up giggles and grey cells alike, that's our kind of public spectacle. From our base in Brixton, we are stewards of an expansive, vibrant hub for artistic creation, BOSI educates and empowers the community by providing ample resources. We are looking forward to another twenty years of maintaining, promoting, and touring the Lambeth spirit that invented the circus, housed Empire Windrush and grew Charlie Chaplin.

Lucy Knight

Executive director, Streatham Space Project

Streatham Space Project is a theatre and multi-arts venue rooted in its neighbourhood in south London. Our vision is to bring collective joy to the doorstep of our neighbourhood. We do this by celebrating our community through cultural events, empowering young people through access to creative opportunities, and being a laboratory for emerging creatives. We are agile, playful, and emboldening. Our high-quality and affordable programme brings people together and promotes community cohesion.

Joseph Lynch

Founder and artistic director, Babel

Babel are an award-winning arts organisation creating powerful experiences that foster human interconnection through poetic, visual theatre productions, pioneering community projects and bold cultural instigations. We believe the stories we tell shape the realities we live. We are a place for people to find themselves, and own their story, amidst the bustle of an increasingly noisy world. Through collaborative, radically inclusive spaces, we amplify underrepresented voices, providing Black, global majority, working-class, neurodivergent and LGBTQI+ creatives a platform to share their stories with the world. Our vision is a connected, compassionate and empowered society, and creativity is our way to get there.

Julie Norburn

Founder and executive director, Art4Space

Art4Space is a community arts centre in Stockwell that champions mental health and social inclusion through art. We offer a wide range of art workshops, training courses and projects for all ages and abilities, as well as award-winning cost-free community programs for individuals with mental ill health and facing social isolation and exclusion. We also offer a unique combination of design thinking and mental health support, which helps individuals develop their creative skills, problem-solving abilities, and resilience. Our mission is to enhance mental health, holistic wellness, and social inclusion for every individual through art. We are working to become South London's foremost arts centre for mental health support.

Anthony Olanipekun

CEO, Grounded Sounds UK

Grounded Sounds is a South London based music charity, providing workshops, programmes and opportunities for young people to learn about music, develop creative skills and gain exposure into the professional opportunities within the music industry. We want to see a world where music is shared equally and believe that music can be a powerful source of self-expression, creativity and positive change in a young person's life, helping them to navigate through challenges that they may be facing and build a sustainable career in music.

Natasha Preville

Founder and managing director, The Ascension Agency

The Ascension Agency is committed to providing holistic support, training, knowledge frameworks and practical tools that fuel resilience and safeguard sustainable futures in the Creative Industry. We exist to cultivate the vibrant diversity of human experiences into a paragon of unity. We resist to forge new pathways for cultural artists to be seen, heard, felt and experienced. Together, we co-curate an equitable world where talent becomes the challenge and change we want to see. Our creativity knows no bounds; without limitation, we find strength to transcend differences and forge legacies through a harmonious symphony of ideas, voices and rich cultures.

Naomi Siderfin
Founding director, Beaconsfield

Beaconsfield knows that artists make positive change in the world, so we activate a space of freedom for experiment (beacons) in the full range of contemporary art mediums (field). Our purpose is to nurture and sustain the labour of creativity and contribute to an understanding of key debates and developments in contemporary art, culture and public life. Our site is both a workshop for razor-sharp cultural critique and a community forum: we provide reflective spaces where people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities can refocus their perspective through the surprising ways that we deliver international art and culture.

Christoff Taylor
Co-founder, Young Creators UK (YCUK)

YCUK was founded four years ago and is led by the intergenerational team of Yasmin & Christoff. It is a creative and production agency co-owned and co-run by young people. In four years YCUK have provided over 3000 employment opportunities to young, underrepresented, and marginalised creatives, leant over 5000 pieces of media equipment for free, and facilitated hundreds of free workshops. YCUK is an unfunded, not for profit organisation, that uses culture and creativity to build a more equitable world.

Epilogue by Matt Blades

Director of Economy, Culture and Skills, Lambeth Council

Matt is Director of Economy, Culture and Skills at the London Borough of Lambeth, responsible for leading the council's approach to industrial strategy and economic regeneration. Previously at Westminster Council, he enabled the Great Western Studios development – a multidisciplinary creative workspace. Matt also brought forward several projects supporting Soho's creative cluster, working with the IPA, Design Council, Film London, BPI, UKIE and others. A key feature of Matt's work was helping arts organisations to refurbish their buildings, working with Studio Voltaire, Rambert, The Old Vic and others. Matt is also passionate about supporting creative education and equity. With his support, Lambeth Council launched ELEVATE in 2019, which enabled more than 75% of Lambeth schools to collaborate with arts and culture organisations, and has brokered over 500 paid opportunities in the sector for disadvantaged young people.

There has always been a connection in Lambeth between culture and social change. Our borough was home to the Festival of Britain, a cultural response to the devastation of the Second World War, and Brixton was the first home of the Windrush generation, whose contribution to British culture has been enormous. Every year, grassroots cultural organisations in the borough celebrate Windrush Day and engage thousands of people.

Many arts organisations are very niche, or rooted to a particular place or cause in Lambeth. But in every case, the people who run them are heroic. Their directors are often also artistic director, chief executive, finance director, head of communications and HR manager all in one – a role with huge responsibility and limited bandwidth available to step away from the daily job of keeping the show on the road. One of the big ideas behind Future Connected was to give those leaders the space to imagine the future of their organisations.

I have long admired initiatives such as the Clore Social Leadership Programme, which works at a national level to support people at the top of social enterprises – and in so doing, helps encourage social change. I wanted an initiative that could impart leadership skills in a hyperlocal way, and that could connect the grassroots art organisations in Lambeth with the big ones. This is where Future Connected came in.

The cluster of landmark venues in Southbank and Waterloo, including the National Theatre, The Old Vic and Rambert, contributed half a billion pounds to the economy in 2019. Lambeth also receives more funding than any other London borough from Arts Council England's National Portfolio investment – 30% sits with Lambeth-based organisations. But we do not see arts and culture simply as an economic opportunity. We see its social value – in helping people identify with different places and cultures, in helping them overcome social isolation and as a means of self-expression.

The local creative economy also has a role to play in improving equity in the job market. If you are disabled, Black, under 24 or over 50, you are far more likely to be unemployed or be in low paid work. Many of the organisations supported by Future Connected are expressly

“We do not see arts and culture simply as an economic opportunity. We see its social value – in helping people identify with different places and cultures”

focused on issues of equity – they are striving to provide more exposure for underrepresented artists. The first cohort of Future Connected Fellows was made up of mostly non-white, female leaders, and all Fellows are representative of the UK population in terms of race, gender and socioeconomic background.

Investing in arts and culture in Lambeth has brought measurable benefits to our young people. Partnerships between our big cultural venues and schools have contributed to closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and other pupils – 55% of disadvantaged pupils in Lambeth go on to higher education, compared with 43% in the rest of England.

Our adult learning service works with some 4,000 adults in Lambeth a year, most from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom have recently arrived in the country, and could have fled war, oppression or other challenging circumstances. Our learning provider network draws on the arts and culture grassroots. Future Connected Fellows such as the Ascension Agency are particularly good at working with people with special educational needs.

Through Future Connected, our high-profile institutions have seen how open the borough's grassroots art organisations feel, and how in touch they are with the community. In turn, Future Connected is supporting these smaller organisations – so essential to the ecology of the creative economy – to take risks and be bold.

The pandemic highlighted where the challenges were for these organisations. It gave an impetus to invest in their development. But the pandemic isn't why we continue to do so. Our job is to think about the future and how we can change it. Virtually everything we do is reliant on forming either small or large coalitions of interested parties from different spheres of life. And bringing the Future Connected Fellows together with leaders in the arts field is about helping them to think about the long term; to give them business planning resilience; and ultimately to contribute to the creative economy of Lambeth. I look forward to seeing the fruits of this programme in the years to come.

Manifesto for Optimism

by Abstract Benna, Lambeth's first Poet Laureate

Do you feel that?
There's a physical force at the point
where the mind and the heart integrate
Towards a goal that I just can't articulate
There's no words, its a vision which surpasses sight
the seeds I'm sowing won't show it but the harvest might
For me, doing, is only half the fight
It's the knowing that keeps me up half the night literally
Celebrating what I haven't yet physically
achieved because I see it so vividly
There's a shrine in my mind to every motivational meme
Each of these quotes are shaping a theme of self-belief

I wouldn't say I'm an optimist,
I just opt to miss most of the boundaries that logic gives
There's barely any logic here, rarely any reality check
Knowing what I bring to the table I'm just projecting
a future that I can actually get
even when I'm nervous, they'll call it nerves
I call it a passionate sign that I'm walking in my purpose
But what do you do when the path turns to a maze
That you can't seem to make it out
When the figure in the mirror becomes your strangest bout
When the doubts first appear
And not even a shot of Dutch courage helps to convert the fear
Into some sort of adrenalin that works I swear
Its worse when you're the leader others look to and follow
when stress from tomorrow occurs

because as thinkers, as doers, as entrepreneurs,
some say we're supposed to be knowers,
but even leaders follow, we follow an urge
it's fuelled by the heart, it sits in the mind
as we do what we need to do
For the vision that surpasses sight
and our drive to see it through
I take pride in my resilience and ability to mute
the inner doubts if they grow
Because I've already felt every emotion the highs, the lows,
from 10,000 hours of crawling through the thick of it
The difference is between me and others, I just didn't quit

Acknowledgements and thanks

Fellows Year 1 (2022–23)

Lisa Anderson, Director, Black Cultural Archives

Jahmar Bennett, Executive Producer, Neon Performing Arts

Sophya Bonsu, Funding Advisor and Project Lead, Vauxhall Gardens Community Centre

Adam Gray, former Executive Director, VAULT

Laura Hensser, Executive Director, Metal Culture (former Managing Director, Gasworks)

Victoria Ijeh, Founder, Iconic Steps

Marsha Lowe, Director, Oxygen Arts CIC

Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director, Omnibus Theatre

Rachel Nelken, CEO, Raw Material Music & Media Education

Victoria Sherwin, Consultant, Incredible Edible Lambeth (former Director, Myatt's Fields Park Project)

Binki Taylor, CEO, The Brixton Project

Fellows Year 2 (2023–24)

Tamara Barton-Campbell, Founder and Creative Director, Renaissance Studios

Marc Boothe, Founder and CEO, B3 Media

Caroline Boury, Director, The Boury Academy

Ben Cross, Founder and Creative Director, Cloud X

Roger Hartley, Artistic Director, Bureau of Silly Ideas

Lucy Knight, Executive Director, Streatham Space Project

Joseph Lynch, Founder and Artistic Director, Babel Theatre

Julie Norburn, Founder and Executive Director, Art4Space

Anthony Olanipekun, CEO, Grounded Sounds UK

Natasha Preville, Founder and Managing Director, The Ascension Agency

Naomi Siderfin, Founding Director, Beaconsfield

Christoff Taylor, Co-Founder, Young Creators UK (YCUK)

Future Connected Team

Rebecca King-Lassman, Year 1 Co-Director, Future Connected, and Co-Founder of Act IV

Tilly Leris, Programme Co-ordinator, Future Connected

Louise McKinney, Director, Future Connected and Founder of Arts Ideas Realised

Renée Trumpet, Year 1 Programme Co-ordinator, Future Connected

Judges

Nic Durston, Chief Executive of South Bank Business Improvement District and South Bank Employers' Group (SBEG)

Karen Napier MBE, Chief Executive Officer, The Reading Agency

Dean Ricketts, Founder, The Watch-Men Agency

Inspirational Interviews

Mark Ball, Artistic Director, Southbank Centre

Alex Beard CBE, Chief Executive, Royal Opera House

Farooq Chaudhry OBE, Producing Director, Akram Khan Company and Artistic Director, Fengling Productions

Ekow Eshun, writer, curator, broadcaster and Chairman, Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group

Dr Errol Francis, Artistic Director and CEO, Culture&

Laia Gasch, Director, World Cities Culture Forum

Dr Ali Hossaini, artist and Co-Director of National Gallery X

Suhair Khan, technology entrepreneur and Founder of open-ended design

Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE, Artistic Director, Young Vic

Karen Napier MBE, Chief Executive Officer, The Reading Agency

Ben Rawlingson Plant FRSA, Deputy Director of Global Public Affairs and Communications, Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation

Victoria Siddall, Trustee and Co-Founder, Gallery Climate Coalition, and Board Director of Frieze

Anne Torreggiani, Chief Executive, The Audience Agency

Erica Whyman OBE, theatre maker and artistic leader, former Acting Artistic Director, Royal Shakespeare Company

Lambeth Council

Cllr Donatus Anyanwu, Cabinet Member for Stronger Communities, Leisure and Sports

Jasmine Bell, Culture and Creative Economy Co-ordinator

Matt Blades, Director of Economy, Culture and Skills

Dawn Bunce, Senior Cultural Development Officer

Lawrence Conway, Head of Communications

Bayo Dosunmu, Chief Executive

Cllr Jacqui Dyer, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Equalities

Alice Edwards, Head of Culture and Creative Economy

Vicky Long, former Cultural Development Manager

Chinnelle McLean, Creative Pathways Manager

Nicola Mclean, Lambeth Made Programme Lead

Joshua McTaggart, Cultural Development Manager

Brodie Turner, Head of Economic Development

Cathy Weatherald, Cultural Inclusion Manager

Lunch with… **Inspirational Speakers**

Ahmet Ahmet, Head of Inclusive Talent Engagement, Somerset House

Matt Armstrong, Head of Policy, National Theatre

Stefano Aversa, Managing Director, AlixPartners

Mark Ball, Artistic Director, Southbank Centre

Harvinder Channa, Diversity & Inclusion, Vice President, AlixPartners

Maria Cheung, Director, Interior Design, Squire & Partners

Matthew Cook, Head of Live Events, Somerset House

Sue Emmas, Associate Artistic Director, Young Vic

Jordan Evariste, Soho Friends Membership Manager, Soho House

Rosie Gillard, Public Relations, Squire & Partners

Cindy Goodwin, Director, Head of Social Responsibility, AlixPartners

Jenny Gray, Associate, Squire & Partners

Mia Gulati, Deputy Director of Development, Rambert

Catriona Guthrie, Commercial Director, Battersea Arts Centre

Ted Hodgkinson, Head of Literature and Spoken Word, Southbank Centre

Caro Howell MBE, General-Director, Imperial War Museum

Tarek Iskander, Artistic Director and CEO, Battersea Arts Centre

Alice King-Farlow, Director of Learning & National Partnerships, National Theatre

Christina McMahon, Deputy Director, Garden Museum

Pippa Moore, Development Director, Young Vic

Rachel Nelken, CEO Raw Material Music & Media Education; Winner of Future Connected 2023 Award

Susie Newbery, Head of Executive Projects, National Theatre

Helen Shute, Chief Executive and Executive Producer, Rambert

Diana Spiegelberg, Deputy Director, Somerset House

Jo Taylor, Director of Audiences, Rambert

Christopher Woodward, Director, Garden Museum

Masterclasses **with…**

Frances Croxford, Founder, The Seeking State

Jenny Elwin, Account Director, Brunswick Arts

Adam Koszary, Head of Digital, The Audience Agency

JC Mighty, Head of Audience Development, *MailOnline*

Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director, Omnibus Theatre

Stephen C Rider, MBA, FRSA

Charlotte Sidwell, Director, Brunswick Arts

Media, publication and website partner

Cultureshock

Partner venues

AlixPartners

Battersea Arts Centre

Department Store

Garden Museum

The Handbag Factory

Imperial War Museum

Lambeth Council

National Theatre

Rambert

Soho House: Brixton Studio

Somerset House

Southbank Centre

Young Vic

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140	Joe Bailey for RSC
153	Courtesy of Lisa Anderson; David JJ Lionel
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155	Courtesy of Victoria Ijeh and Laura Hensser
156	Courtesy of Marsha Lowe and Marie McCarthy
157	Courtesy of Rachel Nelken; Sarah Hannant
158	Shana Trajanoska for Margot Magazine
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162	Courtesy of Caroline Boury and Ben Cross
163	Caito Strongarm; Courtesy of Lucy Knight
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“This is our space. We gather in it as equals. It’s not about being right, smarter or faster. It’s about being the person who can enable everybody else to imagine”

— Erica Whyman OBE

Manifestos for Optimism is a collection of conversations with cultural leaders conducted over two years as part of the Future Connected business development programme. The interviews explore what it takes to lead a cultural organisation, the structural factors that can get in the way of realising a collective vision and how cooperation, shared values and persistence can enable organisations’ ambitions to be realised. The conversations reveal the vital role that optimism plays in building business resilience.

It is hoped that the energy from these conversations will offer new perspective on how to approach the creative act of business planning.

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