

Open Culture by Rachel Coldicutt

Guimarães, Open City Project

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Cultural institutions have long been concerned with openness. In the last twenty years or so, this has led to the rise of “audience development” – a term that usually means bringing excluded groups into theatres and museums, concert halls and libraries, and teaching them how to enjoy what is provided.

But this kind of openness only goes one way: it’s given as a gift, not created collaboratively. In its way, it represents the ultimate walled garden, complete with gatekeepers who protect and explain, and visitors who are allowed to look but not touch.

This is partly because, when culture becomes successful, we celebrate by giving it a building: a cultural container that becomes an emblem in its own right – a convenient landmark with a popular cafe, more famous for its architecture than for the work that takes place inside. These buildings are products of the City, made with the best materials it can afford, and placed in positions that will delight and inspire.

But to survive the Age of Connection, the traditional cultural organisation needs to locate itself in another place – becoming a product of the Web, and rethinking its structures accordingly.

What is Culture?

Culture is a system – or, more correctly, a system of systems. It’s a seething mass of connected and unconnected micro-cultures. Michel Foucault saw it as one of the systems of exclusion, a “hierarchical system of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion”.

This lack of tangibility is a challenge for openness. But if we see culture as pervasive – become aware of it flowing through our networks (the networks of our cities, the Internet, our social groups) – it becomes a vehicle for sharing and collaboration. After all, culture isn’t something that happens to us, it’s something we create together.

The word “culture” can be applied to any regulated system. It’s most commonly used to talk about high art (as in the UK government Department of Culture, Media and Sport), and as a social or anthropological term (as in “gang culture” or “the culture of consumption”). And while we rarely consider the interplay between the two, nothing determines the Culture of Art so much as the culture of people.

Culture as high art is reflected through historic artefacts, books, music and pictures. It tells us who we are by examining who we have been. It tends to be protected by curators, critics, commissioners and historians who maintain the canon of great works, protecting and

conserving it for generations to come. Although this sort of culture is constructed intentionally, the rules that govern it are implicit – set by invisible consensus.

The cultures we inhabit are more plural. An individual might be a member of several cultural groups at once – some might be imposed by religion or tradition, others may emerge as a result of personal affinities. At its simplest, a culture can be the behaviour of a group of like-minded people in a room; at its most extreme, it is codified by statute and mythology. Consciously or otherwise, every culture defines itself through norms such as costume and ritual. More than anything, a shared culture is a shared identity and a shared form of communication.

In this respect, culture is like a language: shared but defined, common to a group but limited by understanding. It can be learnt and it can be changed. And just as a private language with unknowable rules will become extinct, so a closed idea of culture will stop being shared and become irrelevant.

Organic and Inorganic

The creation of an Open Culture – one in which we retain our identities but share our sense of self – is mirrored in the growth of both our cities and the World Wide Web. Just like our cities, the Web has expanded through a mixture of formal and informal processes. But unlike our cities, the Web is not limited by landmass or proximity to transport, and is largely unaffected by civic policy.

Spaces for trading and meeting emerge through a mixture of geographical coincidence and human need. Over time, they become more reliant on supportive infrastructure and eventually are formalised and regulated by policies and laws, housed in buildings and managed by staff. The most desirable cities allow the formal and informal – street markets and supermarkets, underground art and opera houses – to co-exist, influencing one another and inspiring new activity.

On the Web, the formal and informal co-exist even more closely than they do in even in cities. And while many Cultural Organisations have tried to replicate their grand buildings with equally grand and imposing websites, there are no planning regulations that govern what happens online. The most imposing digital edifice can't compete with comparatively informal resources like Wikipedia and Project Gutenberg. In the physical world, Culture is often regulated by formal forces and affected by limitations of space, funding and resource. In the digital world, scalability is comparatively infinite.

Of the Web, not On the Web

In the mid-nineteenth century, Baudelaire called for artists to be “‘of their time’, to create an artistic world that is continuously involved in an interaction with the present rather than the past.” This is just as relevant now for Culture.

This ‘continuous involvement’ can be reinterpreted as being open to connection, moving from a broadcast model of distribution to a collaborative, conversational one that responds to and reflects culture in the wider sense. Becoming available to the network, in both the

technical and human senses of the word, requires Culture to extend beyond its buildings and to engage at a human scale – to become permeable and to permeate.

The modern open institution is therefore *Of the Web* rather than *On the Web*, a native of both its city and the digital realm. The beginnings of this model can be seen at La Gaîté Lyrique, the Parisian centre for digital arts. The heart of the building is occupied by a co-working space, and the centre's programme includes both grassroots digital activity and work by up-and-coming and established artists. Both the building and the programme have an unusual degree of permeability and availability to the digital community, while the wider programme engages at an international level. Although not perfect, it is the beginning of a symbiotic relationship, one that can amplify culture-as-people while also being home to Culture-as-Art.

Open cultures, Open data

The Web gives us all the opportunity to digitise our hobbies and itemise our interests, to drill down to our most esoteric level of interest and find others who are interested in the same things. We all like to be with “people like us”, and our sense of self becomes ever-more granular the more networked we become: the more aware we are of our constituent parts, the more “people like us” we will be able to find.

This is also true of our institutions. What if we saw Cultural Institutions as being made of data and rather than bricks and mortar? Each museum and library is built upon its catalogue, every theatre and concert hall upon its performance schedule. All of these resources are enhanced by the insight and interpretation provided by the Institution. All of this is shareable, connectable data that is, in total, more impressive than any architectural façade.

In making this data accessible – even partially – whether as an API or a simple .csv file, there is the beginning of a culture of connection and transparency. Making Cultural content available outside of the constraints of Cultural Institutions' own website is as radical as removing it from the building. It creates the opportunity for serendipity and combination, for connection on a human scale – person to object, for instance, rather than person to place. And opening up data gives it the opportunity to become connected to the network, *Of the Web*, related to surprising and astonishing things, not restricted within its Institutional context.

Open culture, Open Culture

Institutions are also made of the people who work in them. The courage to be collaborative and transparent happens as much in conversation as it is enacted via policy.

To create a culture of collaboration and possibility, Cultural Institutions could do worse than look to the artists whose work they house – and further, to practitioners in other spheres. Lightening the culture of bureaucracy, enabling employees to say “yes” and encouraging a broader, outward-looking frame of reference is the beginning of the journey towards openness and collaborative development. It is, after all, people who determine culture.

Open-source software development and, for instance, theatre workshops both use collaboration, openness and iteration to create new work. The potential for these two, very different, disciplines to intersect creates an opportunity for the digital and physical worlds to influence each other – bringing together theatre directors and software developers, improvisers and hackers.

When I was Head of Digital at the Royal Opera House in London, the similarities between the digital and theatrical worlds seemed overwhelming. Walking down the corridors I would overhear artists collaborating or improvising, and when I sat at my computer I could see the results of developers who had been doing very similar things. The sorts of prototypes being made at [Hack Days](#) had a lot in common with the scratch work being produced in theatre rehearsal rooms all over London: imperfect but intense articulations of a single idea, made quickly and often collaboratively to prove a point or test a theory.

This led me to organise the first [Culture Hack](#) in January 2011, bringing together people and data from 20 cultural organisations with 79 software designers and developers (to date six Culture Hacks have involved almost 100 cultural organizations). Building on this experience [Happenstance](#), is a research and development project that puts technologists in residence in arts organisations. These projects create new possibilities: introducing people who would never normally meet and provoking conversations that would never normally happen. They are both a catalyst and an incentive for change.

The importance of connecting these communities is borne out by the fact that the most interesting digital-cultural artefacts have been created by remarkable people, not commissioned by institutions: Phil Gyford's online version of [The Diary of Samuel Pepys](#) has run in real-time for the last nine years, dispensing daily entries by 17th-Century English diarist; Anna Powell-Smith has created a free, online version of the [Domesday Book](#), the oldest surviving English public record; [Matthew Somerville's Theatricalia](#) is a database of British theatre productions that documents more than 20,000 productions. Both Pepys' Diary and Theatricalia have grown a single entry at a time, building at a human scale into great cultural achievements that tower over the digital offerings of most libraries and theatres.

These digital artefacts are all 'Of the Web', suggested by the pattern and possibility of data rather than the dictates of a marketing plan. Bringing this understanding of technology into the Cultural world creates an opportunity for more truly open and collaborative working – and creates the opportunity for a cross-pollination of skills and ideas.

What is Open Culture?

If culture of all kinds has traditionally been a system of exclusion, then Open Culture is one of permeability. It is networked and inclusive, but clearly defined – made of thousands of components that can travel alone, each part able to stand for the whole. It may become self-supporting, without the need for Institutions, or it might – over time – recast our understanding of the Institutional role, shift the requirement away from heat and light to other kinds of care and attention. It might change our idea of the theatre and the gallery, or it may augment it – enabling change over time.

Open Culture isn't a threat to our institutions but a vision of their future. By thinking outside of the building but within the community, at a tangible human scale, institutions have the capacity to outgrow their buildings, inhabit new spaces and facilitate extraordinary new work.

By bringing digital thinking into the physical space and thinking in a connected, modular way, we have the opportunity to revitalise not only the Cultural offering of our cities, but also our wider cultural life.

Rachel Coldicutt's areas of expertise are organisational change and digital content strategy. She has been creating digital content for arts and media organizations since 1997, and building and managing creative and technical teams since 2001. Prior to co-founding Caper, she was Head of Digital Media at the Royal Opera House, where she created and delivered the organisation's first digital strategy, building a multi-award-winning content programme and a dedicated digital team. Rachel started her career in editorial roles at Cassell, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, Microsoft Encarta and Encyclopaedia Britannica, before moving into multi-platform content development. Previous roles include: Executive Producer and Acting Head of Market Strategy at UKTV; Interactive Editor at Endemol; Project Manager for Every Object Tells a Story, the first UK museum user-generated content project, for the V&A, Channel 4 and DCMS; Teens Editor at the BBC and Lifestyle and Entertainment Producer for BTOpenworld, the UK's first broadband portal. She is also a board member at London Sinfonietta, an Acquisitions Assessor for the Crafts Council, founder of Culture Hack and co-founder of Makers' Guild.

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As part of the Open City strand, Watershed has curated a series of artistic interventions as well as commissioned think pieces which will explore the concept of openness in relation to city development. Open City provides the opportunity for Guimarães to establish a leadership role for open city development. It is a knowledge exchange programme that will help to re-draw approaches to city-making and change the ways we plan, deliver services and engage communities.

This work will be both published online and presented in Guimarães, providing the context and the content for a symposium to be held in the city in November 2012.

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