



Ken Arnold: Creative Curator

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Ken Arnold is head of public programmes at Wellcome Collection, London and creative director at the Medical Museion, the University of Copenhagen. His role in establishing the original SciArt initiative¹ was pivotal. Two key elements of his creative thinking are first, the primacy he gives to turning familiar time-honoured knowledge into “mysterious” unknowns from which new discoveries arise; and second, the method he proposes of adopting a narrow focus as an initial constraint from which larger ideas can be derived. Underpinning Ken’s practice is a commitment to the idea of museums and galleries as participative ‘living laboratories’. By placing his kind of co-produced multi-disciplinary exhibition into the museum space, the public’s encounter with them, “turns the curator’s multi-disciplinary a la carte menu into some truly trans-disciplinary nourishment”². Keeping open his capacity to generate fresh ideas is vital for his mission to revitalise the role of museums as active public spaces for discovery. For this to happen, he believes that curatorial programmes require flexible processes that reflect a balance between materials and makers seeking cultural engagement that resonates with the visiting public. Finding ways to collectively source, connect and synthesize ideas and then transform them into the tangible objects and artefacts of striking exhibitions is a hallmark of this vision.

His record of innovative curatorial projects is outstanding: for example, in ‘The Identity Project’³, the topic of genetics became one of identity and the space of possibilities was expanded into asking what influences our sense of who we are. This meant that rather than focussing what geneticists could tell us, the topic was open to other disciplinary viewpoints. In ‘Brains: Mind as Matter’⁴, by asking not what brains do to us, but what we have done to brains, the attention was focused on the bodily presence of the organ rather than the neuroscience.

Interview

Q: Where does a new idea for a work, event, performance come from?

K: I am almost sure that the best ideas I am involved with almost by definition can’t be traced to where they come from. I think that the best things we’ve done next door (at Wellcome Collection) and the best things I’ve been involved with are about bits of ideas coming from different places. That’s one aspect of it. ...just being alert enough, being interested enough, not in swallowing everything hook, line and sinker that you’re presented with, but finding the thing in it that might be latched to something else. The other answer is - and this is something that is under-explored in the meta thinking about creativity – is how people come up with interesting topics. And one of the things we got right quite often at Wellcome Collection was to find subjects that seemed so ludicrously broad... and then finding a way of turning something that seemed very big into something quite narrow. Or alternatively finding something that seems quite small – often in material culture and focusing on them and then beginning to derive some rather bigger ideas. But that thing of how do you find the topic and how do you find the question within it, I suppose there is a bit of an art to that.

I am really interested in the role of museums and public spaces have in creating new ideas. We aren't here to get the best art ever, we are here to hopefully get artists interested in what we are interested in and then leave them alone enough so they can do the best they can within their own practice. ... there is something very powerful about encouraging these people to operate in the public domain...In a world so used to the idea of access and interaction and in finding things easily, it's the slowness and the awkwardness of what goes on in museums that is important. The other thing is that many places now welcome the notion that you are using lots of different intelligences. There is a sense of using lots of different type of modes of enquiry - an audio, a visual, a movie... The other thing I do is I do more drawing these days. I have been drawing since I was ten. There's that something that won't leave you alone I do quite a lot of pictures too. I have been taking photographs for 20 or 30 years. I am a bit of an Instagram junky now. Like everybody else I snap away and then about once a day I sit down and find one to put up. Partly because I respond to the visual part of the world so between drawing and snapping things I think are interesting or have some beauty. What I do like about that process is the secondary sense that you're digesting... otherwise you barely spend 30 microseconds with it- that cropping and thinking

about which bits. It's in that process that I'll discover one of them that draws my attention. Instagram for me is about heightened viewing.

Q: Does the 'heightened awareness' stimulated by using Instagram happen in drawing?

K: The question about Instagram and drawing is an interesting one – I guess the accentuated awareness is maybe a more diffuse with the former, and much more disciplined and practiced with drawing. For me, when I do manage to find some time to draw, it feels like the actual making of the marks is the excuse to do the slowing down... I've been struck recently by if there's less than half an hour to do it, there's not much point in my doing a drawing. Unless I've got at least a half an hour clear to sit and look...

Q: When you start drawing, are there are moments when you step back?

K: Yes. I think there is a framing- how much do I see and if I want to look around do I want to capture there? And being realistic I'm not going to get every single one of those leaves but I want to get a sense of how spiky or how fluffy it is.

Q: Are you observing the process as you go?

K: Yes, then getting an initially looking at it proportionally- how much am I aiming to get in- the brush stroke and then within- and it's only for me, I'll never show it but thinking what is it I'm finding visually interesting? Part of it is when I'm beginning to get into it in some detail thinking I'm not really interested in that so I'll just shade that in a bit because it is not really interesting. There is a strong sense that the pencil does the thinking for me. It is very much in the movement of the hand.

I think the world divides into people who say what they think and other people who think what they say. The people who are fairly quiet and compose what they are going to say and then they say it because they know that's what they think. Whereas I often don't know what I think until I hear myself say it. People have asked where did that idea come from for that exhibition and I always think 'I don't know really!' ... You just know that one conversation that's brought some of it to the surface and another that's raised something else and a third one that's amalgamated that, and it does feel as though there are definitely bits of it that I can find my voice in. But that voice only makes sense because it's been part of a congregation, part of a communal activity.

Q: What does being a reflective practitioner suggest to you?

K: There is more tolerance for that in universities. This organisation has a mantra to be effective, efficient etc. and innovation. But it is difficult to be able to feel that you are not quite sure what your aim is for the next hour, the next half day, and it begins to feel that you are not quite doing your stuff. I relish a bit of that and being a professor in a university gives me a bit of a license to fiddle around...

Q: What do you think of John Dewey's characterisation of reflective thinking?

K: I suspect, for me, it might be a little more muddled than Dewey suggests. I get the sense of going around in circles sometimes, but somehow moving on a little while doing so - certainly repeating thought processes with variations - practicing something till you nail it. Thinking about (and frequently talking about) the same thing time and again until one time it just seems/feels a little different and you know you've got something new and more vibrant.

One of the interesting things I have been reflecting on recently is the role of disciplines - trans, cross, multi etc.; how much of it is lining up disciplines in parallel, how much of it is really squashing them together. One of the things that is so obvious is that there is no such thing as trans or multi inter-disciplinary practice unless there are disciplines. If everyone became multi-disciplinary, by definition multi-disciplinary would disappear because we wouldn't have the disciplines to draw on. I think a lot of inter-disciplinary projects actually have within them people who started in one place and ended up in another and carry with them that sense that maybe the world doesn't have to be looked at just one way.

Q: What are your main aims in relation to facilitating inter-disciplinary collaboration?

K: It's creating new experiences... it's a legitimate question that could be asked at any stage of what I've done- and my sense is that I'd probably give a different answer. It's not always been 'this is what I'm trying to do and I've finally managed to do it'. Wherever I am it would probably be different. I think that what seems to unite all of this is an eagerness to find interesting ways of finding things out. I think that my core interest is in enquiry, both the things that are being enquired into (e.g. an exhibition about the heart) and then because I am very methodologically interested, it's new knowledge discovered in interesting ways. The background of all of that-

the politics of it- is a sense of who is doing the discovery. There are interesting ways of making that more and more democratically accessible.

Q: In inter-disciplinary work, what is needed most to make it happen successfully?

K: I think I do have a kind of recipe. It's primarily about people, places and things. And having the right resources to get the right people, places and things means that you need some money and the activity of putting things together. In my solipsistic world, some like me who can puppeteer it all. People is the obvious thing but for me it's the curators on the one hand and the participants, the visitors. I don't go in for this 'there shouldn't be any hierarchy: some are paid to do it and they are experts; others go there on a Friday afternoon. I don't think we have to pretend they are all providing the same amount but each need each other and the whole things would be meaningless if neither of those group were there. So yes, good people at the top and good people overall helping the work... We are totally reliant on good people- good scientists, good artists.

And to complete my trio- the places and things: I am convinced it needs to happen in a forum where people come; these are public activities in my mind. A location? A real place. I don't think it's accidental that these things largely happen in public institutions. It's almost axiomatic for how artists and scientists get together. I am a museum person but I am really intrigued about how much of this stuff – I suppose it goes together with places; places have tangible things by and large- even though they can be a vehicle for imagination (and the digital is just another form of imagination). In that way bringing the stuff and the places where that stuff can be thought about and examined...

Q: Does inter-disciplinary working have an impact on within discipline working?

K: Yes. I've often thought that inter-disciplinary is almost the narrow bit in the hour glass. You start with your separate particles above and then they go through a tunnel in the middle and then they come out at the other end. I'm not sure that inter-disciplinary is an ongoing state as much as a phase you go through. The ideal is then you end up back in sort of a new discipline but with added layers or with open questions. The other thing was to make sure by and large, that whatever topic we tackled wasn't entirely owned by one discipline...for us it was much more interesting to say let's do an exhibition about identity that would be woefully incomplete if we didn't tackle genetics, than do something called genetics and make a passing gesture towards identity. Because with identity, theologians, artists and geographers have a lot to tell us about identity, whereas if you just do something on genetics, I'm afraid that wonderful as some geneticists are, you are only going to get one voice...

Q: Do you find that you have to find a consensus or can you go for left field projects?

K: In this organization, it was easier than one might imagine not to have to get considerable buy in and consensus. ...finding one or two, ideally two, or maybe three people to be the people to make it real and not to ask them to make sure they bring forty stakeholders along with them; but to give them the licence to be as self-propelled as they wish. We did this exhibition on brains but the genius of the project was to say we're not so interested in brains and what comes out of them but it's not what brains have done for us but what we've done to the brain. Coming at something that every museum in the world that's interested in science might do an exhibition about, they would be telling us about neuroscience whereas we've we telling about weird people who'd stolen Einstein's brain and chopped it up into hundreds of pieces and started analysing it. I'm fond of that idea that we take things that you think you know well and make it clear that they are much more mysterious that you thought they were in the first place.

The primary thing about exhibitions is you need to find the stuff itself. The danger then is you have an idea and you go gathering evidence and everything you gather is shoring up this argument, the idea. The more interesting way and better exhibitions come out of parking your idea and then really going to find the stuff that might not quite fit the initial notion approach. It's that balance between ideas and people working on them and being open to being guided by bits of visual material, filmic, others cultures that you think oh that's interesting we need to modify what we think we are saying about all this stuff because that feels powerful and rich and hasn't been seen much before.

Do you have the same team members all the way through?

K: Depending on the project there will be people who are key at a certain phase but less significant at other times. I can move them but they also move themselves. I remember working on The Reading Room with Simon Chaplin, it was an unusual project because we were the co-directors of it. It lasted 2-3 years and people changed when they decided they were not so interested but also the project itself was an efflorescence of ideas and that needs to be corralled a bit. That's a key moment for someone like me to step back in and say, 'The time for

when anything could work is now over and I'll help you decide what will work. Often at that stage in an exhibition project you need more production focus.

Because it's largely based on paying people to do things, the possibilities are always infinite. Usually there is a curatorial team. In exhibition terms, the idea has a meandering way of coming up and once it's there, maybe somebody has been instrumental enough from the start and you think they will have to be part of the team. But often at that stage it is often a case of asking who else might be interesting. Here there is a team of curators and the chief curator would talk to me about who they thought might be the best choice. And then there is always a debate about how early on the design of the visual side should come on...

Q: Can you think of projects that have gone in a direction that is surprising?

K: I think there is an ingredient of surprise in every project. If you're multi-disciplinary and you've got lots of different things you are working with then the opportunity for surprise often comes because, one small group of people are not surprised because they've spent their whole lives living with it but then they meet up with another group of people who've never seen that before and somehow, it's the surprise of the second group that in turn surprises the first group.

Some exhibitions have been very focussed - for example the exhibitions about skeletons. The stuff itself seemed exciting but the surprise there was realising how much empathy a scientific perspective could generate. One of the really interesting things was realising that in the hands of the osteologists, the people who in a collegiate sense you would not imagine they'd be emotional- and yet they were the people that this exhibition beautifully brought out were effectively the people who 're-humanised' the dead bones by applying their science by putting the bones together. One of them said of a skull of a teenage syphilitic from a very deprived background that she felt she was probably giving more attention to this skull in piecing it back together in a scientific way than anyone had possibly in the entire life of this child. So, it's the idea that this was a way of bringing a human response back to a set of dead bones through science rather than through a bit of poetry, struck me as an uncanny thing that I wouldn't have thought of.

The surprise can happen when you let the public in. An unvisited exhibition is oxymoronic really; it's got all that potential energy but until someone crosses the threshold and starts thinking the thoughts, it's entirely mute. Because museums are active spaces, there can be a very different sense of what the exhibition is all about... We did a fantastic project largely down to the artist Neil Bartlett⁵. He had a great idea for sex surveys- let's create a new survey inspired as much by poetry art as by statistics and science, and the way to incorporate the visitors in this project would be to have the last question in his printed survey, as "what question do you want to ask the rest of the public?" And then choose one to replace one of his original questions. He did this repeatedly so that by the end of the exhibition the entire questionnaire had been composed by visitors. In that way, the form was unsurprising because it was understood from the start... It was less a revelation than a strategy for making sure that continual surprise and discovery and activating that notion that a visitor to an exhibition if it captures an interesting idea that someone had just at that moment, that can be a way of making sure there is surprise continually fed into a project.

Another project where surprise was one of the core ingredients was with artist Keith Wilson called 'Things': he said let's start with an empty gallery and we'll put out a call to whoever wants to respond and say what you add to Henry Wellcome's collection now. That and the Neil Bartlett project was a case in point where you know you are trying to create surprise but you've got a semi-disciplined mechanism for keeping it in train. For some artists that sounds too tame - all the spontaneity is killed because they are trying to control it but on the other hand if it's all open, if you are not controlling any part of it, it could be the most exciting moment of your life but actually it could also be as dull and uninteresting as anything you've ever done. So, some sort of constraints...some sort of control and then finding the right people and promoting it in the right way.

¹ SciArt: https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtx057228_0.pdf

² living laboratories' Alfred Barr's 1939 invitation to the public to involve themselves in MOMA the Museum of Modern Art is a laboratory: in its experiments the public is invited to participate.
https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4249/releases/MOMA_1969_Jan-June_0082_56.pdf

³ <https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/identity-project>

⁴ <https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/brains-mind-matter>

⁵ <https://wellcomecollection.org/whats/would-you-mind>