

REVOLUTON ARTS | CASE STUDIES



Revoluton Arts

# A Revolut(i)onary Practice?

Ruth Melville, February 2020

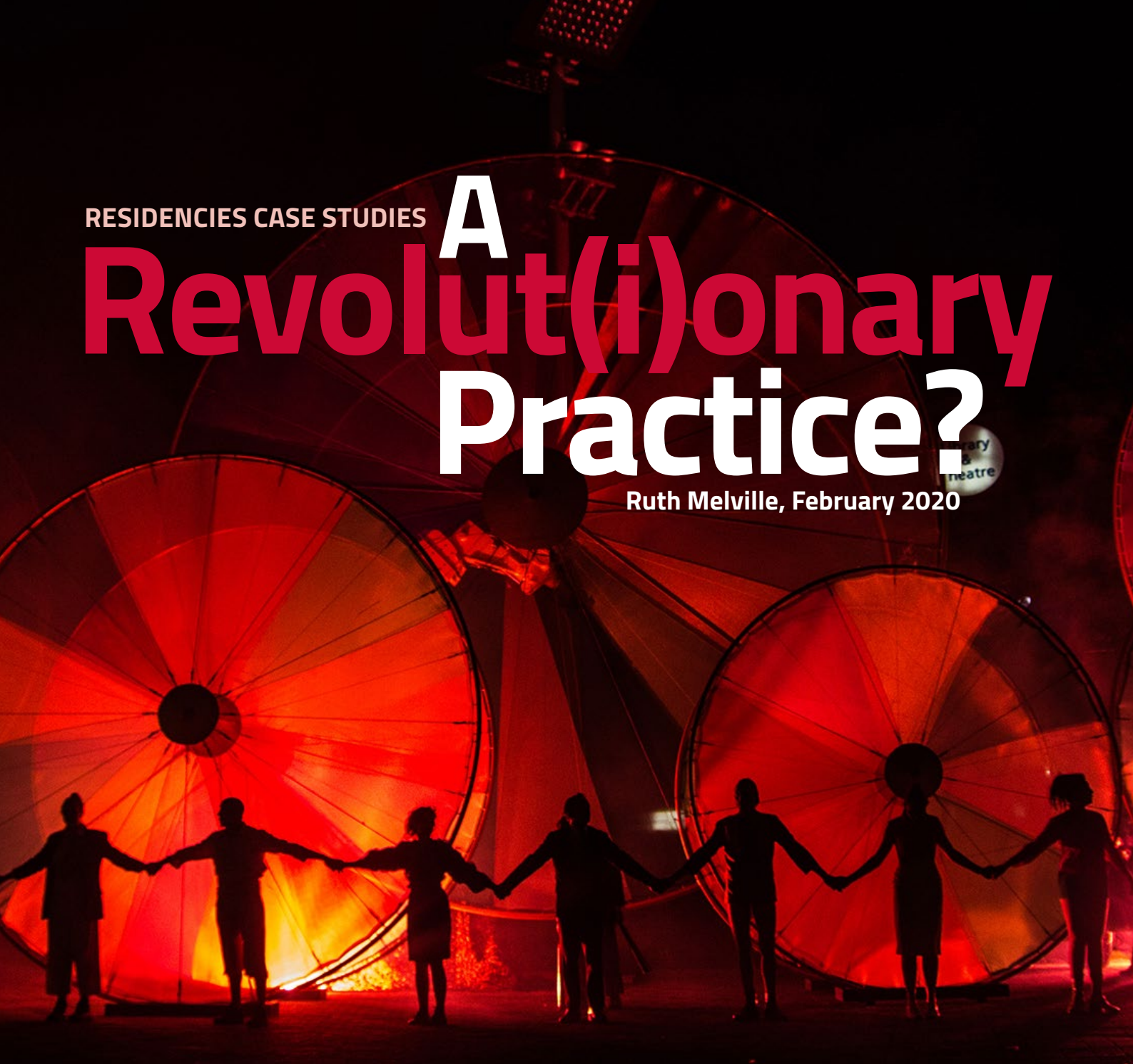


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RESIDENCIES CASE STUDIES

# A Revolut(i)onary Practice?

Ruth Melville, February 2020



As I got to know Revoluton Arts, and Luton itself, through my role as Critical Friend to the programme, it became clear that something of a revolut(i)on was going on in terms of approach and response to the programme. People locally respond to and engage with Revoluton when they'd not have trusted formal organisations before, the joy and fun of the approach was beginning to spread ... but they lacked a way of explaining and then sharing the approach so others could learn from it. Thus, this work was commissioned.

These case studies don't relate to projects and activities as much as to methods and approaches. Revoluton is developing a distinctive style, which works, but is hard to articulate. Using three 'cases' – work in two geographical neighbourhoods and the young creatives programme – we explore and begin to map out how Revoluton are approaching the work, and why this approach matters.

**“Come and talk to us – we are not asking for politics – we are asking for beauty”**

**JENNY WILLIAMS**  
*Revoluton Arts Director*

The approach taken to writing this piece is explicitly narrative, arising from conversations with members of the Revoluton Arts team, plus focus group discussions with their key partners for the three case studies as well as observation carried out over nearly a year as Critical Friend to the programme. This isn't an academic study, but an attempt to begin to articulate what is a very instinctive practice, using the words of those involved, but noting where it links into thinking from elsewhere.

Revoluton Arts are successful in building trust with individuals and groups who tend not to work with formal organisations; they have avoided falling into the standard cliques of a town with numerous fault lines. They are greeted with joy and welcome, cited as the exception to the norm. What is it that they are doing right?

**“We aren't easy to work with – we call our style ‘late but great’ – but Revoluton accept and respect that, even if it is a pain to deal with!”**

Marsh Farm Outreach

Revoluton Arts' success lies in their approach and style: how they work, far more than what work they do.

At first glance it seems misleadingly simple: first they listen, learn, get to know – they don't make

assumptions and don't come in knowing what they plan to do, they come in to find out what is going on, and what is wanted and needed.

They work with what they find in the setting – they “fit the groove that's already there” (Marsh Farm Outreach). Importantly, it isn't just about working with the assets and resources which are there, it is about working with the approaches and principles which are there – methods are at the heart of what works.

**They value how people make and do culture, in a way which goes beyond lip service:**

People locally notice this approach, and they feel valued in it. They trust Revoluton Arts when they don't trust other major cultural sector players. They feel listened to; they trust they won't be used.

**Revoluton Arts are reliable in delivery – they do what they say and this further builds trust.**

But it is also about creativity and change. Revoluton Arts aren't scared to take risks and try new things, using their principles as the glue which holds things together, not as a set of rules or arbitrary limitations.

The approach is about playing and enjoying, but also creating a space which feels right for people - working with others to build something together that works here and now. Every single project is very different because it needs to fit with the place and people involved, not to fit with some centrally determined model.



It is also about who Revoluton Arts works with.

**Like other Creative People and Places partnerships, Revoluton Arts looks beyond the 'usual suspects', but more specifically they put the call out and find people – of all backgrounds and interests – who:**

- Are keen;
- Are prepared to work alongside others in an open way;
- Are open to risks and challenges;
- Want to get going and get doing – not attend a talking shop.

**There is a real enterprising culture to Revoluton projects and partnerships:**

- The young creatives of the Young People's Familam have ideas, and want to make money and create work opportunities for themselves;
- Marsh Farm Outreach don't want to be grant dependent so need alternative income generation;
- Bury Park is a community of small business people and shopkeepers.

**Revoluton Arts has a team which reflects the communities and experiences they work with:**

- It is mainly local;
- Mainly freelance;
- Mainly from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities;
- Mainly practicing artists and creative entrepreneurs in their own right.

**"It's about making sure the basics are covered – paying on time, supporting with ideas, making the answer a 'yes' not a 'yes...if you do it our way'"**

Young People's Familam

The similarities around diversity characteristics matter, but perhaps what is most important in terms of style and approach is the fact that they are freelancers and creative practitioners, used to juggling multiple demands on time and resources – much as the creatives, social entrepreneurs, community activists, and young entrepreneurs they work with are. Dynamism and adaptive resilience are built into the structure of Revoluton Arts from the start, not an add on: they understand the need to 'bounce forward' – not back, how to thrive, evolve, flex and adapt – changing and developing their mission and goals in light of changed circumstances and needs<sup>1</sup>.

Understanding Revoluton Arts' approach is easiest through the illustrations of how it works in practice. Three 'case studies' explore this, based on Revoluton Arts' three 'residency programmes' – intensive and committed work in three communities, two geographic and one age related, where, in different ways, the principles play out.



<sup>1</sup> Key characteristics of systems with adaptive resilience - outlined in Woodley, Towell, Turpin, Thelwall and Schneider (2018) What Is Resilience Anyway? A Review, Gollant Media Ventures and The Audience Agency, commissioned by Arts Council England, pp9-10 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/What%20Is%20Resilience%20Anyway.pdf> [accessed on 12/2/20]



Politics is boring...

art is the **Spice**



Marsh Farm



BE THE  
CHANGE

# Fitting the groove

## Marsh Farm

**Located on the northern edge of Luton, Marsh Farm is the largest housing estate in the town, and was built in the 1960s and 1970s. Described as being “characterised by severe problems of multiple deprivation”, the area came to national prominence in the 1990s.**

Firstly, it became known as the home of Exodus Collective, organisers of raves and community action, part of the dance and DIY culture – described as “more than just a free party sound system – it’s a housing co-op, a city farm, a ray of light in the concrete no-man’s land of Luton.”<sup>4</sup>

And secondly, it was known for civil disturbances in 1992 and then over three nights in 1995. Exodus Collective played a major part in defusing the latter.

In late 2018, major regeneration work began on the estate, aimed at changing the estate’s built environment and reputation.<sup>5</sup>

But Marsh Farm is far more than the statistics and reputation. Marsh Farm Outreach is a group of local activists who have developed their approach to community organising over the years since their start within the Exodus Collective. Extremely articulate and politically

aware, they see themselves as ‘community tailors’:

**“We stitch people together – that’s our art”**

Marsh Farm Outreach

They’d always seen the importance of art and creativity, often as an add-on or attractor for people to get involved in community organising but were, from experience, extremely wary of other arts organisations who came with a package. They weren’t prepared for the estate to be just part of someone’s agenda. Revoluton Arts are described as completely different:

**“Meeting Revoluton Arts was like a prayer... they bring a wish for this to come from us... they fit our groove... they don’t just agree with our ideas... they embrace them”**

Marsh Farm Outreach

<sup>4</sup> “Doing It Yourself”, MixMag: May 1996. p.66–70 quoted in multiple sources  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-46303630>



The 'residency' work on Marsh Farm is partially a literal one as Revoluton Arts is in residence at Marsh House – a formerly abandoned council building refurbished by hand by Marsh Farm Outreach and used as a community meeting and entertainment space, including a bar to generate income (avoiding a dependency on grants which Marsh Farm Outreach are wary of). Revoluton Arts as tenants contribute much needed income, and importantly are 'present' – doing things in the space. As with the other residencies, the commitment to a long-term presence is seen as central to the building of trust.

But the main part of the residency is the addition of an art element to the People's Assemblies – large scale gatherings of residents on the estate to make decisions about where local funding goes, and to identify needs and priorities for action. Using a direct democracy model – with every resident welcome and explicit recruitment at street level by street mobilisers – these gatherings offer a challenge to the view of the

estate as a place needing to 'be regenerated', to have its reputation changed – and replace this with a belief in the place as active and caring.

Marsh Farm Outreach feel that Revoluton Arts alone among Luton organisations were prepared to come in with no preconceptions, and to trust and to see where there is the will and inclination to make change, and then to go with that.

The addition of art was originally seen from the Marsh Farm Outreach end as purely adding some entertainment, a bit of a pull to overcome the sense that politics is boring. However, working with Revoluton Arts has changed their views on the potential of art and culture.

## Marsh Farm Outreach

The inclusion of art is in the form of the 'artists' – a call out from Revoluton Arts was made to anyone who had done artistic or creative work on the estate to come and breathe life into the



People's Assembly plans. To their surprise, 44 people turned up from a whole range of artforms and levels of professional experience, including some commercially very successful artists.

Contrary to some negative characterisations of artists organising how money should be spent, no one seemed to be out for their own ends. They just wanted to give something back, to make something great happen on Marsh Farm. New ideas emerged which took the art well beyond what Marsh Farm Outreach had envisaged, and Revoluton Arts has supported this.

Through Revoluton Arts' link, Marsh Farm Outreach have spoken at Creative People and Places gatherings and they are excited by the concept – and challenges – of cultural democracy. Starting from 'the opposite end' to the arts establishment, Marsh Farm Outreach have the democracy and want to add culture to it, going beyond 'adding art' to using creativity to embed a real culture of democracy into systems of power.

If the '64 Million Artists' definition is used:

**“Cultural Democracy describes an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it”<sup>6</sup>**

then Revoluton Arts are working with Marsh Farm Outreach and others through cultural democracy. Their approach is at the top stage of the cultural democracy scale – co-owning, “... collaborating and giving equal ownership to all stakeholders.”<sup>7</sup>

**“Politics is boring – we started thinking of adding creativity to make it more attractive – politics is what we do, art is ‘the spice’ – but actually it’s led to a culture change within our organisation – democracy actually came from art – early democracy emerged from theatre in Ancient Greece”**

**Marsh Farm Outreach**





**creativity**  
within  
**US**

**Bury Park**



# Out of the box

## Bury Park

**Bury Park is a short distance north west of Luton town centre. Though a recognisable area of the town, it isn't itself a council ward but straddles Biscot and Dallow wards. Notably, small businesses and enterprises flourish in the area – the numerous restaurants, clothes shops and food retailers give a sense of dynamism missing from many other British high streets.**

The film *Blinded by The Light* (2019) is set in the area, and based on Sarfraz Manzoor's memoir, *Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion and Rock N' Roll*, about growing up there in the 1980's.<sup>8</sup> The area has a diverse mix of people ethnically and religiously with a strong Asian British presence. For example, in the 2011 census, over 60% of the Bury Park population identified as Muslim.<sup>9</sup> Locally and even nationally, it has tended to be viewed within the politicised and problematised 'box' of a diverse community, with accompanying challenges.

Revoluton Arts has refused to take this approach:

**“Come and talk to us  
– we are not asking  
for politics – we are  
asking for beauty”**

**JENNY WILLIAMS**  
*Revoluton Arts Director*

Revoluton Arts aims to reignite Bury Park, to celebrate its joy and creativity, to support Bury Park people to put down new cultural roots, water them and let them flourish. The approach relies on a stubborn refusal to accept the arbitrary 'boxes' that outsiders might place

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/06/sarfraz-manzoor-xenophobia-has-not-only-retained-it-has-become-normalised->  
<sup>9</sup> 61% in Dallow, 64% in Biscot, 2011 Census, NOMIS



**“It’s to do with taste... recognising which flavours go together... ”**

**Shazia, Niralla**

Bury Park people in: they don’t limit work to one community or another, they don’t see the place as a ‘hard to reach community’ to be approached through ‘community leaders’ – they work with people, not categories. The area’s richness is set at the fore, a recognition that this is no cultural desert: like many communities labelled as low in engagement, Bury Park is on the contrary buzzing with creativity and hidden cultural activity.

So how does it work in practice? Revolution Arts listen, they wander into shops, chat to people in the street, try things out which might attract people – and spot opportunities as they arise.

**“The creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish, and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences”**

**LET’S CREATE, STRATEGY 2020-2030,  
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND - VISION**

The shops and shopkeepers of Bury Park have been the crucial routes into a community with few 'venues' used by the whole community. The area has a high street which is so vibrant that sometimes it is hard to walk down the pavement. Chatting with the shopkeepers has both enabled the identification of the 'hidden artists of Bury Park' through interests and work mentioned casually in chats, or shown it through the artistry within their craft, the painting hand drawn on a wall. The Creative Bury Park film<sup>10</sup> sums it up: barbers, jewellers, beauticians, fabric retailers, sweet makers self-identify as creatives. The film, shot with Revoluton Arts' eyes, lovingly recognises the artistry within their everyday work.

But they don't stop there. Adding ambition and quality to the existing creative mix, Revoluton Arts have trialled and will continue to develop a

programme of bringing in nationally recognised artists to work alongside these creatives by inviting Farrah Azam, a leading artist who works with henna, to run a workshop supporting mothers and daughters to spend time creating together – echoing the artistry in the work of the local beautician. This programme will be further developed through the Wellcome Collection and Radio 4 led 'Touch Test', in which Revoluton Arts is a partner, involving a major commission with award-winning writer Sudha Bhuchar.

To give space for this creativity to bloom, Revoluton Arts have compiled a list of alternative venues: shops and business premises which could work for arts and cultural activity and help let creativity out of its box of needing to happen in set places, and let it leak and spread through the natural channels of a community.





aspirational  
and **Passionate**

Young People



# just rollin'

## Young People's Familam

**Revoluton Arts is working with young people aged 16-30 across Luton to encourage them to participate in the arts, develop their creative skills, grow their confidence and inspire them to work together.**

**“We want to show people they can do something they are passionate about as a career”**

**JO HUDSON-LETT**  
*Young People's Producer, Revoluton Arts*

There's a strong aspirational element:

The programme has included a range of different events including Slams, a series of workshops led by professionals, Open Mic Sessions which took place regularly and offered a space for people to perform, a Micro-grants programme and involvement in partner projects and go and see trips.

The events have attracted a core of regulars who often bring along friends. The last Open Mic Night attracted an audience of 30; workshops with 15 places are often full.

At its heart, the approach is about valuing the young people involved: starting where they are at; listening to what they want and need; communicating with them the way that works for them; and creating a space which feels safe to take those crucial first steps into a creative career.

The young people themselves gave it the name 'Familam' – choosing to make their own creative family, recognising that is about mutual support and value. These young people are not 'the usual suspects' for creative careers – they come in with a range of experiences, trying to balance creative production alongside other jobs and training, but with a level of energy and talent which shines through the work.

The sessions “just roll” – in part because of the regulars, who provide mutual support, but it is also about Jo's personality – chilled, relaxed, encouraging. She practices what she calls “silent mentoring” – subtle, thoughtful, not explicit, arising from her own life experience - of people (gently) inviting her to get involved in projects.



Young People's Familam is a group, but not a 'group' – it is explicitly open and accessible to all, avoiding any sense of clique. The structure is explicitly non-hierarchical: Jo isn't the leader, but "the glue" – sticking people together, and there's an attitude of listening and saying yes:

**"Jenny will say, 'Go girl, if you think you can make it work' – doesn't matter if ideas are off the wall"**

**JO HUDSON-LETT**  
*Young People's Producer, Revoluton Arts*

with the role taken by Revoluton Arts being that of mentor – subtle, thoughtful, not explicitly advising, but gently guiding.

This modelling of an alternative leadership style has worked for the group as whole. One of the slightly older young women explained how she had started guiding other less experienced members, clearly feeling she had both the right and the responsibility to pass this mentoring on – multiplying leadership naturally through the approach.<sup>11</sup>

Value is also shown by the commitment to treating people well, young people we spoke to felt valued by Revoluton Arts' actions, small as well as large. These include free food at Open Mic

<sup>11</sup> See *Multiplying Leadership in Creative Communities*, Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice, 2020 for more thinking on new models of leadership within CPPs  
Photography credit: **Alex Warchol**



nights, and other occasions; covering expenses to attend, which shows value but also makes the experience accessible to young people who are often struggling in low-wage jobs; ensuring the access to the micro-grants was as easy and fast as possible; looking for further work or earning opportunities and explicitly trying to use the young creatives developed through the work within other projects where opportunities arise.

This was contrasted strongly by the young people themselves with their experience of other cultural organisations where, in at least one case, delayed payment had led to real economic hardship.

This approach is both explicit and subtle, designed and adaptive. Crucially it arises from the experiences of the team. Revoluton Arts' team were these young creatives once; in most cases they had the less likely career, and were the ones who wouldn't typically have been expected to get an arts job. They look to

similar sources for the speakers and trainers – combining aspiration and challenge to young creatives, with an understanding of the many hurdles they will face.

This isn't a programme 'for' young people, designed 'by' creatives, but one generation of creatives sharing their experiences, challenges and fun with the next and so on.

**“We wanted to do a Bazaar for Christmas, to sell all the things we made, to make some money, Jo asked us what we thought would make people come? Which things would sell well?”**

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S FAMILAM MEMBERS**



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LUTON

# Conclusion

**Something different is happening in Luton – Revoluton Arts’ practice might not be ‘brand new’, but it feels new for here; it is needed here, and that matters.**

It is important that it adapts dynamically to need and opportunity, that it practices multiple models of leadership and multiplies leadership through its practice, that it recognises creativity and artistry in everyday spaces and that it celebrates it by partnering to offer further ambition and quality. It matters that there is a long-term commitment, that it is relevant and inclusive, that it is culturally democratic, that it happens in this place, right now...

Perhaps at its heart, Revolutionary Practice is about just getting on with finding people who want to make beauty and fun together creatively, about believing in our collective potential to make something more. About just getting on with it: talking and listening to people, saying ‘let’s create something’, working out together what works, right here and right now, about exciting each other with new ideas, trying things out, and not over thinking it.

**“If Cultural Democracy has an ideal, it is not some distant heaven towards which we are guided by a priesthood, but the quality of what we are doing, sharing, living now. It is about making sense of where we are, through creative and artistic interaction with others. It’s about working out for ourselves what we think is good and why, always remembering that others think differently for equally valid reasons.”<sup>12</sup>**

**FRANCOIS MATARASSO**



**Dr Ruth Melville** is an experienced researcher with a practice that spans academic, practitioner and consultancy research and evaluation. Ruth has 20 years’ experience of research design and analysis within the cultural, regeneration, environment and social inclusion sectors.

She worked on Impacts 08, the Liverpool Capital of Culture Research Programme and advised Aarhus 2017 European Capital of Culture, she is currently Critical Friend to several Creative People and Places programmes and is working with a range of arts organisations on embedding evaluation in practice particularly with hard to reach groups.

Her academic research explores the impact of evaluation on practice, particularly artists’ emic evaluation practices and how these could shape evaluation policy.

<sup>12</sup> Francois Matarasso, p4 in 64 million artists

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