Tales from a River Bank

Bullying, the Arts, and the Production of Museum Space

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Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power
Anne-Marie Quigg

Introduction

There has often been a romanticised view of the nature of labour practices in the arts, culture and heritage – significant segments of the tourism industry. A common assumption is of places of work where committed, talented individuals are able to follow their artistic temperament in a vocational manner. This, from the start, is a highly problematic view of such labour but nonetheless many people are attracted into the industry with a sense that working within it – whether as an artist, curator, or in management or administration – offers the potential for a more enjoyable and more enjoyable work/life balance. Therefore Anne-Marie Quigg’s recently published work, Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power, reveals a very different perspective with regard to some of the problems faced by individuals negotiating ‘creative’ work. Quigg infers that those undertaking careers in the arts consistently have to deal with issues around exploitation as well as a variety of abuses of power. Quigg examines the very nature of harassment and bullying in the workplace, taking the reader through different forms of mistreatment and victimisation that can happen, and has happened, in a variety of arts organisations.

The ideas and concepts that Quigg brings to the fore are a timely intervention as, faced with institutional silence, they may help to elucidate a recent internal investigation into bullying and harassment within the curatorial processes of the recently completed Riverside Museum, Glasgow. In turn, this raises a set of serious questions towards the nature of ‘outsourced’ municipal cultural governance in Glasgow. The parent body of Glasgow Life – the brand of Culture and Sport Glasgow, an external company spun-out from council services which manages culture and sports for the city council – Workplace accounts point to Glasgow Life creating the conditions by which bullying and harassment took place, and then failing to take any significant action upon those understood to be implicated in an internal report.

Bullying of all forms

Quigg’s work gives an insightful snapshot into the labour practices of arts organisations, firstly in terms of the ‘creative’ sector as a whole in relation to key trends in employment practices; and secondly, it also represents the way in which a variety of different organisations manage social relations. In doing this, the primary focus of Bullying in the Arts is therefore not on ‘artists’ per se but on the actual management of the arts in terms of how labour processes are produced. This book therefore helps towards an understanding of unacceptable management practice – such as bullying – but also points towards potential directions for improved ‘leadership’. Quigg usefully provides an immediate and precise definition of the concept of bullying. At one level bullying seems quite simple, reflecting what many may have experienced in some measure at school. On another, she exposes a set of practices that are both startling and intricinsically built into many of the work and management practices endured by employees. To begin, Quigg sees intimidatory behaviour as:

“Bullying, mobbing or harassment is a set of or series of behaviours, recurring regularly, which results in one person or body consistently intimidating and oppressing another.”

“Bullying is offensive, abusive, malicious, insulting and/or intimidating behaviour that occurs on more than one occasion. The frequency of bullying precludes one off incidents of aggression or violence; the most common type of bully encountered in the arts is the serial bully who picks on one employee after another and attempts to destroy them. A serial bully identifies a target and proceeds to systematically bully that person until they are forced to move on, either to another role in an organisation or to another workplace altogether.”

Quigg, having laid out this explicit starting point, then moves to show how such behaviour can develop out of a variety of different circumstances and go unchecked for a variety of different reasons. In doing this, Quigg shows how bullying behaviours are often not just singular actors acting alone, but are often implicit of a wider working culture and due to the very institutions in which people work. Therefore she shows across the ten chapters how such behaviours can develop, from what she terms ‘Founder Syndrome’ to ‘Pair Bullying’, through to ‘Institutional Bullying’ and the issues created by ‘Artistic Temperament’.

One of the most engaging but sometimes most difficult parts of this book is the consistent use of vignettes which give first-hand accounts of different incidences of bullying that have arisen in arts organisations. They give insight into the different and varied practices of bullying, showing how different sets of circumstances can produce very different forms of bullying. Beyond this, however, Quigg also provides a much more stark picture of the nature of ‘paid’ work within the arts, highlighting the mechanisms through which a number of broader inequalities are created which are at times related to bullying. These include low rates of pay, long-working hours, expectations of giving unpaid labour and overbearing expectations from managers.

Quigg identifies ‘Institutional Bullying’ as where, often due to structural changes and management abdication, bullying behaviour can be legitimised because there is sufficient disorganisation that illegitimate practices are missed or ignored. Quigg shows how this can lead individuals or small groups using an apparent lack of supervision to begin to systematically bully individuals – ‘serial bullying’. For Quigg, the importance is therefore about producing positive forms of leadership in the arts. To a certain extent Quigg posits work in the cultural and creative industries as being different to other forms of labour but at the same time suggests that this is no excuse for poor or overly aggressive management. Therefore Quigg sets out to debunk a number of ‘myths’ (see box, above right) about what is often considered good management practice with regards to creative endeavour, by suggesting how they potentially lead to management malpractice.

By exploring how these myths fail and destablise arts practice, Quigg attempts to highlight how management practices that have developed in other industries or non-arts organisations should not be adopted for creative practice. Thus, she fully and problematically subscribes to yet another myth of creativity: that of it being exceptional to all other labour. She attempts to set out a new blueprint towards good arts management that attempts to embrace the informal, time intensive and sporadic nature of such work and to fight the desire to control, contain, and dominate such practices:

“From the perspective of handling negative workplace behaviours, perhaps our understanding of arts management and administration needs to recognize the importance of valuing positive leadership and best practice in management. Perhaps what we need now are: accomplished and motivated people, without a desire for dominance, with a flair for the arts they manage, and the ability to deal with stimulating and challenging experiences.”

The Mythology of Creativity:

Myth 1. Creativity comes from creative types.
Myth 2. Money is a creativity motivator.
Myth 3. Time pressure fuels creativity.
Myth 4. Fear forces breakthroughs
Myth 5. Competition beats collaboration
Myth 6. A streamlined organization is a creative one

Quigg, 196-198: 2011

The Riverside Museum

In 2011, Glasgow Life opened its latest remodelled museum, the Riverside Museum. It replaced the Museum of Transport, so as to redisplay the transport collection and house some new acquisitions. The new site occupies a strip of post-industrial land at the confluence of the Rivers Kelvin and Clyde, cut off from the city on its third side by motorway. It is encompassed within the wider ‘stalled’ urban development of the Glasgow Harbour Master-plan and it sits facing development of the former ship building area of Govan. The museum was built at a cost of around £74 million. Designed by ‘celebrity’ architect Zaha Hadid, it follows a now familiar urban development model centered on ‘iconic’ landmarks. As such, it is a further attempt to make
a bold statement through its choice of architect and architecture: the museum’s homogenous zinc-cladding portraying a wave-like form set facing the river Clyde is intended to add ‘impact’ to the ‘river frontage’, thereby stimulating property investment/development scenarios. It has been primarily funded through a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund and Glasgow City Council. It is hoped that through the building of the Riverside Museum, Glasgow Museums can repeat the success – measured in terms of visitation rate – of the Kelvingrove Museum redevelopment. The Riverside Museum is an attempt to (re)build a second ‘flagship’ museum in the city, one which is to contribute significantly to the re-imaging of Glasgow in the process. Thus, Glasgow Museums arrived at the situation in which it was to re-display its many transport objects. In doing so, many parallels with Quick and Aitken's re-production of the museum’s internal spaces and displays, as the Project Management Team (PMT) for the project and curators sought to produce a new museum. Neo-liberalism – Disciplining Practitioners

Examining how curatorial practitioners have attempted to implement the city’s museological concepts of ‘access and inclusivity’ in the production of the Riverside Museum is of significance to us all. Glasgow’s ‘municipal’ museums are primarily publically funded cultural institutions and they represent a focal point at which a variety of competing discourses come together. Thus, the wider purpose of this research project has been to understand the implicit geographies in such entanglements, as practitioners attempt to produce museum spaces. The apparent lack of influence that the wider entrepreneurial city agenda has had on the way the collection was curated – accordingly, the ‘developers’ have their iconic building, the museum content being largely already in existence, its transfer a matter of course – elides the city’s already integrated museological strategy. Similar to the city’s schematic pursuit of a further iconic building, Glasgow’s ‘new epistemology of museums’ is itself, according to one observer, a medley of received technocratic ideas. However, the Director of Policy, Research & Development at Culture & Sport Glasgow (then Head of Museums & Galleries), posits as theory of museum praxis:

"integrating access at a strategic level across organisational structures and activities". The perceived popular success of this approach with the Kelvingrove Museum stands as a marker of achievement to be replicated across the city. Moreover, it indicates the sentiments of the public to which pressures to deliver large-scale projects such as the Riverside Museum on time and on budget are serving to legitimate and as catalyst for management practices that fall outside Quig’s promotion of best practice and leadership. With this it becomes obvious that the entrepreneurial city does not only govern the landscape architecture but also a supposedly ‘technical’ transferral of existing museum stock and practice. The urban development agenda is having an influence upon museum practice, as failure to produce the museum on time would affect the image of the city and add to other cost issues for a cash-strapped organisation – and can be understood to have led to certain behaviours that should be considered unacceptable. This reflected a wider structure of governmentalism coming down to bear on practitioners in the production of the Riverside Museum. The local state’s desire to maintain its competitive position through enhancing the city’s image meant that those managing production of the museum space produced a specific ‘conduct of conduct’ – a commonly understood frame of reference for which types of management practice are deemed acceptable.

The curators’ position and role was not only altered as a result of the inclusion agenda, changes in the governance structures through which curators operate began to be experienced in changes in their status. Starting from the refurbishment of the Kelvingrove Museum and continued in the Riverside Project, there has been a progressive ‘deskilling’ of the curatorial role. For some curatorial staff this has meant little control over the content to be contained within the museum, as the Project Management Team has sought to make almost all of the key decisions, essentially reducing curators to the function of researchers. To a certain extent, this reflected a producing a museum on the size and scale of the Riverside, organisational structures are likely to operate in authoritarian ways in order to complete the project on schedule. However, within the management of the Riverside Project this often went beyond what some curators found acceptable. To this new way the process has borne “an absolutely miserable time” (Peter, 2009) due to an over-bureaucratisation in the museum process, coupled with a strong desire of some of the PMT to control and micro-manage curators, as well as other members of the PMT. Thus, when disagreements arose, dissenting voices were quickly silenced:

“I think it’s quite widely known that there were a lot of staffing issues. A huge number of people left in the course of the Riverside project which is fairly unusual actually – the rate that people are going.” (Liz, 2009)

This became such a problem that in 2009 there was an internal investigation commissioned by Glasgow Life into the conduct of the Management Team, where accusations of ‘bullying’ were made. However, due to the perceived sensitive nature of this report, it has not been published and no disciplinary actions were taken. Only one copy of the report is believed to exist, held by the current Head of Service.

Variant undertook a Freedom of Information request in order to locate this report, seeing transparency in delivery of our public services as being in the public interest and integral to holding local ‘democratic’ power to account, but this has initially been declined.

On 24/10/11, Variant requested:

• All documents relating to and reporting of management behaviour and management practices that refer to ‘bullying’ within the Riverside Museum Project.
• The publication of the internal report conducted by [the Information Services Manager, Glasgow Libraries] into alleged allegations of management malpractice during the production of the Riverside Museum.

On 18/11/11, Culture and Sport Glasgow, Director of Corporate and Community Planning Services, responded:

“I can confirm Culture and Sport Glasgow holds all of the information that you are requesting…However it would appear that of the information requested is covered by an exemption in accordance with the Freedom of Information Exemption Regulations 2002 (Scotland) 2002 to the extent that it would not be in the public interest to disclose the information, which would be likely to:

(i) substantially to embarrass a public authority;
(ii) substantially to prejudice the efficient conduct of public affairs. Furthermore the information is unlikely to be disclosed, or would be likely to, inhibit substantially (i) the free and frank provision of advice and (ii) the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation or (c) would otherwise prejudice substantially, the effective conduct of public affairs.”

Abuses of Power in the Production of Museum Space

In attempting to research the role of curators in the Riverside Museum it became very obvious that this would be a difficult process, with access to many curators not being granted. While this is often not unusual for research projects that have to negotiate access to participants through senior staff, it also may point toward the sense...
of pressure and need for control to be held by the PMT during this live project. Further to this, various resources were provided with the Riverside Project in Glasgow Museums also refusing to meet for an interview for fear of providing a critical account or anything to the detriment of the project was stated.20

Again, this highlights something about the working relationships developed by the PMT. Through negotiations, conversations with management staff and other curatorial staff (who were willing to speak) within Glasgow Museums staff focused on the processes and questions that have been used and the conflicts that have arisen in the production of the Riverside Museum to date. In understanding why such an over-bearing sense of control was established in the workplace, one that has seen a loss of ownership in work for curators, a demoralisation of staff and created a high turnover of people working on the project, it is essential to look at the context in which the project was created. Due to the structure put in place at the start of the Riverside Project, where curators from outside were brought in, whilst existing Glasgow Museums curators continued to work on the Kelvingrove, the project experienced a change of curatorial responsibilities, with existing curatorial staff from Glasgow Museums only transferring into the Project at a later stage. As one senior research curator describes:

"In the PMT, you were allowed to be a stand alone project because the focus was so much on Kelvingrove and the Riverside was left to get on and do its own thing and then suddenly once Kelvingrove was opened we were brought in to now engage with Riverside and there is a bit of resistance like ‘Who are you?; What are you doing?; This is our project’, and a kind of a bit of a failure to acknowledge that it was your project, it’s a Glasgow Museums project so there is a bit of friction there." (John, 2008)

When the Kelvingrove was completed and the winter gardens of Glasgow Museums organisation was able to shift its attention to Riverside, as John states, this created ‘friction’ and some people considered their desire to have input unwelcome. Riverside PMT’s sense of ownership and urgency, was reflected in the need to keep to schedules and not allow changes after decisions had been ‘signed off’:

“So in a kind of really practical level my role is partly co- ordination of content and making sure that the curators stick to the programme, which in a live project is critical, because if we go off programme, we would get in to the whole thing of legal and financial issues, and the content is all in a really sort of manageable format.” (Sarah, 2009)

And:

“Depending on the stage that you are at and, you know, one of the early stages where you are very inclusive and are welcoming of all ideas and of the input from panels communities and so on…then having to be able to hone these ideas down and I suppose that the challenge of terms and language, understanding the process and the programme so, then, one can’t always have the same inclusiveness once decisions have been taken in order to hold on to financial budget.” (Andrew, 2009)

For Sarah and Andrew, time, financial restraint and the pressure to produce a quality cultural institution for Glasgow legitimised the need for a systematic, strict and bureaucratic set of procedures for turning curatorial ideas into content. This meant keeping to specific cut-off dates in terms of what needed to be completed by when and how research should be written up:

“We were also quite clear to curators, we set up a sort of formal process for deciding stories so they knew that they would submit these documents, there was a time, a programme, and they would submit them by a certain date. The care content team would review them.” (Sarah, 2009)

This also led to a strong and rigid vision within the core Management Team of what the museum should contain and who it should be aimed at, one which attempted to integrate the views of various panels (a ‘community’ panel, an ‘access’ panel, an ‘academic’ panel, a ‘teen’ panel and a ‘junior’ panel). Within this working structure and the language it constructs, there is then a reduction of the role of the curator in terms of what they can do and how they can go about doing it. Workplace sociologist Harry Braverman21 cites this as the splitting of work into a selection of ‘limited operations’. Hence, due to the control of the Core Content Team and the Management Team, the curators had little ability to influence the processes of what would be considered acceptable research and what would be considered the best stories to follow. As Sarah (2009) states, curators were always “one step removed from the decision making process in terms of feeding back to the project management team” in terms of deciding what was to be used. To a certain extent this worked acceptably when the team was still detached from the rest of Glasgow Museums, but when further curatorial voices, who had previously worked on Kelvingrove22, wanted to become involved and offered different opinions to those expressed by the PMT, this created real difficulty.

Two different cultures of working across the service had developed:

“…I mean there is an element of crossover in terms of staff being involved in both projects but the Riverside was started when [the redevelopment of] Kelvingrove was full in swing and it was created as a different way of running a project because it was much more a bought in project team with a lot of short term contract staff and they have a very different approach to what they want out of the project… I think that there is a different philosophy and there has been a kind of disjunction between the Riverside project and the whole of Glasgow Museums.” (John, 2008)

The curator above talks about a difference in philosophies when talking about the two projects, and to a certain extent this difference in working practice and procedure meant a lot of curators felt dispossessed from many of the objects they had previously researched and worked with over the years.

Liz, a former curator, reflects this when discussing how the core content team selected curators to take on specific projects:

“They seemed to be arbitrarily allocated to people. So the stories and the objects that you really have invested time in and were really passionate about: you didn’t necessarily get to pursue. They were handed out to somebody else and there didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason. So people, naturally, the venue curators, naturally took quite a bit of offence at that, it was seen that all the exciting stories were kind of farmed out to people that were on temporary contracts and people that were trying to keep up with the venue running, doing Kelvingrove and doing Riverside, just sort of got the dregs.” (Liz, 2009)

This then became highly demoralising for a lot of curators as they had little control over what they would be doing. Further to this, many curators felt pressured to present work in a way that specifically fitted with what the Management Team wanted, or facts were censored, disciplined, censure or exclusion from the project. Peter, who was involved in the Riverside Project at Glasgow Museums, was one of many Glasgow Museums staff who consistently found himself in such a position:

“They set up a core content team which was to oversee the development of the content and I was told by the director that that was my job to chair the meeting. It was picked up by the project’s senior curator who felt that her role was to chair that meeting. There was a group of five managers and they just gave way – an absolutely miserable time. If I wanted to carry on in chairing the meeting, if I wanted any kind of assistance, if I was met with a wall of silence, we then took up issues at a later meeting. It created a bit of a disclusion and we were going to get up to some of the consequences of that.” (Peter, 2009)

Peter highlights how his ability to have agency within the project was prevented due to him disagreeing with the Management Team and, in further discussion with Peter, he was not the only one to be treated in this way as the project progressed. As the interview continued, he talked about how other curators had suffered similar experiences and as the Management Team wished to retain as much control as possible. Rigidity sticking to deadlines and targets is symptomatic of the effects of neo-liberal discourses upon management attitudes, affecting how curators can go about their work. Richard Bennett – who has “explored how individuals and groups make social and cultural sense of material fact; about the cities in which they live and the labour they do”23 – argues this in terms of what is meant by ‘good work’:

“What do we mean by good-quality work? One answer is how something should be done, the other is getting it to work. This is a difference between correctness and functionality.”

Bennett highlights a tension in the practice of the ‘craftsmen’ which is then reflected in the management of the Riverside Project, where there is a split between correctness and functionality. For the managers in the museum put into a position where there is a specific set of pressures and conditions around them, this means they took a more functional approach to implementing the new museum, one which seemed to guarantee the most likely possibility for the successful completion of the museum, on time and on budget. Added to this was a sense that senior managers on the project and in Glasgow Museums and Glasgow Life failed to see the consequences of the behaviour that was being used to produce the museum:

“It was very obvious that I was being deliberately excluded from meetings, particularly where I had a viewpoint that opposed theirs, it became like guerilla warfare that they were waging over a period of about three years and they were backed up by the project leader. And their behaviour, the pattern that they established, it became apparent to me that it was also applied to other people. There was a point where I went to see the project leader. This was about a particular problem with very aggressive emails; emails that I was getting and very targeted from a senior curator who was junior to me; and he just sat there and said it’s six of one and half-a-dozen of the other, then he said that he was going to start monitoring my emails, which I thought equally offensive.” (Peter, 2009)
Peter shows, like Quigg suggests, that often bullying is perpetuated through a failure of management to deal with the problem and that they often in part blame the victim of the bullying. Peter’s account shows this to have taken place. Despite raising the complaint, there is a failure in the organisational structure to deal with this at the point of initial complaint. In the long run, this meant Peter felt isolated, victimised and unfairly treated, causing him, like others, to find employment elsewhere, whilst those who perpetrated the behaviour remained in post.

Conclusions

The possibility of failing to produce a museum that does not fit with the building’s iconic image, that does not help promote the image of Glasgow, that is not seen to benefit the people of Glasgow, in terms of museum experience and local authority spending, meant that it becomes very difficult for management not to become over-controlling in how it implemented the production of a new museum. Hence, following Sennett’s lead, the delivery of the project becomes the key aim (the functional) which leads to the detriment of the work practices of the people who have the role of producing the museum (the correctness). With such pressure placed upon individuals in the production of the museum, and with Glasgow Life failing to offer a sufficiently strong sense of ‘good’ arts governance, the Riverside Project failed to ensure a sound working relationship for the staff involved, resulting in a number of management failures to adequately support curatorial staff. This produced the opposite to what Quigg calls positive leadership, as the PMT took a negative management approach to the work curators did.

Interestingly, despite the internal inquiry finding against some of the members of the PMT due to the way they operated on the project, little was done due to the desire to complete the museum. As a result of this, the head of the PMT (accused of bullying but found to not be directly culpable) was recently nominated for an award for ‘Outstanding Leadership’ for “his management of the highly successful Riverside Project” in the Glasgow Life Staff Recognition Awards 2011.24 This despite, at the very least, missing blatant examples of malpractice in his own Management Team. However, he was awarded the ‘Chief Executive’s Award for Outstanding Achievement’ stating: “As project director over the last ten years, [the project manager] has been at the helm and his leadership and direction helped to ensure the £35 million museum was both delivered on time and in budget.”

Notes

1  E.g. concerning the use of unpaid interns in creative industries organisations, see Carrot Workers Collective: http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/
2  See: ‘Glasgow Life or Death’, Rebecca Gordon Neshitt; Variant, issue 41:
http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/rgn41.html
4  Itself not an unproblematic or ‘value free’ concept, see, e.g., ‘Artist as Executive, Executive as Artist’, Kirsten Forkert; Variant, issue 35:
http://www.variant.org.uk/35texts/CulLead.html
6  ibid. p.1
7  For a critique of this see, e.g., ‘Make Whichever You Find Work’, Antony Fox & Marina Vishmidt; Variant, issue 41:
http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/slevishl41.html

http://www.clydewaterfront.com/projects/greater-govan--glasgow-harbour/retail/d386---glasgow-harbour-tesco-
id=626
http://www.clydeport.co.uk/index.php?site_id=3&page_id=623
http://www.variant.org.uk/27texts/kelvingrove27.html
16 This observation deserves further attention in particular as we are witnessing the continuing rise of curators and curatorial practices – may we even have to ask more persistently: Who are the curators, and what is their relationship to senior management?
18 This was only disclosed to me due to a curator who took part in the enquiry. Informing me of its production; the report is not open to public access.
20 This individual was offered full anonymity but was still uneasy about speaking so I did not pursue it any further.
22 This is an important consideration because an argument could be made that some curators may be against the use of narrative displays but, having successfully worked on Kelvingrove, they were very much versed in this technique of displaying.
23 See: http://www.richardsennett.com
26 Conflict (2011) Newsletter for Glasgow Life - October. Glasgow: Glasgow Life
27 Ibid.