

Fig. 1

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF INSPIRATION IN AN ARTIST'S ROLE AT ARTPLAY?

Inspiration is often the initial doorway into the making and doing of a creative endeavour - in other words, we get started because we are inspired. Inspiration brings with it momentum and directed energy, and without it, any kind of work can feel heavy, formulaic and discouraging. Yet inspiration can also be elusive, unpredictable and capricious.

"You can't make an appointment with inspiration!"

Gregers Werk, character in Henrik Ibsen's The Wild Duck, 1884

This article explores the notion of inspiration and its adjective and verb "inspiring" as a phenomenology - an inquiry into the phenomenon of inspiration and inspired-ness and what it means to inspire others, drawing upon my own professional experiences as a collaborative music artist to illustrate points along the way. Many of the artists represented in this journal have diverse practices that include making 'our own' work as well as collaborative work with children - in fact, some of us draw little distinction between these areas of practice as they have become completely entwined - but it is to the workshop setting at ArtPlay with child collaborators and participants that I shall most frequently return.

MAPPING INSPIRATION

I began this investigation by creating a concept map, unpacking 'inspiring' in as many directions as I could. It revealed both questions and observations. Stemming out from the central node of "INSPIRING", I established four directions of inquiry:

1. What is inspiring?
2. Who is inspired?
3. How does it feel to be inspired? and
4. Where does inspiration come from?

FIGURE 1: CONCEPT MAP OF 'INSPIRING'

These four questions provide the overall framework for this article. Before embarking upon their answers however, I wanted to establish agreement of definition, and to satisfy my curiosity of the origins of the notion of 'inspiration'.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Online Etymology Dictionary explains that the idea of 'inspiration' referred to the immediate influence of God or a god. This definition, in use in the 1300s, is linked to the Latin word *inspirare*, meaning "inspire, inflame, blow into," which is itself a combination of the prefix *in-* + *spirare* "to breathe". It wasn't until the 1500s that the literal sense of 'inspiration' as an 'act of inhaling' came into usage (*inspirare* in contemporary Italian is the verb to breathe in, to inhale); its usage as 'one who inspires others' is attested by 1867.

I felt intrigued by the shared etymological root of 'spirare' in both 'inspiration' and 'spirit'. With spirits as supernatural entities that have a presence without a physical actuality, the common root word suggested that inspiration and spirits shared important characteristics, being fleeting, unpredictable, precious and personal. The word 'spirit' has other layers of meaning. It can also refer to energy and vitality - in the 1300s 'spirit' referred to "soul, courage, vigour and breath", and was defined as "an animating or vital principle in man and animals". These definitions also align with my experience of inspiration.

The etymological roots of the word revealed a further important characteristic of inspiration - that it cannot be owned, controlled, or contained. If it is indeed an immediate influence of God or a god that has been 'blown into' the recipient, then its receiver cannot necessarily take credit for it either. He or she is merely a conduit for ideas that have come from ... somewhere. We shall consider the provenance of ideas later in this article, but first, let us establish some of the contemporary uses of 'inspiring'.

WHERE DOES INSPIRATION COME FROM?

The ancients held that inspiration was indeed a kind of visitation from the gods. In other times, creative ideas and inspiration were the work of a muse, with the artist as conduit for their intentions. However, for those of us in the business of creating work, we develop over time a process that creates an environment (physical, mental, and spiritual) that is conducive to discoveries and ideas.

Good process for me tends to be open-ended, and include some elements of risk and uncertainty. In the classical music world, where some of my work is based, processes are the opposite of this - they are predictable, with closed (finite) outcomes and a very low tolerance of risk. Thus process is both an individual thing and somewhat dictated by the artform and dimension in which you are creating work.

For participants coming to a workshop, an inner muse must still be summoned. In a workshop setting, it is the artist-facilitator's role to offer a starting point, or a doorway into the creative experience for the participants.

For many years now, I have devised and led creative music projects for the Melbourne Symphony orchestra. Children come to ArtPlay for 2 days every school holidays, to compose and perform a new piece of music alongside the professional musicians from the Orchestra. Each project takes a piece of orchestral repertoire as its starting point – perhaps a melodic quote, or a harmonic progression, an interesting rhythm, or a compositional structure. The children are asked to take inspiration from the way the composer worked with this idea, and transform it into something new. Over the two days, their ideas are developed and re-worked, first in small groups and then in the whole ensemble, resulting most often in a large-scale work for 28 child musicians and 4 adult musicians, complex in its musical layers and gestures, with a likely duration of up to 20 minutes. The whole work is performed from memory, and is recorded but never notated.

For many of the children, this is an inspiring process that reveals capacities they didn't know they had. Children are often amazed by the interest, quality and complexity of the music the group creates. Many who come to these projects have not composed their own music before. They are inspired by the different ways that they can invent music – by working it out on manuscript paper, yes, but also through improvising, listening and responding to each other's ideas, and creating the music right there and then, in the moment and on the spot. They are very aware of the provenance of each idea in the piece that their group creates – whose idea it was, how it was explored and extended upon by the group. They are often surprised by their ability to memorise the music and the notes they must play in it. Their parents always comment on the intense focus and concentration that permeates the ensemble's performances.

The performance outcomes – in particular those that take place in more formal orchestral venues prior to a Melbourne Symphony Orchestra concert, or as part of a larger arts festival, give their work further status and authenticity. It shifts their work from being something that is childlike, praiseworthy in the eyes of people who are already predisposed to liking them (their parents, for example), to being something that can stand on its own artistic merits.

When they stand up to perform in front of an audience, it is their own work that they are performing. They know this, and it is a further point of inspiration that leads many to go home and recreate the music with their siblings or friends.

WHAT IS INSPIRING?

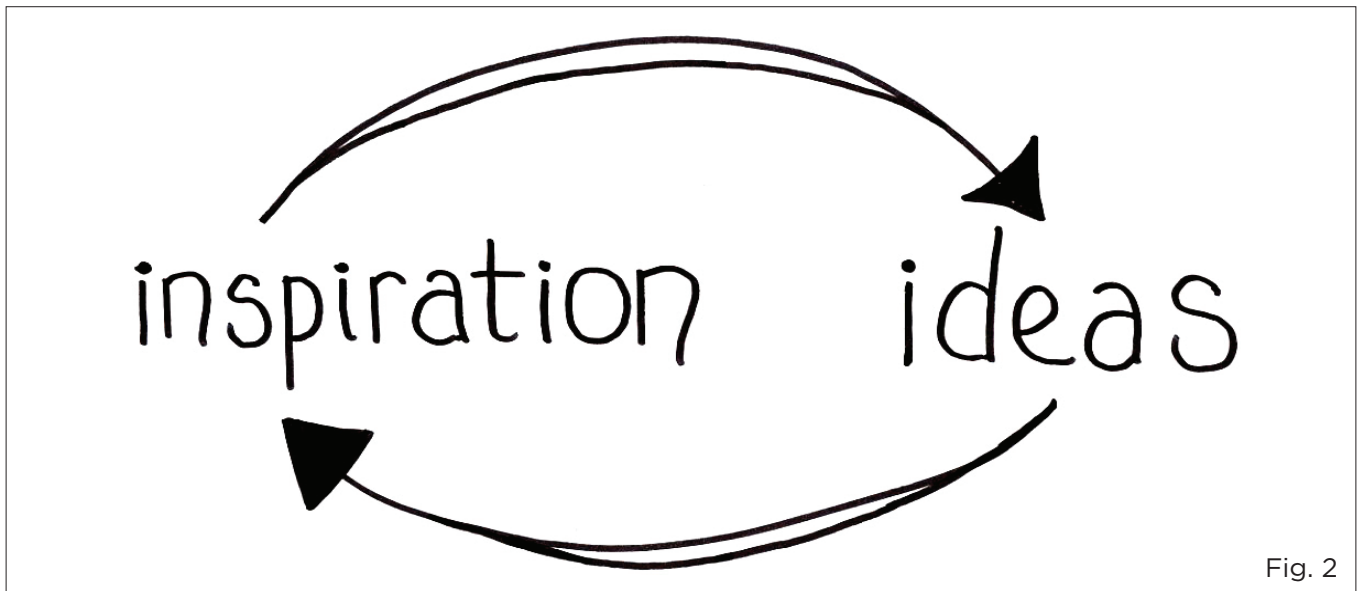
This question is deliberately ambiguous, and there are a number of ways that it can be interpreted. What does it look like when someone is inspired? What do you find inspiring? What do I find inspiring? What inspires children? What are the characteristics of an inspiring thing or experience?

For me, inspiration and ideas come together in a kind of reflexive loop. One tends to feed the other, as well as respond to the other, so much so that 'ideas' and 'inspiration' are almost synonymous.

REFLEXIVE LOOP, “INSPIRATION” AND “IDEAS”

This reflexive loop, and its resulting energy and momentum, can be enhanced by the presence of multiple ideas, from multiple voices. Ideas generate more ideas, which, if facilitated well, can generate further energy and momentum. I have learned over time how much my artistic practice is grounded in collaborative processes. It's not that I don't create when I'm on my own, but I am hugely inspired by the presence of other people – their ideas and contributions, and their responses to mine. Fig. 2

The power of the group also invokes unpredictable outcomes – the creation of work that is uniquely from that particular group of people at that particular time, and with all the experiences and background knowledge that they bring with them (not just in music, but in all aspects of being alive) in response to the creative task posed. If one of those people hadn't been there, there would be a different outcome. This means that not one of us can really predict the outcome of a group-devised creative endeavour. We are in the hands of the gods breathing their influence into us, and



most likely require the hands of a skilled facilitator to help us realise the potential of that inspiration.

In a collaborative composing environment – where a group of people undertakes the task of creating an original piece of music together – inspired people tend to look motivated, engaged, and focused. They may have lots of ideas to share. They are keen to work and not looking for distractions. An inspiring project is also an energising one. It feeds off and back into the energy in the room. Time passes quickly. People are in a state of flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi in his seminal work on this topic.

This kind of flow and intensity of engagement can occur at any age. In the 2012 Music Construction Site workshops I led at ArtPlay, children aged 5-8 and their parents created atmospheric, evocative music, made up of sounds and patterns created by the children and their adults. From the outset, the children were responsible for their choices and decisions about the sounds. They were captivated as they made their way around the room, trying out different percussion instruments from around the world and selecting the one they wanted to play in the composition. They listened to each of the chosen sounds in turn (about 20 sounds, one after the other), in silence, discussing after each one the characteristic properties of that sound, using simple descriptive language that the artists modelled for them. Later, they fell silent as they drew an image of their sound, thinking about its colour, texture and duration. By the end of the 90 minute workshop, these pictures had been arranged according to the children's ideas in to a structure, creating a musical score which the group then played. This was a group of very young children, not an age group one usually associates with playing esoteric, arhythmic, textural music, and they sat with instruments in their hands, waiting for the moment or moments that they should play, listening to their peers as they played, watching the 'score' of images intently and absorbing themselves in the music.

Ideally, a loop will continue on in perpetuity, but the reflexive loop of inspiration and ideas can be broken. Inspiration is responsive to environment, which can include social factors, physical space, and time. Inspiration also responds to personal factors, such as fear, physical discomfort, tiredness, or health.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Groups are complex, and there will always be many exchanges underway between each of the personalities present – some spoken but many unspoken and unacknowledged by the group. A group can inspire each other, but it can also block itself, through being judgemental, overly aware of failure and mistakes, fearful of the unfamiliar or the unpolished (particularly in music, as in Western culture there is a widespread fear of making music, and what music should sound like), being

unfocused, and being uncommitted or lacking in direction. It is the facilitator's role in a creative, collaborative workshop to acknowledge these social factors and encourage the group to find (personally) safe and productive ways of harnessing inspiration and generating material together.

Different groups will have different needs. I regularly work with newly-arrived children from refugee and immigrant backgrounds, for whom music can play an incredibly supportive role as they grapple with the challenges of a new country, new culture, and new language. However, in a creative music environment, they are often eager to explore and experiment. By contrast, groups made up of children who have had lots of formal music learning opportunities sometimes find it challenging to embrace the freedom of invention. This role is similarly complex. As a facilitator I need to find that balance between being prepared and leading, and being prepared and able to hold back so that "the group may discover the journey of (...) invention for themselves". Facilitators maintain artistic leadership, but do so in such a way as to give control over to the group, and remain open to the unexpected outcomes that emerge. From the French *facile*, "to make easy", facilitation need not be seen as different to teaching; however, it is an approach to teaching that requires self-reflection alongside a range of communicative and creative skills, and an openness to exploration and discovery.

In projects like this, questions and problems to solve are a core part of the creative process and the doorway-in to the creative process that I offer the child participants.

Questions and problem-solving may start with reference to the material from the orchestral repertoire that is our source material, or may be more specific to the musical needs of the piece – asking for a "grounding" bass-line, or a "floating" melody, or "fast-moving connective material to fill in the gaps" in a melodic line or rhythm.

Questions may also invite a kind of transformation of intangible musical material into something visible, or vice-versa. "What does this sound look like?" can generate complex graphic scores and performances of these. "What sounds could depict this story?" can lead to the generation of highly-considered sounds, played with acute awareness and sensitivity to musical tension and release.

Later, the questions focus on refinement and improvement. Questions such as "What more does this need?", "Is this communicating our intentions as clearly as possible?" and "Can it be more beautiful/disturbing/extreme/pared back?" encourage participants to consider their work critically and realise its full potential.

The art of asking questions and communicating concepts without dictating or prescribing them is one of the most crucial skills in inspiring others. In the intangible art of music, the questions need to create links to music already heard, to other familiar forms, to images or metaphors, or to interesting performance challenges on the children's instruments. They need to connect the participants to their prior knowledge and offer ways of extending this into new directions. The right questions will steer the participants' responses towards something that the facilitator knows is needed in the piece of music. It could be the difference between asking for a "sound" rather than a "note", "melody" or "rhythm", for example. The questions also need to be authentic. Group composing processes in workshops need not be different to the processes used by professionals working with peers. The questions and challenges asked of the creators and of the music are more or less the same, perhaps with greater reference to tangible examples to help guide the participants' efforts, than would be in the professional environment where a common vocabulary is already established.

With every project and process there is a danger of stagnation, where experience allows us to fall back on familiar strategies or patterns that we know work, but that may result in a less fresh, lively energy. Therefore it is always valuable to challenge your work with an idea out of left-field. Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt put together a collection of over 100 such challenges, known as the *Oblique Strategies*, that are designed to jolt the imagination out of patterns and into new responses. Simpler tactics may just involve adjusting other patterns in your life, such as going to work via a different route each day. Ultimately, the generation of ideas is once again a combination of god-sent inspiration, coupled with the preparation of an ideal environment in which to receive it.

PHYSICAL SPACE

Environments can make a big difference to the creative flow of a project, and thus they have a potential impact on inspiration. I prefer to lead music projects in unimposed spaces that are relatively open. However, a group working in too large or open a space can feel overwhelmed or engulfed. The energy of the group is dissipated by the lack of containment, and the sounds can feel unfocused and muddy due to a cavernous acoustic.

ArtPlay is a large, open-plan space that was not designed specifically for music. What it lacks in acoustic definition it makes up for in other elements that ensure the artist's and participants' focus remains on the creative task at hand. This includes flexible furniture that can be assembled or put away very quickly; heavy things that roll; sturdy curtains and room dividers that enable you to reconfigure the space; natural light that keeps people's brains fresh and eyes lively; and dedicated staff who look after the many additional tasks that workshops entail, such as welcoming and registering participants, and looking after first aid needs, should they arise. The fact that these aspects of the workshop that are in hand, frees up the brain space of the artists and participants to focus on the artistic content and so adds to the inspiring potential of the workshop.

This attention to detail to make a flexible space also a responsive and welcoming space – for artists as well as participants, teachers and families – is, I believe, a reflection of ArtPlay's commitment to giving status to children's art-making, the kind of status that is more often reserved for adult art-making. Some decisions are very simple, like arranging the participants' morning tea one sunny project day to be held outside on the veranda. The children – all aged 11-13 – milled around, helping themselves to snacks and drinks, catching up with friends, and looking for all the world like their own 'café society'. By doing things well, and working with high-quality materials both in the artwork and the physical space, ArtPlay communicates the value and importance of the children's work and their artistic contributions to ArtPlay's culture.

TIME

Time also shares a relationship with inspiration. It is common to feel we don't have enough time to realise an idea, or to feel you are always under pressure from a delivery deadline for creative work. This pressure can cause a lot of stress, and stress and anxiety are enemies of inspiration, which loves a bit of space into which to take up residence.

Conversely, time restrictions can have a galvanising effect, pushing participants through walls of procrastination into activity. With this in mind, we see that inspiration benefits from both short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals that are time-restricted can push us to get started. Longer-term goals offer larger amounts of free space into which our ideas can flow and start to take form.

I learned recently that too much time can also stultify inspiration. In a recent residency in Timor-Leste (East Timor), I spent quite long periods of time trying to get projects off the ground. I had all the time I could ever want to just play my instruments, create my own music and start on the many creative projects I felt I never had time to do in my usual busy life in Melbourne. However, I found myself uninspired and unmotivated to do this while progress on the actual purpose of my residency – projects with the local community – had stalled.

Describing this experience to a fellow ArtPlay artist, she suggested that it was the lack of resistance that could block inspiration. Inspiration and ideas need boundaries or form to bump up against, and it needs the resistance to work against. She likened it to thixotropic substances that hold a form when pressure is applied and turn to liquid when pressure is removed. Therefore, we can see that time on its own has a negligible relationship with inspiration, if there is no resistance or boundary for the ideas to take their initial shape from. At ArtPlay, my workshops tend to work with the galvanising effect of limited time. There is always enough time. Sometimes, we wish there was more time, to refine ideas or hone performances. The limited time means that we get to work with little delay, and we start creating our first compositions within the first 2 hours of the 2-day projects.

PERSONAL FACTORS

One's own physical state can also impact on inspiration. If we visualise a person being filled with inspirational breath from a godly influence, we can imagine that the better shape the recipient vessel is in, the better accommodation it will offer the inspiration. Similarly, every gardener or farmer knows the importance of allowing the ground regular periods of lying fallow, before it is required to nurture new growth again. People are the same. It is natural that the reflexive loop of ideas and inspiration will need to slow after a time, in order to recoup its vital nutrients.

When engaged in a creative project, a further personal element that is crucial is the presence of immediate feedback and achievability. Immediate feedback may be in the form of hearing our sounds coming back to us, rather than having them lost in the din of many children playing many sounds at random or unpredictable times. Being able to have a sense of one's progress – even if a milestone achievement is still some way off – is important in maintaining motivation and the momentum of inspiration.

We are inspired by possibility and achievability. Projects that can be conceived of, and that require skills but that are still somewhat out of reach, are both inspiring and motivating because they stretch us into new experiences and enable us to grow. However, if the project is too vague or unclear, or the likelihood of completion too remote, our inspiration is likely to wane.

WHO IS INSPIRED?

As artists we are (hopefully) inspired to make work. As the work evolves, it generates further inspiration – for us, and for others in our immediate circle and beyond. At this point the work has its own momentum, where it charges forward un-propelled by other forces and where the artist must strive to keep up with all of its potential.

Inspiration works in ripples of influence, ebbing outwards from our initial impact to effect many others. I think of this as direct and indirect inspiration – direct being the immediate inspiration of those who participate in the workshops in some way, and indirect inspiration being what happens later, as the participants go out into the world.

As teaching artists and facilitators we work to inspire the people with whom we work. The direct inspiration is in what happens in the project itself – that they are lit by an idea or ideas, and excited to try and realise it. A further direct ripple outwards from a teaching artist-led project is in inspiring the parents, guardians, teachers or other adults in the lives of the child participants who observe at work in the workshop – lighting them with the excitement that this creative project has had on their child and inspiring them to seek out more such opportunities.

'RIPPLES' OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT INSPIRATION

Indirect ripples are less predictable, and less within our own immediate sphere of influence, but perhaps more exciting for the possibilities they invite. Indirect inspiration includes a participant being inspired to make changes and choices in their future lives in response to their workshop experience. They occur as the child participants go out into the world and inspire their friends and peers with ideas that had their genesis in their workshop experience. In my music projects, I want the participants to be inspired by the starting points and project framework that I have provided – inspired to create their own work in response to these – but I also want to inspire them with the sense of themselves as creative makers and do-ers, active and autonomous.

Similarly, our work as artists and teaching artists can inspire and influence other artists. People may see our work, hear or read about it, and be inspired to create something as a result. I know this has happened countless times for me; more critically, I can name a number of key performances, projects, people, and creative works that have been highly influential in the broader directions my work has taken. For example, the dance work 'Quick Brown Fox' by the Leigh Warren Dancers,

was the inspiration for my Alphabet Dance project, which has had many incarnations and is featured project for The Song Room's Live Site. The music of Shostakovich and the way he embeds his name and other word-derived motifs into his music has inspired a number of composition projects between me and groups of young musicians. The creative use of recorded voices by artists as diverse as Steve Reich, Nitin Sawhney and Topology (Queensland) has inspired me to explore collaborative composition models that depict the voices and stories of young new arrivals in Australia. Fig. 3

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE INSPIRED?

Every person is unique, but we can start to establish an understanding of inspiration in general through a consideration of our own experiences. When I am inspired by something, I want to participate in it myself. I want to join in, or copy it, or recreate it with a group of my own. Ideas and images will play over in my head when I am away from the project.

Inspiration is also infectious. If I am excited by something, I can inspire similar excitement in others – depending on how I choose to communicate it. Similarly, I can be filled with inspiration towards new experiences and ideas by other people's enthusiasm for them. ArtPlay as a space is inspiring because it is largely open and unimposed. The natural light floods in and creates a pleasant and positive energy in the room. Things work at ArtPlay – so all the artists' and participants' energy can be directed towards the project at hand.

Inspiration can feel liberating. It is energising. It is enjoyable. It encourages us to focus and remain focused on the task, particularly if the task being undertaken contains clear goals and provides immediate feedback. While engaged in the task our sense of self-consciousness diminishes, although paradoxically the sense of self will be stronger at the end of the end of the activity. These are my own observations, but they correspond with several of Csikszentmihalyi's eight components of enjoyment, which are central to the experience of flow and the notion of an optimal experience.

CONCLUSION

Returning now to the early usages of word 'inspiring', and its etymological relations, I am struck by the relationship between the spirit of an idea filling me, and a breath filling me (spirare is the Latin to breathe). I see the link between inspiration and breath as twofold – that inspiration can fill us, as we may breathe in and be filled with life-giving oxygen, and that inspiration might in fact be as effortless and un-requiring of conscious effort as the breath, and as much of a life source. We can read this is a reminder to stop worrying about inspiration coming to us – rather, just get out of the way, and clear the pathway for it to enter into you, which it is undoubtedly trying to do.

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be. There will be an answer, let it be.

McCartney, 1970, Let it Be

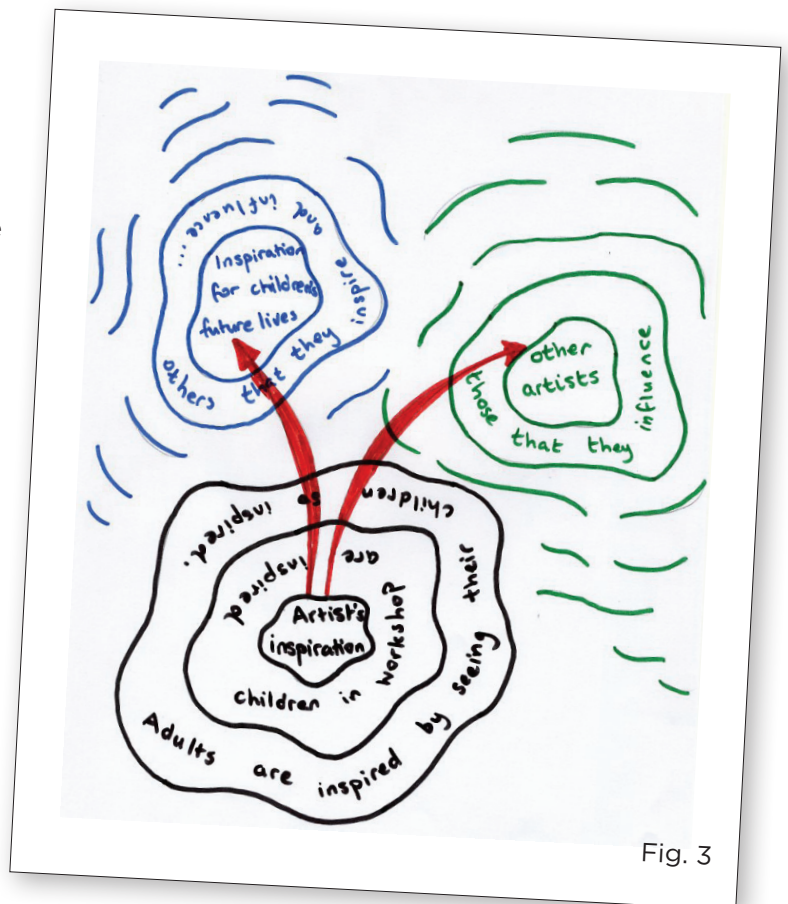


Fig. 3

However, its very separateness, coming as it does as a kind of outside intervention beyond our control, means that we must cultivate and nurture the environment into which we want it to flow. In professional arts practice, we learn what creates inspiration in us, and feed those elements as regularly as we can, to ensure access to those godlike qualities. This cultivation of environment includes both the physical surroundings and our own inner environment.

In the creative, collaborative projects with children that many teaching artists lead, the role of facilitator is one that is essential to the inspiration and inspiring of the young participants. Facilitation is a complex task, requiring a developed artistic aesthetic and skill-set, in addition to the personal and communication skills to guide the creative efforts of the group in such a way as to honour and bring their contributions to the fore. The facilitator finds the subtle balance of maintaining artistic responsibility while in the process perhaps subjugating their own ideas or preferences in favour of the group's.

Inspiration prefers to set its own pace, and determine its own flow. It can be shy of both imposition and control. The imposed-upon space can create blocks to inspiration, as can human efforts to control and dictate when and in what form inspiration will arrive. Interestingly, in considering the role of a facilitator in a group collaborative setting, control and imposition of ideas, power or top-down rulings are similarly destructive of both the inspirational environment, and the creative urges that we want the group to have. This suggests to me that the facilitation of others' ideas is paradoxically an essential step in inviting inspiration into your own life. For me, the projects I have led at ArtPlay over the years (I have been leading music projects at ArtPlay since its opening day in 2004), this has been demonstrated time and time again. It's led me to realise that this kind of creative facilitation and collaborative exchange is a part of my art form, rather than an adjunct to it.

Inspiration thus leaves us with an invitation, rather than a challenge – to seek out those environmental elements that best support inspiration to take hold of us, while at the same time being prepared to clear the path, get out of the way, and simply create the space for inspiration to find and fill. Because it will. It always does.

Endnotes

<http://www.etymonline.com>

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<http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~rf6t-tyfk/oblique.html> Click to read a card.

See thixotropy in action here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL7he4o_c0s

This corresponds with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, in which learning takes place when a person works slightly beyond what they can already complete independently, by working alongside a more learned other. Moll, L. C. (1990). Introduction. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 1-27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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