

## **It's a question of not starting with answers**

The process of commissioning art, for all its long and famous history, has always been fraught with difficulties. Without it, who knows what the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel would have looked like? Then again, it can be a great source of conflict, ranging from the disappointment of having to compromise all the way to the complete impasse best illustrated by Richard Serra's Tilted Arc<sup>1</sup>. What Rednile has been offering with Factory Nights is not only a novel approach to commissioning that dispels connotations of power formerly associated with the process, but also a chance to finally establish a welcome case for best practice.

If you ever thought of commissioning art, as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, you've probably been advised to first develop a brief and then to search for suitable artists to implement your vision. As valuable as these basic guidelines might be, one does not always know exactly what to ask for, how to formalise ideas that might be of a visual or abstract nature or even where to look for artists. As an artist, being approached with demands for "Artwork onto vitreous enamel panels: 160 x 140 x 25mm" or "a piece of public artwork exploring the life and work of So and So" and often little to no information about the context can also be daunting.

What lacks in such an approach is the relationship that makes it possible for communication between both parties to flow in a constructive manner in order to achieve a collaborative, mutually satisfying outcome. As James Lingwood, founder of the commissioning organisation Art Angel once stated: "Every new commission begins with questions, not answers." Without that, expectations, concerns and needs might remain unaddressed, turning the commissioning process into a potentially disappointing experience, or even a nightmarish one. Sometimes, the central issue of facilitating communication is addressed by hiring a consultant, especially in situations where public art is commissioned. This rarely proves to be an efficient solution as the consultant is often employed by the person or body commissioning the art and, therefore, mainly aims to protect their interests.

It is perhaps more helpful to think about the mutual knowledge, trust and respect necessary to a positive outcome for a commissioning process as the foundation of any solid partnership. So why not approach this as one would any other meaningful relationship by relying to a third party for a bit of match-making magic? After all, someone who understands how artists work as well as what potential collectors might want can provide precious help when it comes to cutting through incompatible expectations.

But to reduce Rednile's practice to a match-making service would be an oversimplification. Rather, they facilitate collaborations of all kinds which create spaces of possibility for art to be created and experienced differently. They have made it a specialty to address potential gaps in the cultural landscape of the West Midlands and the North East of England by bringing together practitioners from all creative spheres to devise collaborative projects that have taken the form of temporary public art, events, studio spaces, mentoring and residencies often meeting regeneration and/or

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<sup>1</sup> Tilted Arc was a sculpture commissioned by the Arts-in-Architecture programme of the United States General Services Administration for the Federal Plaza in New York. It was designed by Richard Serra and constructed in 1981, and dismantled, after much debate, in 1989.

community agendas. Basically, Rednile thrives on the fact that there isn't a single perspective that is sufficient to address contemporary art.

Factory Nights, the on-going series of working sessions for creatives popping around different locations of the West Midlands and the North East, gently chip away at barriers between artists and communities, businesses and industry leaders by bringing them together in a playful, often surprising, environment where differences are easy to forget. While having tea on a canal boat, exploring the bed of a closed canal and taking refuge from hail under the cover of trees as we did on Saturday the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2012<sup>2</sup>, conversation flowed easily between members of the Burslem Port Trust and artists. Whoever was inspired by the space and the Burslem Port Trust's enthusiasm to work with creative people, was encouraged to submit a proposal to Rednile for support in developing the idea further.

Instead of bowing out once the introductions have been made, extending this support in all kinds of forms including bursaries and hands-on help, allows Rednile to remain at the heart of the commissioning process. Adding more people to the complex relationships generated by the commissioning process might appear counter-intuitive. In fact, they appear somewhat reluctant to maintain too much of a presence or to leave too strong a stamp on projects that come out of Factory Nights. That slight tension is par for the course when establishing new practices but what Rednile offers is impartial facilitation.

Hopefully, over time this facilitating presence will firmly present itself as an ideal addition to the commissioning process, a best practice of sorts. Far from being the proverbial third wheel, Rednile provides perspective with both an understanding of artistic processes and a clear view of how these can be compatible with the needs and expectations of communities, businesses and local authorities. In other words, they know which questions to ask and they don't hesitate to ask them, opening up the commissioning process for all involved, allowing for self-reflexivity and communication.

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*I am a freelance curator, writer and lecturer based in London. I tend to focus on collaborative processes with practitioners from various disciplines in order to make the most of my various activities without seeking to establish or maintain clear boundaries between curatorial and educational work. I have worked with Tate Britain, Tate Modern, the ICA, the Brighton Photo Fringe, Electra Productions and the Doinel Gallery among others. I completed a PhD pertaining to collaborative processes involving artists, audiences and public art institutions at the London Consortium in 2009. I am a founding editor of the Static (<http://www.static.londonconsortium.com/>) website, and was a regular contributor of art content for Kultureflash (<http://www.kultureflash.net/>). I currently lecture in Critical Studies at the Fine Arts department of Goldsmiths College and in the Art Education at the Arts Management and Policy MA programme of Birkbeck College. More about my work can be found at <http://www.martinerouleau.co.uk/>.*

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<sup>2</sup> Factory Night at Bed of closed Burslem Branch Canal.