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Impact of networking





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a-n Collections: Reflections on networking March 2006

Edited and introduced by Jane Watt, as the first half of her review of NAN, *Reflections on networking* is a collation of material presenting artists' first-hand experiences of NAN. It includes interviews with and articles by artists involved in NAN events, trips and bursaries: Mark Gubb on how to make friends and influence people; Chris Brown and Louise Short on the Quo Vadis event in Bristol and Cardiff; Paul Glinkowski on breaching cultural barriers; Jane Watt on the Critical space event; Susannah Silver catches up with artists who attended Cove park NAN event; Miranda Whall and Graham Dolphin discuss the NAN research trip to Berlin; Alison Unsworth on taking part in the NAN North East trip to Glasgow and Mark Gubb on the first year of the NAN bursary scheme; NAN timeline and NAN map.

With Vox Box interviews: Kwong Lee, Stephen Beddoe, Emilia Telese, Michael Forbes, Caroline Wright, Juliana Capes, Guyan Porter, Hilary Thorn, Marjolaine Ryley, Catherine Bertola, Tony Charles, Aaron McCloskey, Christine Duff and Jonathan Waring.

Cover image: *The Bouncy Boxing Championships* hosted by Sports Day as part of the NAN-NANA event held in Nottingham on 28 – 30 April. The image shows delegates watching runner-up Tom Godfrey (Stand Assembly) triumph in the semi finals with referee Ellie Harrison and compare Adele Prince. www.sports-day.net

A text-only version of this publication is available on www.a-n.co.uk

Notions of networking

Jane Watt examines NAN's characteristics and its relationship to the current networking climate.

Although the desire to join a network might be deeply rooted in a basic human need – to share experiences with others and look for support and affirmation – the type of network, and modes in which engagement is encouraged are manifold. The need to network has been around for millennia, but in the last ten years the landscape for methods of networking has changed dramatically with the widespread use of computer networks. Everything and everyone can be 'networked' no matter whether you work in the same room, building, or on the other side of the globe. Along with this surge in 'networkability' there has been a debate in the last five years amongst social, political, economic and technology theorists and practitioners about what networking means in this day and age. NAN has germinated and developed at the same time as this debate, and, in its initial brainstorming days did, indeed, look at some of these debates. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the characteristics of NAN as a network and how it sits in this climate of recent network knowledge.

The NAN artists' advisory group was formed in 2003 to explore ideas of what a network of artists' networks could or should be, and it identified qualities and characteristics of successful networks as:

"Access into other networks, alliance (rather than membership), aspirational, capacity for change, constantly updated, dynamic, challenging stereotypes, focused on activity, 'give to get', informal/organic, knowledgeable, mutual respect, openness to change, pooling resources, practical and artistic support, proactive, quick information exchange, self-managing, social and professional, trust and generosity."¹

In network-speak, this approach is called 'social capital' a phrase which the American political scientist Robert Putnam used in his book *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) which, by the inclusion of the word 'capital' implies that the resource, in this case 'sociability', has value. As the iSociety points out in their research publication *You don't know me but... Social Capital and Social Software*, social capital "refers to those social networks that go beyond our families, workplaces or official bodies and connect us to friends, associates and strangers for mutual benefit. It is the basis for much collaborative behaviour".² It goes on to point out that:

"As our economy has become more orientated around intangible goods – ideas, skills, effort, information – so social capital has become more valuable. We need to trust the people whose advice we receive... Social and professional networks circulate such valuable information quickly and efficiently."³

Although the language used here is rooted in socio-economics, this assertion is backed up by a-n's own research in the sphere of art practice:

"Since 2001, a-n The Artists Information Company has tracked the growing trend for artists to collaborate and network, and to create professional infrastructures and clusters that serve to enhance their artistic development. This approach is visible not only within artists' building-based organisations but in the breadth of visual arts interest groupings including virtual communities that operate on a UK and international basis."⁴

Several factors appear to be at play that have contributed to the timeliness of a-n's recognition of the importance of networking for artists, as well as a strong will to do something about it. The basic premise was to network artists' networks. The rich resources on which a-n would focus would be "ideas and knowledge; people (members) being a resource themselves; levels of involvement from individual to large organisation..."⁵

These ideas developed at a time in which there was a growing shift, across many professions, not just in the arts, of a knowledge-based economy. In addition there was increasing availability, and affordability, of technology that could assist in quick and flexible communication – mobile phone, email, and online networking. Thirdly, there was an increase in awareness of the importance of initiating and developing opportunities alongside reliance on existing opportunities, and established organisations and support.

There has been recognition of the need to support more traditional physical, space-based networks where artists develop work, ideas and a support network of other like-minded individuals through the development of studio groups through schemes such as Arts Council England's (ACE) Art Time Space Money initiative.⁶ However, a-n found through their own research, that the identification and development of sustainable, physical environments for artists, although important, only provides one way for artists to collaborate, share and support each other.⁷ Building up a physical base is a costly and a lengthy process that requires substantial investment in time and money. Something that organisations, like ACE, are better placed to instigate and oversee.

Individual artists' needs and experiences can change at an astonishing rate. How many artists know what they will be working on, with whom they will be working, or where they will be working, in eighteen months time, let alone five years time? As artist and a-n's Artists' Networks (North East) coordinator Catherine Bertola points out, "networks continually shift anyway, they evolve and they grow and sometimes they fall apart". This identification, and acceptance of the shifting nature of art practice, and indeed the reasonable short-termness of many individuals and groups is paramount to understanding the nature of networking and the nature of functioning as an artist. It is the basis on which NAN has been built. The acceptance of experimentation, shift, change, and cessation is as important for the life and development of the scheme as a whole. It has been key to NAN's philosophy of encouraging other groups and individuals to run networking events in their own

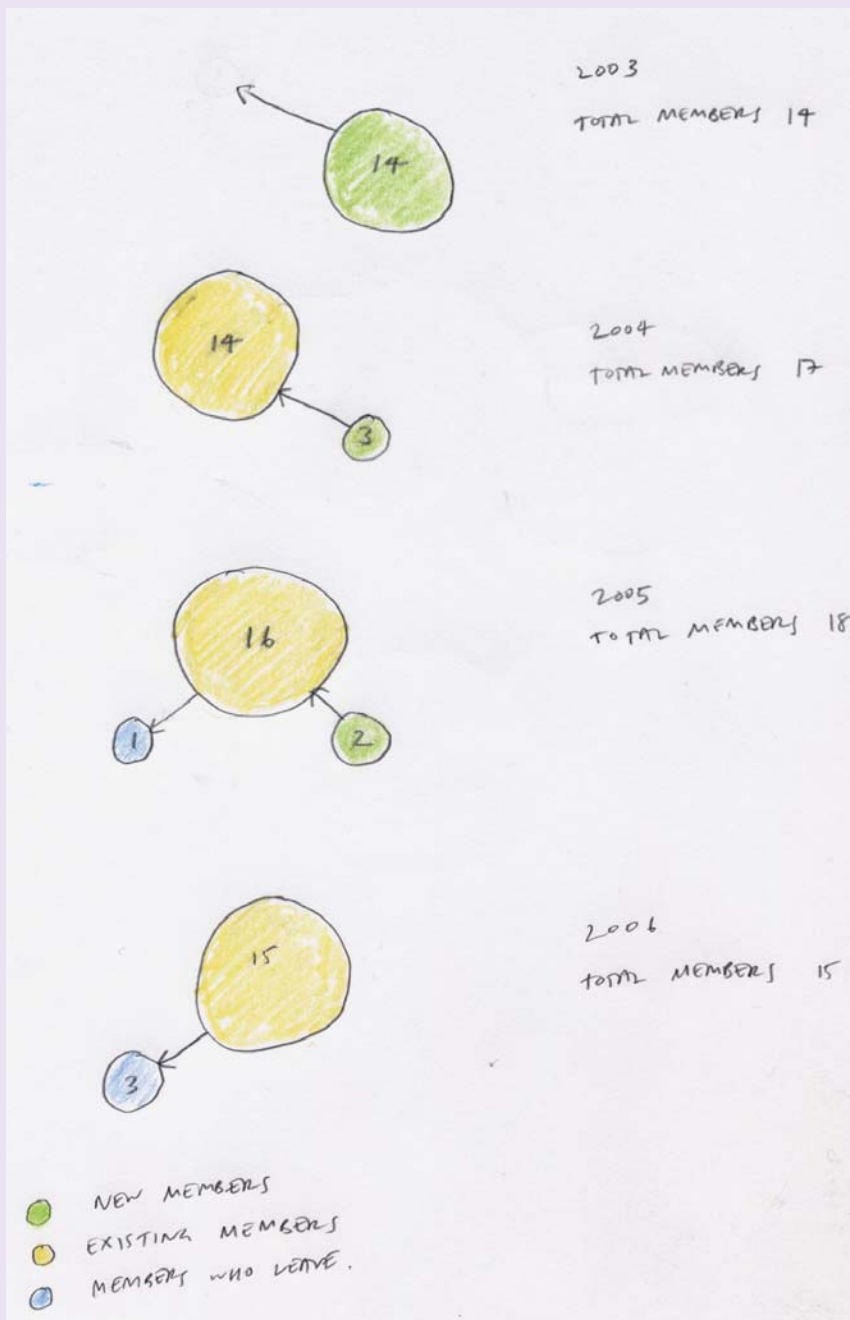


Fig 1 Flow of advisory group members. Diagram: Jane Watt

way, such as the recent Sideshow event, NAN-NANA, in Nottingham to coincide with the British Art Show 6. This type of involvement encourages new ways of thinking and approaching projects and, at its best, allows a dynamic momentum to build up. However, it is equally important to create space for mistakes, to learn from those mistakes, to embrace change and to encourage fresh blood to enter the mix. Juliana Capes, former Artists' events coordinator in Scotland, points out that part of her decision to step aside from her NAN role in autumn 2005 was that:

"I cared about the project enough to want fresh blood to come in and wanted NAN to continue to change and regenerate and have new ideas. I didn't want it to stagnate... It's good to pass it on to keep up the energy levels, so I'd really like that to continue to happen to NAN in general."

Capes echoes the physicist and system theorist Fritjof Capra's assertion that:

"Living networks are self-generating. They continually create or recreate themselves by transforming or replacing their components. In this way they undergo continual structural changes while preserving their web-like patterns of organisation."⁸

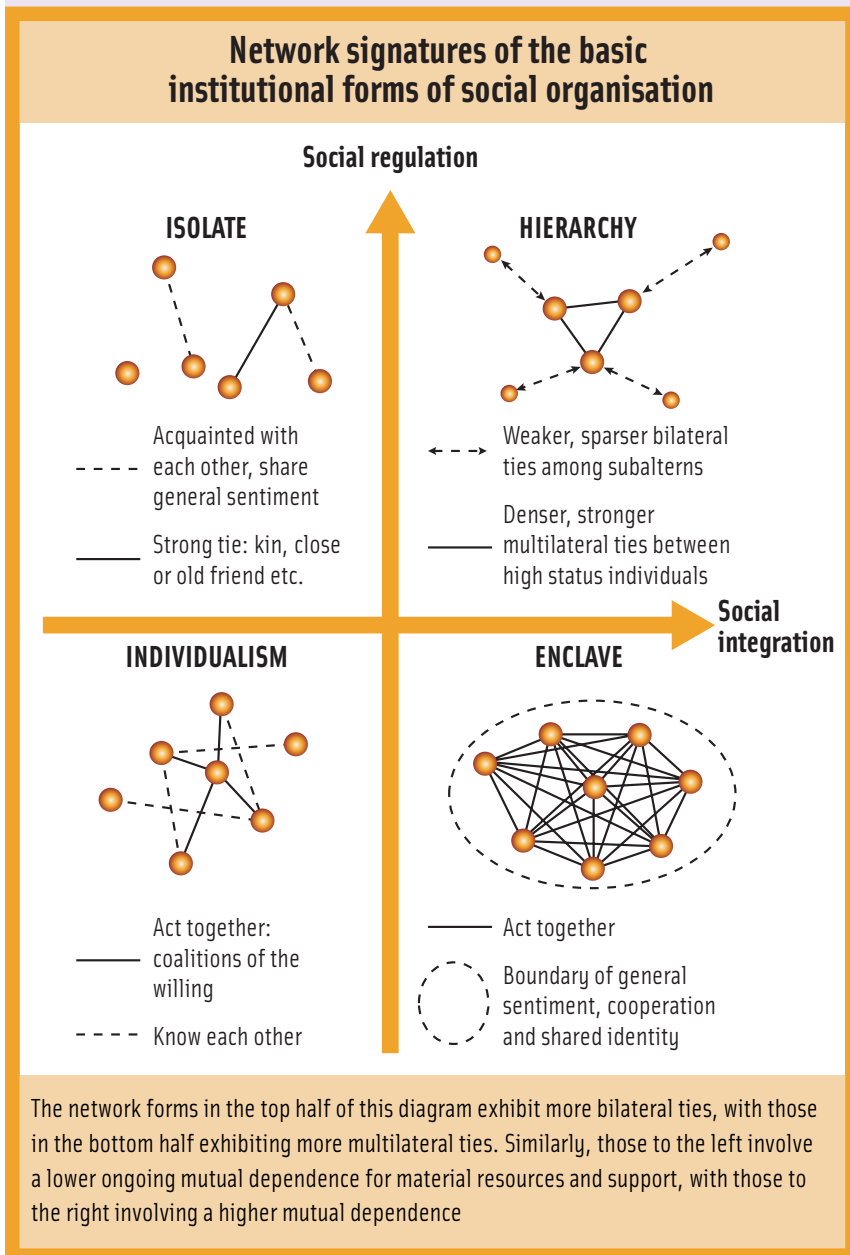
The 'capacity for change' that was identified early on by a-n is an important one, but one which is not necessarily easy to put into practice. Another, often conflicting aspect of human nature – the need for stability, routine, familiarity – can be at odds with this more open outlook, resulting in entrenched practice and attitude.

The fact that NAN has evolved from a strong knowledge-base of initial advisory meetings, together with field observations of artists' actual practice in small groups and networks, as well as an awareness of larger arts funding and professional organisational bodies, has meant that it has been, and continues to be, able to draw 'on-the-ground' expertise, with a bottom-up approach.

Again, this strikes a chord with Capra in his description of social networks:

"As communications continue in a social network, they form multiple feedback loops, which eventually produce a shared system of beliefs, explanations and values – a common context of meaning, also known as culture, which is continually sustained by further communications. Through this culture individuals acquire identities as members of the social network, and in this way the network generates its own boundary of expectations, of confidentiality and loyalty, which is continually maintained and renegotiated by the network of communications... The social network also produces a shared body of knowledge – including information ideas and skills – that shapes the culture's distinctive way of life in addition to its values and beliefs."⁹

The importance of 'multiple feedback loops' is important to the nourishment, as well as the development, of the organisation as a whole. This can be seen in NAN through the involvement of individuals through, for example, initially attending an organised event, and/or applying for a bursary, and later going on to become more involved through organising an event of their own that brings in more people, or who then become more involved in the advisory group with further discussions about the present and future scope of NAN. In this way, a sustainable supply of new and varied blood mixes with the longer-term, more established group, injecting new ideas and energy, as well as building on what has been successful before.



Susan Jones, one of the founding forces behind NAN, is well versed and aware of the socio-political debate around networking, she is equally aware of artists' different practices, modes of engagement and is sensitive to their changing and unique needs. So, through knowledge of possible models in professional art practice, business, sociology, and technology, NAN has evolved from the ground up, through trying and testing ways to network artists and artists' networks. There are echoes of networking models such as public policy researcher, Dr Perri 6's model [Fig 2] in the way that NAN operates [Fig 3] which evolved from initial structural ideas that were identified as:

"early innovators gather in others through induction process; equation of what's put in/taken out; lots of small clusters sharing ideas; membership by ownership/involvement and financial/in-kind contributions; ...responsive/dynamic according to the situation/environment; rolling membership; room to grow."¹⁰

An ethos emerged through initial discussions at pilot meetings in 2003 about the potential aspiration and role of NAN and was identified as:

"act local, think national and global; avoid formal structure by passing on admin responsibilities; core of high-value input, but still needs critical mass; empowering artists/enabling them to travel; engagement through history and recommendation; people can pick and choose what they want/need out of it."¹¹

This has developed into a very real working practice through NAN's ongoing, and very live, projects which include nationwide events, research trips and bursaries (Go and See, Re-View and New Collaborations) and are deeply rooted within researching, listening to and responding to the artist's perspective.

JW

Fig 2 Dr Perri 6's diagram showing network signatures of the basic institutional forms of social organisation. Ref: Dr Perri 6 (2004) 'Your friendship networks' in Helen McCarthy, Paul Miller and Paul Skidmore, (eds) (2004) *Network Logic: who governs in an interconnected world?* London: DEMOS.

NAN in numbers

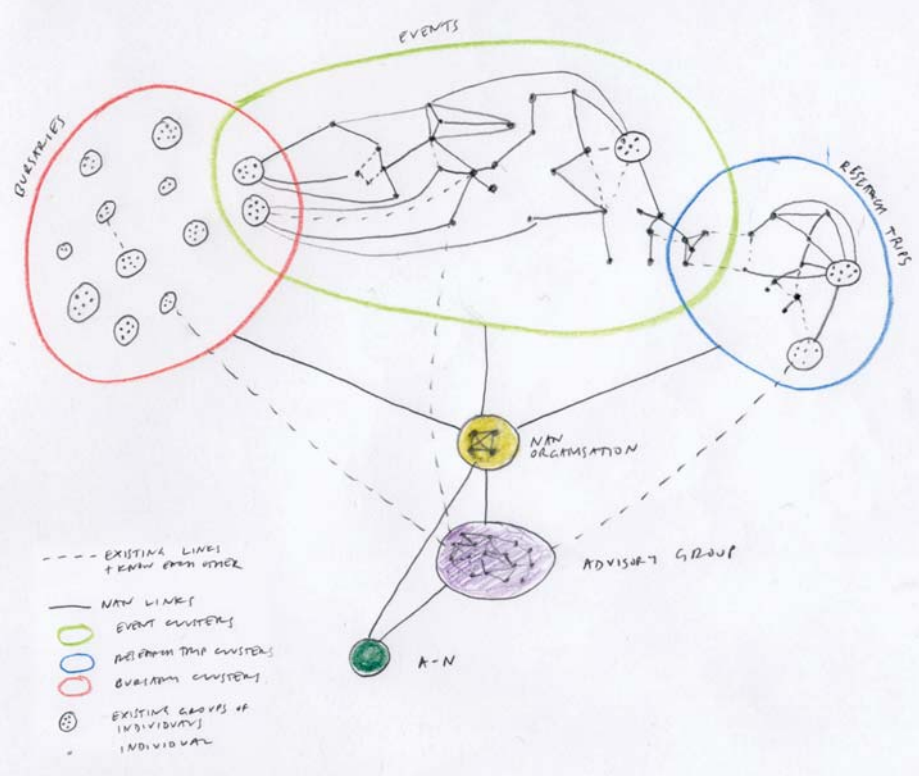


Fig 3 Networking Links and Clusters in NAN. Diagram: Jane Watt

Notes

- 1 a-n (2004) *Networking artists' networks: strategic approaches to artists' coordination and collective action. Report on research and pilot programmes 02-04*, Newcastle: a-n The Artists Information Company, p5.
- 2 iSociety (2003) *You don't know me but... Social Capital and Social Software*, London: iSociety, p4.
- 3 *ibid*, p13.
- 4 *ibid*, p4. See footnote 1
- 5 *ibid*, p16. See footnote 1
- 6 Artists' Workspaces is one of six new initiatives in Arts Council England's Art Time Space Money scheme which aims to, "increase opportunities for artists to occupy affordable and sustainable working places that are dynamic places for creative risk, critical engagement, community interaction and the production of ideas and work". See Arts Council England (2006) *Artist Time Space Money*, London: Arts Council England, p2. See also www.artistsineastlondon.org/essay/index2.htm for Michael Archer's essay 'Oranges and Lemons and Oranges and Bananas' commissioned by ACME Studios for a history of artists' studio instigation and provision in East London from 1960-2000.
- 7 See *Future forecast: Future space* on www.a-n.co.uk for research into artists' perceptions of changing and future studio needs.
- 8 Fritjof Capra, 'Living networks', Helen McCarthy, Paul Miller and Paul Skidmore, (eds) (2004) *Network Logic: who governs in an interconnected world?* London: DEMOS, p27.
- 9 *ibid*, pp29-30.
- 10 *ibid*, p17. See footnote 1
- 11 *ibid*, p18. See footnote 1

- 697 individual artists have attended NAN events and research trips to date.
- 75 artists within networks or groups have received Go and See grants to extend their networks and practice in the UK and beyond.
- 5 artists and 3 artists' groups received Re-view bursaries in 2005/06.
- 6 collaborations involving 16 artists or artists' groups received Artists' new collaborations bursaries in 2005/06.
- 54% of the NAN budget provides direct benefits to artists including events, bursaries, research visits and advisory group meetings.
- 50% of NAN's budget derives from a-n's earned income and revenue funding streams
- 34% of the budget comes from other sources including Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Northern Rock Foundation, European Union and Scottish Arts Council.
- 22% of the NAN budget is spent on administrative, financial and marketing services.