



## Trapped in the status quo?

An ArtsProfessional feature in partnership with people make it work we help organisations change and develop

“Radical, representative reinvention” is the only moral choice for the sector now, says **Richard Watts**, who examines what’s locking us in – and what might help the sector break free from its unfair, unequal and excluding norms.

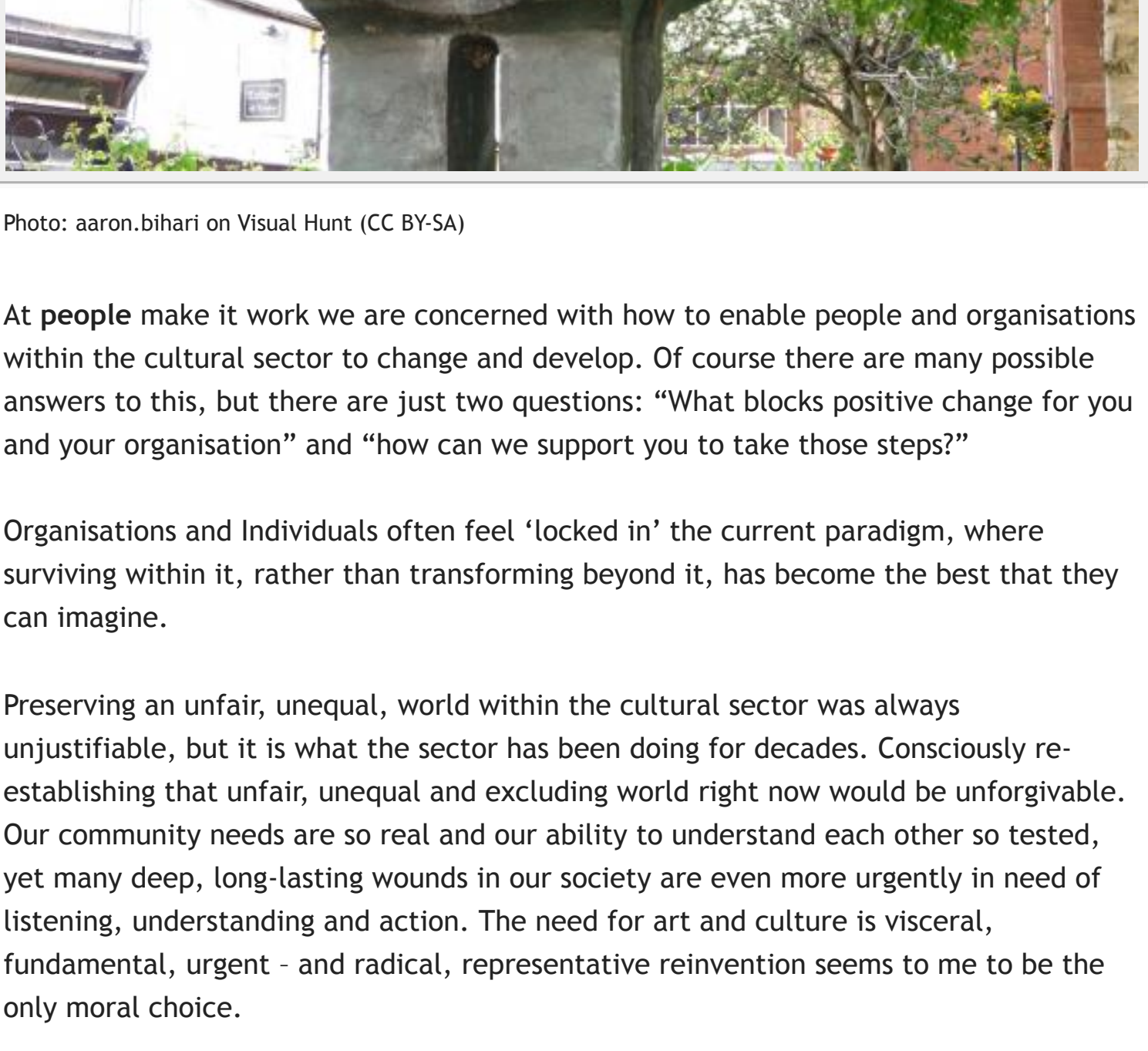


Photo: aaron.bihari on Visual Hunt (CC BY-SA)

At **people make it work** we are concerned with how to enable people and organisations within the cultural sector to change and develop. Of course there are many possible answers to this, but there are just two questions: “What blocks positive change for you and your organisation” and “how can we support you to take those steps?”

Organisations and Individuals often feel ‘locked in’ the current paradigm, where surviving within it, rather than transforming beyond it, has become the best that they can imagine.

Preserving an unfair, unequal, world within the cultural sector was always unjustifiable, but it is what the sector has been doing for decades. Consciously re-establishing that unfair, unequal and excluding world right now would be unforgivable. Our community needs are so real and our ability to understand each other so tested, yet many deep, long-lasting wounds in our society are even more urgently in need of listening, understanding and action. The need for art and culture is visceral, fundamental, urgent - and radical, representative reinvention seems to me to be the only moral choice.

Of course, it is not only about social justice and the needs of communities (crucial and fundamental as that is) but it is also about a rich and vibrant cultural landscape that is populated with diverse people and their diverse voices, enriching the work we make and how we make it.

### What locks us in?

Right now it seems crucial to ask, how do we let ourselves get trapped in the status quo? What are the dangerous ideas that keep us locked into scenarios that no one would design?

- **The mantle of preservation** - Leaders can feel trapped in a role tasked with preservation rather than impact, surrounded by those who depend on the organisation for an income and standing, rather than pressed by those who rely on the organisation for meaning, community, growth and entertainment. Preservation is a dangerous idea that can feel like a calling, but it locks out and excludes, and it disrupts the flow from social understanding to creative response.
- **Too many models** - Our missions must drive our models, not the other way around. Business organisations have felt trapped in an Escher painting of self-replicating activity by the tyranny of their building and other fixed costs. Executive attention is one of our scarcest commodities and it has been too much captured by the organisational and financial machinery, rather than the missions of our organisations and the social conditions and challenges that culture can illuminate, navigate and help address.
- **Hard-won influence** - Achieving positions of power and influence requires effort and determination, even for the most privileged, and for most, one of the drivers will be a belief that they can make a difference, do good, generate progress. This is true for both individuals and organisations. It can be hard to maintain an orientation towards change and reinvention when we believe our position relies on the status quo. What if we use our influence to generate and enable change, not shore up our position.
- **Confidence** - Change challenges can feel insurmountable and navigating them can feel beyond our skillset or knowledge. Feeling capable of maintenance but unequal to a task of transformation is a perspective that traps many of us. If we eschew answers and commit to questions, does that create some freedom? If not you then who? If not you alone, then who with? What if we see that there isn’t a need to do it alone, but there is a need to start.
- **Privilege** - One of the many dangerous characteristics of privilege is the belief that we have the right to shape the world around us and that we will do it well, in a good and benevolent direction, and that others should trust our positive intent. This is an inherently conservative position, that excludes, alienates and is self preserving.
- **Fear of getting it wrong** - One of the many dangerous ideas that keeps us locked in an imperfect situation is a fear of getting it wrong and bringing negative attention to ourselves or our organisation - rather than recognising that harm is already being done by our inaction. We are getting it wrong when we don’t address inequality, exclusion and under representation.
- **Funder relationships** - Do our funders create an ecology suited to innovation, rapid response, reading and reacting to an ever-changing landscape - wild, engaged, scanning animals of the wild, real elements of a live social system? Or have they created an ecology more suited to compliance, acquiescence and reliance - domesticated animals attuned to the changing moods of a master. Domesticated animals don’t survive a paradigm shift and aren’t suited to rapid evolution.
- **Perennial injustice** - there is a dangerous idea that there will always be inequality, always be injustice, always be those that are excluded and so why agitate to change, or if it has to be done, let’s keep our heads down and let others break the new ground, and we’ll follow when we have to or it’s easy to do so. It’s such a dangerous idea: “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people” said Martin Luther King.
- **Time and space** - The space to explore, unpick, reimagine and reboot is hard to find within the fast-paced world we have inherited, and as waves of the present wash over us, days and weeks and months disappear without us carving out the space to think, explore, imagine and decide... to do the work that leads to purposeful, impactful, meaningful action.

### Looking for inspiration?

In thinking about some of the dangerous ideas that keep us personally and organisationally locked into a paradigm that would not be of our choosing, it’s important to find the keys that will enable us to ACT NOW.

So where to go in this moment to unlock and unblock? The best resources or support will depend on your circumstances and the blocks that you are seeking to remove. So many people are also in precarious work situations, facing the horror of redundancy or feeling the need to refresh their personal practice at this time. It’s impossible to be exhaustive in signposting, but various resources and perspectives have been useful and refreshing as we have been thinking about our own work, blocks and challenges: The Bridge Foundation and Jerwood Arts [toolkit on inclusive recruitment](#); Gulbenkian’s [Civic Role work](#); [Museum Detox](#); [David Jubb](#); [François Matarasso](#); [We Shall Not Be Removed](#); [The White Pub](#); [IFTM rewiring the Network](#); [Exchange Project](#); [Freelance Task Force](#); [Act for Change](#) and [ADofthefuture](#).

These resources have the power to shift thinking, highlight blocks and enable action - I’m sure there are many more that you tend to turn to, to fuel, provoke and enable change in your organisation, and I’d recommend that you reach for them now, as well as the peers, networks, partners and community voices that can keep you true to your best intentions, open up, build and develop deeper connections, listen better, grow relevance.

I’d also recommend a people make it work initiative - [CULTURE RESET](#) - an urgent programme to reimagine the future of arts and culture. Launched on 25th June and supported by [Gulbenkian Foundation](#), this subsidised programme will enable nearly 200 people from across the sector to reimagine an arts and culture sector that is more relevant, more representative and more impactful. If you want to identify your version of relevance for your organisation, network or practice then take a look\*: it is for people on furlough, freelancers, people actively working for their cultural employer and those who are currently unemployed.

### Resources

For those who want to take their organisations on a transformational journey, there are also videos and resources on our [people.make.it.work](#) site. We have been exploring the following 5 questions over the last three months and have engaged with 20 sector leaders asking them to create videos, tools and resources that might help, and have test-driven these with 60 leaders from 40 organisations across the UK. They are free to access and designed to help you and your teams:

- Create a new flexible business plan fit for our times (Flexible, iterating and fast)
- Build new working practices for our virtual teams and relationships (agile, distributed, blended)
- Reimagine relationships with audiences and communities that reflect the new world (connecting with place, listening, sharing power)
- Explore new income and value models and sources as secondary spend and ticket sales disappear (responding to changing needs, innovating, testing)
- Shape your cultural offer to flex with a post-Covid or with-Covid social landscape (radical cultural acts, safe practices, digital, new artistic voices, relevance)

You might also find [creative united](#), [CounterCulture](#); [The Audience Agency](#); [Clare CultureCase](#); [Thinking Practice](#); [Ramps on the Moon](#); and [Cultural Governance Alliance](#) useful resources in this context.

The original questions in this article were “What blocks positive change for you and your organisation” and “how can we support you to take those steps?” But let’s end with a more provocative one: “What three actions would you take this week if you decided to risk your organisation in the name of relevance?”

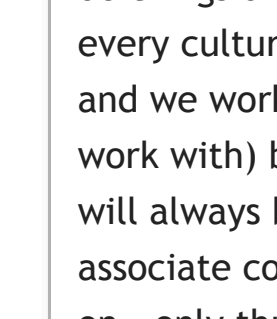
Richard Watts is CEO of **people make it work**, Co-Director of **Change Creation** and instigator of **Culture Reset**.  
[www.peoplemakeitwork.com](#)  
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This article, sponsored and contributed by **people make it work**, is part of a [series](#) sharing insights and learning to help organisations facing change challenges to grow and develop.

\*Applications close 9th July

Link to Author(s): [Richard Watts](#)

Feature: [Management](#) [Covid-19](#) [Coronavirus](#)



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## Comments

Precarious Curator replied on 26 Jun 2020 [Permalink](#)

### Precarious Curator inaction (and pernot writing)

Richard, thank you for this think piece but... I fear that this is all that it remains. As one of the biggest consultancy networks within the UK arts sector, the work of 'people make it work' is itself a huge part of the problem that you outline. It's well known that the consultancy 'industry' is the destination of choice for senior arts managers who are bored of the responsibilities of running publicly funded organisations but are lured by handsome day rates (paid for by those same publicly funded organisations, yet without the guilt). This rise of the consultant has significantly contributed to the deskilling of arts organisations, as senior arts managers evacuate the sector of (arguably) talent and money, which for instance, could have been otherwise spent on paying artists. To rub salt further into the wounding hypocrisy, out of more than 50 team members, only one of people make it work's team is a Black woman. This is indeed a "deep, long-lasting wound".

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Richard Watts replied on 26 Jun 2020 [Permalink](#)

### Precarious Curator, thank you for your comment

Thanks for your comments. Arts Consultancy is definitely not perfect, we deserve criticism, and it sometimes diverts scarce resources. We feel that we do things differently (at the moment we pledge to offer pro-bono support to every cultural sector organisation who approaches us for support, for instance, and we work hard to embed skills and learning within the organisations we work with) but I recognise that how we see ourselves and how others see us will always be different. Your criticism of the diversity of representation in our associate community [https://www.peoplemakeitwork.com/our-team] is spot on - only three of our current team of colleagues identify as people of colour, and it is an urgent priority for me. The CULTURE RESET facilitator team [http://www.peeracademy.co.uk/#team] (a project we launched this week with 192 free places) is representative of the kind of diversity we are working towards across our team. There is no change without debate, and thank you for engaging with this piece. Perhaps we could speak about this further off line, if you'd like to do that, please do drop me a line at [r.watts@peoplemakeitwork.com](#)

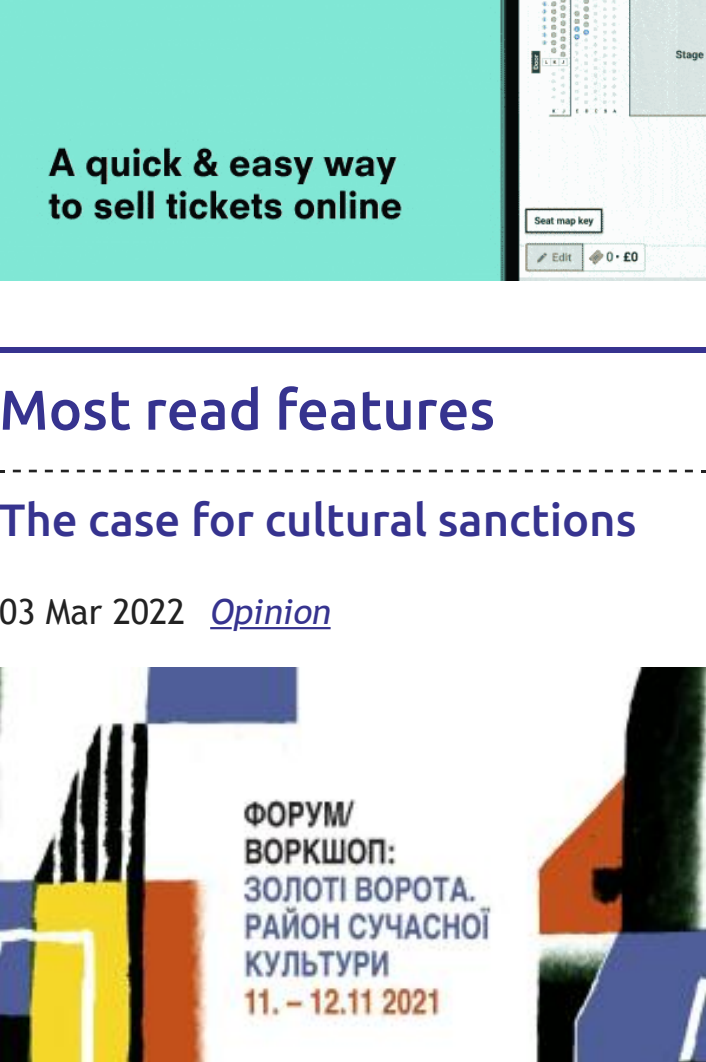
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Stephen Pritchard replied on 27 Jun 2020 [Permalink](#)

### (No subject)

Yes. People make it work is part of the problem, not a solution. The fact that it paid for the article makes this another consultancy puff piece - an advertorial.

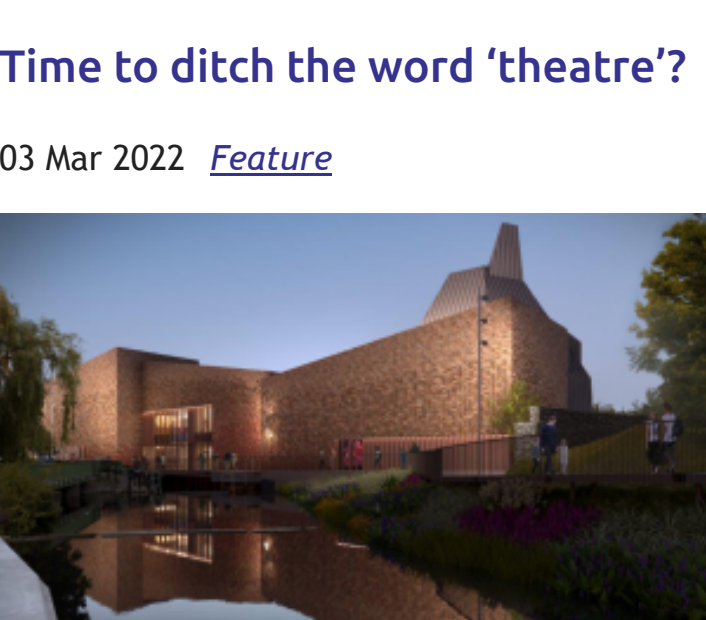
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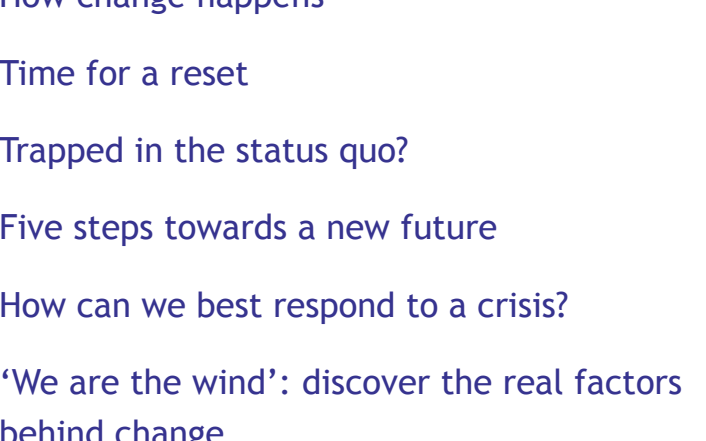
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Wales  
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North West  
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South East  
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**Artistic Director Joint CEO**  
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**Head of Transformation**  
South West  
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