

# LATE CALLS: A REPORT ON A PILOT LAB FOR EARLY CAREER OLDER ARTISTS

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## An ageing world

The increase in life expectancy over recent decades is transforming our societies. Why should it not also change how, why and when they create art?

Everyone knows this is an ageing world. From the USA to Japan, prosperity has brought longer, healthier lives than ever before. When pensions were introduced, they were expected to provide a few years of comfort at the end of a working life. Today, people enjoy 20 years or more of active retirement. Prosperity has also contributed to art's growing importance in economic and social life. A high proportion of the population now enjoys and participates in the arts, and the cultural economy supports millions of professionals.

These social trends coalesce in older people's participation in the arts. This group has long formed a core audience for theatre, classical music and museums, but things have changed in several overlapping ways.

- First, **who is involved**: the middle-class audience of 30 years ago is still there, but they have been joined by older people from all social backgrounds and cultures.

- Secondly, **a more active participation**: older people still enjoy plays and exhibitions, but are now as likely to be acting, dancing, making and debating as watching.
- Thirdly, **a valuing of older people's creativity**: as countless artists, actors, musicians and writers – professional and non-professional – prove daily that you don't stop having things to say, or the ability to say them, when you pass the age of 60.

Together, these changes help explain the scale and variety of older people's engagement with the arts today, an engagement that is supported by bodies in the cultural, voluntary and care sectors.

Take [Bealtaine](#), for example, Ireland's nationwide celebration of the arts in older people's lives. It was launched by Age & Opportunity in 1996 and named for the month of May in which it happens. It includes about 3,000 events, many independently organised by people in their own communities, alongside professional commissions, performances and events. In 2008, an evaluation by the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, reported that:

Bealtaine has had a profound and very visible impact on arts practice in Ireland [and] provides opportunities for meaningful engagement in the arts among older people, both as artists and participants. [...] There is compelling evidence that participation is empowering and transformative and that self-reported physical and psychological well-being is enhanced at an individual level. Bealtaine has proven itself to be a major positive force for the well-being of older people in Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

These findings are in step with other evidence about the life-enhancing benefits of participation in the arts.<sup>2</sup> But what strikes me about Bealtaine is its reach. Age & Opportunity estimates total participation at about 120,000 people, or almost one in five of everyone over 65 in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> To connect with 20% of your intended audience is truly exceptional.

Bealtaine is just one of thousands of initiatives supporting older people's creative participation in the arts today. They come in all shapes and sizes, from national festivals such as Scotland's [Luminate](#) – founded in 2012, partly inspired by Bealtaine – to small companies, such as [Re:live](#), in Cardiff, which works with older people to create theatre

rooted in their life experience. Some of this work, such as West Yorkshire Playhouse's [Heydays](#) or the [Saitama Gold Theatre](#) of Japan, is celebrated and admired, but most is unknown beyond its own circle. It is more often the result of need, desire and imaginative goodwill, than policy or public resources, and some of its energy comes from independent commitment. More can always be done, but it is probably easier today than it has ever been for an older person to be actively involved in the arts – at least in a non-professional capacity.

## Becoming an artist in later life

But what of those with a different commitment to the arts, those for whom art is not life-enhancing but a way of life? There has been much less progress here. Establishing a career as an artist is always difficult. But doing so in later life adds challenges particular to the situation of older people and to how they are perceived by others.

*'Emerging is a horrible phrase. It usually means please don't apply for this unless you're under 35 or it's all the new ideas – and the ideas have got to come from the young artists. What if I think of myself as younger and I look old?'*

**Kate Clayton<sup>4</sup>**

All artists struggle at the start of a career. Whatever their discipline, they must acquire skills, knowledge and experience. They must discover who they are and find their voice. They must situate themselves in the vast domain of past and present practice. They must establish contacts, networks and reputation. They must learn the economic and social rules of their business. And, of course, they must earn a living.

Young artists have a few advantages in facing these challenges, notably youth. Most have resources of energy and openness, as well as the relative freedom of life without children.<sup>5</sup> A young artist may be able to seize an opportunity at a day's notice, move to another city and work 18 hour days when necessary. Since they are likely to have begun their career as students, they will also have a cohort of peers, whose friendship, forged in the intensity of young adulthood, can be a lifelong resource. Young artists are also interesting because they might be the

next new thing. Critical and economic markets seek them out because they make reputations and profit. Identify the right person at the start of their career and there will be rewards for decades.

Artists beginning their careers later are in a different position. Few people at fifty have the energy, strength or flexibility they had in youth; some bodies impose conditions that cannot be ignored. Older people have responsibilities, dependents and ties. Nowadays, it's not unusual to care at the same time for parents *and* grandchildren. Starting an artist's career in middle or later life can involve sacrifices, if the steady income of a senior position is exchanged for freelance work. It might require downsizing or relocation, putting strain on personal relationships. All this takes real commitment. So does going to college as a mature student. It's not just the cost. It isn't easy to go back to school in your fifties. You may be taught by someone young enough to be your child, while your fellow students see you as a parent. You're unlikely to share living or working space with younger peers during or after those college years.

Above all, perhaps, early career older artists also have to live with a deadly, unspoken question: *if you are really an artist, what took you so long?*

The philosopher, Larry Shiner argues that our current ideas of art were invented during the Enlightenment, when individual freedom from royal and ecclesiastical authority was a revolutionary project. In this context, art moved from being a skill acquired and practiced to a personal quality freely possessed by a few. He writes that:

Genius itself had become the opposite of talent and instead of everyone *having* a genius for something, a few people were said to *be* geniuses. <sup>6</sup>

We still tend to see artists as people who are rather than people who do. Authentic artists are born, not made. It is true that people have different gifts and capacities but it's naïve to believe that 'talent will out'. As the experience of the older artists who took part in the Lab shows, creative aptitude is often stifled in youth by social circumstances.

*'I wanted to be an artist, but I was always discouraged. My father had come from a long line of artists who didn't make any money and he didn't want me to go to art school ... and then I had to earn my own living.'*

**Annie Peel**

Not everyone has the confidence or the chance to follow their inclination against opposition. Women, too often brought up to feel that their desires matter less than other people's, face particular obstacles.

*'I acquired very good skills and became very good at being other people's right hand. I used to be much more receptive to everybody else's thoughts rather than my own sense of what should be done but I realised that however much you try to escape answering who you are it's time to do that.'*

**Beatrix Wood**

Other people take time to discover what they want to do. People often change careers in later life. Why should it be less authentic to retrain in your fifties as an artist than as a therapist or a gardener? Colin McLean, a successful dancer in his late seventies, studied contemporary dance only after successful careers in the army and the church. Today, the choreographers who work with him are concerned with his distinctive artistry, not when he began to practice it.<sup>7</sup>

*'I was in my early 40s when I thought I have to take some time out and figure out what on earth it was that I was cut out to do, rather than the career that I fell into just to make a living. I figured out if I'd had no constraints what I would have done when I was younger was go off and make art.'*

**Frank McElhinney**

Happily, our thinking about art is slowly freeing itself from its Enlightenment inheritance. The changing place of art in social life is both a cause and an effect of that evolution. But we are not yet past the idea that the only way to be a serious artist is to have started young. Many artists do – but not all. A growing number are starting careers later in life. They have a lot to give. But we have not yet thought enough about how they can give it.

## Supporting older artists

In 2012 Anne Gallacher took on the challenge of establishing [Luminate](#), Scotland's creative ageing organisation, based at Age Scotland and

supported by public and charitable funding. It's been an exhilarating, demanding and very successful journey to establish a month long festival in October, similar to Bealtaine and [Gwanwyn](#) in Wales. Over the course of five festivals Gallacher (now assisted by an administrator) has established connections with artists, cultural institutions, voluntary organisations, charities, local government and thousands of older people across Scotland. And among them are many older artists, including some beginning their professional careers.

It was in conversations with the playwright, Sylvia Dow, that Anne began to understand the problems faced by early career older artists. Sylvia had studied creative writing after retiring from work in the arts, and she was 73 when her first play was professionally produced. But she wondered how she would have achieved this success without the knowledge and networks she'd acquired in her first career in the arts.

So Luminate began to look at the difficulties faced by early career older artists and soon found that others shared this interest. They included Nicholas Bone of Edinburgh theatre company, [Magnetic North](#), who have supported the creative development of mid-career artists for several years, notably through intensive small groups Space/Time labs.

*'This idea of targeting it in a slightly different way to the work we've done before – to older emerging artists – I immediately thought, yeah, that's a really fascinating idea, to get a sense of how many of those people there are out there.'*

**Nick Bone**

There was [a-n](#), the Artists' Information Company, which, with large numbers of older artists among its 21,000 members, wanted to understand better their situation and interests in the context of the organisation's services. The fourth member of the partnership was [Cove Park](#), an artists' residency centre on Loch Long in Argyll and Bute. A venue for previous Magnetic North labs, staff wanted to learn more about the needs of older artists. Cove Park had a new building with facilities to host a winter-time residency, Luminate decided to pilot a lab for older artists there in February 2017, facilitated by Magnetic North and with the support of a-n.

The opportunity was advertised in late November 2016, and invited applications from *'Scottish-based artists in all artforms who are aged 50*

*and over and are in the early stages of a new artistic career'*. The first surprise was how many people felt they were in that category. Within a month Luminate had received more than 130 applications – three or four times as many as Magnetic North's previous labs. If nothing else this confirmed the demand for support among older artists, but it also showed the range of their experience. Some applicants were so early in a career that it was largely an aspiration. Others were experienced practitioners, but without the single-minded dedication to sustain a professional career. And there were many – far more than could be offered a place – who were producing work of similar quality, but often a different character, to their younger peers.

The applications gave some insight into just how many ambitious older artists now work in Scotland. It was evident that, even if the lab approach proved successful for some of them, the needs of artists who were not at the same point also had to be addressed.

When Luminate, Magnetic North, Cove Park and a-n met in early January 2017 they had a difficult task to choose six participants from such a strong field. They selected artists who seemed to have most to gain from and offer to the process, within a group that was diverse in art form, practice, age, location, life experience and so on. The artists invited to Cove Park in February 2017 were:

- [Annie Peel](#), a visual artist whose large, abstract paintings reflect her interest in the environment and the passing of human and natural worlds. She gained her degree from Edinburgh College of Art in 2014 after a career in publishing.
- [Beatrix Wood](#), a experienced video producer now changing roles to become a self-shooting director, exploring the boundaries of cinema and visual art in work on environmental, historical and political themes.
- Frank McElhinney studied Fine Art Photography from Glasgow School of Art after a first career in manufacturing. His work connects history with contemporary issues such as conflict, migration and nationhood.
- Ian Cameron is a theatre maker making a career change to explore how his original fine art training can be developed within live performance.

- **Kate Clayton** worked in art therapy, development and aid before studying at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art. Her work in visual and performance art addresses her ageing body in contexts of the social perception of old age.
- Lesley Wilson began writing for theatre in 2008 after a career in social work and counselling. Her work has been read and performed at the Traverse, the Tron and the CCA. She has recently turned towards fable as a way of exploring life stories.

The artists live in urban, rural and island locations across Scotland. Their ages range from early fifties to early seventies. They have a varied educational history and three are recent graduates. Each has made a life-changing commitment to an artistic career. That may have been only a few years ago but, with decades of professional and life experience they stand at a very different place than most early career artists. As co-facilitator Alice McGrath noted afterwards:

*'If they'd applied for another lab we might not have selected them but, because of their experience of life and their vibrancy as artists, the conversations were very lively. They could have come to one of the ordinary labs and been brilliant.'*

**Alice McGrath**

For Larry Shiner, authenticity is not incompatible with effort or will. A struggle will not always make someone a better artist, but it will make them a different artist. The commitment made by each of the Older Artists' Lab participants had consequences for partners, children and others. The price paid, in exchanging financial security for creative freedom shouldn't be underestimated, and they have faced practical and personal challenges with no assurance of future success.

*'As an older artist it was lovely to spend a week debating what that meant, sometimes just about being an artist; sometimes about the pros and cons of being older. Hearing other artists talk about how hard it can be – it's important just to acknowledge and identify the difficulties of being an older artist.'*

**Lesley Wilson**

All these artists want to be successful. The intention to be valued within the artistic discourse of your time is one of the things that separates



professional artists from amateurs. But they have seen enough of success and disappointment in other fields not to hold too many illusions about how it is achieved or what it means.

## The Cove Park Older Artists' Lab

The Older Artists' Lab took place at Cove Park above Loch Long in February 2017. It followed the model established by Nick Bone and Alice McGrath in the Space/Time labs they have run together since 2014. Over five days, a small group of artists is invited to reflect, together and separately, on the question '*What nourishment does an artist need to keep developing?*' Since participants work in different fields, how they respond to this question varies, and some of what they gain comes from seeing how their ideas are challenged by other people's experiences.

Mornings are spent in group discussion, afternoons in artistic work or reflection, usually alone. The group reconvenes in the evening, to eat, socialise and often share some creative activity. Everyone is involved in cooking and clearing up, and these familial activities form a kind of glue binding the more formal elements.

Until now, Magnetic North's labs have involved artists in their thirties or forties with established careers. They often have young families, so space and time for taking stock, exploration and talking with peers from beyond their networks is precious, especially as there is a small stipend for the time. It's not easy for freelance artists to take time they could be earning for professional development. But this is also a statement of value: the lab is not a break, it's a different kind of work. For a-n, which has long campaigned on fair remuneration for artists, this was an important principle.

The people who came to the Older Artists' Lab were at once older and less experienced than those with whom Nick and Alice usually work. They brought life experience, expertise and confidence gained in other fields. They didn't have young families at home so the lab was less a respite from intensive daily activity. But they are more professionally isolated than their younger peers, so it offered space and time with people going through similar experiences.

*'It will be very interesting to talk to other people in the same situation as me, and just get that sense of feedback and validation from people who know where I'm coming from.'*

**Annie Peel**

The artists brought varied expectations, hopes and anxieties, but everyone was intrigued by the idea of meeting people on the same journey as them. Several live far from cities where peer contacts are easier to develop and the chance to exchange with people whose experience was parallel to theirs was especially valuable.

### **The discussions**

The Lab began with introductions. This first day was very intensive, with the conversation going on longer than planned because there was so much to share and discover. With hindsight, it seems that the success of the whole week was achieved on that first day. A spirit of mutual interest emerged and with it a desire for cooperation. One spark was the play read by Lesley Wilson, which caught people's imagination. Its ideas and images would be a focus for the idea of working together in future. That was fortunate and unpredictable, as was the sympathy that the artists had for one another's work although it could equally be argued that the partners had chosen the participants well.

*'I really valued the discussions. It was a great way to work things through, talking and listening, but quite exhausting too because it was over lunch and the evening as well. That's a lot of very in-depth conversation. especially for a writer, who's used to quiet time.'*

**Lesley Wilson**

Important as the conversations were, several people would have welcomed more time to explore the work – not necessarily their own practice, but the creative processes in which they are so deeply involved. Everyone gained a lot from hearing others talk about that and from the workshop activities, and some would have liked more of this.

A request for an opportunity to explore methods for critical feedback led to a session that introduced the artists to Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process.<sup>8</sup> The conversation was facilitated by Alice McGrath and

looked at three related pieces of work by Kate Clayton. It was very illuminating for the artist and the whole group. The process encourages responders to listen creatively to their own feelings and consider, equally carefully, the most constructive ways of sharing them. For these artists, who don't find it easy to get serious critical reflection on their work, the experience was especially important. Unfortunately it happened on the last evening, which meant it wasn't possible to explore the process with anyone else, but this could be more central in a future lab.

*'Best of all was the experience of meeting such an interesting, talented and inspiring group of fellow artists, from whom one gained valuable inspirations and insights. The opportunity for intellectual interaction was so welcome, especially for me in my isolated situation.'*

**Annie Peel**

### **Activities**

There was one main activity planned for the Lab: an afternoon walk at Linn Botanic Garden, a few miles from Cove Park, where the artists were asked to pay particular attention to their response to the environment. Bad weather meant that this had to be postponed until Saturday afternoon, but it was a welcome break when it happened and some artists found the exercise exceptionally rewarding. Time was also spent sharing practice in workshop activities before supper. They were valued by everyone, especially by the artists whose work is furthest from performance.

*'I'd have liked less talking and more doing – there were times we were repeating ourselves and we could have pushed forward in other ways.'*

**Kate Clayton**

There was a break in the pattern on Sunday afternoon, because the group was joined at lunchtime by the Luminare team, Anne Gallacher and Edyta Kania, with Sylvia Dow. After lunch, Sylvia talked to the group about her experience of beginning a career as a playwright after retirement, and read a short play. All the artists found this a very rewarding part of the Lab and they enjoyed meeting and talking with Sylvia, informally over lunch and during her presentation.

*'It was both inspiring and encouraging to spend time with Sylvia who is still full of ideas and productive energy aged seventy seven.'*

**Frank McElhinney**

### **Time alone**

All the artists valued the time alone in the afternoons, though they didn't use it for creative work as much as they had expected. The morning sessions were long and intense, and they sometimes felt in need of quiet, reflective time afterwards. So afternoons were spent resting, thinking about what had come up so far, sometimes walking and sometimes preparing for the evening. The older artists generally felt the strain more than the younger ones. Some pointed out the difference between being 50 and being 70 in terms of strength and stamina. Younger people know that rationally, but the *experience* of the ageing body is sometimes forgotten.

*'When I went to Cove Park, I wanted to have time to think and explore in drawing and painting. I spent two of them doing that, but there was a lot going on so there wasn't as much time as I'd anticipated.'*

**Beatrix Wood**

The atmosphere and landscape of Cove, together with the experience of being together in a supportive, safe space brought a noticeable sense of stillness to the group. There was no sense of impatience or hurry. Sensitive facilitation left the largest space for the artists. The result was that people felt the week as a real break from normal life. For one or two of them, coming home felt like a jolt as they were immediately into busy – and in one case difficult – professional concerns. But the wish to protect and use quiet time was an important outcome.

*'Cove Park was very calming. I have to find a way to be still.'*

**Ian Cameron**

*'I now see more value in periods of self-reflection. In future I will periodically set time aside to reflect on the balance between different factors important to creativity. As a result of the residency I think I will probably worry less about time and focus on my main project more avoiding frittering away time on less important things.'*

**Frank McElhinney**

## Assessment

### A highly successful pilot

*'It was a real turning point – being able to step out, gain insights about process, hearing other people's stories, in very sensitive company was tremendously helpful.'*

**Beatrix Wood**

All six artists found the Older Artists' Lab very valuable. It allowed them to reflect differently and more deeply on their work, to share feelings and ideas openly, and to receive informed, engaged feedback. The conversations over meals were an integral part of this, allowing people to return to things that had come up for them during the more formal sessions. The encounter was challenging at times, if only because people were exposed to other ideas and ways of seeing, but the context was supportive. Everyone gained a lot from the physical and performance based activities, perhaps especially those for whom this was not part of everyday practice.

*'It was a very positive experience. I was able to properly connect with older artists for the first time and now feel I have a readymade network of friends and peers. It was useful to work through some of the challenges specific to being an older emerging artist together with people facing the same issues, e.g. problems of networking and collaboration, the generation and realisation of ideas, and concerns over scarcity of time and resources.'*

**Frank McElhinney**

Above all, perhaps, the artists experienced the Lab as validating what they were doing and the sometimes difficult choices that required. It was affirming to spent time with people on similar journeys and to feel understood and appreciated in their artistic work. The result, despite the short-term tiredness and destabilisation, was to encourage all six artists and confirm them in their commitment to their work.

*'I realised that I've been busy making shifts but I have done that now. I'm not at a point of decision. I've made the decisions. I feel more confident; I don't need to worry, I just need to crack on.'*

**Beatrix Wood**

*'I feel I'm taking myself as an artist more seriously, this is the path I've chosen to follow and this is the most important thing now.'*

**Lesley Wilson**

*'I have come to terms with the fact that I am older. Where I am is where I am and I can be with it; there's a sense of freedom about that.'*

**Ian Cameron**

There were conceptual, practical and human factors behind the Lab's success. The first two could be planned for, because method and organisation had been tested before by Magnetic North and Cove Park; while a focus on older artists would stretch them, there was no reason to believe they would not work. The human factor is more complex, but critical to the Lab's success. The two facilitators contributed exceptional personal and professional qualities. They held the group together just enough for it to work but always ready to allow it to go in unanticipated directions. Such unobtrusive, mindful guidance is easily underestimated when it's made to look so easy, but it was essential to the week's success.

The other human factor is the group of participating artists themselves. It is hard to imagine a better balance of interests, experience and skills in a group of artists. Perhaps the key factor in helping the group coalesce so quickly and work together so productively is their common experience as early career older artists. If that is so, it suggests that – with good concepts, organisation and facilitation – future activities with artists in the same situation will also be successful even if they adopt other models than the lab. In short, **the needs, experience and hunger of early career older artists are assets that they can apply to support their own development, with the right external support to come together and structure the process.**

An unexpected but important outcome of the Lab was the decision by five of the artists to meet again in the summer and explore how they might work together on an artistic project. (Beatrix Wood liked the idea but felt she had too many existing commitments to take on something more.) Artists who had not previously thought about collaboration (or had good experiences of it) now felt that there was something valuable they could explore with their peers.

*'I'm very excited by the idea of working together. Because we have different disciplines finding ways of documenting and showing things in different ways will be good. The response to my work was very positive. I came away feeling stronger.'*

**Ian Cameron**

*'I have almost always operated as a bit of a 'lone wolf'. In future I will also make a concerted effort to collaborate more.'*

**Frank McElhinney**

This has happened only rarely in previous Magnetic North labs, and then only between two artists, so this group commitment is a notable development.

*'The fact that they wanted to work in a collaborative way was really exciting and beyond what I'd imagined. It opened up a whole new world about how something I'd written could be developed in a whole different way.'*

**Lesley Wilson**

One explanation for this positive result might be how much the artists found they had in common. If that collaboration develops, then it suggests both a real need for support among early career older artists and that the Lab has created some strong foundations on which the partners could all build to meet that need in future.

### **A model of good practice**

The Cove Park Lab can be considered a model of good practice in this approach. Every aspect was handled in an exemplary manner; specifically, there was:

- A clear, simple offer attracted a strong field of applicants with real needs;
- A strong partnership based in mutual confidence and shared interests;
- A well-conceived and tested model for the Lab methodology;
- A gifted and experienced team of facilitators;
- A balanced group of engaged and creative participating artists;
- An ideal venue for group and individual work in an inspiring setting.

This should not be surprising, given the knowledge and capacities of the partners, but it is no less important for that. The Lab demonstrated the value of giving artists space and time to reflect on their practice in a mutually supportive exchange.

### **Possible adjustments**

Some adjustments should nonetheless be considered in any future lab. The high number of applicants imposed a burden on the partners and meant that many people must have been disappointed not to get a place. Tighter eligibility criteria might have communicated better to applicants who were not yet at the level for the lab. The physical demands that site and programme can make on older people should be considered in the light of this first experience.

*'Cove Park is quite challenging physically – to work one's way down a very steep, poorly-lit, rugged and waterlogged path at the end of a demanding day, in a blizzard...! I'm fit and used to country conditions, but the effect on my arthritic knees meant I lost sleep; others found the uphill climb a problem. More attention should, I think, have been paid to our needs and to the health and safety implications. Similarly, long periods of sitting are difficult - joints lock.'*

**Annie Peel**

There are lessons to learn here, but they are questions of judgement and balance. It will always be difficult to meet the needs and interests of six people. Different sessions will always be more or less rewarding to different people. Apart from the physical challenges some people had, it is hard to see how the Lab could have been much *better*. Various things could have been *different* – for instance with other facilitators in a different place – but whether that would have been better is impossible to say. In the end, such experiences are intensely human. They emerge from the interaction of a group of people and so any change in the ingredients will change what happens. The important thing is that the approach developed by Nicholas Bone and Alice McGrath at Cove Park is very rewarding for the artists who take part. This experience shows that it is equally valuable to the particular situation of early career older artists.



## Building on success

*'People think of older artists as drying up but you only dry up if you play safe, settle in, do what you know. You have to trip yourself up and throw the cards in the air. Cove Park helped me do that. I've got all my life behind me in a backpack and I was about to enter the forest. [The lab] was like crossing a threshold, and now I'm in the forest.'*

**Ian Cameron**

Given the success of the pilot, it is natural to ask what comes next – for the artists involved and for others in a similar position. Having invested in the professional development of six artists, Luminate and a-n have an interest (and perhaps a responsibility) to make the most of that investment. There is a natural process of decompression after such an experience, but then what? In this case, five of the artists have made plans to come together again in August 2017 at Annie Peel's farm for a weekend of shared work and exploration. That is a striking outcome, but Luminate and a-n may both be able to help them build on what they gained at Cove Park in different ways. Possibilities include:

- Connecting them with other people for longer term mentoring;
- Supporting them to act as mentors for other older artists;
- Commissioning them to contribute to programmes;
- Linking them with arts organisations, where they might join the board or act as advisers;
- Involving them as speakers and role models in future meetings.

These possibilities are open to a-n and Luminate, but the differences in their aims, reach and activities mean they need to be considered separately. The key difference for a-n is that it is not specifically concerned with older people but with artists. Before developing any initiatives specifically aimed at older artists, it would need to ascertain whether members wished to be distinguished in this way. It may be that they would be unwilling to stray into an area that might be seen as identity and limiting. The second area for a-n to consider is the difference between older artists and early career older artists. Many of its members are older simply because they have been practicing art for a long time: these may be among those least interested in identifying as older. What is important about the Older Artists' Lab is that it responds to the

needs of artists who start their careers later in life. If a-n is to give special attention to this issue, it might be that it should be in this area. In that case, however, it is likely to face ambiguities about the professional status of artists who are only establishing careers. Clearly, there are important questions for the organisation to consider here, both in terms of its own work and any future partnerships.

Luminate, as Scotland's creative ageing organisation, does not face these questions, but any concerted action to build on this experience would imply a decision to commit to support the professional development of early career older artists. The Lab suggests that this could be an important extension of Luminate's work because it would create a better path from voluntary and amateur participation to a professional career. It would help erode the rigid boundaries between ways of practicing art that are already in decline. The number of applicants shows that many people are looking for ways to make that move. But it would also support Luminate's wider objectives in enlarging the number of artists available to work with older participants, in providing role models and artistic voices for older people, and in challenging simplistic and limiting ideas about ageing in society as a whole.

The lab model might be part of this but it has two limitations. The first is the cost-benefit ratio. A Lab requires a significant investment of staff time, bursaries, travel and accommodation costs, but it can only benefit a few artists. That is not an argument against it, but in favour of placing it in the context of a wider programme of professional development. The second limitation, which is that it is suitable only for early career older artists who have achieved a high level already, also argues for a more comprehensive approach. So what might that be?

The foundation of what people gained through the Cove Park lab was meeting other older artists with whom they shared artistic and life experiences. That is something that could be developed in other ways by Luminate. The simplest way to do that would be to host a series of events that give older artists an opportunity to meet, share experience, network and learn. These might be organised in partnership with arts organisations across Scotland, so that people wouldn't have to travel very far. could might adopt a simple, consistent model, perhaps with a speaker (the experience of bringing Sylvia Dow to Cove Park was very productive), small group discussions, space to show work and so on.

Ideally, the meetings would lead to self-organising local groups that could call on Luminate for some help but would be largely self-supporting. Older artists have skills and resources to take on such activities, if they see them as beneficial. So this approach need not put too much demand on Luminate's limited resources. Ultimately, one could anticipate the emergence of an older artists network in Scotland, linking informal autonomous groups and able to provide the mutual support and knowledge that can help people develop their careers. The lab model could become one opportunity among others rather than something which meets the needs of only the most advanced artists.

This is no more than a sketch of how a devolved approach might work, but it is easy to see how it could fit alongside a festival and the gradual development of activities outside the festival month itself. Whatever the approach ultimately taken, the Cove Park experience shows that there is much that Luminate can do to support early career older artists and that doing so would strengthen its work in the arts with all older people.

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- <sup>1</sup> Ní Léime A., & O'Shea, E., 2008, *The Bealtaine Festival, A Celebration of Older People in the Arts*, Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, National University of Ireland, Galway, p. 122.
  - <sup>2</sup> Some of this, including The Mental Health Foundation's '[Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People](#)' (2011) is available through the [website of the Baring Foundation](#), which has focused its work in the arts entirely on older people in the period 2010-2020.

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- <sup>3</sup> The [2011 census](#) recorded 535,393 people aged over 65 living in Ireland: not all the Bealtaine participants are over 65 but it evidently reaches a high proportion of Ireland's older population.
  - <sup>4</sup> All the quotes in *italic serif font* are taken from my conversations with the artists who participated in the Older Artists' Lab held at Cove Park in February 2017.
  - <sup>5</sup> This discussion rests on a degree of unavoidable generalisation, whose limits must be acknowledged. Among young artists who do not benefit from the advantages described here are disabled people or carers,. Some young artists face social obstacles and economic hardship and it would be wrong to assume that all will develop a career without help.
  - <sup>6</sup> Shiner, L., 2003, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. Chicago, pp. 111-12
  - <sup>7</sup> Matarasso, F., 2012, *Winter Fires, Art and Agency in Old Age*, London, Baring Foundation, p.42-3. See also <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/mar/09/furthereducation.uk4>
  - <sup>8</sup> Lerman, L. & Borstel, J., 2003, *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process*, Takoma Park