



Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of *Music and Arts in Action*. *MAiA* was founded to provide a forum for considering the arts and aesthetic media as active ingredients in social life. That project is, of necessity, interdisciplinary, but it also implies attention to the actual social settings and scenes where music, arts and action meet. We hope *MAiA*'s topic-led approach will dismantle some of the long-standing barriers between academics and practitioners, theory and applied work, and, perhaps most boldly, between the 'social' and 'the aesthetic'. We hope that by transcending these dichotomies *MAiA* will promote the kinds of understandings about the arts that are possible when people from different backgrounds work together: what do music and arts bring to our lives, how do they enhance, provide a basis for and stimulate action, and how do they provide media for the doing and making of social relations? We realize, of course, that these questions merely scratch the surface of the vast repertoire of interactions between the arts and social life.

The arts, though not always sequestered as special or sacred, can be found everywhere across cultures. Here anthropology provides a lead. As Clifford Geertz observed in his essay 'Art as a Cultural System', activities that elaborate social meanings as audible, visible and *tactile* are ubiquitous across time and space. Those things that we can hear, see, feel and touch (and which in turn 'touch' us) provide windows onto the pre-cognitive dimension of human social existence. They remind us of the original connotation of the term *aesthetic*, dealing with sensory perception, which in turn broadens conceptions of sentience to include 'altered' forms of human consciousness (e.g., dementia, coma, mental 'disability'). How this realm of sensory meaning making that we term 'the arts' connects with the social, political, emotional, geographic and physical features of human existence is thus *MAiA*'s quarry, contextualized as much as is possible in the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

In industrialised societies, the so-called 'high' arts are framed by discourses of symbolism and aesthetics (connoted in the modern senses of artistic technique and value). They are lodged in grand institutions and dedicated to national heritage, to conspicuous consumption and to educational policies dealing with cultural enrichment and outreach. At the same time, popular cultural forms and alternative artistic expressions also surround us, through iPods, radios, books, cinema, DVDs and television, concerts, street theatre, busking, graffiti and many other modes of cultural participation that we are unable to imagine here. While our personal lives are marked by often-deliberate episodes of artistic engagement (witness with what care individuals programme their MP3 players), the arts also regularly operate in the *background* of everyday life, and more so in some cultures than in others. Whether conceived of as 'high' or 'popular' (or anywhere outside of these dominant categories), the arts can be seen to structure emotions and the perception of time, elide norms, provide regulatory tools, construct identity and space, and provide instruments of body modification, as seen when music is used as an adjunct to exercise or healing.

The thread running through all of these examples is *action*, both in the sense of socially oriented and practical operations and in the sense of transformation or change. Action provides the centre point for *MAiA*'s keynote questions, namely, how does the close connection between aesthetic and social life emerge over space and time, and how do the arts (as cultural phenomena) enter into individual and collaborative action?

Our concerns have not appeared out of the blue. *MAiA* builds on a rich foundation of work in sociology, psychology, philosophy, cultural policy, history, anthropology, education, linguistics, communication studies, literature, the performing arts, curation studies, art history, music therapy, cognitive science and artificial intelligence, community arts, medicine and medical humanities, arts practice and the natural sciences. Without presuming to forecast directions of future research, we think that the interdisciplinary toolkits developed by these fields signal areas of common interest. Some possible meeting grounds include: a much stronger conceptualization of culture across the human sciences (and in ways that acknowledge interactions that transcend the nature-culture divide), a focus on the mutually constituting relations between people, animals and things, an enriched model of human communication, and an explicit and critical concern with cultural politics.

Within these first pages of *MAiA*, articles by scholars at the forefront of their respective fields begin to develop this conversation. The ability of music and art to convey and spread ideas is discussed by ecological artist David Haley and by sociologists Ugo Corte & Bob Edwards. In Haley's article, we encounter ecological art, a synthesis of art and ecology built upon an understanding of embodied practice and symbiotic relations between humans, their environment, their past and their possible futures. Here, it is art's ability to tell a story that gives it a role as a catalyst for human and social change, a way of affecting the future through, as he puts it, action, relations, transformations and metaphors. Corte & Edwards describe a more sinister case in which the arts are conduits of racism, set in the context of "White Power" music as it has been used to seed notions of white supremacy over the past thirty years. Their work is a sober reminder that the arts are by no means necessarily allied to our more 'nobler' selves.

In contrast, the arts may be linked to human development and healing, as described in Even Ruud's article 'Music in therapy', where we see how musical participation, in both everyday life and the clinical world, may offer individuals and groups resources for self regulation, self-determination and opportunities for action. Ruud argues that music therapy as a field can help illuminate music's role in everyday life, a topic also addressed by Hennion, in 'Listen!' Drawing on his long-standing work on taste as performance, Hennion seeks to strip away some of our second-order assumptions about music, affect and valuation. By contrast, he shows us how we make and are simultaneously made by musical works and how this making generates identities and their cultural bases in one unifying stroke.

Finally, the collective making of meaning through reference to art forms is a theme taken up by Somers in his account, 'Interactive theatre: Drama as social intervention'. A long-serving practitioner and pioneer in the field, Somers introduces theoretical work and an account of his recent production *Foresight* to examine theatre as a medium in which to attempt change, raise consciousness, air issues and, ultimately, resolve conflicts.

Considered together, these articles showcase the power and dynamism of the arts, their role in framing, interpreting and driving action, and their placement at the core of human social being. We hope that they will stimulate debates by academics, practitioners and artists about where and how to examine the arts in action, as well as suggested applications of such work. We look forward to watching these themes unfold in future issues of *MAiA*.

THE EDITORIAL TEAM, *MUSIC AND ARTS IN ACTION*

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