

# Michaela Crimmin



**Name:**  
Michaela Crimmin

**Position/occupation:**  
Head of Arts, RSA.

**Residence:**  
Highbury.

“There isn’t one big sustainability issue – they are all related – energy, water, conflict, consumption, politics, poverty, economics – we have to take them all on in their complexity and their inter-relatedness.”

**Michaela is the Head of Arts at the RSA, which from its coffee house origins over 250 years ago has developed into a lead organisation for social change, providing a neutral space for dialogue, exploration and solutions. In 2005 Michaela set up the Arts and Ecology programme, the purpose of which is to be a catalyst for the insights, inspiration and imagination of artists in responding to global environmental challenges and their social costs. Michaela says,**

“Artists have always had a powerful relationship with the natural environment. Equally artists continually question and re-examine society’s notions of progress. We need their unique perspective on the enormous challenges ahead – on the relationship between environmental issues, and not least climate change, and people.”

**Michaela feels that working at the RSA has given her access to a powerful network of people – RSA Fellows – who are invited to support the organisation because they operate across a wide sphere of influence and disciplines. “It is only by working collectively that we will make change happen.”**

## Sustainability experience

In the past Michaela has commissioned art for hospitals, schools and other public buildings, has directed Art for Architecture at the RSA and coordinated the Fourth Plinth series for Trafalgar Square, all of which have increased her understanding of the environment. “I always knew that sustainability meant ensuring a future for subsequent generations, but over recent years this has brought a meaning and urgency which is truly terrifying – a recognition that has gathered steam over the past years. I’ve

realised that we must make better connections across areas of interest and expertise; we must waste less; we need to live differently. Particularly I wanted to look more closely in my work at what the cultural constituency is doing, and is able to do, and is thinking about, with respect to the really big issues such as conflict, migration, pollution, increasing populations and consumption, environmental degradation.” This proved the start of the Arts and Ecology programme, which was launched in 2005 by Sir David King and Sir Nicholas Serota.

Among the many activities that make up the project, Michaela is currently working on two artists’ commissions in London. One with a young Danish artist, Tue Greenfort, to make a work about environmental issues in London. The RSA is also working with the Wetlands Centre in Barnes and other partners, including the GLA, to confront the issue of decreasing species and habitats through the Bat House Project, with and initiated by Turner Prize winning artist Jeremy Deller: a competition to build a bat house, involving professionals and young people.

Over the coming months the RSA is running a free series of talks – exchanges – between artists and a range of people including politicians and journalists, to raise awareness of sustainability and environmental issues in order to stimulate debate and engage more of the artistic community. An ambitious new website which is being developed aims to build an international network; and the RSA is setting up a series of international partnerships, inviting artists to work with local communities in different countries: the first three are taking place in Brazil, India and Afghanistan.

“At a personal level, with the help of the RSA’s CarbonLimited project, I am beginning to lead a more sustainable lifestyle – I bike everywhere, compost and recycle, and buy fair-trade when it’s available. Art is a good conversation opener with people as we try and resolve the contradictions and the bigger questions – should we be flying? How can we adapt to more truly sustainable lifestyle?”

## The sustainability challenge

“Sustainability isn’t easy to understand and it’s a huge challenge. I am still working out exactly what it means to me and am trying to make changes in my own life accordingly. I suspect it’s like personal relationships – there are deeper rewards in something that continues and that is hard fought for – that’s what we need to prove.”

Michaela believes that one of the biggest sustainability challenges facing London is actually overcoming the apathy and ease at which people ignore what is screaming out at us – and the sheer number of opportunities to consume in a city so brimming with temptations. Meanwhile “there isn’t one big sustainability issue – they are all related – energy, water, conflict, consumption, politics, poverty, economics – we have to take them all on in their complexity and their inter-relatedness. It’s not always easy and it’s going to require imagination and will.”

“There are big opportunities in London for making a sustainable city – we’re the financial capital of the world; we are multicultural and we are linked with the rest of the world probably better than anywhere else on earth. We have charismatic leadership in Ken Livingstone, a leader who really cares about London and Londoners. But we can’t leave it entirely to the politicians. Leadership must take new forms – less top down, more of an inclusive movement. There could be increased opportunities and support for individuals and for communities to get this underway.”

Michaela believes we are more likely to achieve some form of sustainable living by being pragmatic and making step-by-step changes. “I am in absolutely no position to preach, but don’t try and do everything all at once, that’s my advice for any major change. Talk to friends and colleagues, ask challenging questions and find solutions together.” For her, the biggest untapped potential is in the arts – the cultural sector is as implicated as any, has a huge amount to offer and is poised to make a significant contribution.

## London Leaders

“The launch of London Leaders corresponds with the next phase of the RSA’s Arts and Ecology programme and I believe that making the links will have huge benefits. The RSA has a membership of 26,000 people, all of whom are devoted towards working towards social change, and sustainability is the cornerstone of this change.

“I would like to invite the RSA Fellows to contribute ideas; to involve them in initiatives which the other London Leaders are identifying – potentially they have so much to offer.”