



Gagged, or.. smiling?

When the clapping stops; ..the terrible truth?¹

Is the professional arts sector doing enough to address the current crisis?

Covid-19 also presents the arts and cultural sector with some major ethical and intellectual challenges that it cannot afford to ignore; also opening up new spheres of critical and aesthetic practice and research; including the possibility of generating other important and exciting new arts and cultural projects in their own right.

Reviewing the arts sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic the **Culture and Pandemics** report <<http://www.ruralculture.org.uk/culture-and-pandemics/>> argues that, the scale of the crises now confronting us; the ongoing climate emergency, a predicted world-wide economic recession, and the mounting public health and social costs of Covid-19, requires that we urgently come up with a much more 'crisis capable', critical, and socially responsive cultural strategy.

By way of a response the report details an imaginative combination of innovative creative industries and arts-led social, environmental and economic recovery projects.

¹ Liz Gerard, "We must not fall into a clap trap over the NHS". The New European, 23/04/2020; "Don't let the cheers, the clapping and the pots and pans drown that terrible truth out", Owen Jones Guardian 23/04/2020

The 'New Normal' - getting rid of outdated cultural policy orthodoxies?

It's become a cliché to talk of the pandemic's 'normalisation of the unthinkable': 30,000 dead in three months (equivalent of a dozen 9/11s); covert privatisation of an NHS health care sector still struggling in the depths of the crisis; a government U-turn on 'austerity' with £100 millions of public money going to subsidise the business sector. The 'socialisation' of corporate risk/failure is now one of the cornerstones of the Tory government's Covid-19 recovery policy. Also that the 'shock' of the pandemic further exposes the weakness and inequalities in our society, or might overturn the established order of things (political, social, cultural) and force a rethink of conventional policy priorities.

However, it's at times like this that we might need to reach for our Douglas Crimp and Susan Sontag readers². Crimp remarked that the term 'post' (in 'postmodern') usually means; *"..the same as before, but only more so"* ..and a rapid return to the status quo. Sontag in her major works on 'Illness as a metaphor and AIDS' and 'On Photography' also talks about the importance of 'critical turning' points in culture. However, it is the ACE's obsession with preserving the 'status quo', and near mystical pursuit of "excellence", etc., that are driving their 'emergency' funding priorities, and so are occluding the vital critical role of culture. This should now be challenged as a matter of principle.

Dependency culture: is the emergency arts funding too narrowly focused?

The report also shows that the wider arts sector is engaging imaginatively and courageously with the pandemic, across a wide range of innovative, creative, cultural, digital and arts-led healthcare projects. The Arts Council have responded generously. But most of the ACE's £160 million, seems to have gone to keep their existing institutional and funded clients going³. The £35,000 scheme for arts organisations may produce some critical 'public facing' work, but it really needs a national 2-3 year strategic investment framework to work to full potential. The £2,500 offered individuals and self-employed artists, works out at roughly £90 a week; way below even the minimum wage, and after you pay the rent, is derisory.

² Susan Sontag 'Illness as a metaphor and AIDS', 2001; Douglas Crimp, in 'Postmodern Culture', 1985

³ Similarly, Esmée Fairbairn, Paul Hamlyn, Wellcome Trust, etc., have all temporally ended their arts grant funding applications, and are focusing support on existing grant holders and previously funded 'clients'.

Last year the National Lottery celebrated its 25th anniversary, reminding us that over **£5 billion** had gone via the Arts Council - the Lion's share of which, as we now know, ending up with the 'big beasts' in the arts establishment. If you factor in the taxpayer's (GiA) contributions at roughly £3 billion+, then we're looking at a professional arts sector that is among the most generous publicly subsidised in the world. And that these include many of the same organisations who were lavishly 'bailed out' by ACE during and after the 2008 crash.

The key question posed here is; has this country's 25 year-long programme of massive public subsidy for the arts been used to achieve some organisational resilience? Or, as it now appears, will it simply keep on reproducing the same inequalities⁴, injustices, incompetencies, and.. an unhealthy dependency culture?

Furthermore, £8 billion channeled through a single, bureaucratically 'byzantine' organisation, and one with a 'difficult' history,⁵ has also resulted in some major ongoing power imbalances and regional/class/ethnicity/gender inequalities⁶. As Renton, the heroin dealer, in 'Trainspotting', memorably observed: "*When you're on junk you have only one worry: scoring. When you're off it, you are suddenly obliged to worry about all sorts of other shite.*"

Basically, the ACE's record of lack of leadership, an woefully outdated 'Let's Create' future arts policy, and an institutional paranoia (an irrational fear of criticism), set alongside the art communities now near total dependency on ACE-directed public subsidy, have also contributed to a condition of 'critical occlusion' and, worse, a growing culture of self-censorship within the professional arts. (AP 20/02/2020)

⁴ The annual diversity report from Arts Council England, "paints a disappointing picture", chairman Sir Nicholas Serota. 17/2/2020. 'Telegraph'; *'The current system of cultural funding is deeply unjust. It continues to favour a section of the population that by and large already enjoys the arts and culture, thanks to advantages of money, education and geographic location'*. ACE in a Hole, February 2020.

⁵ Since 1998 there have been at least 7 inquiries and critical reports triggered by concerns about the Arts Council's shortcomings; e.g. the Baroness McIntosh report, 2008 "*..the most damaging in the history of the ACE.*" Charlotte Higgins, Guardian. 30/07/2008; GPS 'Rebalancing our Cultural Capital', 2013 - 2019.

⁶ GPS (Rebalancing our Cultural Capital, 2013/19); 'ACE in a Hole' (Jan. 2020). ACE's 'Creative Case for Diversity' report, Guardian 28/02/2020; Arts Council England accused of 'barely mentioning women' in its 10-year strategy; The Stage 7/02/2020

“the Arts Council has a near monopoly of public funds for the arts.. with no balancing local accountability.. [consequently the calls for] “..a properly directed, distributed and accountable [Arts] Lottery .. in supporting culture and arts in England’s least advantaged communities”.

(GPS, Update report Feb. 2019)

The ACE’s Covid-19 emergency funding ‘pyramid’ once again reinforces this ‘dependency model’, and is also upside down. Darren Henley should have given the £90 million to the indie/artists and freelancers. Leaving the NPO ‘sacred cows’, to fight it out over the remaining £20 million. Meanwhile concerns continue to grow about alleged cronyism, a lack of transparency, and vested interests driving Arts Lottery funding decisions, and that the ‘emergency’ arts money may yet again be going to many of the ACE’s familiar faces. Since March, the Arts Council’s much touted ‘Let’s Create’ new 10 year strategy, is now also looking rather intellectually lightweight, self-serving, and increasingly redundant.

Need for an arts and cultural strategy that is more critical and ‘crisis capable’

The report is also a response to ‘ACE in a Hole’ (AP 21/01/2020), which lists; ‘Justice’, ‘Trust’, ‘Risk’ and ‘Accountability’ as guiding principles for an alternative ten year ACE cultural strategy. To these we would add the concept of ‘criticality’. Which has nothing to do with having superior knowledge, or some higher moral efficacy. It’s more about maintaining a critical openness (to new cultural turning points), some humility and a deeper sense of cultural responsibility, that some of us in the professional arts are now feeling, when trying to cope with what is clearly a major global catastrophe.

Many arts institutions; opera, museums, theatre, galleries, writers, and artists’ studio groups⁷, etc., are doing their very best to support their communities and the NHS. For example some fashion designers and theatre companies are also making masks and PPE for the NHS and Care Homes. But, as Serpentine Director Hans Ulrich Obrist has stated (Guardian 30/03/2020), what we really now need is a strategic investment framework, and for a WPA-style (socially orientated) arts project focused on developing more vital critical ‘*cultural turning points*’ during the pandemic crisis.

⁷ Susan Jones and A-N, via the Freelands Foundation have raised a £1.5m Emergency Fund for artists.

Artists and curators already working on critical ‘cultural turning point’ projects

Other excellent artistic, digital media, and curatorial methodologies are being developed by artists which address new critical responses to issues in agriculture, in healthcare settings, and in response to zoonose pandemics. These include the SARS art project by the PARA-SITE gallery in Hong Kong <<https://www.parasite.art/publications/a-journal-of-the-plague-year/>>, and the Vogelgrippe (Avian Flu) mobile van project by artist Stefano Cagol at the Berlin Biennale March 2006. <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/41468/stefano-cagol-bird-flu-vogelgrippe/>> BLAST Theory Brighton, in collaboration with the Wellcome Trust, recently took on a pioneering artist-in-residency research project with the WHO global epidemiology tracking centre in Geneva. More recently with Covid-19, BBC photographer Christopher Bohn produced a moving documentary about the vital work of the ICU team at Hairmyres NHS Hospital in East Kilbride. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-52486923>. Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei, has also begun work on a major film and about the pandemic’s origin’s and its political impact in China. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/08/china-ill-not-only-coronavirus-communist-party-control>>. There are many more.

Now is the time for courageous decisions?⁸

Meanwhile the world’s leading health and economic monitoring agencies (WHO/ WTO, BoE), are describing Covid-19 as ‘*..the most serious public health crisis since the major Spanish Flu pandemic in 1919*’, causing major social disruption and civil unrest⁹, and will result in the ‘*..worst economic slump in centuries*’.

The report urges that ACE and DCMS consider allocating a special £3 million WPA-style arts lottery fund, over two years, i.e. less than .5 % p.a. of the recently announced ‘emergency’ £160 million fund, to support a ‘critical turning points’ pandemics art programme. This would also enable artists and ACE to contribute more fully to the government’s post-pandemic social and economic recovery programmes.

⁸ Alex Harris, Head of Global Policy, Wellcome Trust, London, March 2020

⁹ 30 million are now registered as unemployed in the US. Germany chaos: Riots erupt on streets of Berlin as ‘illegal’ protests defy COVID-19 rules, Express 02/05/2020

However, it is uncertain whether ACE will respond. Their ten years of ‘knocking back’ our imaginative creative rural industries and culture and pandemics R&D proposals, are well documented (pp. 181 - 189, Part II, Creative Rural Industries handbook. <<http://www.ruralculture.org.uk/handbook/>>). Since 2013 we have also tried hard to persuade them of the many benefits of these pandemics preparedness cultural projects; for artists and communities, including the creative rural sector’s c. £4 billion p.a. to the national creative economy, and that they were also, potentially “..a major ACE success story”.

However, seven years on, and in the teeth of what is possibly one of the worst public health and economic disasters in living memory, we are still unable to get a meaningful response from them, nor access to Arts Lottery funding to support this important work. Why, we ask, would the Arts Council want to turn its back, at this particular moment, on a proven and successful strategic arts cultural and pandemics response project, that they had earlier commissioned and invested c. £350,000 in?

Widening the debate for an alternative arts and cultural strategy for England.

The report is also intended as a contribution to the ongoing public debate, initiated by GPS ‘Rebalancing our Cultural Capital’ (2013 - 2019), Robert Hewison (AP Oct. 2019). and ‘ACE in a Hole’ (Jan. 2020) reports, for an alternative arts and cultural strategy for England, which have expressed similar concerns:

“The current system of cultural funding is deeply unjust. It continues to favour a section of the population that by and large already enjoys the arts and culture, thanks to advantages of money, education and geographic location.

(ACE in a Hole report, January 2020)

Another failure of leadership? ‘It does not inspire confidence in the Arts Council’

Interestingly, the National Health Service and public support for the arts (CEMA/ACGB/ACE) were both ‘born’ at about the same time, just after the war. They are still both great public institutions that we would wish to continue to cherish, value and protect.

But I wonder whether the general public could be persuaded to come out in their thousands to enthusiastically clap for the ACE? Particularly, when they discover what the Bloomsbury St. crew have actually managed to achieve with the, now long gone, (“gross waste”?) of £8 billion of *their* money.

Echoing the concerns of John Whittingdale’s earlier MPs’ Select Committee of inquiry:

"The Arts Council played a major role in a gross waste of public money (£31 million Arts Lottery loss) during its involvement in the [The Public] West Bromwich project. Mistakes have been made throughout and we were concerned at the inability of the Chief Executive to provide answers to our questions and the lack of any serious attempt to learn lessons or prevent a repetition. We consider this to be a failure of leadership at the Arts Council. It does not inspire confidence in the Arts Council". (DCMS Select Committee of Inquiry minutes, 28/03/2011; Item 63)

We would all agree that the NHS has more than fulfilled its ‘contract’ with the British people and demonstrated the highest “excellence” in its ‘returns’ for taxpayer support for our health care system. But how sad that many highly skilled and dedicated doctors, nurses and low paid health care workers have had to sacrifice their lives in the process. I can’t imagine Nick Serota and Darren Henley ever contemplating taking such risks, nor would we ask them. But you would imagine that they would have more to show for their £8 billion of public subsidy, than yet another ‘bail out’ and mainly to maintain the art establishment’s status quo.

By all appearances ACE have, for the duration of the pandemic, retreated into their familiar citadels of unchallenged executive privilege, power and patronage. And until some independent, or responsible, body comes along and puts an end to it, ACE will happily continue on the, “..same as before, but only more so”. But if anything useful were to come from the Covid-19 crisis, then putting ‘Lets Create’ out of its misery, might be something we could all look forward to.

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