

The Art of Dying

Preface

This piece originates from the insights generated by the first Money, Mission, Models conference that took place on June 28th, 2004. The expert contributors at the event and the background paper by Adrian Ellis¹, lent support to three important propositions about the arts sector in the UK²:

- That the portfolio of arts organisations in the UK has become too fixed
- That there are too many undercapitalised arts organisations, operating at near breaking point organisationally and financially, whose main preoccupation is survival diverting their energies from the central mission of cultural creativity
- That we need to provoke a more challenging public conversation about the infrastructure supporting the arts in the UK, and the strategy and modus operandi of arts organisation

In summarising these debates for the Money, Mission, Models microsite³, I noted that perhaps we need more arts organisations to learn the '*art of dying*'. Or at the very least we need to challenge more directly the mindset common across the sector that it is a wrong, and indeed a cultural crime, to let an arts organisation die.

The original aspiration of this paper was to make that case. In researching and writing it however⁴, the argument and focus of the paper has necessarily changed. The narrative focuses more on the '*art of living*' than the '*art of dying*', and suggests that the relative stability of funded arts organisations in the UK symptomatic of more profound and fundamental problems.

As a consequence the sector urgently requires transformation - not the snail paced professionalisation of a dysfunctional system that we are currently witnessing. Like all polemics it simplifies and amplifies - but it is based on views shared by senior figures and practitioners in the sector. The challenge for all of us is that those views do not yet form the warp and weft of mainstream discussions about the arts. We must make them so.

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¹ Ellis, A. (2004) '*Money, Mission, Models – New approaches to sustaining the arts in the UK*'

² By arts sector this paper is referring to publicly funded arts organisations as opposed to a broader cultural industries type definition.

³ www.AandB.org.uk/missionmoneymodels

⁴ This report is based on a review of existing literature and evidence on UK arts funding and the future of the sector, and on expert interviews with leading figures and practitioners within the sector. Those interviews were conducted under Chatham House rules, and therefore I have not provided verbatim quotes or attribution. The views expressed here, and any errors, are mine alone.

Introduction - Of minefields

The arts retain the power to make headlines - the stock in trade UK arts story usually details how a challenging new piece of art is offending the sensibilities of a minority group. A notable recent example was Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's new play - 'Behzti - Dishonour', which greatly offended the Sikh community with its staging of a rape in a gudwara, or temple.

Another familiar arts story, which reappears like a much loved migrating bird, concerns the announcement of the latest public spending round, and its impact on the level of public funding to the arts. Even for the protagonists, the debate is well-rehearsed and wearisome - with the arts lamenting the absence of stable and increasing levels of public funding, whilst politicians stress the equity and appropriateness of the funding settlement.

The most recent exchange was more brutal and honest than most. Indeed, the Secretary of State for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the Head of Arts Council England had a most unseemly public spat over the true level of public funding flowing to the arts over the next three years - a bruising public difference of opinion. But apart from its vehemence, the exchange was depressingly familiar - with the public squawking over the level of total funding directing attention away from the more profound challenges facing arts funding in the UK.

This is the departure point for this short provocation. Its starting premise is that it is much harder than it should be to discriminate between the living and the living dead amongst UK arts organisations.

Staging such a debate has all of the attractions of dancing drunkenly through a minefield - given the lack of common ground, the paucity of rigorous data and evidence, and the talent for mendacity of key vested interests.

But dance we must with some simple aims in mind:

- To make the case for a more rigorous public debate about arts funding and practice in the UK, and in particular about how to judge the success of funded arts organisations
- To imagine how things might be changed for the better, and identify some of the immediate challenges facing the leaders of arts organisations and institutions

1. Creating a better public conversation about UK arts funding

What are the features one could reasonably expect of a mature, well reasoned, evidence based debate about arts funding, and the accountability and performance of UK arts organisations? Perhaps the following:

- A broad consensus about the relative weight that should be given to intrinsic and instrumental rationales for public funding of the arts⁵, and a rejection of the incoherent proposition that they are incompatible.
- Widespread agreement about the success criteria, and supporting data, which would underscore the established rationales for public funding - and an expectation that all arts organisations generate data that allows for a proper evaluation of their customer relationships, networks and reach.
- A focus on outcomes in arts funding, in terms of artistic product, consumer experience, and measurable indirect benefits, rather than the maintenance of buildings and institutions

Oh dear - mind the gap. Much needs to be done to create a mature, well reasoned consideration of these issues.

1.1 The intrinsic, the instrumental, and evaluating success

'Too often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas, education, the reduction of crime, improvements in wellbeing, explaining, or in some instances almost apologising for, our investment in culture only in terms of something else. In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself.'⁶

' [The political system]...cannot be expected either to turn over unconditionally large sums of money to high-minded mandarins of the arts... or to ask fewer questions of artistic recipients of public money than it asks of the rest of us.'⁷

Any narrative about how arts organisations can best live and die must briefly travel through a stale and unhelpful debate that dominates much of the public conversation about the arts - namely the relative merits of so called intrinsic ('art for art's sake') versus instrumental rationales to justify public funding of the arts.

In recent decades arguments based on the intrinsic quality and importance of the arts have given ground to more instrumental arguments for arts funding. Under the current Labour government the need for the arts to

⁵ For an interesting discussion of these issues see Holden, J. (2004) '*Capturing Cultural Value: How culture has become a tool of government policy*' Demos

⁶ Jowell, T. (2004) '*Government and the Value of Culture*' Department of Culture, Media and Sport

⁷ Netzer, D. (1978) '*The Subsidized Muse. Public Support for the Arts in the United States*', p37 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

make a contribution to broader economic and social agendas has been made explicit and the DCMS has since its inception been geared to delivering the government's broader objectives. For some critics these developments are reducing the arts to crude handmaidens of economic and social policy and should be resisted.

Unfortunately the debate is as a tyre clawing sand. It is clearly the case that the arts can deliver a range of important indirect benefits which fall into a more instrumental reading of its overall contribution. But in seeking these outcomes we must accept the principle that these benefits will only accrue consistently if the artistic product itself is of the highest standard and judged a success on cultural terms.

Thus, adopting the language of the debate, the success of cultural products on intrinsic terms is the precondition of delivering success in instrumental terms. There is no conflict or incompatibility between the two. Indeed, arts organisations that are being sensitive to their customers, partners and changing environment would regard both as vital organisational objectives.

Once this is accepted, it becomes possible to neutralise the very real danger that unsophisticated support for instrumental ends weakens the case for the intrinsic value of the arts. As Adrian Ellis has commented, an over emphasis of instrumental rationales for funding:

''... sets the bar of public accountability for the arts low and at a clumsy angle to the path trodden by their core activities, values and aspirations; it leaves arts funding vulnerable to transient intellectual fashion, as the weaknesses in particular instrumental arguments become more widely apparent; it irrationally favours particular forms of public investment in the arts and penalises others; and it systemically ignores the fact that the impacts of arts organisations on the economy, on social diversity, and indeed on educational attainment are largely epiphenomenal - incapable of full realisation unless their *cultural* purposes are effectively fulfilled.''⁸

But the force of this argument should not be used to support the profoundly unsatisfactory status quo that currently prevails, which falls well short of a well functioning, transparent framework for accountability and performance. As always, simple questions prove illuminating. My answers to the questions are in blue⁹:

Is there a broad based consensus amongst the main players about how best to measure the success of the arts, whether on intrinsic or instrumental grounds? **Umm... No**

⁸ Adrian Ellis, Platform, AEA Consulting (www.aeaconsulting.com)

⁹ For those interested in the critical literature on the adequacy of performance data on the sector and on the challenges and difficulties involved in measuring success more successfully, see Selwood, S. (2001) *The UK Cultural Sector: Profile and Policy Issues* Policy Studies Institute, London and Reeves, M.(2002) *Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: a review* The Arts Council of England

Do the arts themselves share a unified view of what the outputs of a successful funding model should produce? Eh, No

Do we have good rigorous data on the performance and practices of the arts sector?¹⁰ Well,.No

Would this position be tolerated to the same extent in other areas of publicly funded activity? What do you think.... no

Are arts organisations working hard enough to create a clear culture of accountability, designed and owned by them rather than imposed by funding bodies? Umm....No

Do we have good evidence about the impacts and influences of different models of public funding on cultural success? No

Given the growth of greater accountability in publicly funded services, and the need to champion consumer as well as producer interests, is this muddle acceptable or sustainable? No

As these questions reveal, the sector is stuck in a strategic and operational fog, with some grim implications.

Firstly, we lack the evidence base for informed cultural policy making in the UK. As the IPPR has recently outlined, much needs to be done to shift arts organisations and institutions towards objective evidence collection and away from what can at worst be advocacy for the arts dressed up as robust evaluation¹¹.

Secondly, it is more difficult than it should be to criticise arts organisations and hold them to account. Any jury would find it hard to deliver a guilty verdict when the charge against the defendant is so poorly sketched and the evidence to convict so ambiguous.

Thirdly, and as a direct consequence, it is indeed the case that the portfolio of arts organisations in the UK is too fixed and that we have fostered a performance regime that is too permissive to established organisations. The stability of the sector is powerfully exemplified by the fact that of the list of funded organisations contained in the Art Council's set of accounts for 1945 nearly all have kept their comfortable seat at the funding table. Expert interviewees talked of a dysfunctional dependency relationship between funder and funded, and of a system which favours incumbents - one practitioner described the current system as operating on a '*last in, least served*' principles. Creativity may be an ever present in the sector but

¹⁰ For those interested in the critical literature on the adequacy of data on the sector and on how best to measure success, see Selwood, S. and Reeves, M. (ibid)

¹¹ Cowling, J (ed) (2004) '*For Art's Sake: Society and the Arts in the 21st Century.*' Institute for Public Policy Research

creative destruction is not.

Interviewees therefore acknowledge that there is an urgent need to build greater agreement about what it means to live as a vibrant cultural organisation, and to define more precisely the characteristics that define successful arts organisations of different sizes and scale. Then and only then will it be possible, with widespread legitimacy and support, to adopt a more unforgiving approach to support and funding.

Fourthly, the leaders of art organisations need to acknowledge that funders are not the only polluters in this system. Arts organisations are polluters too, displaying weak leadership on these issues. Their lack of commitment to rigorous research, evaluation and data gathering about their activities, represents a failure of arts organisations and their management. It means that they are not being tough enough about what delivering their mission means in terms of measurable outcomes, and are insufficiently committed to continually improving their organisational practices and performance. Despite the odd public protestation to the contrary, many in the arts like the '*managed informality*' of the current system - it provides a know terrain, with weak incentives to change, in which established players can work with great guile and skill to pursue their ambitions. But it is this very informality that is potentially weakening the long term vitality of the cultural community in the UK.

At worst it creates a preoccupation with funders and not with audiences, with some interviewees believing that many arts organisations aren't half as worried about their audiences as they are about the Arts Council and their grant. Another commented that money has become the conversation in the arts rather than being seen as a means to an end.

Finally, these weaknesses and ambiguities have fostered a defensive and adversarial debate about arts success, which pits arts organisation against arts organisation, reinforcing silo mentalities and practices, and which has done little to encourage expansive and imaginative thinking about how best to foster the development of the sector as a whole.

The sector is neither living well, nor dying fast, just procrastinating badly.

2. Of leadership and primary products

So how might arts organisations live a little better? Would a more concerted effort to correct these deficiencies in evaluating performance, defining success and establishing a more developed culture of accountability across the sector instil greater dynamism and excellence?

The answer is yes, but these issues reflect more profound and more enduring problems across the sector. To tackling them successfully leaders in the arts need to face up to not just the odd untouchable elephant in the room, but a well populated herd.

Firstly, the sector has been painfully slow in adapting to changed realities, operationally and culturally, a truth rarely acknowledged. Indeed, a sector that prides itself on modernity and relevance is dependent on institutions and organisations designed for the past and not the future. Interviewees talked of a default 'no change' mindset in the arts, with imperatives for artistic innovation having proved weak drivers of organisational renewal. The interviewees also sense that the arts have remained rather a closed world, rarely looking outside their sector to the commercial world or elsewhere for inspiration and new practices. As one interviewee commented, modern businesses cannot view their world through the mindsets and values of three decades ago and succeed - it's an unfortunate truth that many arts organisations still do and are still here.

What has this produced? A lack of adaptability, too much fragility, and under developed relations between big and small players. At the level of generality, interviewees depicted many large arts organisations as too complacent, poorly networked, and lacking creativity and entrepreneurial flair. Many small organisations are hand to mouth, too fragile, and too personality dependent to embed and propagate sustained innovation and success, and there not enough linkages and collaboration between the commanding heights and the fragile periphery.

Secondly, the sector must refocus attention on its primary output, excellent artistic products, and place that objective above the maintenance of any individual organisation or institution. Currently, the exact opposite often pertains, as Adrian Ellis has observed '...the primary product of the non-profit is the organization itself, not a particular work or good'¹².

Leaders in the sector must begin to decouple the pursuit of cultural vibrancy from a narrow preoccupation with organisational stability. This has both a practical and radical dimension. The practical is that arts organisations must embrace the principles implied within the recent Gershon review of public sector efficiency and apply them to the arts. In other words they must lend their support to the pooling of resources, whether that takes the form of back office and administrative support, marketing and HR resource, or centralised and shared production facilities. Any efficiency savings accrued through collaboration must be recycled and re-invested in cultural production. Releasing cultural energy and freeing artists to be artists, as opposed to reluctant and failing managers and administrators, should be the primary aim, not a concern with leanness for leanness sake.

In this sense, developments that are often presented in the negative - that the sector faces an inevitable reckoning as the chill winds of efficiency and accountability begin to blow more strongly through the sector - are in fact the necessary foundations of a revitalised sector. The problem is that arts organisations are responding defensively to these processes, rather than

¹² Ellis, A & Mishra, S. (2004) *Managing the Creative – Engaging New Audiences. A dialogue between for profit and non-profit leaders in the arts and creative sector* AEA Consulting, Background Note

shaping them to drive innovation and a clearer focus on the cultural mission of arts organisations.

But this strategic shift requires radical intent. It requires leaders of arts organisations to commit to radically different conceptions of how they might operate, and to accept that one of their primary leadership responsibilities is to make their organisations more adaptive. As in other sectors, this means embracing a vision of organisations as more mobile and fluid and less tied to an unshared fixed cost base. This demands partnering with others in more imaginative ways, whether with the private sector or through emerging public interest company type vehicles, and embracing new operational models which are more dependent on networking and collaboration. The Money Mission Models programme of work is already generating a whole raft of new ideas about how organisations could begin to experiment in these ways. The challenge for leaders in the sector is to embrace them as new blueprints for how they do business, rather than as small interesting experiments to be attached to the unchanging whole.

Thirdly, the sector has a whole lacks cultural leadership. There is an absence of powerful and eloquent advocates for the sector, rigorously pursuing public good questions - with the most talented aligned with organisational and institutional interests. The current debate about funding is too narrow and there is a lack of radicalism in how the sector thinks about the future and plans for the present¹³. The Boards of most major arts organisation reinforce these tendencies - they are better at defending lost causes than the Viet Cong, and many are more formidable in hand to hand combat.

Fourthly, the sector lacks an effective development agency - neither the Arts Council or DCMS are discharging this role effectively. It's easy to criticise the Arts Council, but that shouldn't stop us. Our expert interviewees offered cogent criticisms believing that ACE lacks a strategic vision for the sector, displays a lack of political will to reward innovation over survival, a lack of willingness to foster planned disruption as a trigger for innovation, and at worst has dwindling credibility to act as a development agency for the sector. But the good news for the Arts Council is that they are only narrowly first amongst equals in the blame sharing game, and have the advantage that they are more ready than most to reflect critically on their weaknesses. As we have outlined, there are many polluters in the system.

The final elephant is perhaps the most important. Artists and the leaders of arts organisations are fantastic at special pleading, fantastic at self-justification, and sometimes plain fantastic, but they are weak at sober

¹³ An interesting comparison is the Scottish Executive's establishment of a Cultural Commission (www.culturalcommission.org.uk) which is carrying out a comprehensive review of culture in Scotland, with the aim of grasping a 'generational opportunity of look seriously and maturely at our culture and decide the framework for its support in the future.'(cf. Cultural Commission, (2004) *Interim Report*).

reflection on the weaknesses of the sector. Their continued grudging acceptance of the current status quo would be an abdication for a sector which does not regard itself as a repository of complacency or mediocrity.

3. Conclusion

'If we say that art, all art, is no longer relevant to our lives, then we might at least ask the question 'What has happened to our lives?'¹⁴

That being so we might at least ask the question, why is the collective confidence of the leaders of the sector, and their advocacy achievements so limited, that the arts in the UK remain forever on the defensive, and a less than embedded player in the national project to renew and revitalise our economy and society in the 21st century?

A few of the reasons have been touched on in this paper, and the priority is clear - the leaders of our arts organisations and institutions need to raise their game. The issue is less about the art of dying, and much more about fostering a rigorous public conversation about what makes an arts organisation healthy, robust, and living well creatively. The uncomfortable current reality is that if it looks like an arts organisation, and walks like an arts organisation, it is probably less healthy, less vibrant and less accountable than it looks.

Tackling the challenges we have described will not be met by incremental improvements to the current funding system or the operational health of arts organisations. Indeed, there is a strong argument that incremental change will in practice mean no change. Whilst professionalisation is vitally important, a deeper transformation is required necessitating innovations in the infrastructure supporting the arts and in the organisational structures and relationships that create artistic products.

The most surprising revelation is that the key to unlocking a better future is not a better funding regime, a revitalised Arts Council, or more self confident political leadership at DCMS, although all of those would help. Rather it depends on a shift in the psychological mindset of the arts. It is not just that we require the leaders of the sector to become less defensive and more proactive, to move from a culture of dependency to self-sufficiency, and to become activists for change rather than defenders of the status quo. We also need them to recognise that they have a first order responsibility - namely to reanimate the public conversation about how best to create a vibrant cultural community in the UK in ways that place excellence, access, customer experience, relevance and yes efficiency above organisational and institutional vested interest.

If as a result it is determined that a vibrant cultural community is more likely if we have fewer better funded organisations - so be it. Equally that may not be the outcome in all sectors. Indeed, the overall mosaic of arts organisations would be very different if designed on principles which allowed for better alignment between what we demand of our cultural

¹⁴ Jeanette Winterson, quoted in Kelly, A. and Kelly, M. (2000) *Impact and Values: Assessing the Arts and Creative Industries in the South West* Bristol Cultural Development Partnership

organisations, how we judge their success, how we fund them and how we expect them to be governed and managed.

Cynics will no doubt reject all of the above as aspirational twaddle, and point to continued examples of excellence in the sector as evidence of why transformation is neither necessary nor likely. I don't doubt for a moment that even if the UK arts infrastructure remained unchanged, the sector would continue to produce examples of cultural excellence in the future. Plants do grow in the desert after all.

The doubt must be that under those conditions the arts will continue to lack the collective will and leadership intent to reinvent our arts organisations and supporting infrastructures in ways that allows them to maximise opportunities and transform the role of culture in our lives.

What price an invigorated cultural leadership of the sector? Go on, live a little.