'Meanwhile an audience, quite unaware'

The inevitable importance of art in society

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It’s a commonplace nowadays to say that we live in a time of great change. Politicians, journalists and commentators of every kind repeat this so often that it becomes a given. Such a mark of distinction is typical of our self-regarding age; it may also be rather comforting. But it’s completely unhistorical. Those alive in any decade of the past two centuries, to look back no further, must have experienced an equal sense of upheaval and disorientation. Take, for example, the ten years after 1811, when the population of Britain grew by 17 per cent; or the railway mania of the 1840s, when over 6,000 miles of track were laid (Freeman 1999), transforming forever the relationships between British communities. It puts current pre-occupations with immigration or the information superhighway into perspective.

Change is a rare constant of human experience and perceptions of it are themselves variable. Much of what affects us most profoundly passes unnoticed, like the deep ocean currents beneath the sea’s choppy surface, until we find ourselves somewhere quite unlike what we expected. That has happened, in my working lifetime, to the position of the arts in British society but because it has been a complex and intangible change – unlike the replacement of typewriters by computers – it has not always been observed or understood. More importantly, many of those who work in culture, including artists themselves, and many of their partners in other fields have not yet adjusted to the change. As a result, the way in which they talk about the arts among themselves and to each other is increasingly disconnected from how the arts actually work in contemporary society and that is a cause of many misunderstandings, tensions and wasted opportunities.

This evening, I’d like to explore how the social position of the arts has changed during the past 30 years, to touch on some of the consequences of that change and to suggest some constructive ways of understanding and talking about the place of the arts in Britain today.
Let me begin with how the arts are perceived, first within the profession and by extension beyond it. It probably goes without saying that artists believe their work to be of profound importance not just to themselves but to society, even humanity, as a whole, and that the producers, managers and others who support, promote and market their work mostly share that view. But the same could be said of scientists, doctors, teachers and most professions. What distinguishes those who work in the arts from their peers in other fields is a deep-seated belief that they and their work are under-valued by the social and political culture in which they live. As Sir Peter Hall puts it, the British ‘remain by and large proudly indifferent to our arts and our artists’ (Hall 1999:6). In these discussions, Britain is compared unfavourably with continental Europe where, it is widely believed, the arts are cherished by state and citizen alike.4

It is true that there is a consistent strand in English society, even in the national character if it’s still permissible to use such old-fashioned terms, that is sceptical about art and suspicious of the very word culture, which is seen as abstract, foreign and, tainted by totalitarianism. It’s the empiricist, rational and phlegmatic kind of Englishness that launched a mercantile Reformation and led Adam Smith, a characteristically British philosopher, to describe us as a nation of shopkeepers.5 Since artists are not always better able to escape their origins than anyone else, this pragmatic, undemonstrative, anti-intellectual aspect of English culture manifests itself throughout English arts and letters. It is why England produces Elgar, not Puccini, Dickens, not Flaubert, Elisabeth Frink, not Joseph Beuys. It’s why England produces John Betjeman, passionate advocate of English idiosyncrasy, but must borrow Nikolaus Pevsner, whose intellectual approach to English architecture is still seen by many as essentially foreign (Mowl 2000; Watkin 2001).6 In political terms, that sceptical strand is why England has – or used to have – Terry Dicks, and France has Jack Lang; Terry Dicks, MP for Hayes and Harlington between 1983 and 1997, could always be counted on to oppose public spending on the ‘luvvies’ and ‘plonkers in the arts world’.7 It’s why the popular press instinctively falls back on easy clichés about contemporary art and its value, so that its prevailing question is not ‘Is it good?’, which is worth asking, but ‘Is it art?’, which mostly isn’t.8

But if Pevsner claimed to identify a national character in his 1955 Reith Lectures on the ‘Englishness of English Art’, he also recognised that it is not isolated from external and historical contexts: ‘There is the spirit of an age, and there is national character. […] The two can act in accordance and they can interfere with one another until one seems to black out the other completely.’ (Pevsner 1956:16) The nervous vitality of Jacobean theatre is as recognisably English as the Puritanism of Milton’s Commonwealth, yet they are barely a generation apart. And, I would argue, there has been an equally rapid and
complete transformation in the place of the arts in British society in the past generation – a transformation in the opposite direction of that between James I and Cromwell and which has raised the perceived value of the arts today to extraordinary levels.

Just to put this in context, it’s worth looking back at the situation of the arts in England 30 years ago. It is strikingly difficult to conjure up an image of the arts in the 1970s, at least as far as the sector subsidised by the then Arts Council of Great Britain is concerned. Of course the national companies and orchestras were producing important work, and many of the regional reps were thriving; the British Museum invented the blockbuster exhibition with Tutankhamen in 1972; community oriented arts and theatre were establishing themselves (Hewison 1995). But it is notable that the signature arts building of the period, Denys Lasdun’s Royal National Theatre, has failed to win a place in the popular imagination. Beyond the subsidised sector, the arts were growing, particularly in areas like advertising, film and television, but from a very small post war base. If the 1970s are now seen by some as a golden age of television that may be because, with only three channels, the available audience was at least concentrated. Arts commodities were scarce: in many provincial towns, buying a book or a record meant going to W H Smith or Woolworth’s, while it was normal to wait three weeks for a bookshop order. Media coverage of the arts meant half a page of reviews in the broadsheets and the specialist press. Even access to cinema was less than you might expect: in 1975, there were 1,547 screens in the UK attracting a total audience of 118 million.

Thirty years later, in 2005, there were 3,357 cinema screens while the audience had reached 171 million. That change is mirrored in every aspect of the arts and culture today, where there has been an unprecedented growth in both supply and demand. Public investment in the arts is typical of this trend. In 1976, the Arts Council of Great Britain received a Government grant of £28,850,000, worth about £143 million today (Witts 1998:544); in 2006, the comparable figure was £408 million for England alone, to which must be added another £172 million of National Lottery funds. Public investment in the arts, through the Arts Council, has therefore risen by over 400% in real terms during the past 30 years. Although easily comparable figures are not available, there has been a similar growth over the same period in the arts spending of local authorities and, more unexpectedly perhaps, of other public bodies such as education authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Youth Justice Boards and so on. The economic and social re-creation of industrial cities as places of entertainment has brought an investment in cultural infrastructure not seen since the high-water mark of Victorian urbanism: Tyneside has the Baltic and the Sage, Salford the Lowry and the Imperial War Museum, Birmingham its
Concert Hall, St Ives its Tate – the list could go on and on. ‘Iconic’ arts buildings are used to brand places in a casually competitive globalising world, displaying themselves like gaudy flowers in an overstocked garden to attract the buzzing tourists and companies looking for somewhere to settle temporarily. New public art commissions dot the landscape, seemingly trying to do for some out of the way place what the Angel of the North has done for Gateshead: everywhere wants to be a global player, a world-class venue. Spectacle and street arts enliven the streets, and festivals animate country lanes from Hay on Wye to St Endellion. Local and national government no longer see access to the arts as a matter of democratic participation, but as a way of enriching education, health and social services, engaging the disaffected, rebuilding fractured communities and fostering social cohesion.

The commercial arts sector, driven by what is variously called the knowledge economy, the leisure economy and most recently the experience economy, has expanded hugely, making available products and services available in ever more varied forms. The creative industries – if you accept the concept and definitions – are now said by government to be worth £13 billion to the UK’s exports and have accounted for 7.3% of Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2004 (DCMS 2006). This massive expansion of commercial cultural activity has helped erode conventional cultural and aesthetic boundaries – for instance between classical European and so-called world music, or between children’s and adult literature so that the former is now often published simultaneously in alternative covers for different readers. New information and communication technology has created new markets – such as digital music downloads – but also undermined some of the established bases of the creative economy, notably copyright.

New technology has also gone a long way towards delivering some of the ambitions of 1970s community artists by giving millions of people access to some of the means of cultural production and – through sites such as myspace.com and youtube.com – the still more precious means of distribution. Even cultural criticism, the last stronghold of establishment values, is under assault from online critics, bloggers, reviewers and discussion forum members who are shaping contemporary judgements about art in unexpected ways. There are many questions about the nature and extent of this democratisation, both in terms of the preconditions of entry (such as access to education and computers) and in the possibility of its manipulation, but the key point is the huge rise in participation in the production and consumption of the arts in contemporary Western society. In a culture that values individualism, self-expression and creativity so highly, it is not surprising that so many young people aspire to be ‘creatives’ of one kind or another, or even celebrities, like the generation of Young British Artists whose public
profile is so different from that of their predecessors of earlier decades. Applications for university places in creative arts and design rose by 13% between 2000 and 2004, while the number of students in those subjects rose by 21% in the same period.15

This engagement in the arts is recognised in a new annual survey undertaken by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. According to the first Taking Part survey, published in May 2007, ‘more than nine out of ten adults had engaged in at least one form of cultural or sporting opportunity during the past twelve months’ (Aust & Vine 2007:6). In relation to the arts specifically, the DCMS reports that 67% of all adults, or 26.4 million people, had attended an arts event in the last year (Aust & Vine 2007:56) and that 45.6% participated in an arts activity at least once a week (Aust & Vine 2007:66). Voluntary and amateur arts activity has always been widespread, from individual writing, music or craft work to more organised activities such as amateur drama, dancing or choral singing. But the undoubted growth in demand for the arts since the 1970s also reflects profound and complex changes in Western society.

The more obvious causes are economic and linked to the emergence of post-industrial consumer societies. An increasingly educated population, often working in service industries and with more leisure time and more disposable income has tastes and interests quite different from its counterparts of 30 or 60 years ago. But there are also more purely cultural reasons, notably the widespread retreat – in Western Europe – from both politics and religion as satisfactory ideological frameworks for living. As Terry Eagleton argues, it is culture that has filled the vacuum left by this loss of faith, because, as the domain of ‘civility, community, imaginative creation, spiritual values, moral qualities [and] the texture of lived experience’ it ‘seemed the only forum where one could still raise questions about fundamental ends and values’ (Eagleton 2003:83). Artists, writers and performers become central figures in contemporary society, role models and secular saints whose integrity is accepted without question even as faith in politicians declines. The arts have always played a central role in ethics, philosophy, politics and religion: it’s just that now, as faith in these other systems wanes, art is left as the principal supporter of the value systems they once jointly expressed. It’s a very big job.

This is also partly why arts policy has become so controversial. Not all artists have understood the transformation in the position and status of culture in the past 30 years. Many still feel under-appreciated and, of course, many still struggle personally for the time and resources to create their work. In itself that is not surprising, since the growth in the supply of art – reflected in the numbers now graduating from creative arts courses each year – has at least kept pace with the growth in demand, and there are still more people wanting to earn a living in the arts than even the growing numbers of consumers
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...can comfortably support. One result of this continuing – but, as I have argued, quite misplaced – sense of marginalisation is that the arts world still struggles to communicate effectively with partners outside its own field. The arts world’s discourse is too often one of entitlement and justified grievance at the failures of others. It seeks to persuade others of the value of the arts in an argument that is less relevant with each passing day. It fails to recognise that the question is no longer ‘What good are the arts?’ but ‘What have the arts to offer me?’.

In fact, far from being pleased by the increased value placed on the arts and the resources that come with it, many artists seem to fear the increased attention their work is receiving from politicians, other professionals and the public. When these outsiders take a serious interest in art, or celebrate its importance or contribution, the cognoscenti question their motives and intentions, fearing a loss of standards or even the end of culture itself. There is no shortage of Cassandras predicting the imminent collapse of Western civilisation. Thus Jonathan Glancey sees London’s new cultural infrastructure including Tate Modern and the Royal Opera House as no better than Roman ‘bread and circuses’ (Glancey 2001), while Michael Kustow fears that commerce and technology are inflicting ‘life-threatening mutations’ (Kustow 2000:xiii) on an ancient theatre culture. For some, the popular appeal of artists such as Anthony Gormley or Andy Goldsworthy is proof in itself of lack of substance in both creators and audiences. Underlying all these views is an old dread that if people outside the arts get involved they will, through ignorance, insensitivity or sheer venality, wreck the whole delicate structure.

So do the indicators of increased spending on and engagement with the arts merely show a debasement of public culture, a growth in quantity at the expense of quality? Setting side for a moment the complicated question of what we mean by quality and whose criteria or judgements should guide us in that (Carey 2005), it is hard to see clear evidence of the long-forecast ‘dumbing-down’. While there are plenty of commercial forces willing to exploit the worse human instincts or to standardise tastes in order to maximise market potential, there are also powerful forces of resistance in the arts, in education and elsewhere. There can be little doubt that more people read today, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the population, than at any time in English history. The growth in popularity of reading groups also suggests that they are often reading in a thoughtful way: a current project in the East Midlands has identified over 530 reading groups supported by the region’s public library services alone. The same is broadly true of classical music, despite the continuing jeremiads anticipating its final breath: yet with more ensembles playing more concerts in more places, to say nothing of radio and recorded music, this form is music is more widely enjoyed than ever. In
Northamptonshire, the county music service employs 400 musicians to provide tuition for about 13,500 young people and manages various youth music ensembles, including three symphony orchestras, choirs, jazz bands and string quartets; it’s difficult to imagine a time when more of the county’s young people were active in music making. The anxieties about quality, standards and values are not wrong, but they are better understood in the context of a questioning of dominant cultural values that is part of the democratisation of access to culture that I have already touched on. Things, as ever, are not as simple as they might appear.

To recap, it is clear that there has been a transformation of the arts in Britain over the past generation, which has seen them move from the margins of public policy to become a central concern of government, of many local authorities, of substantial parts of the commercial sector and of the public at large. Both the supply side, by which I mean the production and distribution of culture, from art schools to concert halls to bookshops to critics, and the demand side, the audiences and consumers, have grown enormously while maintaining a broadly similar relationship to one another as in the past – that is, a greater level of supply than demand. So there is much more activity than in the past, and that activity touches almost every part of contemporary life. As a consequence, culture has also become a primary territory of contestation internally, about the rightness of different kinds of cultural policy, but more importantly externally, about the values and beliefs that are expressed through cultural and artistic work. The most notorious current instance of this is the confrontation between liberal capitalism on the one hand and religious ideology on the other, both of which express their political claims through cultural devices. So far from being marginal, as is so often said, one might argue that culture has become almost too important today, since it is made to carry alone so much ideological freight that was once shared with other domains. We are all audiences and many of us are also creators, like the members of a choir hearing and singing at the same time. Yet, lulled with an out-of-date image of the arts as marginalised, we are often unaware of our roles and so struggle to reflect critically on them.

So where does that leave us? More particularly, where does it leave those who work in the arts or cultural sectors or who have a wider responsibility for public policy? How can they act well in this new environment? I can see three broad areas where change might be constructive.

First, it’s essential to recognise the changing position of the arts and culture within contemporary society. They are at the heart of the economy and of people’s leisure and social lives. Most fundamentally, they are the territory on which identity and belief are expressed and contested. If government, public agencies and citizens understood better
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the role that the arts play in their lives, they would be in better position to decide what they thought of that role. And they would be better able to debate what kind of arts and cultural life they want.

Secondly, those responsible for public policy in culture and more widely need to see that, despite (or perhaps because of) culture's fundamental importance, it is largely (and fortunately) beyond their control. That is difficult for a governing class with an essentially utilitarian and managerialist worldview to accept. Cultural policy in Britain is still very simplistic. It's simplistic about people; it's simplistic about their lives, their desires, their intentions, their purposes; and it's simplistic about the arts, their practice and their uses. Much of what happens in the arts as a result of public investment, legislation or regulation is not supported by clear thinking; where the rationale and intentions of policy are clear, they tend to adopt wholly inappropriate cause and effect models. Art cannot be commanded, at least not consistently and not for long. It can be exploited for ideological purposes, but not outside the context of a totalitarian state, and even then it contains its own escape routes and alternatives. Since culture's most profound influence is often unaware and unacknowledged, policy-makers and those who work in the arts need some humility alongside their vision. We need to deflate the rhetoric and become more serious. In a democracy, and to be fair the tone of public policy has recently been in this direction, the challenge is to enable culture rather than plan or direct it. That means giving particular attention to people's access to culture whether as creators, consumers or, as many are, both. The right to participate in the artistic life of the community is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for good reason: It is also one of the guarantors of other human rights.

The third change flows from this. If the role of the state is to foster an environment in which cultural activity can flourish and to which all citizens have equal access, it remains true that not all artistic and cultural activity is equally good or equally desirable. Art expresses values, ideas and beliefs and few people would say – even in this post-modern age – that all values, ideas and beliefs are of equal worth. Public cultural policy must therefore find credible, democratic bases on which to differentiate in its response to the spectrum of cultural activity and expression. Culture is too important to be disregarded: it's high time that the audience became aware, self conscious and self-critical.

1 United Kingdom Encyclopedia Britannica 2007 [cited 16 May 2007].

2 The line reached Falmouth less than 20 years after the passing of the Cornwall Railway Act in 1846; see [cited 3 June 2007].

3 As long ago as 1949, the Arts Enquiry set up by the Dartington Hall Trustees bolstered its arguments for state support of Opera on comparison with the current situation in France, Germany, Italy and other continental countries; see Music: A Report on Musical Life in England, London 1949, p. 85.

4 Napoleon, who is usually credited with this epithet, was probably quoting Adam Smith consciously or not: ‘To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers’, An Inquiry into the Nature And Causes of the Wealth of Nations, 1776 Book Four, Chapter VII, Part 3 [online edition] [cited 3 June 2007]
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Notes continued

6 For the ’un-Englishness’ of Nikolaus Pevsner see: http://home.clara.net/games/pevsner.html [cited 31 May 2007].

7 Terry Dicks MP, speaking in the Arts Debate on 5 May 1994, Hansard Vol 242, Col. 904, accessed 16/5/2007 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199394/cmthansrd/1994-05-05/Debate-5.html. The late Tony Banks MP said of Terry Dicks: ’When he leaves the chamber, he probably goes to vandalise a few paintings somewhere. He is to the arts what Vlad the Impaler was to origami.’ The Guardian, 10 January 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1682818,00.html [cited 17 May 2007].


9 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/jy/magazine/6445783.stm [cited 1 June 2007]


12 Comparisons are made between 1976 and 2006, the latest year for which the Arts Council has published its annual report; in each case, the figures relate to the financial year ending in March of the year given.


14 In 1977, the Arts Council had 250 staff, not including those of the independent Regional Arts Associations (Witts 1998:533); in 2006, in the new merged structure and after a substantial staff reduction programme, there were 630 Arts Council England employees.


16 Note that all these examples – and there are many, many more – post-date the increases in government funding of the arts since 1997; indeed, one might almost wonder whether they are not provoked by that increase in funding and the attention that comes with it.

17 See for example, Tom Lubbock ’Blinded by the Light’, The Independent 15 May 2007; ’Gormley is a controversial artist. Go into any gathering of artists, almost any sort of artist, and wait for the derisive groans and guffaws when Gormley’s name comes up; savour the silent assumption that nobody worth talking to could possibly admire him.’

This adage is perhaps the most appropriate description of the importance of literature in our lives. Literature reminds us of stories, epics, sacred scriptures, and classical works of the old and modern times. It is defined as the body of written works of a language, period or culture, produced by scholars and researchers, specialized in a given field. Why is literature important? Let us see. Literature Adds Value. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in society. They are a depiction of the different facets of common man’s life. Classical literary works serve as a food for thought and encourage imagination and creativity. Exposing oneself to good literary works, is equivalent to providing one with the finest of educational opportunities.