A kick up the Arts

Opinion by Denis Joe August 2012

In January this year, West End theatre ticket sales broke box office records, and the most recent Turner prize exhibition, held this year at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts in Gateshead, enjoyed an increase in footfall of around 40% compared with previous years. It seems that the arts have never been more popular.

So why do the arts organisations increasingly resort to claims of curative properties in order to secure the funding they need to survive? In the health sector, especially in mental health and geriatric services, art therapy is increasingly seen as an alternative to psychiatric and medical care.

We hear much talk about making art ‘relevant’. So bringing poetry to inner-city youngsters, for example, involves rap and other forms of performance poetry. Writing or painting is viewed as an important new mode of self-expression for the mentally ill. In the drug and alcohol recovery industry, art is targeted as an alternative to substance misuse, and in minority communities, art is used to celebrate tradition.

As John Tusa, former managing director of the Barbican, said in 1999: “Mozart is Mozart because of his music and not because he created a tourist industry in Salzburg or gave his name to decadent chocolate and marzipan Saltzburger kugel. Picasso is important because he taught a century new ways of looking at objects and not because his painting in the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum are regenerating an otherwise derelict northern Spanish port. Van Gogh is valued because of the pain or intensity of his images and colours, and not because he made sunflowers and wooden chairs popular. Absolute quality is paramount in attempting a valuation of the arts; all other factors are interesting, useful but secondary. “ (quoted in Reeves, M. *Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: A review London.*
Arts Council England p. 83-84).

Yet funding in the arts today is strongly underpinned by instrumentalist policies, art must further social and political policies in some way. Subjecting the art world to ‘the party line’ was in the past seen as something that only happened in totalitarian regimes. Today it is such common practice that local authorities feel no compunction about this cynical approach - see Ticking the Right Boxes
. How then has our relationship to the arts deteriorated to the extent that art is no longer viewed on its own terms, as Tusa so eloquently articulated, but instead has to depend on spurious therapeutic claims, or cling to notions of relevance, in order to secure funding? The answer, I would argue, can be found in the very nature of state funding of the arts.

The history of arts funding in Britain

Aside from royal patronage, there was little appetite for state or municipal funding of the arts up until 1940. Even though the Museums Act of 1845 allowed money to be taken from local rates in order to support the visual arts, this rarely materialised. In 1916, as Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Neville Chamberlain called for municipal funds to be used to create an orchestra for the city. The opening concert of the new orchestra took place in 1917 and by 1920 Edward Elgar was conducting the City of Birmingham Orchestra (a forerunner to the CBSO) in a concert of his own compositions.

As Lord Mayor, Chamberlain became a champion for municipal funding for the arts. His reasoning, back in 1916, sound remarkably like that of today's policy makers. Recognising that

"The war has shown in all ranks of society the character of the stock is the same; but realising that all do not start with an equal chance in life, is it not the duty of the community to try to make up to some extent the deficiency of those who started with disadvantages?"

(*Neville Chamberlain: Volume 1* By David Dilks. CUP 2002 p. 187)

". . . for I believe it is necessary for success to interest the mob & I am convinced that this can easily be done if they are encouraged to take part in music themselves. Every club & and every big work should have its own orchestra and glee society and competitions should be held under the auspices of the City Council. Thus you would help to educate the public, you could introduce a new & engrossing interest into the lives of the working & lower middle classes and incidentally you would make it possible for the more educated and highly trained people with a musical background to get high class concerts & opera at a comparatively cheap rate."

(Quoted in *The Arts as a Weapon of War.* Jörn Weingärtner. Tauris Academic Studies. 2002. P. 47).

During World War Two, artists took the initiative in organising concerts and exhibitions. At the beginning of the war, the pianist Myra Hess came up with the idea of giving a weekly piano recital in the evacuated National Gallery, which proved so popular that it became a daily event. A year later, in 1940, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), was established to help promote and maintain British culture. The underlying objectives were more about national morale than cultural betterment. CEMA also organised serious music concerts in factories and for troops. A poem in The Listener, 18 September 1941, by an Elizabeth Lister, succinctly caught the feeling that art could be a weapon of war:

When Junker and Dornier
Fly over the house with horrible persistence
They remind us of the thornier
Side of existence.
And oh, the terrifying whine
Of Messerschmitts 110 and 109!

But when Sonata and Quartet
Are played at the National Gallery for our pleasure
They induce us to forget
War's horrifying measure.
And oh, the blessed boon to men
Of Opuses 109 and 110!.'

Art funding: Just another welfare benefit pay-out?

The tide turned under the Thatcher administration, when almost £5 million was cut from the total arts spending of £63 million, the number of Regularly Funded Organisations was halved, and entrance fees were introduced at many art galleries and museums. It was Richard Luce, as Arts Minister, who opined in 1987 that, "There are still too many in the arts world who are yet to be weaned from the welfare state mentality." There is an element of truth in this. Many organisations and artists have come to rely on Arts Council grants for their survival. Is this dependency culture the right way to support the arts? A comparison with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the US federal agency for funding the arts would suggest otherwise.

The NEA was created by an act of the U.S. Congress in 1965. Over the past decade public and private sources have accounted for roughly 56% of total funding of U.S. non-profit arts organizations. The remainder have come from box office receipts (*How the United States Funds the Arts*, NEA 2007). This relatively high contribution of box office receipts contrasts sharply with the British funding system, where there is little sense of the rewards of success. The cultural contribution that a work or organisation makes becomes secondary when the political criteria of ‘bums on seats’ is introduced.

In every field of art during the 20th Century the USA has excelled. Artists such as Pollock, De Kooning and Rothko; writers such as Mailer, Vonnegut Jr., and Updike; poets such as William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg and Merwin; music composers such as Elliot Carter, Cowell and John Adams; not to mention multifarious developments in theatre and cinema - these all impacted enormously on the world of art, pushing boundaries at each step.

Britain too enjoyed its cultural high point. From the mid-19th Century to the early half of the 20th century there was a renaissance in British arts, with many artists championing and creating new and challenging works. They created a vibrant movement right up to the beginning of World War Two, independent of state interference and patronage (with the exception of those artists who entered into royal services). Their influence beyond Britain, though, was negligible.

The crisis in the Soviet Union and the eventual collapse of the Eastern Bloc countries, created a profound loss of direction around the early 1990s, internationally, destabilising public policy in western societies. In Britain any venture - be it art or a building programme - was measured on its social benefits, by a government desperate to be seen as proactive. For arts to be funded there had to be a return that could be measured by its social impact. The Arts Council's funding criteria was concerned with social rather than artistic outcomes.

Such funding criteria are anathema to artistic integrity, but they are a logical outcome of state sponsorship. When the state patronises the arts, art inevitably becomes a policy tool and public expenditure has to be justified. Reliance on state funding means accepting those pre-conditions. As a result artists are less likely to take risks and art becomes moribund, which, I would argue, has been the case with art in Britain since the end of the Second World War.

A far superior approach to funding the arts is the US model. Public arts would benefit from funding through a public subscription, which would at least mean that works of art met with the approval of members of the public rather than have works imposed in public places by local government as Jan Bowman suggests. As history has shown, the rich are quite capable of appreciating art to the extent that they will put their hands in their very deep pockets, so why should we not welcome their contribution wholeheartedly? After all, it is surely preferable to jumping through the hoops set by bureaucrats.

Ironically it was a politician, John F. Kennedy, who said: “If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him”. If the artist continues to look to the state for his or her financial support, they must be prepared to make themselves the servants of their political masters and, as such they can never be free.

Editor's Note: What's behind a renaissance in the Arts? Well if you want to discuss this particular topic you should come along to the Manchester Salon on Monday 10 September and join in trying to answer the important question of what is new and changing in the Arts at the moment.