

Us and them

The arts sector is missing the mark in making its case to the wider public, says Liz Hill. In her session at the Shift Happens conference, AP threw down the gauntlet and challenged the sector to do better.

I have been involved with the arts for nearly 25 years now, but I still remember my first impressions of the sector. It was an unexpected world full of delightful people who were completely passionate about their work. They didn't start work until 10am, never wore suits, didn't understand numbers and all read *The Guardian*. And even though Facebook hadn't been invented, they all seemed to know each other.

Why such a vivid picture? Well, because it was so different from my experience of the previous 25 years.

I was brought up in a family where my mother believed firmly in the importance of education, loved to travel and took a keen interest in politics, but had no interest whatsoever in the arts. She is now in her 90s, but I think she has only been to one professional arts performance since my childhood – and hated it; and in my living memory has neither been to a gallery nor read a novel. But she always reads the *Daily Mail* on Saturdays, as does my mother in law, and as do around 5 million other people – about 10 times as many as read the *Guardian*.

My father was more inclined towards the arts, though he would never see himself as such. He was a talented professional photographer who specialised in making commercial audio-visual slide-tape productions in the days when cine was very expensive. But he would never think of himself as having worked in the 'creative industries' – or that his work was in any way related to being 'artistic'.

Unsurprisingly, my own appreciation of the arts was slow to develop. I learned to play the piano – badly. And the recorder – even worse. I think I was taken to a ballet aged about seven. And I occasionally used to watch the local amateur group perform because my friend's dad was in it.

I still remember the first professional play I saw when I was about 18 – the inspiring 'Whose life is it anyway', with Tom Conti at the Savoy Theatre. But wonderful though it was, it didn't change my life and I carried on, as many young people do, studying for a degree that was nothing to do with the arts; starting a career that had nothing to do with the arts; and having a very clear preference for partying, gigs, pub, cinema, and playing tennis than anything arts-related.

It was only when, as a university lecturer, I was asked to deliver a management course specifically tailored to the needs of music students did I start to really 'get' what the arts have to offer and to understand that it was something of great value.

So why am I now sharing these embarrassing secrets?

It's because the title of this session is 'refocus' and this morning I want to make a case for why the arts sector needs to refocus on those many millions of people – the majority of the population, in fact – who think the arts are 'nice' but peripheral to their lives. And that means telling them something that resonates with their world, talking to them in a language they understand and using the media that they find most compelling.

To be brutally honest, none of the messages currently coming out of the sector about 'the value of the arts' would have even begun to move my dial had I not become involved with the arts sector.

I would have heard rave reviews of Matilda, War Horse and One Man Two Guvnors, seen that the West End is pulling in record numbers, and concluded that theatre is thriving. And therefore I would probably have been more persuaded by Quentin Letts' rants about ['squealing luvvies'](#) than I would by Nick Hytner's [pleas of poverty](#).

I would have read about the healing power of the arts in hospitals but been grinding my teeth that it takes two weeks to get an appointment to see my GP, and concluded that the arts couldn't possibly be a priority.

I would have heard that the lives of disadvantaged children can be changed by the arts, but seen more evidence that they can be changed by football.

I would have puzzled over the fact that the arts even need public funding when the tickets for anything 'good' are so expensive, and all the people I know who go to the arts are rich anyway, so why subsidise them?

And I would have pointed to the fact that everyone I know who likes creative stuff does it through amateur dramatic groups, painting classes and book clubs – not 'arts organisations'. And they don't get any subsidy.

These are the sorts of arguments that the arts sector is up against, and they are perceptions that are difficult to shift.

So why is it that people in the arts sector view the arts as fundamental to life, when others see them as peripheral? Let's think about an 'average' day in an 'average' life.

Stanley Parker defines leisure as “the time left over after other obligations have been attended to”. And he says that the day can be divided into five types of activity:

- Work – time spent in paid employment
- Work obligations – time taken up as a consequence of employment, such as travel to and from work, or overtime
- Non-work obligations – activities including childcare and housework
- Physiological needs – time spent engaged in eating, sleeping, washing...
- Leisure – the time left over for TV, Games, sport and exercise, study, faith-related activity, leisure shopping, pub... and arts.

But if we compare the ‘average day’ pie chart as it might apply to people working in the arts, with the chart for those not working in the arts, perhaps it’s easier to see why we care passionately about the future of the sector, yet millions of others can’t see what all the fuss is about.

If you work in the sector, not only are your working hours spent in the arts, but you probably do some overtime in the arts and spend a higher than average proportion of your leisure time in the arts too. Your education experience is most likely to have involved the arts and your friends are probably keen on the arts too.

So what about people who aren’t working in the arts? The amount of time most people spend thinking about the arts represents just a tiny fraction of all their thinking. Is it any wonder that the sector’s own view of its importance is different from theirs? No, it’s entirely unsurprising that there’s a disconnect between the way ‘we’ see the world, and the way ‘they’ do. It really is a case of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

So, what to do about it? How can ‘we’ encourage ‘them’ to see things differently?

In fact, getting people to see things differently is something that the arts sector can be rather good at – artistic expression is often driven by that very impulse. But I’m not convinced that a lot of the sector’s creative genius has yet been applied to the task of gaining public understanding of its work. Simply saying “support the arts – they’re important – so don’t cut our funding” is hardly a subtle or persuasive technique, and saying it through The Guardian is a surefire way of preaching to the converted whilst leaving the rest untouched. There must be more creative ways of getting people to sit up and take notice.

Let’s take a look at [one of the most popular TV adverts of 2012](#), because this really did make people sit up and take notice. Actually it’s a public information video, but there’s not a hint of worthiness or pleading – it’s a creative treatment that speaks in a language people understand, with a message that uses both humour and cultural references, and issues a call to action that they can respond to. And it was all paid for by a [charity](#).

But did it work? Well, listen to this comment left on YouTube by JimmythePyro, two months ago. He said: "I've hurled abuse at this advert for being shite and cheesy and rubbish, but today my grandad's life was saved because my Uncle knew what to do based on this advert. I'm going to hold my hands up now and publicly say I was very wrong about this advert. Thank you for making it. I was an imbecile for doubting you."

Are you thinking "well, this is just a one-off"? Think again. At the International Festival of Creativity in Cannes just last month, the Australian commercial '[Dumb ways to die](#)' swept the board and became the all-time most awarded commercial. The message? It was about pedestrian safety around railway lines. It's not an obvious contender for an artistic treatment, yet the combination of black comedy, clever animation and a catchy tune has brought it worldwide acclaim. It was uploaded to Youtube on 14 November last year, viewed 28 million times within the first 2 weeks, spawned 85 parodies, and has its own page on Wikipedia.

But it wasn't just the creative message and viral spread that impressed the judges – it was also its impact. John Mescall, the Creative Director of McCann Melbourne, which created the ad, said this:

"Firstly, juries have been impressed by the short-term effect of the 21 per cent reduction in accidents, but secondly this is a behavioural change campaign and these campaigns take years to evolve ...we've created a framework for discussion around rail safety that did not exist six months ago. It was an invisible topic, but it's real now for people. It's a soft measure for effectiveness but we've taken something that's actually invisible and created a discussion around it that is ongoing."

Yes, the advertising industry has really got the technique of mass communication down to a fine art – and art it certainly is. Yet strangely, however keen the arts sector is to impress the Government, by describing itself as the bedrock in which the creative industries – like advertising – have their roots, the potential for using the medium of advertising to gain public understanding of its work has so far been overlooked. The sector is populated by talented actors, artists, animators, film-makers, writers, composers and producers with more than enough talent to pull something amazing together, but it hasn't happened – yet.

Back in the 1970s, the industrial giant Dunlop wanted to demonstrate that they were an indispensable part of the fabric of life, and came up with one of the most effective brand advertising campaigns of the decade. It was, shall we say, 'of its time' – which becomes very clear at the end – but I leave you with the thought that if an [advertising campaign like this](#) can embed the notion that a tyre and rubber products manufacturer makes an indispensable contribution to people's lives, what more could the arts achieve?

So, the question now is, are those of 'us' for whom the arts are central to our lives, up for the challenge of using their creative talent to connect with 'them', for whom they aren't?

ArtsProfessional wants to find out, so today we're going to throw down the gauntlet. In the autumn we will be launching a competition to find the most creative idea for getting the message across. And for the winning entry, we're going to launch a Crowd-funding campaign to take it from concept to completion. If you would be interested in joining us to form a small project group to get things off the ground, so much the better. I look forward to meeting you.

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This is a transcript of her presentation to the Shift Happens conference on Monday 8 July 2013