

John Holden, Demos *What Next?*

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In this final keynote, delegates were asked to consider what we should do with our newfound knowledge of why people engage with the arts. What does it mean for arts organisations, for the funding system, and for the sector as a whole? How might we work collaboratively to communicate the role the arts plays in the lives of the public? How might we work collaboratively as a sector to raise the profile of the arts as relevant and meaningful to people's lives?

Where next?

John Holden began by threatening to talk about the taxonomy, epistemology and hermeneutics of audience development when actually what everyone wanted to see was the AMA board doing the can-can and singing an arts marketing anthem.



Instead, they would have to make do with this picture and a few thoughts about what we might consider doing once we leave.

The conference has shown how much better an understanding we have of the issues we face than even a few years ago. On the other hand, it also demonstrates how little has changed in the arts; there seems to be a long way to go before we have as great an enthusiasm for the arts in the population as a whole as there is in this room.

Policy Context

There are three significant shifts in policy in the last five years.

1. Changes in devolution and the arms-length principle

There are many benefits both to the politicians and the arts from the arms length principle. It protects the arts from political interference and on the other hand means that politicians don't have to justify individual artistic decisions.

Recently though, there have been challenges from both left and right political perspectives about the arms length principle, in all parts of the UK. The degree to which politicians want to be involved in the arts is still a live issue. It will form a backdrop to what funders and organisations do, how they market themselves to government, what research they do and how they behave.

2. Shift in emphasis arising from Brian McMaster's report to DCMS: 'Supporting excellence in the arts from measurement to judgement'.

It represents a change from accounting for the instrumental value of the arts to other ways of valuing the arts. James Purnell enthusiastically welcomed the report with these words

"We must free artists and cultural organisations from outdated structures and burdensome targets, which can act as millstones around the neck of creativity."

This is very different from the Local Government Association's report of 2007:

'Targets Matter. They express what organisations are trying to achieve. They affect behaviour.'

Whilst we should welcome the recognition of excellence and quality in the arts it is surely unwise to abandon the idea of targets all together. Surely it should be about judgement **and** measurement because we need both.

The question – what is excellent? – is a very important question that we need to address all the time because excellence is not static, it is relative and subjective. What is worrying about the report is the proposal that quality should be about self-assessment and peer review as if it is only for the arts community to be the sole arbiter of these matters. Our culture is a public culture and should involve the public. We may be experts but we don't need to be gatekeepers.

3. Public Engagement and Consultation

We are much better informed than we used to be. Reports referenced and presented at this conference: Taking Part, the Arts Debate, Culture on Demand and Alan Brown's work have all been really valuable for finding out what people think about the arts.

What do these reports say? What can we do about it?

The headline figures are good. According to Taking Part, 67% of the population takes part in theatre, whilst 94% takes part in culture in some form (though this includes sport).

However, if we dig deeper it's not so encouraging. Most people have very limited and sporadic engagement. 84% say they do little if anything or participate only sporadically. 12% call themselves an enthusiastic participant in the arts which means that they do something three or four times a year. A miniscule 4% can be described as voracious – they go to all sorts of arts events regularly.

This lack of participation within the 84% is not due to indifference. The Arts Council England Arts Debate discovered:

'.. a strong sense among many members of the public of being excluded from something that they would like to be able to access. They had a feeling that certain types of arts experiences were not for people like them.'

This is a tragedy for a number of reasons.

First, we have an obligation under the UN Charter of Human Rights which says:

'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enjoy the arts.'

Secondly, it shows a huge failure on the part of the education system.

Thirdly, it is an enormous denial of human enjoyment, stimulation and pleasure. It's appalling that after 60 years of spending public money on the arts we still have so many people saying they don't have the confidence to go into a theatre, a gallery or a concert hall.

We have known for a long time what the barriers are. There are many studies which go back to the 1960s, most of which come down to two factors as having overwhelming importance.

- Education – the higher the level of education someone has, the more likely they are to attend the arts
- Acculturation – culture is normalised through the influence of others on our views, especially family and peer groups.

This has been reaffirmed recently in the Arts Council England report 'From Indifference to Enthusiasm'.

Does the fact that so little has changed mean we are faced with an intractable problem?

Optimism and Change

There are reasons to be optimistic. Attendances are increasing, there are excellent initiatives in the education system and there are many new forms of communication which can put us in touch with a wide range of people.

We will only make real progress, however, if we are prepared to change.

First, we require more **collaboration**, a word which derives from the Latin *laborare* – to work – and collaboration means working together, not just producing a few shared outcomes. It is

about working together on a long term basis. The evidence shows that the most enthusiastic consumers of the arts enjoy a wide range of things – the omnivores like a mix of artforms and both high and popular art. This surely demands a collaborative approach.

Funders increasingly have to come to terms with ambiguity and the blurring of boundaries. This means they have to manage new tensions and relations, representing the arts to politics and politics to the arts, a difficult balance between advocacy and objectivity.

Secondly, we need to pay more attention to **class** as defined by social status as well as by income. William Dershowitz in the American Scholar wrote recently:

'The great disadvantage of an elite education is that it makes you incapable of talking to people who are not like you.'

Are we good at talking to people who are not like us? Dershowitz continues:

'Elite schools pride themselves on their diversity, but that diversity is almost entirely based on ethnicity and race; with respect to class, these schools are largely homogenous.'

Given that society seems to be becoming more unequal, we need to ensure we do not fall into the trap of only talking to people who are like us.

A more encouraging trend is that people are meeting together as equals in mass participative cultural events, from Glastonbury to the Sultan's Elephant.

Unlike other public services, people actively choose to participate in the arts. This makes the arts special – it makes us feel part of society. We should be turning the old assumptions about the arts being elitist on its head – because it is a rare place where people can come together as equals.

Demand

We have mainly been looking at the supply side of the equation, but we need to look at demand. It is only by working with the trends in society that we can improve the confidence which the public has in the arts.

First, we need to do much more with education and learning. If level of education is a key determinant of participation in the arts, then we need to ensure we are working with nurseries, schools, universities, public libraries and any place where formal or informal learning is taking place. Arts organisations will have to increase their capacity to meet the desire of people to learn.

Second, mass broadcast media is still very important and we need to start from where people are. The vast majority of people still get their arts from tv. Four million people watched Leonardo in 2003, about the same number who visit the National Gallery in a year.

However, television's grip is gradually loosening. Young people spend much more time on the web being actively social. The passive consumption of arts could well be a 20th Century aberration. We seem to be returning to a more participative model in the arts. The book club

is not unlike the 18th Century salon and the 19th Century sing song has its renaissance in the garage band.

As participation increases, people want a greater say over what their cultural experiences are. The playlist and customisation approach is already common in the commercial world. It is possible to configure the Fiat 500 in thousands of different ways so that you tailor make your own car.

The public is also much more capable of being organised. Clay Shirkey in 'Here Comes Everybody' says: '*Group interaction just got easier*'. We now communicate many to many. If people wanted to, they could easily organise themselves and demand what they wanted from us. Perhaps we should be prepared.

So, the challenge is there; to collaborate better, to understand the public better and to help the 50 million who rarely go through the doors of an arts organisation to feel confident to do so. Arts marketers can change the lives of many people for the better so that they discover that the arts really are for them, because they are.