

making. The expertise of curators, music teachers, sculptors and dramatists is too often cast to one side as leaders in the arts doff their cap to youth, ethnic minorities and the socially excluded. Endless museum schemes ask special interest groups, from homeless youngsters to residents of old people’s homes, to curate their own histories through donating objects that “mean the most to you in terms of culture”.

Committees are set up in local areas to ask communities what sort of exhibitions they would like to visit. In one report *‘Opening Doors: Learning in the Historic Environment’*, for instance, it says that “historic properties should consult with local communities and visitors, as well as those who do not visit, about what they would like to experience in order to increase their relevance to everyone”. Elsewhere, the recently published Children’s Plan criticises the ‘curriculum of the past’ since it was ‘dominated by content coverage led by the teacher’. Marry this with the emphasis on ‘personalised learning’, and we end up with children setting the agenda by choosing the content of music lessons.

Democratising art to make it relevant is presented as empowering. We are told this new attention to the public’s interests is an assault on the allegedly traditional deference to experts who used their expertise to dictate the arts agenda. At the launch of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Partnership’s Setting the Pace, Keith Khan, then head of Culture London 2012, turned to a group of school pupils “displayed” in the front row and told them “I’ve got to learn from you”. This sycophancy is not isolated and indicates that deference is far from dead. Instead those who lead the arts have become mindlessly deferential to new constituents, such as ethnic minorities or teenagers. This false intimacy with the public, propelled by a cloying flattery about their artistic acumen, has now reached its pinnacle in a celebration of any demonstration of public creativity regardless of any real flair or content.

DEMOCRACY & PARTICIPATION

Two of the key mantras of today’s cultural policy are “engage-ment” and “participation”. These buzz-words may sound harmless, but we need to be wary. They may embrace the empowering rhetoric of democratic involvement, but often such an approach is less about enabling people to appreciate the arts or become artists, and is more about trumpeting participation as an end in itself. We are told that “access should be more than just being an audience member”. Government wants to see more people “acting, learning, dancing, making, dressing, doing it themselves...” (Tessa Blackstone, Cheltenham speech, 2001). Witness the numerous “community music making” and song/ playwriting initiatives proposed for the Cultural Olympiad. Age is no barrier - older people can be “active participants in movement and dance workshops...in hospices and homes for the elderly”.

Significantly, this participation has coincided with an erosion of the formal teaching of the arts in the school curriculum. This might suggest that the quality of artistic participation is less important than the evidence that everyone is joining in. Even with the much trumpeted new £25million scheme to entitle every schoolchild to a minimum of ‘five hours of culture’ a week, Education Secretary Ed Balls emphasises that he wants, “all young people to have the chance to both experience and *take part* in creative activities to help them learn and develop” (my emphasis).

It is clear that no barriers to participation – such as having no artistic talent – will be allowed to get in the way of everyone joining in. This is glossed over by the assertion that – to quote Culture Secretary Andy Burnham - “All children have creative talents”. The government’s role is “to ensure that they have the opportunity to develop them”. So the DCMS and the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) have launched *‘Find Your Talent’*, a Pop Idol-style approach to education that will ‘unlock the creative talent of all young people’ and *SHINE*, a week-long schools’ festival “to celebrate the talent in everybody”.

But does everyone have talent? Even the crassest of TV talent shows, *Britain’s Got Talent*, recognises some differentiation and the talentless are buzzed off stage. *The Music Manifesto* claims that “everybody can sing”. But is opening our mouths and making some pseudo-musical noises creating music? The Southbank Centre tells us it’s ok if we “Can’t sing a note” and instead urges us to join in regardless. “Why not try the Vocal Beatbox Orchestra Workshop”, after which our uncles novices will have the chance to perform at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, “alongside the Swingle Singers” as part of the “World’s largest Beatbox Choir” *later that same day*.

Hearing the government proclaim it is keen that more pupils play music is encouraging, until you find out what it means in

practice. The focus is not on reading music, instrumentation, rhythm, harmony and melody; rather schools are instructed to provide what is ominously called ‘music-making op-portunities’. This can encompass everything from practicing DJ-ing skills to orchestras opening up rehearsal time to allow children ‘to have a go’. So while frequently the ‘music-making’ approach is praised because it allegedly removes the ‘barriers’ that prevent children from ‘making music’, making music is redefined as participating, it doesn’t matter what in; simply banging a drum - with no sense of why or how - will suffice.

One sure way of creating a love of the arts in later life, and challenging what McMaster describes as the ‘it’s not for me’ syndrome, might be to guarantee an excellent, universally available arts education in schools. A surefire way of develop-ing talent is to introduce it to tutored teaching. But as you can’t learn to play an instrument without concentrated listening, study and hours of often tedious but necessary prac-tice, and not everyone will either exhibit the temperament or develop their skills sufficiently to succeed at this, you can be sure this is not the focus of the government’s five-hours-a-week promise. As John Tusa explains, “Contemporary creativity has been democratised so that knowledge of the rules, skills and traditions is rejected as elitist, restricting, authoritarian and irrelevant”. Instead, “immediate expres-sion and instant understanding” inevitably take precedence “over the painful, learned accumulated disciplines of the arts”.

For all the manifesto proclamations about inclusivity, today’s youth are rarely given access to formal music history or the theory of rhythm and harmonic structure - the very features that all music genres share, and the very thing that would allow pupils meaningful engagement.

POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT - ARTS TO THE RESCUE

The broader political context is key to grasping the participa-tion aspect of arts policy. Recent general and local elections have revealed stark evidence of political disengagement that haunts all mainstream parties; the ‘none of the above’ party tends to gain more votes than politicians. For government, the arts are seen as just one useful point of contact. One suspects politicians look on with envy at the crowds queuing up to see the Terracotta Army at the British Museums; oh to inspire such enthusiasm. And if *Strictly Come Dancing, I’d Do Anything* and *The Xfactor* can get millions of votes, then maybe politics can ape their popular culture appeal.

Certainly, the drive to democratise the arts appears to be as much about giving democracy itself some new dynamism as opening up culture per se. The literature is littered with references to art’s ability to build “social cohesion” to “allow communities to reforge and develop social networks”. The DCMS website talks of how culture can be used to “create a sense of local pride and belonging”, to strengthen “commu-nity networks and capacity”, to “develop social capital”. The arts can provide “a positive focus for community activity” and develop “neighbourhood renewal” and “civic pride amongst residents”. Cultural institutions are instructed to develop “shared values and common purposes”, to “Build bridges” and “Break boundaries”. The titles of government reports such as *Bringing Communities Together Through Sport and Culture* ³ make this agenda explicit and highlights “the important role that ...arts can play in engaging those at risk of disaffection and promoting community cohesion”.

More recently, against the backdrop of tensions associated with devolution and ‘parallel lives’ amongst diverse ethnic and cultural groups, the focus has turned to identity-building. In his opening speech in his brief tenure at the DCMS, minister James Purnell paraded the arts as a tool in building national identity to tap into Gordon Brown’s Britishness agenda. Museums, galleries, theatres, libraries are recruited to host citizenship ceremonies because “being made a British citizen in those kind of surroundings allows people to associate their new citizenship with key cultural icons, and then offers the chance to build a longer term engagement”. In her DCMS blog Margaret Hodge explains that the “main point” of her infamous Proms speech was that culture is “really important when it comes to giving meaning to our shared values and common identity”, especially at a time when “globalisation, migration and terrorism are challenging traditional concepts of identity and nationhood”. The DCMS enthusiastically proclaims that “Dance, music, theatre, poetry, story telling and many other art forms, all help to promote understanding and respect between our different cultures”. The theory is that if everyone participates in culture, everyone will feel involved and somehow a shared identity will emerge.

Should the arts sign up to the policy wonks’ new agenda? When Hodge demands that the cultural sector creates “the

icons of a common culture that everybody can feel a part of and feel a collective sense of ownership in”, might we ask what happened to artistic autonomy?

WHAT NEXT FOR ARTISTS?

In the new world post-McMaster, it was hoped that at last, art could be given its due respect, without the crass instrumental hoops that so many in the arts world have grown weary of. But recruiting the arts as “building a sense of belonging” is just as dangerous, however radical sounding.

It may be flattering for artists to be told by politicians about the power of culture to “touch and move people across the barriers of race, religion and class... providing unique opportunities for us to make constructive changes to our lives and to the lives of our communities” (Hodge’s speech). It is easy to see why the arts might espouse this role as having a higher purpose than the rightly maligned art as social work agenda. But can the arts bare the burden of reinvigorating public life and bringing harmony to fractured communities? Can art really promise to make “constructive changes” and who dictates what is constructive?

Artists should think twice about helping the state ‘connect’ and ‘engage’ with the lives of ordinary people. Do artists really want to act as Trojan horses in helping government ingratiate itself with and infiltrate its way into the lives of the general public? No doubt, many artists are keen to work with the public, and to contribute to social well-being. But you can’t have it all ways. We should remember that when we allow art to become a means to non-artistic ends, it is one small step to allowing it to be used as a law and order weapon against youth in tube stations.

- 1 Appleton, Josie (2004) *Art for inclusion’s sake*, Spiked, last accessed 14 July 2008: http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/000000CA4BC.htm

2 Minihan, Janet (1977) *The Nationalisation of Culture*, Hamilton

3 Hodge, Margaret (2008) *Britishness, Heritage and the Arts*, speech last accessed 14 July 2008: http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/mini-ster_speeches/1989.aspx

4 *Bringing Communities Together Through Sport and Culture*, (2004) last accessed 14 July 2008: http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Com-munitiesBooklet.pdf

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ARTICLE

The Tyranny of Relevance

Claire Fox

Ascending the escalators at Wood Green tube station in Haringey, one becomes aware of the unlikely strains of Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* or a Tchaikovsky waltz. Over the last year a 40-hour playlist featuring the canon of 18th and 19th century classical music has been a constant background noise to the bustle of my local underground ticketing area. Personally I find it frustrating to catch only snatches of my favourite sonatas. However these musical gobbits are not aimed at the likes of me; they are targeted at teenagers. Might this mean that public authorities are keen to introduce contemporary youth to the wonders of high art, to educate their ear to the complexities of symphonies and classical compositions? Predictably not. The thinking behind *Transport for London’s* scheme is that the likes of Strauss or Schubert will deter youngsters from hanging around the tube and hence reduce crime and antisocial behaviour.

Here we have an apposite example of how the authorities view the relationship between the public and art in 2008 – contempt for both. This might be a metaphor for official arts policy in general. Art is used as an instrument of social policy: Handel and Brahms are at best seen as ambient pacifiers, at worst as a repellent; young people meanwhile are presumed incapable of being attracted to the finer things in culture.

This example may seem too explicitly authoritarian to fit in with today’s inclusive agenda. After all, hasn’t the Depart-ment for Culture Media and Sport and the Arts Council spent the last decade preaching the need to open up the arts to as wide a public as possible? How does using high culture to frighten away the mob fit in with official goals to make the arts accessible? Actually it is precisely this contemporary mission - to democratise the arts on behalf of the public - that can lead to disdain for both. Ironically, elitist assumptions lurk behind the assertions of democratisation.

HISTORIC REFLECTIONS - ELITISM THEN AND NOW

Historic parallels show that while today the language of democracy accompanies attempts to attract new audiences to the arts, this can mask even more disparaging views of the public and art than those espoused by more traditional elitist attitudes.

Holding derogatory views about mass audiences is nothing new. On the surface, London Transport’s prejudices are not dissimilar to the nineteenth century elite’s who sought to use the arts to calm the baying mob. As Josie Appleton has noted in her essay *Art for inclusion’s sake*¹, Victorian patricians believed that “aesthetic and intellectual refinement would help to discipline the masses”. In 1832, when the House of Commons contributed funds towards the building of the new National Gallery in London, Tory leader Robert Peel told parliament: “In the present times of political excitement, the exacerbation of angry and unsocial feelings might be much softened by the effects which the fine arts had ever produced upon the minds of men.”

These historic elites believed that the arts – if listened to, looked at, or appreciated even by the most unruly - would have a civilising impact. Conversely, they supposed that the most uncouth proletariat could be lifted beyond their im-mediate circumstances and be transformed by art. In 1841, a Commons select committee saw art as a “means of moral and intellectual improvement for the people” (quoted by Janet Minihan in *The Nationalisation of Culture*). Hence some of the best collections of paintings in the world were presented in galleries consciously aimed at encouraging all classes to visit. It was assumed that all classes would be able to enjoy the same art. The National Gallery’s location in Trafalgar Square, the official centre of nineteenth century London, was in part chosen so that the rich could come in their carriages from the West End, and the poor could walk from the East End.

These views stand in contrast with today’s prejudices, which offer little hope of art transcending social background or appealing to everyone regardless of class or culture. Today the notion that certain art forms such as ballet, opera or classical music cannot embrace everybody has become an article of faith. When appointed new director of the Baltic contemporary art gallery in Gateshead, Peter Doroshenko explained the only way he could “reach out to Tynesiders” was commissioning work in the Newcastle United football

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ground: “These people aren’t ever going to come into the Baltic. I’m realistic about that.”

It has become fashionable to presume that certain art forms and institutions are forever exclusionary. Because the audi-ences of classical music today are often predominantly white and moneyed, the music itself is dismissed as elitist. Sean O’Hagan, writing in the Observer claims, “Anyone who still thinks classical music is not elitist should take a look around them when they next take their seat at a live performance”. In a recent speech, Culture minister Margaret Hodge observed that the audience: “for many of our greatest cultural events - I’m thinking in particular of the Proms - is still a long way from demonstrating that people from different backgrounds feel at ease in being part of this.”²

The flip side of this is an obsession with demographic head-counting, as a signifier that the art is accessible. Hodge ticks off the arts for attracting unrepresentative audiences that are “simply a sea of white faces”. But this official attitude to accessibility has inevitably led to the arts becoming over preoccupied by the ethnicity or cultural background of its audience.

Not only does this ghettoise audiences, but it also reveals how art itself can be devalued in pursuit of quotas. Too frequently a piece of art can receive approval – regardless of its aesthetic value - because it ticks sufficient boxes. Conversely an extraordinary artistic endeavour can be derided because it attracts the wrong sort of people. This has the negative consequence of suggesting that whatever attracts the masses – however tenuous its link to art – is culturally significant. Hodge contrasted the Proms negatively against such “icons of a ‘common culture’ as “*Coronation Street*”, “*the Archers*” and “the festivals and public holidays we share”.

This approach has had a marked effect on the way arts institutions go about attracting new audiences. Despite all the egalitarian rhetoric by today’s cultural mandarins, they (along with London Transport) seem to believe that beautiful paintings and orchestral masterpieces will deter the masses from hanging out in their institutions.

Last year Tate Modern director Sir Nicholas Serota declared: “We want to significantly broaden the audiences who visit Tate Modern.” Revealingly, his attempt to increase the museum’s appeal to young people was not by focusing on the collections. Instead a special sleepover party, at which 150 youth bedded down in self-decorated tents, was organised in the Turbine Hall. Back at the Baltic, director Peter Doroshenko commissioned “an enormous skateboarding ramp inside the gallery” to combat the “austerity and sterility of the gallery” that was allegedly deterring younger visitors. When the Southbank Centre aims to lure inner city youth into its precincts, it doesn’t push its wonderful Barrenboim recitals, but rather hosts an annual beatbox convention.

Democratising access to the arts is often less about popularis-ing the universal appeal of art, and more a concession to the idea that different audiences essentially relate to different art niches. The sum of its various parts can be passed off as art for all. Arts institutions can be put under pressure to put on forms of art deemed likely to attract these different ‘ghettos’.

DIVERSITY OR GHETTOISATION?

Sir Brian McMaster’s recent groundbreaking review, *Support-ing Excellence in the Arts - From Measurement to Judgement* (January 2008), seemed to ridicule these approaches head on. In his foreword, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, James Purnell wrote, “The time has come to reclaim the word ‘excellence’ from its historic, elitist undertones and to recognise that the very best art and culture is for everyone... regardless of class, education or ethnicity”. However, true to form, even this report makes a point of emphasising social type and ethnicity in a way which is likely to undermine its rhetorical commitment to championing “the very best art and culture for everyone”.

McMaster demands that “artists, organisations and funders must have diversity at the core of their work”. The range of diversities the review cites is so broad that it includes every possible demographic label imaginable, and should cover “the span of ages, religions, cultures, sexualities, disabilities

and socio-economic backgrounds” as well as “new and under-represented communities settling in the UK” such as “those emigrating from Eastern Europe or fleeing conflict around the world”. One fears that this can only lead to a frenzy of plays aimed at the Polish elderly or a spate of Buddhist art exhibitions. It certainly implies that we cannot simply produce or present art for all.

A range of contemporary arts projects follow this trajectory. *The Music Manifesto* - a government policy that admirably promises to bring music education back to life in schools – tells us, “We share the conviction that music education should reflect the diversity of Britain today and should be ac-cessible to everyone”. In the name of ‘reflecting...diversity’, it is assumed that everyone will not be able to appreciate the same music. *The Music Manifesto* plays down classical music in schools, because it is considered inaccessible to those who aren’t part of ‘British culture’. Instead, it suggests that music lessons will involve all children if they are encouraged to bring in music to the classroom from ‘their own cultures’ so that nobody feels left out.

It is of course reasonable that a diverse range of music genres should be available and that classical is not viewed as the only important music. However, as arts critic Sarah Boyes has pointed out, rather than saying “different types of music can be understood and learned about *regardless* of cultural background or religious belief, it seems to be saying they are important *only because* people have different cultural backgrounds” (IoE Education Forum Opinion, 3 August 2007).

THE TYRANNY OF RELEVANCE

It is argued that the arts will only attract diverse modern audiences if they become “relevant”. The McMaster report stresses that the cultural sector will only thrive if it is “truly relevant to twenty-first century Britain and its audiences”. Hence, all the schemes to attract the young to the arts inevitably include those of alleged “relevance” to today’s teenagers. One of the ten official projects of the Cultural Olympiad is a World Festival of Youth Culture. But why do our cultural officials feel the need to champion youth culture that is spontaneously embraced – indeed created - by every young generation?

Becoming relevant to the audience sees major cultural institutions embarrassingly ‘getting down with the kids’. On the assumption that today’s techno-savvy youth will relate to anything involving new technologies, no arts scheme is complete without mention of new media, digital art or sampling. The National Theatre’s new *Bring and Share* scheme proudly boasts that “if anything reveals the National’s entry into the twenty-first century” it is this “interactive iPod-evening”. People are encouraged to “bring their small white boxes and let the DJ plug them in, encouraging a global music eclecticism”. This attempt by the arts at ingratiating themselves with new audiences often belies an embarrass-ment about their traditional roles. The National Theatre is proud of its scheme because “it’s a world away from the image of the National as a library-quiet, furrowed-brow palace of seriousness”.

When art hangs on the coat tails of teenagers, it does them – and art – a disservice. Teenagers are congratulated for making ‘mashup’ videos on YouTube and lauded for their self-expression, however shallow and ephemeral. This approach actually denies new audiences access to anything meaningful or challenging. Instead it recycles culturally familiar or mass consumed creativity back to an audience already accustomed to it. Making art available to “the many, not just a few” is an admirable egalitarian ambition, but in today’s policy context, it is a con.

McMaster rightly castigates attempts by arts organisations to “second-guess what their audiences want”, concluding this often means “cheating them out of the deepest and most meaningful experiences”. However the report’s fatal mistake is to overstate the importance of relevance. McMaster argues that “For something to be excellent it has to be relevant, and for it to be relevant it has to be continually reinterpreted and refined for and by its audience”. Yet asking audiences to reinterpret and redefine the arts so that they become relevant can lead arts organisations to outsource artistic decision