

# Make Friends With Strange People

*Peter Jenkinson OBE*

*"A country like Britain today survives and prospers by the talent and ability of its people. Human capital is the key. The more it is developed, the better we are. Modern goods and services require high value added input. Some of it comes from technology or financial capital - both instantly transferable. Much of it comes from people, their ability to innovate, to think anew, to be creative. Such people are broad-minded: they thrive on curiosity about the next idea; they welcome the challenge of an open world. Such breadth of mind is enormously enhanced by interaction with art and culture."*

Tony Blair at Tate Modern, 2007

*"...we must free artists and cultural organisations from outdated structures and burdensome targets, which can act as millstones round the neck of creativity."*

James Purnell in the Foreword to the McMaster Review, 2008

*"Earlier this year, it was said of culture in Britain that we are living in a 'golden age.' It is certainly a time of phenomenal creativity but I think that the true golden age could be ahead of us."*

Sir Brian McMaster in the McMaster Review, 2008

As an unapologetic optimist, passionate about the powerful role that art, culture and creativity plays in the life of individuals, communities and nations, I am in these opening years of the twenty-first century more hopeful than ever that we are about to witness a seismic shift in thinking and doing in our cultural ecology that will bring people of all kinds into ever closer involvement as makers, participants, audiences and critics. It could be truly exciting, but collectively we will need to push hard on all fronts for this to happen. Sir Brian McMaster, in launching his recent agenda-shaping report for DCMS *"Supporting Excellence in the Arts. From Measurement to Judgement"*, suggests that the best is yet to come and goes on to argue that the UK is on the verge of a cultural 'Renaissance'. But is it? And if so, is that a good thing? What might and should such a renaissance look like?

Such grand or even boosterist claims have become commonplace in recent years. The UK has been proposed by many as the most creative nation on earth, with London 'the world's Creative Hub' populated with international leaders in invention and imagination. "We have the most innovative designers and architects, the most popular museums and galleries, the biggest art market, the greatest theatres..." (Tony Blair at Tate Modern, 2007) But do we? And is it enough to be 'the biggest' or 'the greatest'?

Certainly in the last decade or so there has been significant and positive change on many fronts. We now have more artists and so called 'creatives' than ever before, in all areas across the country, many of whom are internationally renowned; the infrastructure of buildings and institutions - from artists' studios to major galleries to public art - has seen enormous investment, not least through the unprecedented beneficence of the National Lottery and regeneration funds. Interest in art and especially contemporary art is at an all time high, particularly amongst younger people who are visiting our museums and galleries and other sites in record numbers. According to academic Tony Travers, more people now go to museums and galleries than go to football matches! Tate Modern is celebrated as the most popular museum of modern and contemporary art in the world with over 5 million recorded visitors each year, many of these under the age of 30. Simultaneously, people are also enthusiastically embracing ever more cheaply available technologies and actively creating their own art on many platforms every day of the week and distributing their products and ideas freely across the world in seconds. In our schools creativity in learning is poised to be built, if slowly, into the mainstream, to ensure education

systems fit for twenty-first century needs. Culture plays an increasing role in many other sociopolitical contexts including healthcare and the criminal justice system.

Our creative industries employ 1.8 million people at a conservative estimate and have one of the highest rates of growth of any UK economic 'sector'. The Frieze Art Fair became the third most significant art fair internationally in as many years whilst retail stores TK Maxx and IKEA now sell artworks by the thousands each week. In government, traditionally hostile over centuries to even the merest whisper of that 'foreign' word 'culture', we've at last caught up with the rest of Europe and now have a Department of Culture with a seat at the Cabinet table...it's interesting to reflect that it was only 10 years ago that it replaced the Department of National Heritage, with its all too narrow and comfortable associations with Beechfaters, Elgar, Brideshead Revisited and warm beer on the cricket green. It took all of those 10 years for our then Prime Minister to make his first major speech in 2007 on the serious role of culture and creativity in national life - many said it was 10 years too late! But at least the speech was made and with some conviction. One of our most astute champions of contemporary culture, Tate Director Nick Serota, has declared that the country now 'feels' different, as well as looking and behaving differently. Looking back to the darkness of the past it is hard not to agree with him. Things have moved on. But have they moved enough?

Can it really be quite so rosy in the Garden of England and those of the other UK nations as our leading pundits like to suggest? I believe beyond the glowing headlines there are more disturbing narratives and diagnoses and thus we urgently need to burst the seductive bubble of complacency and look again before devising and acting on new propositions for the future.

For the great majority, an artist's life is precarious, to say the least, with few ever achieving the fabulous wealth of the most famous - perhaps a couple of hundred 'artworld stars' at most - shouted about in the tabloids. Many artists have the remarkable ability to generate new and unexpected ideas about the world we live in and to speculate radically if not dangerously about the future, yet they continue to be regarded by those with power not as players in the game but as prettifiers on the margins. Nick Serota famously stated that if we had as many artists represented in the Houses of Parliament as we do lawyers we'd be living in a different country by now. As the irreversible engine of UK affluence forges ahead, reinventing, tidying up and gentrifying previously underused or derelict areas of our communities, artists are being forced out of their once 'affordable' working and living spaces every week. This is a consequence of 'progress' made worse in London in particular, and ironically, by the preparations for the 2012 Olympics. It is an unhappy picture nationwide and, when it is notoriously difficult for artists to make their voices heard or to make their voices count, the situation demands action from those who are able to do so.

Equally whilst art is unarguably more popular than ever it remains the case that it is the most wealthy and the most educated who take advantage of our publicly supported cultural institutions, agencies and opportunities. Many communities remain isolated. In London, where I live, the great majority of young people living in South London never cross the river to experience the fabulous resources available, many of them free, in the centre of the city.

Whilst great efforts have been made to develop the so-called 'hard to reach' with some notable successes, all too often this is still undertaken with a somewhat patrician or condescending mindset not that far removed from the nineteenth century cultural missionary position in which culture was seen as being improving or good for you - a good cultural experience as a

prescription of medicine to patients, one way traffic, without recognition of people's own culture or innate creativity. We need new thinking from our cultural and political leaders and the creation of new and sustained relationships with people of all kinds that confound the top-down and bottom-up divisions of the past. This calls for a more complex immersion in the relationships between society and cultural production.

The appearance of new and refurbished cultural facilities and services, many of them of world-class quality, is undoubtedly a very welcome and long overdue addition to the UK scene, yet this has also served to highlight still further the 'art-shaped holes' in the map of public provision and the continuing difficulty of ready access to opportunity for many. Even for those who can and do make use of our cultural resources we must surely question whether popularity is the only or pre-eminent measure of success or value. And if you are living in an 'art shaped hole' is all lost?

Creativity is almost emerging, alongside culture, as a parallel cure, twenty-first century snake oil, yet it is little understood, not least amongst our political and bureaucratic leaders. When it is understood, with all its potential for rapid individual and collective transformation, disruption and resistance to authoritarian strategies, its development is resisted, toned down or dismissed in order to maintain the status quo. Alternatively creativity is confined to certain ghettos in our communities - 'The Cultural Quarter', 'The Creative Zone' - rather than being envisaged as potentially happening anywhere and everywhere by almost everyone. The American economist Richard Florida's book *'The Rise of The Creative Class'*<sup>2</sup> continues to have enormous influence across the world and is useful in diagnosing some of the conditions in which creative individuals and agencies might flourish. At the same time it implies the restriction of creative engagement to certain people and not others, who remain consumers. It is certainly the case here at present - almost 95% of those employed in the UK advertising industry today are white - but it doesn't mean it can or should stay this way. In this still class-ridden country we do not need another exclusive class. Mass or everyday creativity must surely be embraced and the possibilities for communities of all types wildly reimagined if we are to move forward as a nation. The potential is enormous.

It has been said of the UK's education systems that they are based on a nineteenth century model in which 90% of the students were taught to be the 'workers' and 10% the 'management' and that this is totally inappropriate for surviving and thriving in this century. I wonder whether the same might be said for the UK's 'cultural system.' I hope that in the years to come we can see new, surprising, richer and deeper collaboration between publics and institutions, between 'amateurs' and 'professionals' and between 'expert' and 'everyday' creativity because we cannot continue to inhabit the comfortable, even smug, silos we are in at present. In the future real and positive change will be brought about by generously connecting up all of our riches, rather than simply continuing to exhibit them. Make friends with strange people.

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<sup>1</sup> Travers, Tony (2006) *Museums & Galleries in Britain: Economic, Social and Creative Impacts*, London School of Economics

<sup>2</sup> Florida, Richard (2002) *The Rise of The Creative Class*, New York: Basic Books

Peter Jenkinson is is a Cultural Broker who has worked widely in the arts across the UK. Peter is particularly interested in the participation and engagement of young people in the arts. He was the founding Director of Creative Partnerships and established the New Art Gallery Walsall, widely regarded as one of the most successful lottery projects to date.

Peter has more recently acted as a panellist and advisor to Channel 4's Big Art Project, broadcast in November 2008.

[www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/B/bigart/](http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/B/bigart/)

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