

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

the arts after the events of 2001

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THE ARTS COUNCIL OF ENGLAND

This speech was given by Peter Hewitt,
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Introduction

I was coming back from Exeter that lunchtime. I had spent the morning addressing a couple of hundred people, many of whom opposed our plans for a new single organisation to fund and support the arts in this country. On the train, mobile phones were registering something of a different order. We knew instantly, as I did years ago when the Soviet Union went into Czechoslovakia and on Kennedy's assassination, that this was one of those 'where were you when you heard?' moments which stay with you throughout your life. The morning's debate seemed petty alongside the news we were now hearing. The impact was immediate, unnerving and literally unforgettable.

In the following days I, like many, could think of little else. I was gripped by the monumental audacity of the attack; by the utter low-tech simplicity of approach; by the unforgettable visual imagery; by the unbearable personal stories which emerged.

Of course I knew that by the genocidal standards of the 20th century the level of human loss was, dare I say, modest. But this was an attack on the very heart of Western, globalised, capitalist culture; an attack captured live by the very media who lie at the heart of that culture. Inevitably, though uncomfortably, it seemed to implicate us more directly than say the genocide in Rwanda. It was an attack designed to pierce Western consciousness like no other modern day calamity.

The days and weeks after the attack seemed to me to be a period of collective contemplation and reflection. The Prime Minister recognised this in his extraordinary speech to Labour Party Conference. I quote:

'This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order the world around us. Today, humankind has the science and technology to destroy itself or to provide prosperity to all. Yet science can't make that choice for us. Only the moral power of a world, acting as a community, can. By the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more together than we can alone.'

Such statements, and others made at the time, led me to wonder whether September 11th might just induce a shift, however small, in our Western value system. And, if so, what the implications of that might be for those who work in and care about the arts.

The value of art

And that led me to prepare this speech in which, reflecting upon September 11th, I want to argue for the value of art in society in these times. Times which are by turns bewildering and uplifting, exhilarating and profoundly insecure.

Now let me say something about where I am coming from in this speech. I am coming simply from my position as Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England. I am not speaking for the entire arts community. I have no right to do that. Nor is this a learned, academic treatise – that is beyond my capacity. What I am doing is sharing with you some perspectives drawn from the professional position I occupy.

This evening I am going to focus on the intrinsic value of art in a society which seems to be driven by profound disruptions: technological innovation, scientific invention, changes to social structures and values, the position of nations and the nature of nationhood in a globalised economy.

Part of the ethic of our times is that we live in a more open, more tolerant, more self-governing world, in which people expect a voice and a stake in society. The Reithian values are gone, there is no established 'canon', and individual choice is paramount. And as this ethic of self-rule has grown, so our lives seem subject to forces of technology and globalisation which are beyond our grasp.

We feel both more in control and yet more out of control of our lives. We have more choice than ever before but in some respects our lives seem caught up in global forces that are more powerful and impersonal than ever before. The rich language of art and artists plays a vital role in enabling us to express our deeper feelings of

hope, pleasure, anxiety, longing and loss that these often disjointed experiences provoke.

Works of art provide us with individual satisfaction: a sense of release, pleasure and reflection. And they act as a focal point around which we can share and dispute meanings.

Art helps us to understand what we have in common and where we differ, what we like and what offends us, what excites us and what leaves us cold. We come together around art without having to agree about it. Art helps to populate and energise an open public space for reflection, expression, empathy, dissent and disagreement.

Perhaps September 11th will make those of us in the West see the world differently, particularly the world we have created over the past two decades, with the collapse of communism, the growth of globalisation, the spread of new technology and media, and the culture of individualisation in our society. What was different and shocking about September 11th for us was that we were involved and implicated, as an audience, trapped by our own fascination with the terror, and moved by our feelings of profound sympathy for strangers.

I am struck by the role of art in helping us to express our feelings and to shape our understanding of events like this, which are otherwise presented in mainly analytical, political, military or religious terms.

Reflecting upon the role art plays in response to events of this nature may tell us something about the wider role art plays in society.

I will now consider that wider role under four themes: art and terror; art as solace and comfort; art and war; and art and memorial.

Art and terror

First, art and terror. In retrospect, art foreshadowed the terror in New York.

Much has been made of the link between September 11th and the disaster movie genre. Yet one of the most eerily prescient modern works which denounces media spectacle is Johan Grimonprez's extraordinary video film *Dial HISTORY*, a chronology of airplane hijackings which mixes reportage, Hollywood film clips and previously censored footage. Made between 1995 and 1997, the film is part of the current *Trauma* show at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art.

Art plays a vital role in allowing us to explore our darkest feelings and so to confront what terrifies us. As the poet Tony Harrison puts it: 'Unless you can come to terms with dark subjects there is no measure of life at all.'

Donald Hall, the American poet, writing about the war poets, said:

'Wilfred Owen showed that poetry should face horror directly, terror was not there to be belittled. The very act of facing it, of embodying it in the form of language, gave it shape that was communicable to others and so made the terror controllable.'

It is not the artist's job to flinch from images that provoke revulsion. Terror is one of art's chief subject matters. Our imaginations are schooled in feeling terror.

The attacks have been said to have brought terror to the streets of America. Don DeLillo, writing in *Harper's* magazine, went further and announced that after the attacks 'the world narrative belongs to terrorists'.

Yet terror plays as large a role in art and culture as it does in politics and warfare. Terror is a global business in films and novels. Millions of us, paradoxically perhaps, choose to engage with forms of art that terrify us. From *Beowulf* to *King Kong* to *Nightmare on Elm Street*, we consume terror. We seem to need it, to revel in it.

Arguably, the leading instigator of terror in America is not Osama Bin Laden but Stephen King.

As he once put it:

'I recognise terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorise the reader. But if I find I cannot terrorise I will try to horrify and if I find I cannot horrify I will go for the "gross out".'

Terror stories usually involve the unmasking of the monstrous, deviant figure, often an alien or a deformed hybrid. Deviance intrigues as much as beauty.

It is easy to see how the presentation of Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network fits into the cultural mould of the horror story. We crave information about the identity, origins, nature and behaviour of the monster in our midst; the offspring of a rich, modern and privileged family who turned into a crazed fundamentalist.

Yet we should also be aware of the points where real terror and fictional terror diverge, how our fictionalised templates, mirrored by media spectacle, can misguide us in the real world.

In cinema the unmasking of the monster that is the source of terror is comforting precisely because of the unmasking itself. Locating the source of real terrorist threats in open societies is much more difficult. In the cinema the loss of control we feel during a horror movie is contained. Real terrorism is threatening precisely because it cannot be so contained, at least not without giving up important civil liberties.

The events of September 11th unfolded like a horror film but that does not mean we can or should adopt the horror film as our lens for viewing September 11th and its aftermath.

Solace and comfort

Now to art as solace and comfort.

Art has vital qualities that we turn to in moments of confusion and crisis. Just as people turned to the media to inform them about the events of last autumn, they turned instinctively to art for qualities the media could not provide.

In New York in the days after the tragedy people came together to sing hymns and songs of remembrance. Music helps to orchestrate our emotions and since September 11th people have relied upon it to help articulate, ritualise, and contain their feelings of grief, fury and dread. Leontyne Price, the 74-year-old soprano, came out of retirement to sing heartening spirituals and anthems. Andrea Bocelli, the Italian tenor, sang *Ave Maria* at Ground Zero. In this country, Joanna MacGregor and Nitin Sawhney collaborated to create a new piece of music inspired by September 11th.

People have always turned to poetry to make sense of complex emotions prompted by events that are played out in public with a deep personal resonance. WH Auden's *September 1 1939*, an evocation of New York on the day Germany invaded Poland, was among the first poems to be aired and republished in the wake of the attacks. As one publisher put it: 'Poetry is the new prayer.'

The press, sometimes controversially, turned to novelists – such as Martin Amis and Don DeLillo – to help articulate a response to events that in the immediate aftermath seemed beyond the reach of the standard journalistic register.

In the weeks after the attacks, downtown New York became populated by people's art in the form of memorials, pictures and poems left in remembrance.

One of art's most vital functions in society is to provide a common language to share deeply intimate feelings of grief and sorrow. Art provides a bridge to coax the private and intimate out into a shared, public setting. Without art we would find it increasingly difficult to convey our innermost feelings to one another. Imagine a world without colour, rhyme or melody: it's bleak beyond belief.

Art and war

And that leads me to some reflections on art and war.

War has frequently provided communities with a shared sense of meaning and purpose, which artists were often enlisted to express. No more so than in Britain.

As Linda Colley pointed out in her history of Britain: war, often with religious connotations, was the midwife of national unity. That national

unity was impossible without its cultural representations.

In the 19th century, popular images in the visual arts, poetry and literature painted a romanticised picture of war and the warrior, as younger generations were prepared to fight for Empire and perceived justice.

Despite the carnage of the Great War and the voices of the dissenting war poets, that image of war as heroic persisted well into the 1930s. The most successful film of that decade was the *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, in which the knightly Gary Cooper protected millions of defenceless Indians from the marauding tribes of Afghan leader Mohammed Khan.

Even as recently as the 1950s, heroic and idealised depictions of real wars were still big at the box office. *The Cruel Sea* was the top film in 1953, the *Dam Busters* in 1955, *Reach for the Sky* in 1956 and in 1960, when Britain was little more than a decade away from joining the Common Market, the biggest film was *Sink the Bismarck*.

Yet as the 20th century progressed, it became more difficult to project romanticised visions of real warfare.

Since the 1950s, Britain's real wars in colonial outposts, including the Falklands, and in Bosnia, the Gulf and Afghanistan, have not provided material for glorifying heroism.

Art and memorial

Modern wars, which often involve the killing of defenceless civilians, are recognised at best as morally ambiguous. The modern always 'on', always 'there' global media brings us both sides of the story at the same time. Artists take a more independent, more questioning, interrogative role. These days, far from concentrating on the heroes of battle, artists are far more likely to focus on perpetrators and innocent victims.

They are heirs to a tradition of war art which takes us from Wilfred Owen's poems, to Picasso's *Guernica* and Frank Capa photographs of the Spanish Civil War, to the image of Kim Phuk running burned and naked from her village in Vietnam. That same tradition will, I am sure, inform many artistic responses to September 11th and future, as yet unknown, modern conflicts.

Here art is operating in a more open critical space, a space that the modern media has played its part in creating. More exposure, in some senses, has created more room for more imagination. War is still unfortunately a vital and often visceral part of our culture. Yet the romanticised version of war is largely confined to fantasy that usually takes places in the undefined past – *Lord of the Rings* is basically a battle story – or the near future, *Independence Day*. But art's relationship to real war has become increasingly reflective, critical and interrogative.

And finally to art and memorial.

Art has been and will be employed in memorials to the dead of September 11th. One of the first official memorials is *The Tribute in Light*, which for 32 nights from March 11th is using massive spotlights to shine two beams of light into the exact space that the Twin Towers previously filled.

Just over 3,000 people died in the attacks on September 11th. More than 40,000 babies have been born in New York since the attacks. Five thousand people are thought to have died in the war in Afghanistan following the attacks and 100,000 children are currently at risk in that country. Artists will play a pivotal role in conveying the meaning of September 11th and its aftermath to future generations in both societies.

But how? The changes in the nature of public memorial tell us something interesting about how public expectations of art are evolving.

Memorials used to be religious symbols, or life-like representations of heroes in action. Yet most modern memorials seem to be minimalist in tone and design: plain walls, blank boxes or empty chairs on to which people can project their feelings.

Almost without realising it, minimalism, one of the most radical forms of modernism, has made its way into people's hearts and ways of thinking. It has become the modern language of popular memorial.

Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial in Washington is an outstanding example, so too the simple library of Rachel Whiteread's holocaust memorial in Vienna. And Peter Eisenmann's proposed memorial in Berlin, also to the holocaust, originally conceived with Richard Serra, is a field of plain concrete pillars.

Artistic exploration of new minimalist forms in public art has generated a new public language, a contemporary response to present day feelings of loss and commiseration.

So, what lessons might we draw from these reflections on the role art plays in terror, comfort, war and memorial?

One lesson relates to 'open space'.

The open space for artistic expression is expanding. It is increasingly difficult in a more democratic, self-organising, less deferential and more educated society to prescribe any one particular role for art to play. Art will not be contained or confined in this way. We now expect to find art on many sides of an argument or issue, for good and ill, pleasure and terror.

The new open space is neither like a perfectly regulated public piazza nor a sterile shopping centre. The open space for art is far more cacophonous, chaotic, unpredictable, noisy and exciting. It defies prescription and control.

It is very dangerous for anyone to assume, in advance, that they know for certain what the public will find engaging. The public that likes Bruce Willis films also likes high art minimalist memorials.

The open space in which art explores issues like love, war, work, science and terror will develop through a complex, evolutionary and adaptive process. It cannot be managed in detail by anyone, least of all public policy makers like the Government or the Arts Council. Artistic expression is constantly reinvented, reinterpreted, refashioned, rechannelled and repackaged. In evolutionary terms artists will seize on any technique – old or new – to explore their territories through innovation, mutation, camouflage, predation, appropriation, parasitism and sabotage.

Borders and boundaries

The new open space also raises further questions about boundaries and about identity. Increasingly, we live in a world without boundaries where money, goods and technologies can travel easily across borders.

But in a world with fewer borders in trade and commerce, so it has thrown into relief those borders and boundaries that still matter. The important remaining boundaries in our globalised world are increasingly about culture, tradition,

belief, religion and identity. As commerce becomes more borderless, so many people are even more determined to retain a defined cultural identity. This lies at the very heart of some of my debates with the English regions in recent months.

But we cannot hope to understand these cultural sources of identity – at whatever level – without engaging in cultural exchange and expression, without being open to different cultures. Even President Bush is said to have had a private screening of the film *Khandahar* at the White House to gain an insight into Afghanistan. In London, *Khandahar* played to packed audiences at the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

The more daunting the cultural border, the more necessary it is to cross it, to explore, to probe, to reach towards understanding.

We need art because art transgresses boundaries of culture. One of the roles of art is to break down boundaries between different forms, styles and modes of expression.

This issue of borders is not confined of course to geographic and cultural differences. The boundary between technology and nature is increasingly being tested by the science of genetics. That is why the work of artists such as Marc Quin is significant. His DNA portrait of Sir John Sulston, one of the most important geneticists of the last decade, is itself the

product of an innovative partnership between the National Portrait Gallery and the medical research charity the Wellcome Trust. It is an excellent example of art allowing us to navigate new boundaries with science.

Some see a growing overlap between the way artists and scientists view the world. From what I know of popular writing on science by the likes of Stuart Kaufman and Richard Dawkins, science is increasingly about understanding mutually adaptive, self-organising and complex systems, that are often dynamic only because they are poised in a narrow space with chaos on one side and stagnation on the other.

Sounds alarmingly like the Arts Council.

But art has a huge amount to offer, particularly in education, in helping young people to develop ways of creative thinking that can be applied in science. The Arts Council and Regional Arts Boards are already active in this field but the new Arts Council should take forward 'the art of science', perhaps in conjunction with major public and private funders of scientific research, to explore how the double helix, the twin trajectories of art and science, interrelate.

I think it is essential to encourage modern art to explore and transgress the borders and boundaries of our society, in culture and in science. Borders can be obstacles but they can also be interfaces of exchange and creativity.

That is where we need to see art, it seems to me, trading between different cultures, disciplines and ways of viewing the world.

Who 'we' are

To move on. This modern open space for art raises further questions, questions about the meaning of community and identity and who 'we' are: whom we identify with, embrace, share values with, stand up for.

Art helps to establish a sense of community and shared meanings, values and aspirations. It is striking even now how English reactions to the modern, industrialised countryside are shaped by the paintings of John Constable. But art also helps to explore and break down community from within and without, and thus to find new sources of shared identity. This is reflected in the Tate Britain's mission to use the gallery and its exhibitions as a space to explore the history and changing meaning of British identity.

Again art will, of course, find itself on all sides of this debate about the meaning of community. Art will be deployed to promote nostalgia for lost community: in New York the travelling exhibition of Norman Rockwell's paintings is a sell-out. In London, Tate Britain's *American Sublime* is an evocation of a pre-industrial rapture the American landscape provoked. Now that sense

of the sublime in American culture is increasingly filled by technology.

But post September 11th, there is a real danger that we fall into that trap of thinking of community in exclusive, closed terms: that we see diversity as a danger rather than something to celebrate; difference as a threat rather than something to be intrigued by; the unknown as something to fear rather than explore.

The more the economic forces of globalisation bring down boundaries and borders, the more we will need bases for co-operation that go deeper than just mutually beneficial trade in commodities. As our mutual dependence becomes global, so does our need for moral responsibility to one another, across large distances and quite different cultures, and for people who may well reject aspects of our values and lifestyles. And as we grow, art can help provide us with a sense of identity and a medium for global exchange of ideas. Pictures and music, performance and dance travel more easily than speeches.

It is a message conveyed well by Jonathan Glover, the historian and cultural commentator, who argues that the basis for moral responsibility will not be found in a universal rationality but in our instinctive ability to react spontaneously and to resist inhumanity. For this to be possible, Glover argues, the opportunities for exercising our individual and moral imagination must be

expanded: in particular, our capacity for feeling respect and sympathy for people quite different from ourselves. And I would argue that this capacity must be instilled from early childhood, and that creativity in formal and informal education has a fundamentally important part to play.

Spirituality and meaning

Which brings me to art, spirituality and meaning.

The events of last autumn were widely seen, within the US and to some extent in Europe, as a judgement upon a world that had got out of kilter, unbalanced somehow by the penetration of consumerism into our lives.

The end of the 1990s were accompanied by what was in retrospect an outpouring of self-doubt and even self-loathing from the Western intelligentsia about the decline and decadence of Western society – corrupted by the market and obsessed by trivia of sex, celebrity and entertainment. Just at the time when Western values seemed to be dominant, following the end of the Cold War, so they also seemed to be vulnerable to a profound lack of self-confidence. Critics of the US accuse it of cultural arrogance. In some senses, it seems to suffer from grave self-doubt.

After September 11th we saw the reaffirmation of civic values among the firefighters in New York and through a sense of huge communal support.

People looking for something beyond the market to provide their lives with meaning.

I certainly felt a powerful sense of a quest for new meanings in this country in the latter part of last year.

People seemed shocked into realising they wanted more in their lives than working and shopping, enjoyable and satisfying though both may be. They wanted a sense of meaning, explored in spaces protected from the intrusions and distractions of always 'on' consumer culture.

And I believe that in an increasingly secular Western world, art has a vital role to play to connect us to that sense of deeper meaning. Poems are a modern form of prayer. Art provides the setting for modern communion. It is no cliché to see Tate Modern, the Lowry and the Baltic as the new cathedrals.

Art helps us to explore our imaginations and deepest feelings, our pleasures and fears, collectively and solely. We should not and cannot prescribe art to play a particular role in society. We need art to be as much a medium for our lives as technology and the media. Art thrives in these unfolding open spaces, which encourage exploration not just of the new but also of the traditional.

So, what does all this mean for the work of the new Arts Council, the subject of discussion that September morning in Exeter?

I want to say something about:

- the philosophy which will underpin the work of the new organisation
- the principles we will follow
- and some thoughts on the kind of activity the Arts Council might sponsor.

A new philosophy

First, the philosophy and outlook of the new Arts Council.

To begin with, let me say what we are not 'for'. We are *not* for 'closure'. We are not for battenning down the hatches.

To seek closure is to want to retreat behind physical and cultural walls and mindsets that simply make us feel more secure, less threatened.

One completely natural response to the bewilderment many people felt after September 11th was to want to close the world down and simplify it. Instead of making an intellectual and imaginative leap to explore and understand a world that is more complex than we thought it to be, it is tempting to put a lid on it.

It is easy to see already some reactions that are defensive, security conscious and which lead to withdrawal and retreat, nostalgia and melancholy.

So if closure is what we should be against, it seems to me that we at the Arts Council must stand for the new kind of open space referred to earlier.

A space constantly open to what the world is becoming, to diverse ideas and influences, to art that is open and that uses its capacity to articulate and accommodate ambiguity. Information might be true or false, a one or a zero, but art refuses to be pinned down in that way. That is why art is so potent in exploring such a complex and shifting world. Art is open when it uses metaphor to draw out similarities amid irreducible difference. Art makes us think outside the categories we normally use; it shocks and surprises and enchants us to think afresh, in part by juxtaposing the odd and unusual. That is why a constant search for new forms of expression is vital.

Art seeks the edge of our experience, both for pleasure and shock. As Richard Sennett, the sociologist, argued in his *Conscience of the Eye*:

'In the ecological structure of ponds or on the wild land, the most intense activities take place at contested borders... Less conflicted spaces behind the borders are less active. The social centre is at the physical edge.'

I am fascinated by the sense of the fertility of contested artistic borders.

I see the Arts Council's main role as being to work with many partners, public and private, to develop a diverse, vibrant and open space for artistic

expression. Our role is to promote art, and engagement with art, as a process of exploration. Our role is to promote art that allows people to explore the feelings that the experience of modern society provokes in them. It is not our job to provide explanations, still less route maps, of how we should move forward.

Exploration through art

We at the Arts Council are in what you might call 'the platform business': it's our job to help create the platform for a multiplicity of artistic expression in this country, to reflect the multiplicity of cultural experiences in society and the richness of the environment in which we live. Or to take a different analogy: we are the publicly funded, artistic equivalents of those who financed people like Ernest Shackleton to explore the Antarctic. We fund artistic expeditions.

On those expeditions, art helps to provide us with the language through which we describe the world and our feelings about it. If we confront a complex, shifting, dynamic world with a limited language, the artistic outcome will be similarly limited. We need a range of artistic expression that matches the complexity of the society we live in and the environment we face.

The Arts Council's fundamental role then is to promote exploration through art. Art as enquiry.

We want to open up the space for artistic expression and fund more imaginative, bold expeditions to uncharted territories in this new open space. Recognising always that the space is made up of many components – viewers, audiences, artists, sponsors, buyers, sellers, critics, profiteers, charlatans, funders and others.

So how does this play into the current Arts Council/Regional Arts Boards reorganisation?

Let's remember where we started:

Well, we started with a track record of real success. As someone who has worked at regional and national level for 20 years, I am intensely proud to have been part of the achievements of the Regional Arts Boards and the Arts Council. The proposed changes must not detract from that substantial achievement.

But change is necessary. Why?

We had in the Arts Council and in the Regional Arts Boards, 11 separate organisations that did not always work together as well as needed. We had quite rigid borders between region and region, and between regional and national. Some duplication, inconsistency, complexity. Polarisation of policy, with regions seen to be about the arts in social contexts, the national about excellence. Disputatious internal workings. Budgetary inflexibility. And an insufficiently clear voice making the case to Government for the importance of the arts.

Basic principles

Our new, single organisation will build on the best regionally and nationally, and adopt the following principles. We will:

- promote the value of the arts socially, the value of the artist, and the value of art itself – all in equal measure
- respect regional identity and difference but encourage a richer, more complex definition of what 'we' means in this country today
- send our artistic expeditions across borders – physical, even regional, borders as well as ideological borders
- create new open spaces, made up of new art forms, new collaborations, new audiences and new international, regional and local connections
- sweep aside some of the bureaucratic clutter which impedes artists from focussing on production and innovation
- establish new platforms for the arts of all descriptions, in an ever complex, ever evolving, sometimes threatening external reality
- create the capacity to respond to artistic aspiration and to take bold action when needed
- and find a new, confident voice in public dialogue about the importance of the artist and the arts in society – as I hope I am beginning to do this evening.

A vital role for the Arts Council is to make a more powerful case for greater Government recognition of the civic, public and democratic value of the arts. To recognise the enormous return that comes from investment in the arts.

This is not a speech about what Government should or should not do to promote the arts. But it is a heartfelt attempt to convey one message about the kind of relationship we are seeking with the Government and how, as funders and supporters of the arts, we should respect and engage with artists.

The arts play a wide range of roles in society, many of which contribute directly to aspects of Government policy. Art galleries and other institutions play a vital role in social regeneration, from Tate Liverpool to the New Walsall Art Gallery. There is acceptance of the role creativity and culture play in commerce and economic growth. More of the working lives of more people involve the creation, production and consumption of cultural products that require creativity and imagination. We've taken up the challenge to make arts institutions more accessible. And we accept absolutely that those who use public money should account, openly, for how it is spent.

So far so good. But this evening I have been arguing, to Government and, in a sense, to ourselves, for the artist and the artistic process, for creativity, for freedom of the imagination and for recognition that

art is often unplannable, often unmeasurable and very often untargettable.

Art can live under pressure, in repressive societies, but it cannot be prescribed. It thrives in open spaces where it has room to breathe, where people are free to explore. It is by nature resistant to instruction or targetting. The whole point of creativity, as with all forms of innovation, is that it is impossible to know the outcome in advance. This can at times run counter to the instinct of policy makers in Government and in funding bodies like ours, who, in their keenness to uphold accountability, are inclined to detailed targets, leading inevitably to micro management and, at its worst, the stifling of initiative and innovation. I say to them relax, let go, entrust.

I want the new Arts Council to have, as it does at present, a co-operative and creative relationship with Government, based on trust and common objectives. I know Government recognises the role we are playing in the economy, from creative industries to tourism, in community regeneration and social exclusion. In return I ask the Government to take a lead in trusting the new Arts Council and the bodies it funds to allow artists and the arts in this country the space to grow and create in terms which they themselves define. And I call on our own new organisation to act likewise in our relationship with the arts community. Of course we should be accountable and we will be. But if support for the arts becomes too controlled and prescriptive it will kill off the very creativity it is meant to set free.

What we will support

Finally, what kind of activities might the new Arts Council sponsor with its new found capacity for innovation and freedom of manoeuvre?

The war artist has been a staple of history, from Tennyson to John Keane and no doubt we will, as a society, continue to send artists to war for us. But the artist has a far more adaptive role to play. We should now enable them to spend time in different cultures and settings in the UK and around the world, so that through the prism of their art we can begin to make sense of the cultures which we share on this planet.

Working with partner organisations around the world we should explore more global exchange: a free trade in imagination and ideas, to act as a counterpart to trade in goods and services.

We need to create new open spaces for art in all our communities, in particular in those communities in the UK where there are already worrying signs of cultural closure, with little shared space in the Bradfords, the Burnleys and the Oldhams for white and Asian communities together. New understanding of the role of such spaces for what they make possible in communities – unthreatening zones of expression and trust – is what we need.

We must establish a cultural ‘right to roam’, to taste, experiment, learn from the many different cultures that make up these islands, let alone what is beyond. This must be available to all of us from children in schools to mature adulthood.

We need artistic capacity, spread throughout our society and its many communities, to provide us with the depth and diversity of imaginative capital to make sense of, and the most of, the complex world we live in.

We should encourage artistic expeditions aided by individual endeavour, entrepreneurship and experimentation, fertilised with public support.

That is why, as Tony Harrison put it, every poem is ‘a momentary defeat of the pessimism that threatens to close the world down’. Such life-affirming force needs no prescription, only honour and recognition.

And we must keep telling those inclined to prescription, art will never be contained, and creativity never controlled.

These are our goals and I firmly believe that while it has not been easy getting this far, we have never been in a better position to realise those goals than now.

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