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ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

Council Paper 753

For Decision

COMMUNITY ARTS AND THE ARTS COUNCIL

(Note by the Deputy Secretary-General)

The Council has been given a good deal of information about community arts as background to its discussion on 19 March. This paper attempts to pull some of the threads together in an examination of the nature of community arts and in the light of that, invites Council to review its present policy in this field.

What makes community arts special?

2. In any examination of the nature of community arts, the first point to be made is that they are not a separate art form. A particular community arts activity may be based on music, drama, visual arts etc, or on some combination of them; it may equally well be crafts-based; but community arts has not extended the media of artistic expression. Unexceptionable though this point may seem, it is not always clear from what community artists say.

3. What is it then that distinguishes community arts from other arts activity? Though no two community artists would be likely to give precisely the same answer, the following perhaps represents a reasonable distillation of the main points they make in talking and writing about their work:

i) it is concerned with the creative process, not the product;

ii) it evokes a community response rather than a series of individual responses;

iii) it gives the community an opportunity to change their environment and thus their lives for the better through their involvement in the creative process;

iv) as a result of all these, it reaches people to whom the traditional arts are quite alien.

4. At first sight, these points are not obviously fraught with definitional difficulty. But each is worth careful examination, not least because of the hostility which often arises in discussing them with community artists directly.

5. The first point (the contrast between process and product) is crucial to the arguments of community artists. But, with due respect to the strength of their convictions, the argument is specious. Any arts activity involves both process and product. The production of a play at the National Theatre involves a group of people in an artistic process. Of course the people involved in the National Theatre's process are a paid group drawn together for the purpose by reason of their professional and artistic qualifications, whereas those involved in the community arts process are a voluntary group ineluctably bound together from the beginning by geographical and residential qualifications. But the groups involved in both processes are communities in the broader sense. The essential distinction is in the narrower [illegible]

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exclusive) definition of "community" which is reflected in community arts. There is no such essential distinction in the definitions of process, nor of product: while it is true that the National Theatre's process is so successful that thousands of other people who have not been involved in it are prepared to pay to see the product, that is a distinction of quality and not of essence.

6. Some community artists have gone so far as to say that in community arts the product is irrelevant. This may be true from their point of view, but it is questionable whether it is true from the point of view of the community. If the community concerned perceived no commendable qualities of any kind in the product of a community arts project, it would be unreasonable to suggest that such a failure would not detract at least to some extent from the potentially enriching experience of their involvement in the process. Moreover, it is difficult for the Council to be indifferent to the quality of the product while community arts are competing for funds with other activities where the quality of the product is the paramount consideration.

7. The second point (the question of community response) is another source of confusion. If it is intended to imply that a production of 'Othello' or a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony cannot produce a certain common feeling among the artists concerned (let alone among their audiences), it flies in the face of experience. Certainly the responses of the individuals concerned are not identical in all respects; but nor are the individual responses of those involved in the community arts process. It may be that it is ultimately more satisfying to share an experience (of whatever kind) with a familiar community of people than with an unfamiliar one which disperses after the experience, but this is in the nature of the community and in the nature of sharing, not in the nature of the experience itself.

8. The third point (the enrichment of the environment and of life) presents similar definitional problems. Certainly a mural, for example, has a very direct impact on the environment; and community arts can have an equally striking, if indirect, impact in cases where they contribute to a general programme of community action intended, say, to persuade a local authority to renovate rather than demolish and replace existing housing. Plainly, such activities can give a new sense of purpose and meaning to the lives of those involved. But to distinguish community arts from other arts on these grounds requires a very limited definition of terms such as "environment", "enrichment" and "sense of purpose". There can be little argument that other arts activity also enriches the lives of those involved; and it is definitional that the highest manifestations of the arts must contribute at least something to one's sense of purpose and meaning of life. The sense of loss experienced by somebody moving out of an area which provides a full range of artistic experiences at the highest level is very much a matter of environment in the full meaning of the word: "cultural desert" is an environmental metaphor.

9. The fourth point (the question of the kind of people drawn to community arts activities) is yet another source of confusion. Community artists themselves tend to interpret it in terms of social class. It is the case that in some areas in which community artists are working (such as Craigmillar in Scotland and the Hulme area of Manchester) social groups A, B and C are so thinly represented that the activities must be largely confined to groups D and E. But it is not at all clear to what extent this reflects the nature

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of the area rather than any intrinsic attraction of community arts for those in social groups D and E. In any case, emphasis on social class tends to obscure the fact that the correlation between social class and appreciation of the arts is in exact. Although community artists tend to stigmatise traditional arts activity as "bourgeois", there are many bourgeois Philistines, and many who are drawn to the traditional arts are in so sense bourgeois - unless they are to be defined as bourgeois purely by association!

10. In so far as at least some community arts activities are at a fairly basic level of artistic achievement, it may be reasonable to suppose on a priori grounds that they would not appeal to those who had already developed an appreciation of traditional arts activity; and the rather relentlessly political overtones of much community arts philosophy will no doubt itself deter a certain section of society (not of course a section directly related to social class): it may therefore be that, taken as a whole, community arts activities do indeed tend to reach people who have concluded for whatever reason that the traditional arts are not for them. But there is little firm evidence one way or the other. The question is perhaps ripe for independent research enquiry.

11. The argument in the preceding paragraphs is that it is wrong to regard community arts as different in their artistic nature from the high arts. They are different neither in process, product nor impact. The only essential difference lies not in the definition of "arts" but in the definition of "community". Community arts are distinctive in their focus on a specific oommunity with a common geographical, residential and - at least in some cases - social background, and in aiming (if not necessarily always achieving) within that community to attract in particular people to whom the creative process has hitherto been alien.

Implications for the Arts Council

12. Given that community arts are not different in their artistic nature from the high arts, it is quite wrong to suggest that the same artistic criteria cannot be applied to the community arts process as to other artistic processes or to the community arts product as to other artistic products. Community artists who argue this point may perhaps be concerned that the rigorous application of artistic criteria will deprive them of support. Of course they are right if artistic criteria are the only ones to be applied. By most artistic standards, community arts projects are generally much more basic than the professional arts. Egg-dyeing or firework displays, for example, may be a kind of art, but they are art at a comparatively simple level.

13. Some may argue from this that the artistic content is inferior and that the community arts movement is therefore effectively talking down to people by implying that only low level artistic experiences are appropriate to a particular class of people. But it can equally be argued that community arts are right to recognise that there is a group of people so far short of any understanding of the contribution which the creative process can make to their lives that it is necessary to concentrate with them on the simpler and more basic elements of that process. Certainly instruction or education in the basic elements of any process is a skilled task, and if it is to be done it needs to be done well. But to insist on artistic excellence by the standards of the mature forms of the high arts is as unfruitful as it would be in a primary school.

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14. If the view of community arts as essentially condescending were to prevail, the only logical conclusion for Council would be to withdraw from them entirely. If, on the other hand, Council feels that, provided that community arts are well done, it is a legitimate aim to use comparatively basic processes to help demonstrate to communities the potential impact of their creative capacity on their lives, it would seem to follow that Council must have at least a general interest in fostering a vigorous community arts movement.

15. In the latter case, the key question for the Council is whether it can most appropriately foster community arts by direct financial support, indirect financial support or simply general exhortation to social, educational and community agencies. Given that the arts content of much community arts is at a fairly basic level, it may be that any financial support, whether direct or indirect, can only be justified on pragmatic grounds: first, that the Council is already involved in financial support for community arts; and second that, were the Council to withdraw, it is unlikely that other agencies would be able to make good the deficiency. In practice, therefore, the main options may be between direct and indirect financial support.

16. It is at this point that the distinguishing feature of community arts - that is the specific orientation towards a localised permanent community - assumes paramount importance. In subsidising any activity directly, the Council implicitly claims an ability to assess the overall quality of the work. But in the case of community arts, the quality of a particular project can only be fully assessed by taking account of its impact on the community; and whoever is making the assessment must therefore be sufficiently close to the community to be able to discern its impact. This is manifestly beyond the capacities of the Council. In that case, not only is the Council's policy of devolving responsibility for community arts the right policy, but it needs to be pursued with all possible speed to ensure that the community arts movement ceases to be deprived of its right to have its activities assessed by those best placed to make the assessment.

17. Such a conclusion does not itself answer the question of what funds the Council should make available to the Regional Arts Associations in future years for community arts. To all practical intents and purposes, the needs of community arts are limitless. But there must be some limit to the Council's contribution to what is only partly an artistic movement and a comparatively basic one at that. In all the circumstances Council may feel that, following devolution, it should be left to Regional Arts Associations to determine their own levels of support for community arts in the context of whatever increases in general RAA funding the Council is able to sustain.

Conclusion

18. This paper has argued that community arts are not essentially distinguishable from other arts activities on artistic grounds and that the one truly essential distinction is a matter of the definition of the community involved. While normal artistic criteria may be appropriate to assessing the artistic aspects of community arts, full assessment requires proper acknowledgement of their community aspects. Council itself, however,

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is in no position to make that full assessment because it is too remote from the communities concerned. In the light of this, Council is recommended to agree:

i) that its policy of devolving responsibilities for community arts is therefore right and should be urgently pursued; and

ii) that there is no justification for taking special measures to increase the present level of the Council's funding of community arts.

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