

ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

Council Paper 754

FOR DISCUSSION

C O M M U N I T Y A R T

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Introduction

1. The background papers which have been circulated comment on the history of the Arts Council's support of community art and on some of the activity which goes under that name. This paper is intended to open discussion on the reasons why the Council supports community art in the first place.
2. The question of whether community art should be supported or not has been studied by distinguished Council members in the past, and debated by Council. The answer has invariably been positive. But the question of why it should be supported has received less attention. As a result, we have all felt some uncertainty when brought under pressure either by critics of our support for bizarre activities or by enthusiasts who want far more than we can afford. The likely allocation to community art for 1980-81 represents a severe cut in real terms and therefore in the level of activity that will be practicable on a budget that started substantially below the recommended level and has never approached any reasonable estimate of what was needed. But this paper is not about money, and is not precipitated by the financial crisis or by any immediate political threat. It is simply timely to review, in different financial and social circumstances from 1974 and 1976, and in the light of recent evidence, the Council's fundamental justification for its work in this field.

Rubbish

3. A good deal of nonsense has been talked, mainly by community artists, about the justification for community art and its place alongside established artistic activity.
4. The principal piece of nonsense is that community art is in some way distinct from and superior to so called bourgeois art. The reasons for this judgement may be of interest in themselves and are discussed below but the conclusion is simply not worth attention. Anyone who dismisses Mozart, Cezanne or Henry James as irrelevant to the human condition needs help, not argument.
5. The second piece of nonsense is a simple development of the first, to the effect that art is about social change. There is nothing new about the confusion between art and revolution. There is indeed a relationship: art is a subversive activity in that it opens the mind and the imagination to new perceptions and unsettles familiar interpretations of experience. But art has no objectives: once harnessed to specific objectives it is no more than a cart drawn by the horses of political ambition and institutional power, and the only argument is about who should hold the whip. We need have nothing of it.
6. By no means rubbish, but also to be disposed of, is the idea that community art is a form of light entertainment or fun. I take my cue from Tippet,

that "behind the mass demand for entertainment lies somewhere the desire for something more permanent, for the deeper satisfaction of proportion and beauty in a world of impersonal exploitation" Although we may not easily distinguish the boundary between art and entertainment we can certainly distinguish them as two classes of activity, if only by the fact that one is intended to satisfy the imagination at a modest level and the other aspires to stretch it to breaking point.

Access

7. The way is then open to a clear acceptance of the role of community art in giving people access to forms of artistic experience which might otherwise be denied to them. This is a matter first of sheer proximity; the painting, the music, the drama or whatever are happening where people are, rather than in palaces of culture that are not only physically distant but also alien in style. Secondly it is a matter of education in the sense that it provides people with the opportunity to progress from a lower to a higher level of experience, perception and understanding. The importance of this role cannot be overstated, nor has the extent to which it has been achieved in the practice of community art (as opposed to the rhetoric) been measured. But it has been better argued elsewhere (e.g. Richard Hoggart's paper on Access and Excellence) and I need dwell on it no further.

Anything else?

8. None of this to my mind would justify a separate category of artistic activity, a separate committee (whether at 105 Piccadilly or in a regional arts association) or a separate fund. It may be that none of these arrangements will indeed be justified in the long term. But for the moment I believe them to be important for reasons which we have not yet explored, and which I put forward tentatively, perhaps naively, and certainly without adequate critical examination.
9. Two strands of thought emerge in this context. The first is that art is not only a trigger to transforming catharsis but also a means of exploring and interpreting ordinary human experience in its own right. It does this not with reason alone ("like a bed without a mattress") but with all the senses and more. Its task is to penetrate common human experience, to interpret it, to express it, and to lift it to a level of universality that gives it significance and enables us to see ourselves as members of a race not merely as lonely and battered individuals. An alternative metaphor is that art reaches down into the collective unconscious, but, although it might otherwise be more appropriate, its implications are too specifically Jungian for the present argument.
10. But in western art the emphasis has been on individual experience and on the significance of art to the individual; the transcendent experience has been personal, not communal, even if it occurs in a crowd. The term 'community art' refers therefore to artistic activity validated not solely by reference to the peaks of individual achievement and experience in European culture (from which it is not divorced) but by reference also to its success in exploring, expressing and celebrating in artistic form things that people hold in common. Its authenticity derives both from the material it uses as its source, which is fact or experience common to the group, and from the form in which it is expressed, which can be experienced by people together (not merely simultaneously) rather than on their own.
11. I use 'common' here not in the sense that the experience is familiar to each individual, like being in love, but in the sense that it is shared by all.

like an earthquake, like the bondage of the Jews in Egypt, or like negro slavery in the southern states of America. But I do not mean either to separate art for the individual from art for the community, or to call for a reversion to the folk art of a different age. The distinction is made rather to draw attention to the fact that what folk art achieved for a previous generation is lacking from our modern urbanised industrial society. In this sense too art has failed the masses who have turned to commercial music and the sway of the football crowd instead.

12. Herein lies the reason for the emphasis by community artists on involving people in the process of creation and not merely offering them the product. It is partly the question of access: in the foothills, the techniques of climbing the high peaks can be learnt, even if most who learn them will never venture that far. Some artists whose individual work would be valuable to others may also discover themselves and be discovered in such activity. But the fundamental justification is that in this kind of activity the means of creation is as important as the artefact itself. The painting of a mural by people living in the area, guided by an artist, may introduce some people to the idea of painting and thus become a point of access for learning about art and for subsequent artistic experience. But it is more important that people should have used their own experience and feelings in contributing to the mural. To invest the work with some of one's own passion is to share and express at a higher level the common experience of those members of the human race who inhabit East Ham, or wherever it is. The finished product is not one man's interpretation of a common experience, but a communal venture into art. It stands then not as a curiosity from an alien world, nor only as a reminder of an involved few days, but as a continuing and significant artistic experience. The more I visit community art groups the more I look for the artists among them, the alchemists of community art. Their means may be humble and sometimes even pedestrian, and some of their work may be making fun, or social improvement, or therapy - none of which is our business. But the catalytic power of art, if it is there at all, informs the whole work.
13. I mentioned earlier the relationship between art and revolution. Art has a function of interpretation (which by re-interpreting experience can be disruptive, if not subversive), but never of prescription: it may alert the human spirit to what's amiss, but it will never tell us what to do - that's the business of politics. But community art is inevitably closer to politics and social change than is the art that depends primarily on individual experience and interpretation. To sing of the woes of a group of people (e.g. negro slaves in Mississippi) is not only to express their pain but also to call - if only by implication - for change: the move from expression of feeling to a call for change is imperceptible to the human eye. We should recognise this contiguity between perception and reaction in art and social change, not in the sense that many community activists would wish us to recognise it (i.e. in short-term political advantage) but in the use of art to explore - not to prescribe - solutions for the human predicament.

Conclusion

14. The Battersea mural drew on local feeling and expressed local experience. It stood up to criticism as painting in its own right but beyond that it lifted the mundane experience of living in that part of London to a level of significance otherwise unattainable. The Paddington Printshop has produced posters that have the same kind of power - I do not judge their comparative quality - as Toulouse Lautrec's urgent paintings and posters of contemporary scenes. What do we make of such conjunctions? I welcome

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Marghanita's idea of "excellence at simple levels," but I use it in a slightly different sense. She was right to choose only the recordings of Victorian popular songs "whose level of performance was high enough to 'work' effectively as art." But I would extend her meaning of excellence at simple levels to include the way people use artistic form to explore, to interpret, to express, to celebrate, and to transform their own experience. Excellence at this level is no mean feat.

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