

1. Introduction

The CORAA Group of Officers responsible for Community Arts has considered the Deputy Secretary General's paper, and believes the assumptions on which the paper is based to be false, and the subsequent arguments therefore, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, misleading.

The Group wishes to register its concern that a paper on this subject be submitted to Council without prior consultation with the Regional Arts Associations when:

- i) The Associations' involvement with this area of work is considerably greater than that of Council itself.
- ii) On its own admission, the Council "is in no position to make full assessments because it is too remote from the communities concerned".

In the light of this statement (ii) above, the Group also believes that the conclusion contained in 18(ii) of his paper cannot itself be justified.

2. The Assumptions

- i) The Deputy Secretary-General's analysis of Community Arts rests on a set of assumptions that appear in paragraphs two to four, under the heading of "What makes Community Arts special?". The question itself is curious, and the Group is unclear why it is being asked. Practitioners of Community Arts, along with orchestral managers, theatre administrators and gallery directors, will argue that their work meets a special need when they make their cases to their funding bodies, but this is very different from the first assertion the paper proceeds to refute - that the essence of the art is distinctive. Indeed, the Arts Council's own Evaluation Working Group, under the chairmanship of Lord Hutchinson, stated in its report that "Community Arts are not a new art form which face us with a completely blank sheet on which we must write quite new criteria, they are rather a way of working" (paragraph 3.7). The Report was warmly endorsed at the time by the Community Arts Committee, on which many community artists served - a response, it must be said, accorded to few of the publications that purport to speak for community artists.
- ii) The statement that Community Arts is concerned with creative process, not the product, needs to be disposed of once and for all, for it is not a distillation of what community artists say or write, but a simplification. The 1974 Working Party Report, under the chairmanship of Harold Baldry, referred to the community artist's concern with the "process rather than product", but this was amplified in the Report of the Evaluation Working Group of 1978, which commented on the statement as follows:

"Some people have taken this to mean that the quality of the work done has no relevance so long as the "animation" side of the activity succeeds. We are quite sure that this is not the view of most community artists, nor of the 1974 Working Party; rather excellence is felt to be but one of the criteria in evaluation. There are additional criteria and some different criteria and these reflect the different approach in Community Arts, but it is by no means the case that we are dealing with a separate category that does not relate to the criteria in the various arts that we are familiar with. In the early stages of a project's development "process" will be more important than "product"; once established, the quality of the product becomes of increasing significance."

2. The Assumptions (Cont.)

- ii) The experience of the CORAA group suggests that community artists are deeply concerned with product and the quality of their work. Indeed, many artists have stressed that the effect of the process is limited and short-term unless those involved in it can see a development in the quality of the product. This is not to suggest that all currently subsidised Community Arts is good, nor is this the place for a critique of every Regional Arts Association and the Arts Council funded project; but the Group would maintain that, in general, the quality of product is consistently higher than the Deputy Secretary-General implies. The Arts Council's specially appointed assessors would appear to share this view, and the Group would draw attention to the Leeds Animation Workshop or the Paddington Printshop, the Manchester Hospitals Arts Project or the Greenwich Mural Workshop - to name but a few - to exemplify the standard of work that can be achieved through Community Arts.
- iii) The assertion that Community Arts evokes a community response rather than a series of individual responses represents the same kind of simplification. Community artists, certainly, initiate "community ventures into Art" (to use Robin Guthrie's phrase), but to suggest that they make absolute distinctions between community responses and individual responses is to set them up in order to knock them down. In the Group's experience of Community Art, communal and individual responses go hand in hand, the emphasis varying from project to project. For example, the Commonword Workshop in Manchester produces publications by individuals, anthologies from groups, it organises public readings and it distributes books and leaflets to hundreds of individuals. The work itself explores many realities, and the project as a whole can be seen to evoke responses in all kinds of ways and situations. Such dimensions exist in many of the projects with which the Group is connected.
- iv) The aim of changing the environment is a feature of some projects: it by no means applies to all of those with which the Group is associated, and where it does exist, should be seen in the context of the other aims. (This can be achieved by an examination of the policy documents and annual reports of the projects supported by the Regional Arts Associations).
- v) The Deputy Secretary-General is correct in his identification of the claim that Community Arts reaches people to whom the traditional arts are quite alien, but in the Group's experience, these claims are not made on the basis of points 3(i) to (iii) suggested in his paper. The Group believes that, in general, the claim is justified but that the principal reason lies in the efforts that community artists make to seek connections with the people with whom they work. This consideration underlies the decisions relating to both where they work and how they work.
- vi) The Group has not experienced hostility in discussing these issues: indeed, officers have found community artists keen to discuss their work, and concerned that it should be properly understood.
- vii) In general, the Group is concerned that the assumptions contained in paragraphs two to four of the Deputy Secretary-General's paper are ill-founded and have been put forward without proper evidence. No reference is made to specific projects or publications, and while the Group would accept that there are many approaches to Community Art, it cannot accept that the statements put forward represent a "reasonable distillation of the main points they (community artists) make in talking and writing about their work". It also questions the validity of such an exercise and believes that such issues deserve a more thorough approach.

3. The Arguments

- i) Given that the assumptions in the paper are demonstrably untenable, many of the arguments that follow become irrelevant, indeed, it might be suggested that any further comment is unnecessary. However, the Group believes that the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Associations should understand one another on such issues, and that if there is a difference of opinion that cannot be resolved, it should at least be recognised.
- ii) The point that National Theatre professionals and Community Arts participants are both communities involved in the artistic "process" is semantically correct and indisputable. To compare the narrowness and exclusivity of the two communities, however, doesn't appear to be a particularly useful exercise, but if it is to be done, the Group would feel bound to say that entering the paid community of the National Theatre would present rather greater difficulties to the public than entering the voluntary one of a Community Arts project.
- iii) Although the Group is aware of the comments relating to "Bourgeois Art" in Sue Braden's book "Artists and People", to which the Arts Council has given considerable publicity, it has not found that community artists "tend to stigmatise traditional arts activities as bourgeois"; the danger of attributing one person's views to all those that might be assumed to be associated with him or her are too obvious to be spelt out. The Group is aware of many people involved in Community Arts who have no quarrel with traditional forms of art. The point is that they are concerned at the apparent inaccessibility of much of it to so many people, and therefore use new approaches to Art in their own work to try and reach a wider community.
- iv) On the question of the kind of people drawn to Community Arts, it should be noted that many projects - such as the one in Hulme in Manchester - are based within a short distance from the traditional 'centres of excellence'. The fact that the participants clearly feel that they have little connection with these 'centres' does seem to reflect the intrinsic attraction of Community Arts rather than geographical considerations. As far as social class is concerned, it would be more accurate to suggest that community artists invariably work where they consider the need to be greatest, where there is the least evidence of creative activity, and that it is therefore a question of priorities rather than discrimination. It may well be that social groups D and E would be found to be in the majority amongst participants in Community Arts projects (the Group offers no opinion on this), but the Group has no doubt that given the resources, a Community Arts project could operate effectively in most areas of Britain, regardless of the class of its residents. After all, considering the number of people associated in some way with the Arts (5% of the population according to Lord Redcliffe-Maud), it can hardly be said that current Arts provision caters for all those in social classes A, B and C! The main point, surely, is that Community Arts projects have generated interest and involvement where more traditional approaches have had little impact.
- v) The Group does not accept that "the overtones of much Community Arts philosophy is relentlessly political". Some community artists hold strong political convictions, but this is not new in the Arts, neither is it shared by all or necessarily the majority of those working in Community Arts - as was recently demonstrated by the Community Arts conference in Barnstaple, where widely differing views were expressed on the very question of the relationship of Community Art to political movements. Political and social vision, in any case, has informed and inspired artists throughout history, indeed, if the artist is to deal with the totality of human experience, politics have their place - to say the least.

3. The Arguments (Cont.)

- vi) The Group endorses the view that context and function, as well as artistic standards, play an important part in assessment. However, it believes that the Deputy Secretary-General places undue emphasis on the 'basic' level of Community Art. The examples given are hardly representative (indeed the Group is not familiar with egg dyeing at all), and the best in Community Art, such as the Floyd Road Mural in Charlton, or Joe Smythe's pamphlet of poems, are anything but basic. The Group recognises, though, that artistic quality is variable in Community Arts, depending on the stage of the project's development, but would draw attention again to the Evaluation Working Group's comments on quality (see 2(ii) above), and would maintain that variable standards are part and parcel of "fostering a vigorous Community Art movement".
- vii) The Group believes that there are rather more positive reasons for supporting Community Arts than those put forward in paragraph 15 of the Deputy Secretary-General's paper. The spirit of the Hutchinson Report seems to have been forgotten, and it is perhaps appropriate to remind ourselves of its concluding sentiments:

"The recreation of a sense of community, of a sense of belonging, of communication and consultation, of self-confidence and of achievement, may well spring from the skilled development of arts-based creative activity within a community. We are convinced that the Council in continuing its support of the practice of Community Arts will not only be contributing to the development of art itself, but will be making it possible for an ever increasing number of people to experience and appreciate some form of artistic expression, leading as a result to the enrichment of their lives. Such people have not hitherto been the concern of the Arts Council. The experiment has shown a way to find them. It would be tragic in our view if they were now lost."

4. Conclusions

Given all that precedes, it is a nice irony that the Group finds itself in agreement with almost all of the conclusions. However, reference has already been made to 18(ii), and the Group believes that judgement should be reserved on this issue pending further discussions. In the case of the devolved regions, further evidence will be submitted to Regional Committee when estimates are considered later in the year, and the situation should therefore not be pre-judged.

In conclusion, the Deputy Secretary-General is warmly invited to attend a future meeting of the C.O.R.A.A. Group of officers responsible for Community Arts, to discuss points raised in this paper and in his own.