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To: Tony Banks, GLC Labour Group
 From: Alan Tomkind
 Subject: GLC Arts Policy

CULTURAL ELITISM OR CULTURAL POPULISM: THE PITFALLS OF BOTH

In the short time available to me at the moment I've done no more than offer a number of blunt assertions (which because of brevity may appear over-simplistic) about the basic concepts and strategy that should inform a radical, socialist arts policy in the GLC labour Group generally, and specifically in setting up a Community Arts Board.

The Labour Party's past record in arts policy: Sadly the Labour Party's record (like the TUC's) can be characterised at best as a liberal-democratic concern to provide more resources, more democratic access for 'the community' and at worst as a total failure to engage with the content and politics of cultural forms to a degree where, for example, in the section of the Labour Party's arts policy booklet (The Arts & the People, Labour Party 1977) that deals with 'community arts' there is a rapid accommodation to the right's critique and a reinforcement of the dominant bourgeois model of arts practice. There is an exact parallel between Labour's failure to engage with the (ideological) content of the arts and its failure to engage with the content of education. Labour says that it will restore the cuts, expand and maintain the service, more comprehensive schools, but has not pushed or recognised the need for a socialist pedagogy, a socialist content in schooling/the arts.

BASIC CONCEPTS: some left and right perspectives

1. Culture: the dominant definitions reinforce an authoritarian/paternal view as a handing down of works from the heritage, from civilisation, ie a common culture based on the common denominator of repression.
 A radical perspective on culture sees culture a) as the ways of life of particular sections of the community, with the politics of class, gender, race age conflicts central to an understanding of the social formation and b) as the production of symbolic forms which are recognizably artistic, theatre, films reggae, comics, music... where the emphasis is on an understanding of these forms as communication of meaning/ideology rather than the traditional terrorism of taste. Hence, questions about the quality of a particular communication can be raised in terms of its ideological role, its mode of address to an audience etc.
2. Ideology: the term ideology imputes a political role to and effectivity to all forms of culture art, religion, philosophy, literature—the lot. The right sees ideology as a form of propaganda which may act as a backdrop to a cultural form but has little to do with the social, educational and political meanings of a particular work. Indeed, it is a feature of bourgeois ideology to define those works which have a social and political meaning as non-art. Bourgeois ideology rarely attends to the ideological role or meaning of a work, the work is defined totally through the popular psychology of the possessive individualist model of 'the artist', a superior inner expressiveness. (In capitalism bourgeois ideology uses ideology in general for material support.) The left should understand the arts as embodied ideologies which can be mentally liberating or mentally crippling; they signify reality in different ways which serve the interests of one class against others.
3. Hegemony: This suggests that the ideology of the dominant class is imposed on the members of subordinate classes OR simply dominates by winning consent ie by maintaining consensus views ...hence one of the dangers of popular culture. Hegemony not only suggests that there are dominant groups but also dominant cultural forms, dominant meanings within particular artworks. Hence, while it is often very difficult to match a particular cultural form with a particular class or taste group it is possible to judge that certain forms such as opera, such as fine art painting, etc have been extensively hegemonised by a dominant class group. For example photography has not been extensively hegemonised because it is fundamentally a collective form, it is endlessly reproduceable, it becomes increasingly available (economics) every day. This is not to say that photography does not carry, however, dominant hegemonic meanings. Photography has become one of the most powerful forms of contemporary communication, literacy.

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4 Popular Culture/High Culture: These derive their force from differences in social class. In the main it can be said that this dichotomy is meaningless. Certainly popular cultural forms are as worthy of critical interest as high cultural forms. However, It can also be seen that a judgement of value implied by these terms cannot be sustained with reference to the intrinsic properties of particular cultural forms. Certainly, some works such as Shakespeaere's plays could be seen as starting out as popular culture, ie widely available to a number of groups, and becoming high culture (one definition) in being turned into a scholarly literature. However, and this is a crucial point, this is not to say that there are no intrintic differences in quality between cultural forms. Certainly, there may be extensive resemblances between King Lear and Tarzan but these are less important than their intrinsic differences as literature. This is massively important politically because whilst popular culture does carry the two main meaning of a) the perjorative sense of a passively received mass culture, (dominant ideology) and b) of a resistant oppositional folk culture it may still be possible, for example, to see 'literature' 'art' as the internal foes of ideology and popular culture (the consensus) as its secret accomplice.

5 Forms: This is not the place to go into the vast range of variable relationships in forms, and their historical relations. Certainly the left must pose a social and historical theory of categories such as literature, art, music, etc. These cannot be an action replay of the right's critique. Dividing lines of value must be drawn, perhaps for the first time in the arts policy field, whose determinants are not aesthetic at all but straightforwardly political. ie Quality in a work of art defined by its critical degree of 'defamiliarisation' from dominant ideology, and within a committed politics of form.

6 Policy : The Community Arts Board

My main concern here is that we get people on this body who are politically and ideologically OK. In order to achieve this aim I believe certain things need to be taken into account.

- 1) We should invite nominees to the Board who can have some knowledge of the social, political and formal (properties of what might be a radical literature) concerns outlined above.
- 2) We should be conscious of the gains made in the past ten years by the community arts movement but should be even more conscious of its shortcomings in that, in part, it does operate some of the bourgeois definitions and class language; it is limited to a range of practices - eg the insistence on making the training of community artists (careerism) an aspect of the board's work together with the false and anti-intellectual stipulation that all members of the CAB must be practising community artists. The fact that the community arts movement says little about the content of particular forms, does not address the politics of women's struggle at all, and works through a system of representative democracy makes me a little wary of their understanding of power relations, the theory and social relations of forms. Many radical groups would resist the category 'community arts' at all costs.
- 3) The Community Arts Board must do more than just move the allocation of funds to different projects. Both of the GLC conferences have identified the need for facilities, offices, rehearsal spaces etc and a fighting structure that hopefully outlast the present GLC and any subsequent Tory administrations. We must not, in my view, do a Gulbenkian Foundation job on the radical groups of London. ie give them substantial funding for one or two years and then when they have been encouraged by us to expand, we pull the rug from under their feet, leaving an even greater catastrophe/acrimony than would have been the case if we had not encouraged them. The Gulbenkian has left a trail of anger in the wake of such a policy.
- 4) We must be very careful who makes up the Board initially. The GLC should be able to choose which people it wants from ^{among} the GLAA, GLACE or DORA ⁸⁶ nominations, on political/theoretical grounds.