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Art as a means towards alleviating social exclusion: does it really work? – A critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting recent developments of British cultural policy is that debates on possible ways to tackle social exclusion and debates on the role of the subsidized arts in society have intertwined, so that the contribution that the arts can make towards alleviating the symptoms of exclusion is today highly emphasised by the government and the major public arts funding bodies.

Indeed, in the last few years, we have witnessed the widespread adoption of the philosophy of social inclusion within both the cultural policy arena and the debate among professionals in the arts sector.

Young people and the socially excluded seem to be now – in the rhetoric of the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) – at the top of the funding agenda:

'Following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, DCMS will be reaching new funding agreements governing its grants to its sponsored bodies. These will set out clearly what outcomes we expect public investment to deliver and some of these outcomes will relate to social inclusion' (Smith, 1999).

The arts are therefore officially recognised to have a positive contribution to make to social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal by improving communities' 'performance' in the four key indicators identified by the government: health, crime, employment, education (DCMS 1999a, 21-22). Moreover their very contribution to tackling social problems is identified as a justification for public 'investment' in the arts.

This is hardly a phenomenon limited to the UK. The shift towards an instrumental cultural policy, which justifies public expenditure in the arts on the grounds of the advantages that they bring to the nation (be them economic, social, related to urban regeneration, employment, etc.) is indeed a European trend (Vestheim 1994, 57-71). The aim of this research is to investigate the policy implications of this new stress on the subsidised arts and arts organisations as agents of social change. Indeed, if the funding bodies' emphasis on the social impact of the arts and the activities of cultural

organisations is genuine, it should not be long before evidence of activities to include the socially excluded will be required on all funding applications.

This paper thus aims to look critically at the consequences that would derive by the adoption of the social impacts of the arts as a new policy rationale for future arts funding.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND THE ARTS

The concept of 'social exclusion' is a relatively new one in Britain, and represents a shift from the previously dominant concept of 'poverty'. The notion of 'social exclusion', first developed as a sociological concept in France, has been subsequently embraced by the European Commission, and its adoption in Britain can be seen as an aspect of the EU harmonisation process (Fairclough, 2000, 51; Rogers 1995, 43). However, within the British arts sector, the concern for the actual exclusion of large sections of the population (mainly belonging to the lower classes) from publicly funded arts activities has been a source of concern much earlier. The Arts Council's Royal Charter (1967) contains an explicit pronouncement of the Council's obligation to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Britain and across social classes. Interest in social exclusion has since grown in Britain and throughout Western Europe in relation to rising rates of unemployment, increasing international migration, and the cutting back of welfare states.

The emergence of the term thus reflects an attempt to reconceptualize social disadvantage in the face of the major economic and social transformations that characterise post-modernity.

Indeed, it has been argued that the transition from modernity to late modernity can be seen as a movement from an *inclusive* to an *exclusive* society (Young 1999, 7). The market economy emerging in post-Fordism was the result of a restructuring of the economy encompassing a reduction of the primary labour market and an expansion of the knowledge-based secondary market. This has resulted in the creation of an underclass of structurally unemployed, and to what Will Hutton has described as the 40:30:30 society. Forty per cent of the population in permanent and secure employment, 30% in insecure employment, 30% marginalised, out of work or working for poverty wages, and most at risk of social exclusion (Hutton 1995, 105-110).

In Britain, the attempt at tackling social exclusion has been strongly promoted by New Labour after it won the general elections in 1997. Social cohesion and a more inclusive society are indeed – at least in the party’s rhetoric – crucial factors in the success of Labour’s ‘Third Way’ towards the aim of Britain’s ‘national renewal’ (Fairclough 2000, 22). To this end, in December 1997, the Prime Minister set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) whose aim is to help improve Government action to reduce social exclusion across all departments by producing ‘joined up solutions to joined up problems’.

The notion of social exclusion has the benefit of seeing poverty and disadvantage as multi-dimensional rather than merely in terms of income and expenditure. Even though material disadvantage is still a primary focus of strategies for social inclusion, they also encompass important new strands. In the context of this research, the most important dimension of the debate is the new focus on the cultural and social dynamics of inclusion, and the emphasis on the positive role of the arts and heritage in alleviating the symptoms of exclusion.

In the UK, the view that the arts have a positive contribution to make to the cause of social inclusion – a position long held by community arts groups - has been enthusiastically endorsed by the government via the DCMS, and by the Social Exclusion Unit’s Policy Action Team 10 (PAT 10)¹, which deals with the Arts and Sport. The Report compiled by the PAT 10 on neighbourhood renewal reads:

*‘Arts and sport, cultural and recreational activity, can contribute to neighbourhood renewal and make a real difference to health, crime, employment and education in deprived communities’.*²

Such a strong formal commitment towards exclusion on the Government’s part has a direct impact on arts funding provision. Indeed, in Britain, the Government sets overarching goals for the arts which are reflected in the strategic policy that the DCMS sets for the arts sector. The implementation of this policy is then carried out in partnership with the Arts Council of England (ACE), the Regional Arts Boards, the Department for Education and Employment, and a number of other bodies following the so called “arm’s length principle”. This principle defines the relative autonomy of the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Boards in deciding how to allocate the

¹ PAT 10 is a cross-governmental Policy Action Team within the SEU with the task of studying the contribution of arts and sport to neighbourhood renewal.

² DCMS (1999a), 8.

available resources to individual art forms and artists, and it should ensure – at least in theory – that decisions are not affected by political considerations.

However, it should not be forgotten that all decisions relative to funding allocations are informed by the Funding Agreement between the DCMS and the Arts Council, which incorporates DCMS's objectives for education, access, excellence, and – more recently – social exclusion. Moreover, ACE has to show, through a series of performance indicators defined by the Agreement, that it is actively seeking to fulfil the Government's objectives for the arts.

The DCMS' formal commitment to social inclusion is therefore reflected in the funding agreement with the Arts Council covering the period April 2000 – March 2002. The document declares that in order to fulfil its aims of making high quality arts 'available to the many not just the few', DCMS will work to 'promote the role of the Department's sectors in urban and rural regeneration, in pursuing sustainability and in combating social exclusion'. More specifically, the DCMS has ten 'goals for the arts', one of which is 'to develop and enhance the contribution the arts make to combating social exclusion and promoting regeneration'. ACE has to 'deliver' against performance indicators derived from these goals. Consequently, the Arts Council is expected to produce various pieces of documentation showing the activities targeted at ethnic minorities, disabled and generally excluded groups and assessing its contribution to the inclusion and regeneration cause (DCMS 2000a).

Even though a quick glance at ACE's funding package for 2000-2002 seems to show that ACE's commitment to social exclusion might be stronger on the level of the rhetoric than that of the resource allocation (ACE 1999a; ACE 1999b), it is evident that the major public funding bodies of the arts in Britain, DCMS, ACE (and consequently the RABs) have subscribed to an instrumental view of cultural policy. In this view, the public spending on the arts is justified in terms of an 'investment' which will bring about positive social change and contribute to alleviate social exclusion in disadvantaged areas of the country.

It is interesting to note that the DCMS has taken on board the cause of the arts' contribution to inclusion despite the fact that Phillida Shaw, author of the *Research Report: Arts and Neighbourhood Renewal* - a literature review on arts and social in/exclusion commissioned by the PAT 10 – came to the conclusion that 'it remains a fact that relative to the volume of arts activity taking place in the country's poorest

neighbourhoods, the evidence of the contribution it makes to neighbourhood renewal is paltry' (DCMS 1999b, 6).

It is indeed very significant that, despite the official admission of the lack of indisputable evidence of the effectiveness of the arts in contributing to social cohesion and neighbourhood regeneration, in recent years, Britain has witnessed an increasing use of publicly funded arts initiative to address socio-economic problems, ranging from major capital projects to local participatory projects.

THE 1980S AND THE GLORIFICATION OF THE INSTRUMENTAL ARGUMENT FOR ARTS FUNDING

The 1980s represented a really difficult moment for the British arts world. On the one hand, postmodernism had eroded the legitimacy of the very notion of "Culture" on which cultural policy had hitherto been founded, leading to what Craig Owens refers to as 'a crisis of cultural authority specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions' (Owens 1990,57).

In the past, the fact that the State should contribute - through the public arts funding system - to the preservation, diffusion and promotion of 'high quality' culture in the name of the citizens' welfare was considered a matter of course. Once the principle of equivalence entered the cultural debate, decisions made on the basis of excellence, quality and artistic value were not so easily justifiable. Nevertheless, in policy debates, cultural value had so far represented the main criterion for deciding which activities were to be supported by public subsidy (that is, by people's taxes), and which were not.

The Arts Council was now faced with the task of justifying to the nation the fact that public money was spent according to the aesthetic judgements of small groups of people who could no longer claim the authority for higher artistic judgements.

Even the principle of 'access', which together with "excellence" represented the keyword of cultural policy since the post-war years, had now lost its hold. In the new relativist cultural climate, many felt that the Arts Council's attempts at bringing high art to the people - based on the assumption that it would 'do them good' – was the product of a paternalistic and patronising attitude that was no longer acceptable (Bennett 1996, 9).

On the other hand, another crucial event for the arts world in the UK was the election of a Conservative government in 1979 and, with that, the beginning of the 'Thatcherite era'. The new government declared its mission was to promote the enlargement of the private sector and to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' in order to reduce public expenditure and increase efficiency. As a consequence, the level of public support of the arts remained unchanged for a number of years (and that corresponded, in real terms, to a reduction in funding). In this new climate of great uncertainty about future levels of public expenditure, it was strongly felt throughout the arts world that, in order to survive, the arts needed to be able to make a strong case against further reductions in funding.

To this end, in the 1980s, the arts sector decided to emphasize the economic aspects of its activities and their alleged contribution to the wealth of the nation.

This was originally a defensive strategy of survival, aimed at preserving existing levels of cultural expenditure. The hope was that, if the arts sector (now referred to as the 'cultural industries') could speak the same language as the government, maybe it would have a better chance to be listened to. However, as Bianchini points out, this initially defensive attitude pretty soon seemed to offer the opportunity for more positive arguments for the expansion of public expenditure on culture on the grounds of its economic returns (Bianchini 1993a, 12-13).

This new approach to justifying public arts funding was officially embraced by the Arts Council in a glossy brochure produced in 1985 entitled *A Great British Success Story*. It was designed and written to look like a company report: the 'prospectus' indeed described itself as 'an invitation to the nation to invest in the arts' and used freely the language of the 'enterprise culture'. Productions became 'the product', the audiences 'consumers', and the language of subsidy becomes the language of 'investment' (Hewison 1995, 258).

The new cultural policy rationale that was now taking root is best represented by *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain*, a book written by John Myerscough that attempted to demonstrate and measure the positive economic contribution that the arts sector could make in an era of industrial decline in terms of job creation, tourism promotion, invisible earnings and its contribution to urban regeneration.

In the book, the logic of an instrumental view of culture was clearly proposed as the only possible ground for a defence of public arts funding:

'This was a time when central government spending was levelling off. Arguments based on their intrinsic merits and educational value were losing their potency and freshness, and the economic dimension seemed to provide fresh justification for public spending on the arts' (Myerscough 1988, 2).

While the economic argument achieved vital recognition for the arts and cultural industries, and became both influential and fashionable, its flaws were very soon pointed out (Hansen 1995, 309). In 1989, the economist Gordon Hughes contested the all-inclusiveness of Myerscough's definition of the arts, and challenged the validity of the methodologies through which he had collected his data. It has also been noted that the jobs created by the arts and the so-called 'symbolic economy' are mostly part-time, insecure or low wage, and therefore far from being a solution for contemporary problems of structural unemployment (Lorente 1996, 3).

Hansen (1995) actually challenges not only the validity of the results of the economic impact studies carried out by Myerscough and by many others after him; she also maintains that in such an approach the arts are evaluated on an incorrect basis because the real *purpose* of the artistic activity (which is not producing economic returns) is not taken into account.

However, despite the well-founded criticisms, studies on the economic impacts of the arts carried out in the '80s and '90s had a long lasting influence over cultural policy debates.

At a first glance it might seem that much of the keywords in the rhetoric of the Community Arts movement have become an integral part of current debates around cultural policy. DCMS and the Arts Council seem, moreover, to have embraced the once oppositional values and predicaments of the Community Arts movement, and to have brought themes such as participation, empowerment and community development into mainstream cultural debate. However, this paper aims to show that, notwithstanding similarities of arguments and shared 'buzz words', the spirit that animated (and by all means still does) Community Arts and the spirit that informs current cultural policy documents are in fact quite different. Indeed, the thesis purposed by this paper is that current policies focusing on the arts as a tool towards social inclusion are in fact rooted in the instrumental notion of the arts and cultural policies that affirmed itself in the 1980s.

THE ARTS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL: AN INSTRUMENTAL CULTURAL POLICY FOR THE 1990s

The new focus of DCMS policy and funding to promote social inclusion originates in the Government's commitment to the regeneration of poor neighbourhoods and is an integral part of the development of a social inclusion policy in the context of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (DCMS 1999a, 3). The belief that the arts can have a positive role in community development and urban regeneration, however, is hardly a New Labour discovery.

The links between the economic benefits produced by the cultural sector and issues of urban renewal had already been explicitly made by the Arts Council back in 1986, in the publication *Partnership: Making Arts Money Work Harder*. In this document (whose very title is symptomatic of the cultural and political climate of the times), economic arguments for the public support of the arts and the cultural industries were applied to highlight the arts' contribution to urban renewal. According to the Arts Council, the arts, in partnership with the local authorities, could 'bring new life to inner cities', create new jobs and 'help develop the skills and talents of ethnic minorities and other specific communities' (Hewison 1995, 258).

In the rhetoric of the Arts Council we can easily identify themes that have been 'recycled' by current policy documents. However, in the '80s, the emphasis of urban regeneration strategies all over Europe was pretty much placed on the pursuit of economic growth, in the name of which social factors were often overlooked.

Policies for urban regeneration were initially led by physical development aimed at improving the internal and external image of former industrial cities all over Europe. The most conspicuous investments were channelled towards cultural 'flagships', such as the new gallery for the Burrell collection in Glasgow, the Albert Dock and the Tate of the North in Liverpool, and Centenary Square in Birmingham (Bianchini 1993a, 16).

Unfortunately, the 'urban renaissance'³ hoped for by the Arts Council did not happen. In fact, the urban renewal projects of these years were criticised for representing a 'carnival mask' used by local and national politicians to cover up persisting and

³ *An Urban Renaissance* was the title of a pamphlet published by the Arts Council in 1988 to reinforce the view that the 'enterprise culture' could contribute to the development of deprived areas.

growing economic and social inequalities among the population (David Harvey, quoted in Bianchini 1993a, 14).

On the grounds of this failure, and in association with a growing interest in issues of quality of life, the social dimension of urban regeneration became the new focus of attention. By the early 1990s the government and the funding bodies had acknowledged that regeneration is not just about new buildings, but rather about people and the quality of the lives they will be able to live in a certain area.

One other circumstance that contributed to the shift of focus towards social rather than economic considerations in cultural policy was the ever increasing involvement of local authorities in arts funding. Indeed, local authorities' spending on the arts exceeded that of central government for the first time in 1988/89, and has ever since. This came to mean that local authorities became important contributors to the ongoing debates on cultural policy.

As a result of the involvement of non-art agencies in the arts funding, the agenda has shifted. The Arts Council may place aesthetic considerations above all others, but the public sector (health authorities, social services departments, etc.) is mainly interested in the social impact of the arts rather than in aesthetic or economic considerations.

The same phenomenon can be witnessed at the European Community level, where only 7,7% of expenditure in the arts for the period 1989-93 derived from specifically cultural programmes. The bulk of resources for the cultural sector (82,79%) derived from the Structural Funds and various Commission initiatives programmes⁴ (Fisher 2000, 34). These additional resources are vital for the arts world, especially when set against the background of reduced national spending on culture. However, the Structural Funds are measures that address regional inequalities, in the attempt to promote more balanced economic and social development within the European Union. Therefore, access to these resources is conditional to the ability of the arts to prove their efficacy in the social sphere.

⁴ The Structural Funds are aimed at reducing regional disparities between the European member States. One of their priority objectives is to promote the development of less-developed regions in the EU. In particular, Objective 1 funds are aimed at the poorest regions, where GDP is up to 75% of the average in the EU. Commission initiatives are a number of other programmes that are aimed at correcting various regional imbalances within the framework of regional policy (e.g. INTERREG, URBAN, LEADER, SME, etc.)

In the light of this survey of the main developments in cultural policy in the last twenty years, it should be easier to put current policies on social exclusion and the arts in context. Despite the rhetoric of the funding bodies (evolving around the keywords of participation, empowerment, social cohesion, personal and community growth, so reminiscent of the '70s debate on cultural democracy), current policies in the cultural field are the direct derivation of the instrumental theories of culture that dominated the policy debate in the 1980s. Policies aiming at tackling social exclusion through the arts still justify public 'investment' in the arts through the argument that they provide 'value for money': a cost-effective contribution to the solution of weighty social problems.⁵

THE ARTS AGAINST EXCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF AN INSTRUMENTAL CULTURAL POLICY

The main implication of this instrumental view of cultural policy is that the claim that investment in the arts actually *does* produce positive social impacts has to be convincingly proved. Moreover, for the argument to hold, it should also be demonstrated that investment in the arts can make a *significant* contribution to the cause of social inclusion, in fact more than investment in other areas of public and social policy.

In this perspective, the evaluation of the social impact of arts programmes assumes paramount importance. Quite surprisingly, however, virtually no critical study of the social impacts of the subsidised arts has been conducted in the UK (DCMS, 1999b).

The only exception is the project carried out by the consultancy and research organisation Comedia on the social purpose and value of participatory arts.

The aim of the project was 'to develop a methodology for evaluating the social impact of arts programmes, and to begin to assess that impact in key areas' (Matarasso 1996). To this end, around 60 arts projects were chosen to represent the core case studies, with some 600 people (both organisers and participants) contributing through interviews, discussion groups, and questionnaires (Matarasso 1997,7).

In the final report on the project, *Use or Ornament?*, François Matarasso has summarised and presented the findings on the social impacts arising from

⁵ The term 'investment' with reference to public expenditure in the field of arts activities promoting inclusion has been used by Chris Smith in a speech he made in 1999 (see bibliography), and it's widely used in all of DCMS' and ACE's documents on the arts and social exclusion analysed in this research.

participation in the arts. This is indeed the area of the arts to which social benefits are most commonly attributed in policy discussions (Matarasso 1997, iii).

The unquestionable merit of the project, and of Matarasso's work in particular, is that it represents the first - and so far the only - attempt at formulating a specific methodology for evaluating if and how participation in arts activity does change people's social life. Moreover, this work strives to offer an alternative evaluation method to the output-driven Performance Indicator approach favoured by the Arts Council. The need for a move from 'hard', quantitative indicators to 'soft', qualitative ones had already been advocated, in 1993, by Franco Bianchini, who had called for 'new methodologies and indicators to measure the impact of cultural policies and activities in terms of quality of life, social cohesion and community development' (Bianchini 1993b, 212).

Comedia's work presents itself as the first effort of applying the method of 'social auditing' to the evaluation of arts projects. Comedia defines social auditing as 'a means of measuring the social impact of an activity or organisation in relation to its aims and those of its stakeholders'. The advantage of this approach is that it views an activity or organisation as a complex whole, placing emphasis on values and on the opinions of *all* the stakeholders of arts projects (funders, arts organisations *and* participants). Moreover, social auditing is presented as an effective mechanism to show funders the values of the organisations' objectives and the extent to which they are successfully met (Lingayam, MacGillivray, Raynard 1996,21-22).

Directly linked to the values of social auditing is what probably represents the most remarkable aspect of this project: the emphasis on the need to adopt 'people centred approaches to evaluation' that can address the *outcomes*, rather than the outputs, of policy initiatives (Matarasso 1996, 13). This means a focus not so much on the programmes' output (the artistic product), but on its long-term impacts on the participants.

However, if on the one hand the pioneering nature of this work has to be acknowledged, on the other hand, the whole project, and the methodology it proposes, is not without flaws.⁶ As this section of the paper will show, on the one

⁶ The criticism of Comedia's work is based on the analysis of the already mentioned reports published by Comedia, with the addition of *Northern Lights* (1996), *Taliruni's Travellers*

hand precious and important observations on the difficulties and potential pitfalls of arts projects evaluation are responsibly put forward. On the other, it seems that - in the practice of evaluation - Comedia's researchers are the first to completely ignore those wise warnings.

First of all, the emphasis on outcomes rather than outputs - which is certainly the most innovative of Comedia's suggestions - seems to be contradicted by the five-stage evaluation model proposed by Matarasso.

The five stages of the process are: planning, setting indicators, execution, assessment and reporting. The problem is that the assessment stage is advised to take place 'on completion of the project', whereas the different stakeholders should all compile reports on the results of the projects 'shortly after completion' of the project. This is indeed the methodology followed by all the reports and the evaluations carried out within the project (Matarasso 1996, 25). However, what about outcomes? These, as one of Comedia's working papers clearly points out, 'will typically take longer to emerge than outputs' (Lingayah, MacGillivray, Raynard 1996, 33), and would not therefore be taken into account by such an assessment process.

It is arguable that this consideration strongly undermines the findings of a study that claims to evaluate how arts projects can have life-changing effects on participants, and on how this can contribute to community development. For instance, Matarasso tells us that 37% of participants have *decided* to take up training or a course (1997, vi). What we will never know is whether that was just the result of a short-lived enthusiasm or a real life-changing decision. It would have probably been more significant to show what proportion of projects participants *had actually taken up* further training a few months after the programme.

An evaluation method that really placed outcomes at its heart should rather focus on long term monitoring of the participants and the effects of the arts on their lives. However, long-term monitoring is a very complicated and expensive form of assessment, as it involves repeated interviews with the participants over the years. Moreover, it can be expected that arts organisations would rather opt for a 'quick' evaluation process, as they need to prove their success to the funders in order to advocate continued funding.

(1996), *The Creative Bits* (1997), *Vital Signs* (1998), *Poverty and Oysters* (1998), and *Magic, Myths and Money* (1999). Full references in the bibliography.

One more methodological difficulty identified by Matarasso is that of the cause-effect link. Indeed, being able to show change in relation to a predefined indicator does not prove that the change was produced by the arts programme being evaluated. The solution proposed in the working paper *Defining Values* was to seek to establish a causal link between the programme and its outcomes 'by the elimination of outside factors' (that is, all the variables that might have affected the programme's outcomes) (1996,19). However, when the issue of establishing a causal link - critical in a discussion of evaluation – is presented again in the final report on the project, it seems to be dismissed without having been resolved. Indeed all Matarasso has to say to support the causal link he purports between changes in people and the arts project studied is:

'...it cannot be denied that there is a cumulative power in the hundreds of voices we have heard over the past 18 months, in vastly different circumstances, explaining again and again how important they feel participation in arts projects has been for them. How many swallows does it take to make summer?' (1997, 6).

This is hardly a consistent or strong argument!

One more source of concern in *Defining Values* is the use of statistics in the context of arts projects evaluation, and the often ambiguous way in which questions are phrased with bias towards getting a higher proportion of the desired answers (1996, 15 and Moriarty 1997, 9). However, *Use or Ornament?* (as well as all other Comedia's reports here considered) makes a massive use of statistics, some of them derived from ambiguously formulated questions.

For example, Matarasso boasts that 73% of participants have been happier since being involved. This percentage represents the proportion of the interviewees who have expressed agreement with the sentence 'since being involved I have been happier'. These results are accepted as valid without any further discussion. However, it is arguable that the attempt at measuring quantitatively something so subjective and for which there is no predefined scale as happiness would at least require more in depth discussion and a more complex investigation of the participants' experiences. In the same way, Matarasso claims that 52% of participants felt better or healthier after participation in the arts; 49% had even changed their ideas (about what, though, we don't know, since people were simply asked 'has the project changed your ideas about anything?') (1997, 101).

One more point that it is interesting to make is that in *Use or Ornament?* Matarasso poses the question of whether social policy issues could be tackled more cost-effectively by other methods rather than the arts. He maintains that 'participatory arts projects are different, effective and cost very little in the context of spending on social goals. They represent an insignificant financial risk to public services, but can produce impacts (social *and* economic) out of proportion to their cost' (1997, 81). It is not clear, though, on the basis of what data Matarasso reaches such a conclusion, since no comparative data on costs and results achieved with different methods accompany these considerations, a fact that undermines the validity of his claims.

Matarasso asserts that the results of Comedia's research project lead to the conclusion that 'a marginal adjustment of priorities in cultural and social policy could deliver real socio-economic benefits to people and communities' (1997, v). However, some of the claims he makes about the capacity of arts projects to empower individuals and communities are founded on flawed arguments and statistics. As a consequence, his advocacy for the redirection of public funds towards participatory arts projects is not very convincing. Moreover, in the perspective of national arts funding, participatory arts projects represent a very small proportion of public spending on the arts, especially on the part of the DCMS and the Arts Council.

Indeed, in the only research that Matarasso has conducted on audiences at an art event (rather than participants in an arts project) the impact of the arts on people's life appears substantially less remarkable. In *Magic, Myths and Money* Matarasso has studied the social and economic impacts on Manchester of a week in English National Ballet's tour of Cinderella. There are here ambiguities similar to those registered in *Use or Ornament?*, such as the 93% of audiences disagreeing with the statement 'watching ballet has no lasting impact on me' (1999, 50). Whether this impact refers to an enjoyable night out or a life-changing experience is a mystery the report does not disclose. Despite its merit in pioneering this kind of research, the findings in *Magic, Myths and Money* can hardly provide grounds for justifying public expenditure on the arts on the basis of their positive social impacts.

One final problem with Comedia's approach to the evaluation of the impact of arts projects on excluded people and communities is that very often the importance attributed to social outcomes overshadows aesthetic considerations. Indeed, in some cases, such as in his work on the impacts of community arts in Belfast, Matarasso explicitly excludes artistic considerations from the scope of his analysis (1998b, iii).

This can be explained with the fact that quite often the projects analysed by Comedia's researchers are funded by local authorities as part of anti-poverty strategies (i.e. Portsmouth in *Poverty & Oysters*), or by development or regeneration agencies (as is the case of Belfast).

ISSUES OF QUALITY

Matarasso's work is indeed a clear example of the fact that many arts funding bodies (especially at the local level) do not put purely artistic concerns at the top of the reasons why they fund arts projects. Consequently, aesthetic considerations have often little or no room in their evaluation of the success of their art-related programmes.

This marks a very strong difference with the attitude of agencies specifically devoted to arts funding. For these bodies, all allocations of resources are founded on and imply a quality judgement based on aesthetic considerations. Moreover, the less money there is to spend on the arts, the more necessary it is to make judgements based on quality (ACGB, 1992, 37).

In this perspective, it will not come as a surprise that quite often issues of quality have been the cause of friction between major funding bodies (especially the Arts Council) and community arts groups.

On the one hand, the former value quality and excellence in the arts and make of them important criteria for subsidy. On the other, community arts activities, which are mainly participatory, place more emphasis and value on the artistic process - with its empowering effects – rather than the artistic product (Webster 1997, 1-2). This is particularly true of those projects targeted at disadvantaged communities, where often the participants have little or no previous experience of the arts.

Despite the formal recognition, on the part of the arts 'establishment', of the intrinsic value of participatory arts in the community, quality is still a delicate issue in the relationship between the national funding bodies and community arts groups.

This situation is best exemplified by the problems recently faced by Green Candle. This is a dance company strongly committed to education and work with the most fragile elements in the community: young people, the elderly and the sick. As Green Candle's artistic director, Fergus Early, has explained during a conference on community arts and social exclusion organised by Mailout in July 2000, the company

has been facing the possibility of a cut in funding from ACE. The reason for this is the different evaluations of one of the company's latest projects involving a group of elderly people in a movement and dance project.

As it can be easily imagined, the bodies of elderly people are not as agile and flexible, or slender and beautiful as those of the professional dancers employed by the national dance companies funded by ACE. Nor had the project participants ever had formal dance training before. The Arts Council, Early argues, probably on the base of a notion of quality in dance that would be more appropriate for English National Ballet than participatory dance projects, deemed the project of poor quality; hence the threats of reduced subsidy. However, the very same project was judged highly successful by Green Candle staff and by the participants in the project, since it had given old people the chance to express themselves through their body and to enhance their flexibility, with good effects on their health and their general feeling of well-being.⁷

Who is right? Can a bunch of old people dancing awkwardly be art? And, more importantly, can it be 'quality art' worth of funding? Or should this kind of projects be funded merely on the grounds of their positive effects on the participants, regardless of any consideration of quality?

This example clearly shows the need for new definitions of quality and value in arts projects, in order to solve and surpass the sterile dichotomy of these two very different notions of quality, in particular in relation to participatory arts. Today a new idea of quality is needed that can give dignity to participatory arts projects and that recognises their specific characteristics and aims. Some moves towards more inclusive notions of quality have already been made. For instance, in the context of this research, the contribution of the Norwegian scholar Henrik Kaare Nielsen could prove particularly useful.

Nielsen has tried to distinguish some of the criteria of quality that have so far appeared in cultural policy debates. These are a 'universalistic-normative' identification of quality with the traditional fine arts (the basis of post-war democratisation policies); a relativistic 'anything goes' position in which quality is not really an issue; and a 'particularistic-normative position' (originating from post-

⁷ The source of the information on Green Candle is the presentation entitled 'Issues of Quality' given by Fergus Early at the Mailout conference *Moving the Margins*, held in Derby on July 12th 2000.

modern theories) where quality can only be defined within certain contexts. Nielsen supplements these 'traditional' notions of quality with a fourth, innovative one. He indeed introduces a 'pluralistic-universalistic normativity', where *the experience process* determines quality. In this view, the quality of a cultural activity, or of the process of creation, is related to the artist's or participant's engagement with the complexities of reality and the enriching experience that derives from it (Waade 1997, 337).

The usefulness of this diversified notion of quality is that it does allow to sidestep the friction between the differing notions of quality upheld by the Arts Council and community arts groups. Moreover, it offers arts organisations working in the field of participatory arts a chance to argue their case to the funding bodies more effectively, and to finally be able to defend their projects by using criteria of quality relevant to their activities.

MUSEUMS AS 'CENTRES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE'

In the context of the present research, museums and art galleries represent an interesting object of analysis, since they are traditionally seen as institutions presenting more 'difficult' and 'elitist' forms of art. This notwithstanding, during the last decade, within the climate of accountability and competition for scarce public resources already discussed, museums too have faced an increasing pressure to present a convincing case for their role and value in society.

This new attitude towards museums finds clear expression in the 'policy guidance' document on social inclusion published by DCMS in May 2000, entitled *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*. The document states that:

'[museums] can play a role in generating social change by engaging with and empowering people to determine their place in the world, educate themselves to achieve their own potential, play a full part in society, and contribute to transforming it in the future' (2000b, 8).

In the document, DCMS presents the possibility of museums becoming positive agents of social inclusiveness as an uncontroversial matter. However, the aim of inclusiveness is rather a challenge for museums, which in many ways can be seen as representing 'institutionalised exclusion' (Sandell 1998, 407). As Ames explains,

'[m]useums are products of the establishment and authenticate the established or official values and image of a society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values' (Quoted in Sandell 1998, 407-408).

This means that the political, social, economic and especially cultural dimensions of social exclusion are often reflected in museums. For instance, we might argue that the exclusion that minority groups experience in many aspects of their lives is reflected, at the cultural level, in the museum that fails to tell the stories of those groups and hence denies their validity. Museums, thus, are hardly the neutral spaces that the DCMS document makes out. In fact, Sandell argues that museums, because of their validating role in society, not only reflect the social exclusion of certain groups, but by promoting a unilateral cultural perspective, reinforce the prejudices and discriminatory practices diffused in the wider society (Sandell 1998, 408)

The 'exclusive' nature of museums is actually confirmed by the statistics presented by the DCMS itself relative to a research carried out by MORI in 1999. It showed that only 23% of people from social classes DE visited museum and galleries, against a proportion of 56% of visitors from classes AB (DCMS 2000b, 8). This seems to confirm Tony Bennett's view that "museums, and especially art galleries, have often been effectively appropriated by social elites so that, rather than functioning as institution of homogenisation, as reforming thought had envisaged, they have continued to play a significant role in differentiating elite from popular classes" (Quoted in Sandell 1998, 409).

However, DCMS has made clear that future funding agreements with publicly funded museums and galleries will reflect DCMS's aim of promoting social inclusion (2000b, 25). Consequently, alongside its more traditional role as educational institutions, museums today must justify the public support they receive in terms that demonstrate their ability to promote social inclusion, tackle issues of cultural deprivation and disadvantage, and reach the widest possible audience.

So, if the museum has, up until now, acted mainly as a reinforcement of exclusion, is it realistic to expect it to reinvent itself, almost overnight, as a 'centre for social change'?

The possible contribution museums can make to the cause of social inclusion is quite a complex matter. Indeed it is not limited to the more obvious issues of access and participation. Because of museums' legitimising role in society, the 'inclusive

museum' has to engage also with the sphere of representation, that is 'the extent to which an individual's cultural heritage is represented within the mainstream cultural arena' (Sandell 1998, 410). So, according to this line of reasoning, the truly inclusive museum is the one that seeks to give voice to groups and communities that museums have silenced in the past and tries to become relevant to their lives, thus encouraging them to access its services.

More practically, it seems that museums in Britain have chosen to act as agents of social regeneration, with the aim of delivering positive social outcomes to specifically targeted groups affected by disadvantage and exclusion. This is proved by the increasing number of museums hiring especially devoted outreach staff.

Even 'flagship' museums, following the funders' requirements, are seeking to reposition themselves in the direction of inclusiveness. A telling example is the new and much discussed Tate Modern, and the ways in which it has tried to establish a positive connection with the disadvantaged community of London's Bankside.⁸ Not only has the museum built a resource centre for the benefit of the local community, it has also organised a number of participatory projects involving the local community, and even training sessions in arts management for a group of local unemployed people.

However, is it right to expect one of the most prestigious museums of modern art in the world to become a training agency in the name of social inclusion?

Is there a conflict between the pressure to include the excluded that museums are undergoing and their specific responsibilities for the conservation, interpretation and presentation of the artistic collections for which they are responsible?

This is quite an important issue, since museum professionals have expressed concern for the possibility of conflict between museum's scholarly duties (especially for museums with highly specialised interests) and the needs of inclusiveness. Sandell warns that 'it would be prudent to recognise the many limitations of the museum and accept that their role in directly tackling the social problems associated with exclusion is likely to be marginal' (Sandell 1998, 416).

This invitation to prudence sounds very different from the confident tone used by the DCMS' document. In its foreword Chris Smith writes:

⁸ Information derived from the proceedings of the conference *Inclusion: An international conference exploring the role of museums and galleries in promoting social exclusion*, held at the University of Leicester in March 2000.

'...the evidence is that museums, galleries and archives can ... act as agents of social change in the community, improving the quality of people's lives through their outreach activities'.

Museums are thus being asked by the funding bodies to assume new roles, to demonstrate their social purpose and more specifically to reinvent themselves as agents of social inclusion. However, despite these new demands being placed on museums and galleries, there has been very little supporting analysis and evaluation of the social impact of museums' activities, and virtually no discussion or questioning of the relevance of the social exclusion debate to the museum sector.⁹

Despite Smith's declarations, the assumption that museums can realistically be expected to become 'agents of social change' is hardly a well proven fact. Rigorous studies of the social impacts of museums working with disenfranchised communities are therefore badly needed, and will probably be most welcomed by the museum community. However, one cannot help but conclude that if positive social impacts on the part of museums have not been yet demonstrated - and if in fact their role in society still seems to be that of helping perpetuate the status quo of cultural deprivation among lower classes - museums' contribution to positive social change can hardly be hold as a justification for public funding of museums and galleries.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems possible to conclude – on the basis of the arguments put forward by this paper – that the issue of the social impacts of arts projects is here to stay and is likely to have a prominent position in future debates over cultural policy in Britain and beyond.

The impression that social issues will probably gain a substantial centrality in future cultural policies seems to be reinforced by the European Community's cultural programme *Culture 2000*, which builds upon the commitment to cultural access expressed by the Article 151 of the Treaty of Amsterdam (ex Article 128 of the Treaty of Maastricht). The programme formally acknowledges the contribution that culture can make to social cohesion across Europe. Consequently, targets of the

⁹ This point is made by Sandell (1998), but the lack of reliable evaluation of the social impacts of the activities of the museums that have already embraced the cause of inclusion was also put forward by many of the speakers at the *Inclusion* conference.

programme's initiatives are essentially all European citizens, but in particular the young and socially underprivileged ones (EC 2000).

The argument has already been made that - for the instrumental view of the arts to be vindicated - the case should be made convincingly that the arts *do* indeed produce social benefits, and that they do so more significantly than investment in more traditional social policies. The discussion has also attempted to show that not only has the effectiveness of socially orientated arts project not been object of extensive study, but the little research available has far from succeeded in presenting a strong case for the social impacts of the arts.

In the light of this considerations, it might be made, for the social impacts of the arts, the same observation that has been made for the economic impact studies of the '80s: that in attempting to sustain the cause of public funding of the arts, they have in fact weakened the argument for public support of the arts (Bennett 1995, 61). If the arts cannot prove to be a cost-effective means of delivering social benefits, they are destined to lose the struggle for funding against other areas of public spending of established effectiveness in tackling social issues.

However, the main problem created by the argument that the arts are a source of urban regeneration, or that public subsidy is in fact an 'investment' with specific, measurable social returns, is that the arts became entirely instrumental. Degraded to the function of mere tool, arts become a matter of 'value for money'. The view of a non-arts professional, registered by Matarasso, is quite eloquent:

I'm very positive about the use of the arts as long as it's not art for arts sake: it's a tool. You've got to have clear determined aim and objectives, and have an end product (1997, 61).

This study is not aimed at advocating a model of public support for the arts based on the 'art for art's sake' rationale. In fact, it is profoundly informed by the belief that since the arts are made possible by the commitment made by society through public spending, it is to be expected that they should have clear responsibilities towards the society that maintains them alive.

In this perspective, the fact that so much of public money goes to art forms the consumption of which is effectively still the reserve of the well-educated and the wealthy (after over 50 years of 'pro-access' policies!) is undoubtedly a source of

unease. However, the aim of this paper is to show how instrumental cultural policies are not sustainable in the long term, and how they ultimately may turn from 'policies of survival' to 'policies of extinction'.

Indeed, if the logic of the instrumental view of culture presented by the quote above is taken to its extreme (but intrinsically consequential) conclusions, there would be no point in having a cultural policy at all, as art provision could be easily absorbed within existing social policies. Hence the need of public arts funding bodies that put artistic considerations at the heart of their practices of resources allocations.

Culture is not a means to an end. It is an end itself. Many attempts have been made to demonstrate that culture is a peculiarly successful means of promoting social cohesion, inclusion or regeneration, but they miss the point if they regard culture as one means to social regeneration among various possible others. To borrow the words of Lewis Biggs, ex curator at the Tate of the North, Liverpool: 'Culture is a successful regenerator because it is an end in itself: the activity is inseparable from the achievement' (Biggs 1996, 62).

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