

# State of the Arts

On a visit to Brittany last year I was walking round a fairly austere cathedral in Vannes with my son. Above the alter there is a beautiful stained glass window of the crucifixion. We were following a fairly elderly English couple around and the wife turned to her husband and said 'You see the sky around Jesus' head?' and the husband said 'yes' and she said 'That's the colour I want our bathroom'. You see, we laugh. But here was a woman using to improve the quality of her life.

I run a creative organsition in a small town on the surrey Hampshire border. And when I am asked what we do I say that we help people live longer, feel safer, be happier. Based on a belief as Isabelle Allende so elegantly says that *'The arts are to humankind what dreams are to the individual'* or as 10cc put it *The things we do for love*

I would contest that for the arts to contribute to the big society, or society as mum calls it we need to challenge our view of what the arts are and are not. We need to reject ideas of things posed as false opposites – often used to prop up the established and contemporary arts world. Here are a few. Excellence or popular, accessible or experimental, maker or audience, local or international, amateur or professional. People express who they are in all sorts of ways. As knitters and cooks as gardeners and cake decorators, we tell stories to our children, dance at weddings, speak poetry at funerals, sing songs to our country at the start of football matches. Art is everywhere.

Big Society can't be about propping up the old system but finding new ways of making sense of the world. We need to understand the things we are prepared to do for free that we wouldn't accept paying for. James Davidson and Mike Clark are two photographers who set up The Daily Shoot as a digital project which sets an assignment every day. Earlier this week the task was to take a picture of a plug. And over two thousand photographers around the world went out and took pictures and uploaded them onto the site. For free. If you had offered them £5 to go out and take a photo for you nobody would engage. But ask me to contribute, to belong, to shape....

I am not arguing for an amateur rules model. Or maybe I am. What I do know is that the more people know how to make a pot the more likely they are to recognise the work of an extraordinary potter, understand the craft and be prepared to pay for it. You see participation and excellence in the same ambition.

Finally we need to rediscover our generosity. Try saying we rather than I. share the credit. My sense, in the arts at least, is that things are getting better. Under the last government we were stabbing each other in the back. Under this government we are stabbing each other in the front. We cannot allow the impending cuts, whatever there reason to set us against each other.

I am not sure if arts make society but they do help us think, understand, feel and imagine. They develop our emotional intelligence, bring us together, help is imagine, heal, build empathy and develop a vocabulary to make collective sense of the world.

[A panel contribution for the annual RSA/State of the Arts conference](#)