

Tell Them What You Think

I was talking to a colleague recently about the future of the arts, given the mess the economy is in. Her response was to tell me that in China the symbol for crisis is the same as the symbol for opportunity – she also told me that the Italians don't have a word for baby sitter, the significance of which I have yet to work out. But given that I can see the truth in her first sentiment there should be real opportunities for new thinking as the Arts Council develops a plan for the next ten years – to which we are being asked to contribute.

Consultation is difficult. Using the web as a tool might be most peoples' first suggestion. But the level of debate on the ACE blog is depressing and does nothing to reassure me about the potential for digital media to offer a more participative culture. What appears is a series of rants about tone and language. I don't doubt the importance of getting these right – but, please, a little more comment on the content would shape a more rigorous debate on the future of the arts.

As for the document itself, it's a difficult balance. Offer too much detail and be accused of stitching it all up or speak in such broad terms that it would be hard to argue against. For me, it's about right. Yes, there are things I would challenge and there are places where it could be braver but it is a considered, well contextualised set of ideas from a group of people who have clearly thought hard on how to position the arts for a future that is going to be different. I wouldn't have known where to start. Responding is a much easier game.

The big idea looks like a fixed term funding programme. I think this could have the biggest impact and is overdue. The current system of one size fits all is too blunt. However, it will mean fewer regularly funded organisations (RFOs) and those that remain will be expected to play more strategic roles. How else, with a reduced staff team, is the Arts Council going to achieve its ambitions? But isn't all funding fixed term? Maybe we should do away with RFOs altogether and develop particular, flexible relationships with a range of organisations. Some might be seen as infrastructural, others artistic. Then we could avoid a hierarchy in which everyone thinks they should aspire to becoming an RFO.

I think it odd that the Arts Council has a mission of 'Great art for everyone' and a goal specifically around young people. There is something Orwellian about the idea that 'all people are equal, but young people are more equal'. Surely everyone means everyone? Anyway I have noticed a trend, at least in theatre, for companies to no longer describe themselves as children's or theatre for young people anymore. The thinking seems to be describing work for a particular audience marginalises ambition. Better to make great work and attract as wide an audience as possible. Maybe the sector is ahead of policy? I really think there is an opportunity for the Arts Council to say something about the wholeness of its ambition, of the culture it aspires to create, if we stick with Great art for everyone.

How about replacing 'a targeted and limited fund for new buildings' with investment into increasing our capacity to tour all art forms. Haven't the national theatres of Scotland and Wales taught us anything about the needlessness of buildings? Most of the artists I know are working outside or in other people's spaces to reach new and more diverse audiences in ways that might excite them.

As for the goal for an arts sector that is sustainable, resilient and innovative. I understand the sentiment behind ACE's concern for artists 'not to worry about next week's wage bill' but is it not that worry which will ensure that the arts are 'resilient and innovative' as well as relevant and connected to its audiences. Indeed might Ace do better in describing the goals as expectations of the arts community themselves? 'Ask not what your Arts Council can do for you...'

What else? I think we still haven't cracked the significance of the connectedness between amateur and professional – certainly not in the way that sport gets it. Although I was at a knitting festival recently and was amazed by the generosity that community has for encouraging each other to be as good as they can be; sharing advice, resources, informally tutoring and celebrating skill in a way that most arts sectors could learn from. Indeed, I have long thought that the crafts have a lot to offer in terms of participation and inclusion. And I guess that's what I hope for most of all. That through this consultation exercise we find ways of developing a more collaborative, participative and mutually supportive arts sector.