

# Contracted Culture

The public (including artists) are not allowed to interject at the Scottish Arts Council's public meetings. They are not allowed to say anything at all. It is an Athenian Democracy but everyone must be gagged. No wonder then that the SAC has not motivated public attendance for these muted shows. Yet, in spite of their stiltedness, insights into the SAC's shadowing of Cultural Policy and indications of subsequent shifts can be gathered there, for those who do attend. The question still has to be asked, is this the state of affairs everyone wants?

In contrast, recent artist-run events in Scotland have encouraged debate on a wide range of issues affecting artists. Events such as the series of panel discussions accompanying PLANO XXI (an artist-curated event of Portuguese contemporary art and music at venues across Glasgow) and I Love Alternative Spaces (organised by the 'artist-led' Collective Gallery in Edinburgh). Noticeably, the participants at these events took up the task of exploring the socio-economic conditions in which artists live and work. Far from 'moaning and whining', these events had an air of urgency about them.

Drawing from these events and a swathe of Cultural Policy material, this article is an attempt to position current influences on artists and artist-run projects; to question the authenticity of artists' alleged 'independent' status, and to speculate on the wider implications for artists and artist-run projects in the face of the current political re-organisation and exploitation of Culture.

## Domestication

The received wisdom amongst artists is of the vitality and independence of the Contemporary Visual Arts in Scotland, that they are "self-sustaining." In contradiction to this asserted potency, another all too common assertion (often in the same breath) is that contemporary artists' networks in Scotland are lacking "a market."

While certain aspects of the visual arts' infrastructure in Scotland has been publicly funded by the Scottish Arts Council's Visual Arts Department—which is not to claim a democracy of allocation—there is no domestic private dealership system which ultimately supports this type of work. Yet the public funding mechanisms have functioned in absence of this dealership, supporting a concept of work that is fundamentally premised on its circulation as a unique commodity and, in tandem with the art schools, abetted in internalising the narrow view of such an individualistic system's 'reward capacity'.

As a consequence of this market hyperbole, private dealers stake a minor amount of capital in the contemporary visual arts in the UK yet hold a dominant position in the minds of the majority of artists and public funders. The lack of such an explicit dealership body resident in Scotland is peddled—by public funders and artists alike—as an obstruction to greater access to a mythologised 'free' market. As if the existence and localisation of private finance capital inclined to speculate in the contemporary visual arts somehow finalise a greater Cultural maturity.

The deception is of a direct correlation between the artist's symbolic value accrued in the public sector and a monetary value within the private sector. That the symbolic value of the artist and work can immediately translate into monetary reward. It is an attempt at legitimising public spending on cultural production on the back of a particular economic mechanism, one which documents artist-led activity as nothing other than a feeder system for the private sector.

## Malignant benevolence

But public funding is not only to legislate as a research-and-development instrument for the benefit of an allegedly remote market. The Visual Arts Department at the SAC also have the task of coercing artists and arts organisations to conjure both a domestic and international market for the purpose of gradually superseding aspects of the SAC's own role. A surrogate commercial sphere will be created, therefore marketisation is necessary and will be instilled through a managerial discourse imposed on the public sector.

The Visual Arts Department needs no help in condemning its own existence, and more broadly that of the SAC's—in campaigning for the market exploitation of culture it (mis)aligns freedom of expression with the 'free' market. It contrasts the private sector as a disinterested unrestricted space where 'anything goes', against public money's rationed resources and creatively prohibitive criteria. Sadly, private finance does not work that way. It is conservatively speculative. Seeking to appeal to the largest common denominator it reinforces orthodoxy. Far from being innovative it is self-replicating in mimicking tried-and-tested 'formulae for success'. If the Visual Arts Department look to commercial qualities as principle indicators of worth, they will cease to fund 'cultural activity' that is distinguishable from a broader marketisation and circulation of products already in existence.

The public funding system has helped sustain (if not wholly understood) the social world of the economy of the contemporary visual arts—rather than supporting an infrastructure which tackles deficiencies in the relations of production and enables access to the means of production and distribution. Supposedly it uses private capital (in the form of taxes) to offset disproportionate distribution of opportunity and representation. But the system has been given over to enhancing concentrations of wealth and their influence.

Commercial sponsorship often seeks to associate with the 'social world' aspect of conspicuous consumption, which is taken to be as equally important as any capacity for production—the cliché: "you don't sell a product, you sell a lifestyle." Central to this is a quasi-version of a concept of art that celebrates individualism by means of the idea of the self-motivating and self-creating artist who embodies a heightened and highly valued subjectivity.

Within the artist-lead sector the social-scene—the circulation of fashion in clothing, music, etc.—has become increasingly foregrounded to the point of stylistic association and accumulation not just acting to re-inforce the social structure but becoming the very work. Accompanying this turn in practice has been a return to a notion of the modernist autonomous art object—not that anyone remembers it going away. Locked in its white walled cell seemingly arrested from any external distraction or stimuli, its ambiguousness is mitigated by a belief in the power of the work to express itself, of the transparency of high culture. This 'return' can be understood in part as a reaction to increasingly exclusionary public funding criteria, the seemingly economic impoverishment of the public sector, and an internalisation of an agenda of macho self-reliance and a fantasy of freedom from social constraint. 'Independent' and 'alternative' as banded around the artist-led scenes relate less, if at all, to the ideological basis of the work but more to the economic impoverishment of the practitioners.

## The breakers' yard

Having asserted the key role that the public funding bodies play for the arts in Scotland, the explicit shift in these bodies has been from one of an image of an advocate of cultural space based on democratic freedoms and rights, residually open to further development and radicalisation, to one of a more explicit 'cultural broker'. With yet another rear-garde adoption of enterprise rhetoric, the Visual Arts Department at the SAC has started making claims to being a 'development agency', advocating a role in brokering relations between public and private monies using leverage of public funds as inducement for arts organisations.

It would seem both arts organisations' and comparatively the Visual Arts Department's 'public accountability' is to be measured by the SAC, and in turn the Scottish Executive, in organisations' ability to gratify the private sector in a diminishing of the Department's role as a funding body in what were its established areas of support—for aspects of the arts to become primarily dependent on and channelled by private sources. In explicitly aligning Culture with commercial values in this way, the SAC has (supposedly unproblematically) substituted a cultural prerogative for a more conspicuous commercial competitiveness. To participate in pronouncements of "self-sustainability" is effectively to allude to and reinforce the compounding of the public sphere with the commercial, a stripping-back and commodification of the properties of the public sector altogether.

## "When they hear the word Culture, they reach for their management tools."

There is another strand of pressure currently being brought to bear on public funding bodies such as the Scottish Arts Council and Local Authorities—the 'issues of purpose' of public money are to be more explicitly allied with the government's fancies of social policing. This has manifested primarily through the Scottish Executive's National Cultural Strategy, itself an adjunct of the government's Social Inclusion hyperbole.

All cultural production has a political existence in that it either challenges or supports the dominant myths a culture calls 'truths', it participates in the circulation of relative values and meanings, and there is an unacknowledged struggle over who determines this or these 'truths'. Cultural practices and institutions that make meaning, where symbolic communication is the main purpose, are being brought to heel through pressure exerted via public funding mechanisms. The public funding mechanisms themselves are being steadily reeled in by government with the objective of their 'issues of purpose' augmenting other areas of government policy, such as 'education', 'urban regeneration' and whatever else takes their fancy.

Art—more broadly Culture—is now to serve highly prescriptive social and economic ends, and, as a medium of making sense of the world, exploited to influence the perception of weaker state responsibility as unavoidable. This aligning of arts' funding priorities to other fields of government policy—and their financial resources—could be interpreted as what is meant by 'joined-up government'.

For the SAC, claiming to be working "with greater flexibility and effectiveness" means contorting itself to best fit the uncomfortable mould of its new task masters.

## The free Market is compulsory

'Culture' is seen as constituting a particular field

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of government, on which there is heightened emphasis with new-Labour. Its vague yet viral promotion of a 'Culture Industry' can be understood as a PR distraction, the surrogate for an economy based on manufacturing. New-Labour poses state intervention for a 'new economy' as seeking to influence the public perception on which it hazards this phantasmagoric 'new' economy to be contingent. With the constitutionally limited remit of the Scottish Executive this is even more exposed.

Within an ideology of 'governing by influencing cultures of behaviour' Culture is treated as one instrument of social influence. Government's means of enshrining and invoking market values through the public sphere—its Third Way melange. In what is a standardising of its subject audience within a delimited culture of 'Common Purpose', Culture is to be re-organised on custodial grounds of 'moral supervision', intimately related to perverted versions of self-reliance and free enterprise. It is to abet in confirming rather than contesting 'free' market authority. The spin is: the 'socialisation' of those as seen as outside of the labour market via the reinforcement of an image of self-esteem through a work-ethic—an expansion of 'training programmes' targeting the unemployed, single-parents, and now pivotally children and young people. As a means to exert influence over 'cultures of behaviour' on target sections of the population, Culture has become the polite and less alarming synonym for Society.

Under the guise of inclusiveness, there is a tension between a commitment to free access to public museums and galleries with their new task of improving the social fabric of society in the form of an accentuated individual responsibility, and market principles that require the generation of private income as a leisure attraction. Pressure is on arts organisations to become magically self-sustaining by creating and increasing their private proportion of income whilst demonstrating a cathartic educational function. (The fact is that this has been going on long enough for everyone to conclude that this is not going to happen.) As a result the programming of these venues is required to appeal to a construct of the widest possible audience (yet paradoxically specifically for the young) and for it to be repositioned in terms of a consumer base contained within a pseudo-populist rhetoric of moral renewal.

## Oiling the wheels of the new moral machinery

In ratifying 'marketisation', artists are also being demoted to a client group (fodder) for an ascending private training/ administrative/ commissioning sector. This is a consequence of outsourcing from the public to the private sector and the naturalisation (or at least tacit acceptance) of a perception of a necessity for art to be complicit with state propaganda amongst this professional managerial class. With new-Labour soliciting a ménage à trois between government, the voluntary and private sectors, public funding is ceded in the form of a financial exchange, with virtual set briefs of their 'priorities' appearing as projects up for tender.

Under the guise of public funds being publicly accountable, there is a bovine bureaucratic migration towards the view that artists are in need of administering, guiding, training, mentoring, advising, re-skilling so as to be equipped to pay lip service to other fields of government policy. Helpfully this will also provide the subjugated mass for the expanding private managerial trade itself, with a vague objective of artists becoming trainers, mentors, advisors, re-skills of the jobless themselves in a kind of cycle of abuse in job-creation jobs.

This is a coercive attempt at a redesignation of

the locus of aesthetic practice, announced as an attempt to make art 'useful', and superimpose a correlative 'publicly accountable' end product. Culture itself is to be the aggressive conditioning influence on the 'wayward' segments of society—there is to be no room for discontent within culture, for a critique of power relations which implies a struggle with hegemonic powers. For this would bring to light the ideas which underlie and represent the vested interests of retarding independent progression and freedoms.

## Dispensing with distance

Much of what now constitutes the domain of the contemporary visual arts is an effect of other kinds of forces and relations of power, of a ruinous and opportunistic alignment of arts funding to other areas of government policy by government—to the extent of the Scottish Executive commanding direct jurisdiction over projects such as the highly suspect programme of 'Cultural Co-ordinators in Schools', announced as part of the National Cultural Strategy. Concern raised within the SAC is that the programme looks set to avoid its influence altogether; more importantly this would totally evade the vestigial political disclaimer of the Arts Council's "arms length" adage. The concerted force of influence is made explicit with the recent clarification from the Department of Culture Media & Sport in England that where the Scottish Executive ordains SAC involvement in delivering the priorities of the National Cultural Strategy, SAC can now explicitly solicit organisations. Moreover, in the event of those prioritised activities not being undertaken by any existing organisation, SAC can now concoct one with the explicit function of condoning the National Cultural Strategy—the erroneous assumption being it is in the interests of its own survival to do so. (These revised solicitation processes were announced and then agreed by Council in November 2000.)

With the SAC being reeled-in to become more of a direct apparatus of government—another threat of a "bonfire of the Quangos" hanging over them, the increasing "integration of Lottery and voted funds work", and Lottery still centrally defined from London—its function is not to encourage but explicitly intervene and impose what is espoused as legitimate cultural activity. The implications for policing and censorship are obvious. There will be very little resistance: in effect the funding system of reinforcement and reward has already been sufficiently internalised, and on the rare occasion when broached, too readily dismissed as nothing more than a survival tactic for artists and organisations alike. Intellectual honesty is not required.

Far from their pro-active independent image, many arts organisations are re-inventing themselves in a subservient supply and demand relationship to public funding criteria. With revenue funding for smaller organisations in question (especially within the Visual Arts) and private capital a figment of someone's sick imagination, 'educational workshops' for which funding is available are considered a justifiable survival tool for the rest of the artistic programme. It may just be out of such false realism that artists and organisations are participating (if colluding is too strong) in the integration of their more overt regulation.

"Their spiritual make-up has become elastic enough to make the constant doubt about their own pursuits part of their quest for survival. They know what they do, but they do it because, in the short run, the objective situation and the instinct for self-preservation speak the same language and tell them it must be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse."

**Peter Sloterdijk, *Cynicism—The Twilight of False Consciousness***



'Innovative' or 'marginal' cultural practices are being lost sight of in the interpretations and implementations by public funding agencies of overarching cultural policy directives—directives once claimed to come from 'consultation' with 'The Sector' itself. Consistently, what pass as alleged consultative and policy informing events are little more than one area of government (to varying degrees of power) talking to another in their various guises, re-inforcing the agenda of the day, re-affirming the message that is denied as being anything other than apolitical 'common sense'.

"[T]hat a political party or movement becomes hegemonic when it succeeds in normalising (or naturalising) its conception of the world—in making its world-view part of the cultural and political common sense, while simultaneously discrediting alternative worlds views."

**Jacinda Swanson; Self help: Clinton, Blair and the politics of personal responsibility, 'Radical Philosophy'**

Absolute codes of behaviour based on adherence to work-ethic priorities, consensus and central regulation abound as bureaucratic policy makers try to dictate the very terms of support and arts officers in turn interpret and peddle this cultural governance. Far from challenging this set of events, artists and artists' organisations in speculating in a competition for funding (wittingly or not) act to reinforce the tenuous grounds on which its allocation is based. Who remembers the initial moral flurry when the Lottery was first introduced as a potential means of additional funding, and how many now even question the extent of its overtly prescriptive criteria? The atomising of funding—the advent of deterministic funding streams for specified areas of activity, and one-off project funding—has peculiarly been allowed to act as the means of greater influence and closer regulation over those gaining receipt. A kind of amnesia, or self-denial, has set in as organisations continuously re-invent and re-align themselves to annual, schizophrenic alludings to 'prioritisations'. For those that the current 'prioritisations'—cunningly devised fables—may in fact appear to benefit, there again seems to be little questioning of the structural conditions that spawned them, a disinterested "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Acceptance of short-termism is to the detriment and exclusion of others despite all the redemptive claims. When resources are presented as scarce and competition for them high—a self-interested 'get it while you can' mentality proliferates. (Meanwhile there's more money sloshing around the coffers than ever before.) What real independence is fostered in the 'independent sector', when all policy towards it must reinforce the dumb acceptance of this system of 'cultural rationing'—gently explaining that there can only be room for x,y or z and that it is perfectly acceptable for independence to be explicitly excluded by government—in the name of cultural diversity and inclusion.

There appears to be little resistance to being over determined by relations that fix artists and artists' organisations as always-ever affectively subordinate to an externally devised and politically rigid agenda. The Year of the Artist is perhaps a prime example, where the discourses of the artists

(those that survive the system of vetting) are allowed to exist: but only if safely contained within the primary narrative of the Year of the Artist's pan-promotionalism.

The mantras of managerial efficiency, entrepreneurialism, and individual responsibility have over-run the public sphere and been consolidated under the new-Labour government's Third Way aberration. At the bottom end of this, the Visual Arts Sector, we see an illusion of sustenance by a mix of private patronage (spurred on by the state conducting itself like some tawdry cheerleader) and public patronage in the guise of a 'culturally generative force'.

### Propaganda of Individualism

Within the art schools the charismatic artists' 'do-it-yourself' rhetoric acts to conflate the existing sets of relations between the various speculating agents in the field of cultural production, neglecting the cumulative effects that have, and persist to cause, cultural capital to attract cultural capital, sustained by unquestioned notions of individualism. It has become a conventional and convenient facade that tends to obscure the relations of power while suggesting that everyone may simply choose to participate once equipped with the correct inclinations.

"[F]ocusing on individual agency and responsibility, such economic common sense plays an important ideological function in diverting attention away from structural conditions and differential power relations. Instead it blames bad economic conditions on the vice [failure] of individuals... The language of personal responsibility thereby reinforces a de-politicised conception of the economy... locating the solution to economic and social problems in the reform of individuals' character and not in government or community efforts to alter structural conditions or relations."

**Jacinda Swanson; Self help: Clinton, Blair and the politics of personal responsibility, 'Radical Philosophy'**

### Structural unemployment

Public funding is increasingly cut according to unproven government theories whilst simultaneously shifting the attention of solving structural problems away from government and onto individuals without the resources. Social and economic problems are re-conceived as problems of the individual, including their causes and solutions. The visual arts in Scotland are not an autonomous entity of their own devising but comprise of sites of interconnection and contestation between various bodies: local/ regional/ central government funding mechanisms (with all the shifting 'prioritisations' and 'issues of purpose' they carry with them); the corporate/ private sector; the Scottish Art Schools; workshop providers; individual artists and artists' networks. We must then view that which manifests as The Visual Arts in relation to the social/ political/ economic environment that exerts influence over its production and dissemination.

One outcome of the demands placed on artists' spaces through the public funding mechanisms to 'professionalise' their 'casual' labour structures has been their recent embracing of New Deal work experience placements. Surrounding such 'training opportunities' is the illusion of successful



trainees gaining a toe-hold in the labour market. Needless to say such work experience programmes do not actually create any jobs. Rather, in re-articulating a surplus of subsidised labour they—ironically—act to arrest any such occasion, providing the foundation for a high turn over of labour generally within the field, exacerbating competitiveness for existing jobs. So, while New Deal is opportunistically seen by arts organisations as another funding stream their actions are complicit in adding to the broader illusion of progression in the labour market. The same thing will happen on a wider scale to organisations.

### Arrested Development

It has been argued that artists' self-determination and individual agency was in part a critical project in its own right—exposing and circumventing unequal power relations; questioning assumptions of debilitating models of what constitutes 'the centre' and 'the periphery'; challenging the values associated to legitimate modes and courses of dissemination; entering into and propelling alternate fields of discourse...

Much of what passes as artist-run is being made to fixate on success and value as adjudicated via a pseudo-economic relation of profit making ability. This is defined by a weak and experimental formulation of market integration: in reality government deception towards individualising political problems. Increasingly self-censoring in adherence to these funding priorities, has resulted in an arresting of the imagination of what can constitute the politics of independent practice. This generalised submission to government/market jurisdiction (where perhaps there was a self-consciousness; an idealism of alterity; or at least a more self-aware, critical relationship before) has been a recuperation of a model of independent artist-led activity (personal responsibility) into a government propaganda model that exculpates flexible yet weak and insecure conceptions of employer and government responsibility.

It is hard to believe that historically this alignment was the aim of artist-run spaces, that subservience and not independence was the goal. There is need to position this debate within the context of the larger neo-conservative political agenda, but there is also need to investigate the social and ideological positions taken up by artists and arts administrators so as not to absolve them—us—of responsibility for the situations we find ourselves in.