

Editorial

I don't have time for this

Most artists and arts administrators agree that the last thing they want to do is go to another meeting about future strategies for arts funding. There's so much 'public consultation' already, most of it performed by 'independent' third parties, who somehow never manage to 'consult' the most relevant people. We're a little worn out by it, and we seldom seem to see the benefits of it. The trouble is, the decisions that are about to be taken, in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, will affect the shape of arts provision for a generation. Fundamental questions are now being asked by central and devolved governments about how the arts should be funded. Tedious as it may seem, it's essential that practitioners and arts organisations involve themselves in addressing these questions; particularly because politicians may already have answers of their own in mind about what 'uses' culture might have.

In Northern Ireland, the Review of Public Administration (RPA) has just been published. It aims to cut the size of the public sector in the North, from the 26 District Councils to the various Executive Agencies and 'Executive Non-Departmental Bodies' such as the Pig Production Development Committee and, of course, our own dear Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The laudable plan is to pass as much responsibility as possible back from the many unaccountable quangos set up during twenty-five years of direct rule to the various departments of the new Executive.

The relevant passage of the RPA reads as follows: "The alternative to the existing executive public body would be to delegate most of the Arts Council's grant giving power to local government and to bring the remaining funding within DCAL [Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Northern Ireland] for direct support of regionally important projects."

The potential for political influence is clearly one problem with direct executive funding of the arts. This isn't some conspiracy theory, just an observation about politicians' priorities: if you can redirect arts funding towards so-called 'social

regeneration', particularly the kind that's very visible in your own constituency, then why not? The various political parties in the North have not so far had any particular love for the arts. It's quite possible that after any resumption of the Executive, Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists could be running DCAL. The DUP are more well known for picketing and censoring art forms they don't like than for supporting experimentation and innovation. As the RPA itself points out, "... there is support for the long established principle that [arts funding] is best done at arm's length from government to avoid the suspicion of undue political influence in individual decisions and to protect Ministers from being directly answerable for the policies and performance of organisations or individuals in receipt of funding."

The principle of peer review and expertise is also at stake. Within the current Arts Council, imperfect as it undoubtedly is, there is an established system of evaluation of applications by panels of artists, and furthermore there's the many years of experience that arts officers have in assessing artforms. The politicians and civil servants don't have that. So why waste time duplicating, relearning, and so on, when the object is supposedly to save money? This is all very straightforward for (say) pig production, but cultural provision is not just about economic throughput and return. The return is largely – horror of horrors! – unquantifiable.

If grant-giving powers are devolved to the local authorities and DCAL, furthermore, then small arts organisations face yet more bureaucracy. Those not designated as 'regionally important' (probably this excludes most organisations that aren't the Ulster Orchestra or the Grand Opera House), but who routinely carry out arts activity in different council regions, will have to duplicate their funding applications to several authorities. They'll also have to work out which one will provide their core funding.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, having realised last year that their future could only be secured if they made common cause with their clients, are now organising a series of

'workshops' across the North to meet clients and concerned parties with regard to their response to the RPA, which has to be submitted by the end of September. It's in all our interests that this response makes as strong a case as possible against direct executive funding. We'd therefore urge all interested parties to get involved in the consultation process – the dates of the various discussions are shown in the ACNI's ad elsewhere in the magazine.

In case you think that the closure of the Arts Council is an unlikely option, bear in mind that this was precisely what the Welsh Assembly wanted to do to the Arts Council of Wales. Only at the last minute did practitioners manage to raise enough of a rumpus to scupper the Assembly's plans. Several 'regionally important' groups – theatres and orchestras again – were nonetheless 'topslliced' and are now funded not by the ACW but by the Assembly.

Meanwhile...

Arts Council charm offensive hits first hurdle with return of literalist bureaucracy!

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland will have to work harder to convince practitioners that "we're all on the same side really". Applicants for this year's General Arts Awards to individuals who had also received an award under the same scheme last year were told that their applications could not be considered, since the rules state very clearly that only one award may be made in any twelve-month period. Most applicants probably felt that the 364 days that separated the 2004 and 2005 deadlines constituted twelve months: surely one was 'last year's award' and one was 'this year's'? Unfortunately the Arts Council did not feel the same. Public funds will now be wasted considering the inevitable appeals, and extra money may have to be found to subsidise applications for which there was no sane grounds for disqualification. Little misunderstandings such as this may not help the ACNI's new project of encouraging us to find common cause with them in their hour of need.

Letters

Dear Variant,

21/4/05

I read with great interest Leigh French's article on progress with producing a new visual-arts magazine for Scotland. It was good to see made so explicit how such a magazine has to negotiate a complex theoretical, political and cultural minefield if it is to be useful and successful.

There were a number of aspects of the article which touched on CIRCA, and I would like to add a few correctives:

(a) In 1996 the Scottish Arts Council gave CIRCA £2,000 towards researching a Scottish supplement to the magazine. The supplement itself was self-financing, through advertising (and because CIRCA covered the overheads). The Editorial Panel – Sam Ainsley, Malcolm Dickson, Judith Findlay, Neil Firth, Kevin Henderson and Eva Rothschild – determined the content. The British Council, because they were approached by us and because it was a one-off event, agreed to send the supplement to all British embassies.

(b) CIRCA did not tender for the new Scottish visual-arts magazine.

(c) We haven't decided to ditch the compact format of CIRCA – though we are in a process of redesign, and anything could happen.

(d) It's a bit of a stretch to describe CIRCA as "almost entirely publicly subsidised"; approximately 40% of our income comes in grants from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

If, as the article suggests, CIRCA is the model in some people's minds for how the new Scottish

magazine might appear, then I can guess at one reason why progress has been slow: although it is a large sum, £200,000 over three years is probably completely inadequate. The key problem, as far as I can see, is that by the time advertising income is at a healthy level – after a year or two, say – production costs, salaries and overheads will have dug a very deep hole of debt from which it might be impossible to recover. Just a guess. In that respect, teaming up with The List does make sense, as some costs can be shared. As for only employing the editor two days a week – as the article suggests – and expecting the magazine to come together: I suspect the editor would spend the remaining five days of the week in therapy.

I really hope the new magazine does appear, and soon, whoever the publisher may be. There is so much good art, and so many good writers in Scotland, that such a magazine is long overdue.

Keep up the good work,
Peter

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Variant responds:

Dear Peter,
Thank you for clarifying that CIRCA did not tender for the Scottish Arts Council's new Visual Arts magazine—which narrows their 'selection' even more.

You may perceive the British Council support for the supplement in CIRCA as 'matter of fact', but inequitable use of institutional resources is just that, inequitable.

We can inform CIRCA that The Map was launched in Edinburgh in early February and is commercially published by The List group. Despite recently being further underpinned by a SAC subscriptions drive, this 'invisibility' neatly serves to illustrate the deficiencies in their imposed market 'solutions'.

Presenting the SAC's decision making processes as merely pragmatic is to negate their political complexity, and the negative impact such corporatist consolidations of market and institutional power have on 'cultural diversity'—to use their language.

There may well be 'many good writers in Scotland', but this is largely due to the support of self-organised networks, and this latest rebuttal is based on the market exploitation of their knowledge and circumstances.

You may consider that £200,000 is small fry to produce a magazine with salaried staff, even with privileged institutional co-operation, but we would like to take the opportunity to thank the SAC Literature Department in awarding Variant an annual project grant of £9,200 towards the production of three issues of Variant magazine and for their support of the independence of Variant's editorial.

Letters (continued)

Commons Service Group

In response to the WTO's empire, we recommend art.

Dear Variant, 28/3/05

The Commons Service Group, a curatorial collective based at the *Ecole du Magasin Professionnel Curatorial Training Program*, writes to you from Grenoble, France. We are interested in *Variant's* position as a "form of collaborative curatorial / aesthetic practice in its own right and an educational, discursive public space" (Editorial Winter 2004). We would like to invite *Variant* to participate in a curatorial project that functions as an "aesthetic maneuver" to disseminate information on the significance of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for contemporary art production.

The GATS is an agreement between the 146 member countries of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). When the GATS came into effect in January 1995, culture was initially exempted—but only for a period of ten years. In 2005, culture and many other publicly funded "services" are due to be renegotiated. The GATS will have serious consequences for the cultural field, yet little information is available because GATS negotiations have occurred outside democratic processes. The GATS reduces the trade of immaterial goods—designated as "services"—to solely commercial value, and encapsulates the cultural sphere within the category "Recreational, cultural and sporting services". Of particular concern is that GATS "national treatment" rules designate government funding of public services and non-profit organizations as "distorting trade" and a potential "barrier to trade", violating the GATS.



The Commons Service Group is working with artists to create a series of A5 single-page "inserts" which will be disseminated via an international selection of free contemporary art publications—both in print and on-line—in May and June. We propose that *Variant* participate through the placement of inserts in the next issue, and also via the web version. These inserts comprise one element of a larger curatorial project. *The Commons Service Group* declares contemporary art a "GATS Free Zone" and will be present at the professional opening of the Venice Biennale with

a portable kiosk—to be created by artist/architect collaborators *Public Works*.

We believe that art is part of the commons, that it should circulate freely, and that culture cannot be regulated as a trade commodity. We have specifically chosen to work with free art publications because they are supported by public cultural funding. We align ourselves with artistic practices that propose alternative economies and modes of exchange, and that envision new models of work. We admire *Variant's* initiative and dedication in creating a space for critical engagement with the social, economic and political context of contemporary cultural production. For these reasons we are asking for *Variant's* collaboration.

We will happily answer any questions you have about this project. We also invite you to visit our web site where we have created an information kit on the GATS:

www.ecoledumagasin.com/csg/

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The Commons Service Group are delighted that *Variant* has participated in this project, presenting readers with inserts created in collaboration with artists: Lara Almarcegui (Netherlands), Etienne Cliquet (France), Maura Doyle (Canada), Claude Lévêque (France), Chris Lloyd (Canada), Public Works (UK), Antje Schiffers (Germany), YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (Korea).

Other participating publications: *L'Art Même* (Belgium), *Fucking Good Art* (Netherlands), *Hors d'Oeuvre* (France), <http://multitudes.samizdat.net> (France), *Nero* (Italy), *Republicart* (EU), <http://samplesize.ca> (Canada).

Elsa Stansfield (1945-2004)

Pioneer of European artists' video



For more than thirty years, the Amsterdam-based artists Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield have been creating both discrete and monumental works and installations across the world. Now this successful international partnership has drawn to an end. In the morning of Tuesday, November 30, Elsa Stansfield died, after a two month struggle against acute leukemia.

Elsa Stansfield was born and grew up in Glasgow and later trained in London, where she studied film at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. From 1972 she worked regularly with Madelon Hooykaas on collaborative film- and videoprojects in London and Amsterdam. In 1980 she was asked to develop the department of video/sound at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht and consequently she decided to settle down permanently in the Netherlands.

Stansfield and Hooykaas are closely associated with the development of video art in the Netherlands although they might be more properly referred

to as sculptors using a wide range of media, both old and new. Materials such as copper, lead and stone are combined with contemporary media and methods resulting often in keynote commissions such as their work 'Abri' situated in the sand dunes near Wijk aan Zee. The work manifests itself as a kind of parabolic dish, situated within it is a seat, giving view over dunes and sea. Visitors can, sheltered by this 'shield', listen to the amplified sounds of wind, birds and the breaking of waves.

The work she made with Hooykaas has been exhibited all over the world, for example at the Documenta in 1987, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and at exhibitions in Sydney, Montreal and Tokyo. Elsa retained strong links with Scotland, exhibiting their first video installation at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow in 1975, and most recently a new video installation at the Visual Research Centre, Dundee Contemporary Arts in April 2004. Stansfield and Hooykaas were well known and respected by their peers across the UK. David

Hall, the pioneer of British video art commented on hearing of Elsa's death:

"Elsa was the first artist to be awarded an Arts Council bursary to work with video in my department at Maidstone College of Art in the mid-seventies. Later, from 1980, as head of time-based media at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, Holland, she enthusiastically organised international seminars and exhibitions. Her work in association with Madelon Hooykaas will be remembered as of profound importance in the developing European video art scene."

Sue Hall, another colleague from the early days of European video scene said:

"From one of Elsa & Madelon's art videos I remember the chaotic tranquillity & soothing rhythm of breaking waves. That's the image I see when I think of Elsa. Compact, dark, intense, clever & a completely original artist. On her own path, with Madelon, a unique talent whose art could immerse an audience in her world."

Elsa was an artist, inspirational teacher, and profound thinker. One of her ex-students Justin

Bennett, now an established new media artist, offers the following thoughts:

"I met Elsa for the first time in 1991 through a mysterious bullet hole in the window of a gallery she and Madelon were exhibiting in. Although I was a fan of their work since seeing the grey, grainy photos in an old LYC booklet, the meeting was the start of a long, though sporadic relationship. I studied with Elsa the next year at the Jan Van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, and thereafter collaborated occasionally by making soundtracks for their work. Elsa was a great teacher – one who didn't have to say very much to get me thinking. Sometimes her comments could be completely off the wall, and only much later it would dawn on me what she had meant.

Steve Partridge