

# Editorial

Glasgow is posed as a poster-child for post-industrial culture-led urban renewal; ex-Council leader Steven Purcell – the schoolboy-like figure, hand outstretched, on the front cover of this issue of *Variant* – placed at its epicentre of city-boosterism. All this is now unravelling; Purcell quitting his posts and Scotland amidst cocaine and alcohol confessions to his regular lunch-colleague at the *Scottish Sun*. Yet straining to be asked, contra the column inches, is how deep does old boys' club cronyism and corruption run in the city elite's pursuit of property and place-marketing in all this?

As Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt annoyingly detailed here of Culture and Sport Glasgow, Council functions have been hived off in quick succession to arm's-length companies with Labour Councillors on board: care services, culture and leisure, catering, City Building for "all your requirements relating to Construction", parking, community safety, city marketing... Anything that can be transmogrified into an AELO has been. The official excuse for arm's-length external organisations, even amidst crunch 'n' squeeze ridicule, is the myth of market efficiency. Still, the costs of this privatisation of control and management of services and assets is borne by the public purse, over-and-above what it would have cost had the services remained in-house, only now beyond the boundaries of public scrutiny and control too. Proliferation of this network of spin-off companies is not unique to Glasgow; its elaborate system of political patronage perhaps is. And only now do we hear belated Scottish government cries for inquiry into spin-off companies where salaries have ballooned, conditions for staff deteriorated, and thousands spent on euphemistic 'hospitality' has circulated back into Party coffers.

Steven Purcell was, in large measure, a media creation of managerial hubris, and his story remains so. We've been led to believe Purcell was the best thing to happen in Scottish Labour politics for decades. The media relaying that he was even a future First Minister. The Glasgow press has paid homage to Purcell all these years, portraying him as the icon of modern sophistication; embodying him as the symbol of market-orientated entrepreneurial governance. Purcell wanted a 'glamorous' Glasgow to lead the headlines – the shops mostly, especially the more expensive ones – not the corollary neglect. But the growth-coalition wizard absconded as Sauchiehall Street, the upper arm of the fabled golden 'Z' of Glasgow retail, degenerates into a combo of Pound Shops and collapsing paving stones.

What happened to the man who wielded a £2.5 billion budget one day and vanished into thin air the next?

This story goes that alcoholism and a breakdown brought on by work pressures (fingering the Commonwealth Games) led Purcell to rush to resign both his Leader and Councillor

posts within days and then flee the country; and in the midst of this mayhem find time to appoint lawyers and a PR company and attempt to gag his former colleagues who've sought to distance themselves, and the Party.

Media coverage has unsurprisingly tended to focus on "demons" and "downfall", on morality and confessional. Yet the personal circumstances of Purcell are, mostly, moot. However, the personification of Purcell with a 'life-style' of conspicuous consumption cuts both ways.

Hoisted by their own petard, the Council has denounced their own managerialist rhetoric of 'strong' Leadership, worried that "everything the council achieved during Mr Purcell's time as leader has somehow been devalued". This acute reversal cautions that the "City is not just about one man", that the city 'transformations' were "not because of the person who was in charge but because of the hard work and dedication of you and your colleagues" – for those who retained their jobs amidst the plunder of infrastructure in the pursuit of urban revalorisation.

The real issue remains that which 'scandal' obfuscates: the cronyism and corruption of a hurried restructuring of local government along lines of market largesse at public expense; how here, as elsewhere, de-industrialisation has spawned an 'economy' of superintended consumerism reliant on exploiting a low-waged vulnerable service class; how property speculation's boom-and-bust has blighted the city and reinforced extremes of inequality masked by pageant.

As a property-market magazine candidly concluded in March, under the banner 'Loss of council's Team Glasgow is huge blow for property': the scandal surrounding Purcell may grab the headlines, but the loss will ultimately be the property industry's. Whereas polite press commentary had been, until late, satisfied running emotive stories of Purcell's personal habits, skirting his otherwise well known relationships with Glasgow property subsidy-junkies.

The dearth of mainstream media reporting led to online speculation of Purcell's all-too-cosy relationship with sectors of the Scottish media and its failure to fulfill its elusive role of holding power to account – namely, the press's part in a regular Friday drinking date, dubbed 'The Ritz Club', which, *Holyrood Magazine* toyed, "included the editors of rival red tops [David Dinsmore], the *Herald's* departing editor-in-chief [Donald Martin] and Purcell himself..." There was no news in the Truth / No truth in the News. But still the complex network of Councillors, businessmen and public sector chiefs, most with connections to the Labour Party, in Glasgow's iconic 'redevelopment' went for the time largely untroubled.

A prickled *Sunday Herald* driven by the *Scotsman* and the *Scottish Daily Mail* to comment responded to "suggestions of a network of

powerful figures working behind the scenes to influence the workings of the city ... that this so-called network includes leading figures from the media [and] is now threatening to undermine public confidence in the integrity of the Scottish press", as there have "been hints that some Scottish newspapers have pulled their punches on the controversy because editors have been too close to Mr Purcell or, worse, they have been cowed into submission by Peter Watson and PR firm Media House." The former was wished away: "Glasgow is a large city but its political and business centre is small. Personal and business relationships meld together, contacts extend and overlap, boundaries blur. Business dinners become social occasions, colleagues become friends."

Culture & Sport Glasgow's hectoring of *Variant* following Rebecca's analysis of its interconnected business interests should be reassessed in light of this epiphany. In 2008, Culture & Sport Glasgow took over the research department and text archive for Newsquest (*Herald*, *Sunday Herald*, *Evening Times*) resulting in job losses. Someone interested in the rudiments of democracy might want to ask how a privatised arm of Glasgow City Council was allowed to become so tightly interconnected with Glasgow's dominant media group, what with the NUJ's Vice-President-come-President also being the head of PR for spin-off Culture & Sport Glasgow at the time?

As Neil Gray, examining Workers' City resistance to Glasgow's 1990 City of Culture to better understand the continuum of dispossession, writes in this issue of *Variant*: "...Purcell only reiterated neoliberal convention when he promised that 'Team Glasgow' (an un-elected cabal of business leaders purporting to represent the wider interests of 'Glasgow') would do everything they could to help businesses 'cope with the downturn': 'The first thing that all public bodies, including my own Council, must do, is to examine where we can help business by being more flexible and willing to do things differently. This is no time for unnecessary rules and processes; this is a time to do everything we can to help'". Quite.

"Discovering the basis for happiness and contentment among frugality is not an individual endeavour...", Gesa Helms too writes in this issue of *Variant*. Taking such a social pursuit of understanding, in this issue we also look further afield for ideas and values in the hope that some seeds might land here. In this spirit – all too aware an entrepreneurial ideology in the public provision of culture has been passed-off onto Scotland – we re-publish the following encouragement from Poland:

## Radical Change In Culture / Manifesto

### Preamble

Culture is one of the most important fields in the struggle for a more democratic, egalitarian and free society. If the changes currently proposed to this field by the Polish authorities are not subject to a wide social debate, consultation and criticism, they will bring catastrophic results for both the producers of culture and society as a whole. Culture should be perceived as a public good, not a privilege for a selected group of citizens. The dangers embedded in the governmental proposals for reforms in the domain of culture have already been discussed by artists, theorists, cultural and social activists. All agree that culture is a very specific field of production, and that it would be endangered by an exclusively market-oriented

strategy of organizing it.

For the Polish authorities, culture appears to be just another life-sphere ready to be colonized by neoliberal capitalism. Attempts are being made to persuade us that the 'free' market, productivity and income oriented activities are the only rational, feasible and universal laws for social development. This is a lie. For us – the cultural producers – culture is a space of innovation and experimental activity, an environment for lively self-realization. This is under threat. Our lives, emotions, vulnerability, doubts, purposes and ideas are to become a commodity – in other words, a mere product to fuel the development of new forms of capitalist exploitation. It is not culture that needs "business exercises" it is the market that needs a cultural revolution. That

revolution should not be understood as a one time "coup d'état", but as a permanent, vigilant and compassionate dissent, a will to protest against, verify and criticize any form of colonization of the field of culture for the private interests of market players and bureaucrats.

Therefore we say: "We would prefer not to". Our resistance is an expression of our more general protest against the commodification of social relations, its reifying character and general social injustice. We hereby express our existential and political solidarity with the people who oppose this marketization of all spheres of social and personal life. Culture plays an important role as a space for experimentation and reflection, for creating mutual trust and bonds between people. Cultural interactions based on the spontaneous activity of

individuals and groups play a crucial role for the development of the society, including its economic dimension. Recognizing the importance of this is a necessary step in creating a space for self-realization and democratic debate.

We will not be bribed with special privileges like the recently announced “1% of the GNP for culture”. We will not be distracted from our vision of the social world, in which the producers of cultural symbols would be able to pursue their activities in a heterogenous, self-governed community made of free, equal and diverse individuals respecting solidarity. These are the necessary conditions for culture to cease to be a privilege, and to allow culture to become a true right of everyone to freely shape their life. That is what we want and this is what we will aim for.

## What Are We Against?

### Against bureaucrats and economists governing the domain of culture

The economists tend to misunderstand the distinctive character of culture as a domain of the common social life of the multiplicity of people and their activities. They employ the same theoretical tools to speak about culture as they would to growing potatoes or manufacturing vacuum cleaners. Culture is not subject to the simple calculations of investments and profits. A much more appropriate set of descriptive tools might be provided by concepts such as potlatch, carnival, excess, transgression or generosity. Terms apparently unknown to economists, who not only would not understand them, but tend to seriously misunderstand their power. At this very moment the same hedge fund management and financial specialists, who in the current financial crisis have proven their incompetence, short-sightedness, arrogance, self-interest and greed, are beginning to “reform” and “restructure” another domain: culture.

### Against the commercialization of culture

The application of the laws of supply and demand combined with an introduction of concepts such as “market value” into the sphere of culture will certainly have a negative impact on its quality. In our opinion Jenny Holzer’s slogan “Protect Me from What I Want” undoubtedly constitutes a better principle for culture than “free” market values. For the development of democracy, equality an open access to culture is crucial. It provides the society with tools to transform itself and encourages participation in politics too. The ‘free’ market restricts these forms of participation to the economically privileged. We will not hand over our power of collective cultural decision making to finance. We shall not let money be the ultimate condition of the development of culture and society.

### Against the instrumentalisation of culture

The efforts by our leaders to use culture as a tool for the accomplishment of short-term and short-sighted aims; such as the promotion of a region or city, electioneering, the management of national identity, and so on, always leads to cultural impoverishment. We therefore want culture to be free from the duties and obligations of professional politics, whether in the form of imposed topical social issues, tying funding to designated political contexts or the promotion of official ideologies. It does not mean however, that we support politically indifferent culture enclosed in its own consecrated world and projecting itself and its own interests back onto the society in which we all live. We believe that the opposition between “pure art” and “engaged art” is false, this has already been demonstrated through the history of the avantgarde, modernism, critical postmodernism and various critical aesthetic theories. Art is most effective and its influence on society is strongest not when it is locked in an

ideological cage, but when it can freely profit from autonomy. We therefore agree with Guy Debord: “The point is not to put poetry at the service of revolution, but to put revolution at the service of poetry”.

### Against elimination or impairment of the cultural public sector

Culture is a public good par excellence. All public institutions should therefore guarantee public access to culture and the ability to produce it. One of the indispensable conditions of the autonomy of culture and a necessary element of an appropriate cultural education is the efficient functioning of public institutions – which must act according to their public mission, and not for the sake of the private gain of politicians or municipal authorities.

## What We Propose

### Elimination of the centralized, bureaucratic model of governing culture and, in its place, the opening of social councils for culture and art

The councils (regional and national) would make decisions concerning all the cultural institutions including art academies. Both the producers of culture and its publics would participate in the councils (and would be chosen according to the principles of participatory democracy, including participatory budget procedures). The constitution of the councils would nevertheless have a mixed character (politeo-democratic or meritocratic-and-democratic) so that the art producers would have more power than could be implied by their sheer number. The councils would transform culture into a genuinely public good, so that it would cease to be state property it wouldn’t be just a toy in the hands of bureaucrats and politicians, who use it for their own purposes of self-promotion, political propaganda, electoral campaigns, etc.). The national or regional offices would only have executive, consultative and administrative functions – councils would become sites of democratic power based on meritocratic principles, not on the needs of particular political groups or markets. The councils would gain real prerogatives and qualifications for decision making and control over the work of officials, which would differentiate them from existing bodies of evaluation and counseling, which generally serve as tokens for bureaucratic control at work.

### Equal legal status of various forms of intellectual property

Culture is malfunctioning in a regime of closed intellectual property a regime of copyright, trademarks, and patents – just to mention the most common forms of exclusive legal organization. Ideas, inventions and concepts should circulate freely – be used, modified and cross-connected in order to create new cultural value, not harnessed to the market for the private accumulation of profit. Some currents of contemporary culture, like film or music have already exceeded this legal framework of intellectual property rights and they constantly cross the limits of what would be considered “legal” (i.e. found footage, mash-up, sampling, mixing and other new media techniques). We will therefore promote and apply alternative and democratic forms of protection and redistribution of the author’s rights using “open license” strategies. Meanwhile, we demand the introduction and extension of the existing forms of production and distribution of culture in ways that would be appropriate for the new, horizontal exchange, distribution and circulation of cultural production. We are against restricting the distribution of culture according to the aim of maximising profit.

### Social welfare of (not only) art producers

A vast majority of art producers (both – artists and organizers of events) currently live under

conditions of precarity, without social insurance or any hope for retirement benefits. This condition of precarity does not necessarily mean that artists live in poverty, but it forces them into a state of permanent instability and insecurity about their future. The domains where art producers are not benefiting from full employment, like visual art and literature, and where the only way of providing oneself with health insurance or retirement (i.e. buying it), means that they are forced into the marketplace and forced to adapt to its conditions. The art producers who for various reasons do not participate in this “free” market exchange are condemned to live in a state of permanent risk. The market itself cannot provide the distribution of resources which could alleviate that precarity. The market makes us live in a world where everybody works, and only a few profit, whereas an effective development of the process of symbolic production requires the participation of all members of the social network regardless of the ability to pay. Without the whole collective body of cultural producers and their publics (i.e. the art milieu and the art scene) no “genius” will appear – neither in painting nor critical video art, neither installation art nor performance, neither sculpture nor socially engaged practice. The only reasonable solution would be to propose an unconditional guaranteed salary for all cultural producers, which would not be a form of a social hand-out but signify a recognition of their role in creating all the creative and cultural resources of society. In a longer perspective this would lead to the regulation of the legal guarantee for a common wage based on a redistribution of incomes from the top to the lowest level of income, for all members of the society.

### Basic education about contemporary culture

We demand an introduction of a new topic – contemporary culture – to the basic school education, starting with kindergarten. These lessons would provide knowledge on the main issues in culture of the last 20 years, with a special emphasis on current art production. The lessons should have an interdisciplinary character – developing knowledge and experience in both theory (elements of history of philosophy, history of art, art theory and art criticism) and practice (visits to concerts, exhibitions, theater shows, participation in critical debates). As it can already be understood, this education would not mean a grinding of cultural knowledge, but rather a work on creating self-determined, critical and informed forms of reception and participation in culture. Such knowledge and experience should aim to facilitate the creation of non-hierarchical, nonviolent models for sharing one’s opinions and experiences. It would therefore become a preparatory class for critical reflection, participation and living in a direct democracy.

### Signed by the members of the committee for a radical change in culture:

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