

92-017

DISCUSSION DOCUMENT



INTRODUCTION

Within this folder is a discussion document produced as part of the process of putting together a national strategy for the arts and media. It does not form part of the strategy. Neither does it express any sort of 'official' view. It was written in order to focus discussion and stimulate ideas.

WHY?

The arts and media in Britain are in renaissance. Over the last decade, they have shown a confidence and diversity never seen before. In quality of work and audience demand, the arts and media have never looked healthier or more central to people's lives. More than ever before, the arts are a source of civic pride as well as personal enrichment.

The arts and media in Britain are in crisis. Scarcely a day goes by without press stories of theatres facing closure, grants being cut or audiences declining; of a lack of good innovative work in all art forms; of the absence of a sense of direction, purpose and adventure.

These views may not be incompatible, and each has some truth. What is beyond doubt is that ideas of what is art have expanded; that demand has rightly grown for access to the arts, film and broadcasting to be the right of all rather than the privilege of the few; and that resources, both public and private, have struggled to keep up. Growth in the variety of the arts contains its own problems. So how can the strategic injection of public money, and the growth of partnership with the private sector, encourage new developments? What should the priorities be? How do we make sure that the opportunity to enjoy the arts is spread ever more widely throughout society?

This is where the national arts and media strategy comes in. In 1990, the Minister for the Arts asked the arts and media funding bodies (the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Film Institute, the Crafts Council and the Regional Arts Associations/ Regional Arts Boards) to prepare a national strategy. One of its purposes is to provide the basic framework for their work. The Scottish and Welsh Arts Councils are conducting parallel exercises; and the local authorities and museums funding bodies are also associated with the strategy.

A further purpose is to consider whether the public money spent on the arts and media has been used to best effect, and how those responsible can do better in the future. It is important that all those with experience of and a passion for the arts and media provide support, assistance and advice to get the strategy right. Most important, it must be seen as a strategy for the arts and media, not for the bureaucrats.

HOW?

The paper in this folder is part of this process. It is one of a series of discussion documents; each is available free on request. Responses to them will be collated by the National Arts and Media Strategy Unit. Arising from this, a draft of the strategy will be prepared by Spring 1992. This too will be available for comment. The final version of the national arts and media strategy will be completed by Summer 1992. The hope is that the resulting document will be slim, challenging and readable - and that it will provide a mission statement for the arts and media over the next decade, as well as setting out clear goals and targets.

The national arts and media strategy will not write a single novel, put on a single play or make a single film. What it can help bring about, if the funding bodies receive the help of those who care about the arts and media, is the maximum opportunity for such creativity to flourish and for it to enrich the lives of ever more people. Your contribution to this process will be valuable and valued. Please send your views on this discussion document to the address below, to arrive by 30 November 1991.

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A PLEA FOR POETRY

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De uitleentermijn bedraagt een maand. Mits tijdig
aangevraagd is verlenging met een maand moge-
lijk, tenzij de publikatie inmiddels is besproken.

De uitleentermijn is verstreken op:

4 JAN. 1993		
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NATIONAL ARTS AND MEDIA STRATEGY

A PLEA FOR POETRY

John Fox's paper rather stands alone among the strategy discussion documents. There is no simple list of questions that can be asked arising from it. Rather, we should be interested to receive your own views, arguments or meditations on the relationship between 'high' and 'low' art. How can we bring out the poetry implicit in our lives? Do 'community celebrations' make a lasting difference, or are they merely papering over the cracks? What is needed, apart from money, to make John Fox's vision a reality?

Let your imagination wander.

NATIONAL ARTS AND MEDIA STRATEGY UNIT

AUGUST 1991

NATIONAL ARTS AND MEDIA STRATEGY

A PLEA FOR POETRY

JOHN FOX

**"The poet of the future will make dreams concrete"
André Breton 1928**

Summary

Founded in 1968 Welfare State International is an established company of artists, poets, engineers, musicians and sculptors, which has created hundred of site-specific celebrations with communities all over the world.

John Fox, the founder and artistic director of WSI, draws from the company's experience and, in a polemical and entertaining style argues strongly that art and poetry have become marginalised in Britain and that our severe cultural recession is far more dangerous than our economic recession. It is urgent that imagination and creativity are placed high on the national agenda and freed from the stodge of an ever growing art bureaucracy which - at the expense of the majority - perpetuates out-moded ideas and irrelevant categories through an army of consultants, marketing experts, publicists and rigid forward planning imposed from above.

"We are seeking a culture which may well be less materially based but where more people will actively participate and gain the power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant in their lives. Be this building their own houses, naming their children, burying their dead, announcing partnerships, marking anniversaries, creating new sacred spaces and producing whatever drama, stories, songs, rituals, ceremonies, pageants and jokes that are relevant to new values and new iconography".

After carefully defining the role of "social poetry" and the nature of "vernacular art" the author draws on some particular illustrations from the work of Welfare State International. These include "SHIPYARD TALES" from Barrow-in-Furness, a massive festival of creativity where 500 people (many of them builders of Trident submarines) produced 14 original plays, stories, films and fire-events

in the summer of 1990 and "GLASGOW ALL LIT UP", when 10,000 people from the whole of Strathclyde paraded with 8,000 sculptural lanterns on October 6th 1990.

Through these and other examples, John Fox questions the basis of the thinking behind the "old notions" of Keynes, Myerscough and Wilding, for example, and argues for a new evaluation of the place of the artist and art in contemporary culture. He suggests that the old categories of art, drama, literature and music, fine art and commercial be relinquished and more resources be allocated to the dynamic new and experimental; that in a new and ageing western society we should re-examine the nature of work and leisure - which "should be more than negative work" and more away from a system dominated by economics and the commodity market. Artistic activity should be moved to the central stage and we should look to more traditional patterns where the cultural framework comes first. Where we will need to change:

"the fundamental premises on which we have built our society, its institutions, its economy, where people come before profit and long term interest before short-term gain".

Finally he offers some "wilde" ideas which include the NHS prescribing saxophones, undertakers painting portraits on coffins, the conversion of aircraft carriers into art centres, the use of theatres for weddings and child naming ceremonies, 'salon' bars and new art schools to be build in every town and city and the National Arts and Media Strategy to be handwritten and illustrated with illuminated paintings prior to being faxed to every person in the land so that...

the poet of the future will indeed make dreams concrete!

A PLEA FOR POETRY

JOHN FOX

Introduction

Welfare State International is a company of freelance artists, musicians, makers, performers and writers who research new forms and contexts for celebratory art.

For over two decades we have pioneered many experiments in many communities around the world. The work varies from mammoth carnivals for and with thousands of participants to one person story tellings. This work is recorded in "The Engineers of the Imagination", Baz Kershaw and Tony Coult, Methuen, 1983, revised 1990.

As the Artistic Director of WSI, I will draw on examples of our work to present a case for placing social poetry at the centre of our culture.

In the long-term we need a situation where the original artist/poet is seen to be essential to the well being of society and more people are trained to be artists.

At the moment, companies like WSI and many thousands of people with original artistic ability are marginalised through an attitude and through a lack of resources. On the edge they are not an efficient force for change.

This is bad for them and the country as a whole.

What are we looking for?

We are seeking a culture which may well be less materially based but where more people will actively participate and gain the power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant in their lives. Be this building their own houses, naming their children, burying their dead, announcing partnerships, marking anniversaries, creating new sacred spaces and producing whatever drama, stories, songs, rituals, ceremonies, pageants and jokes that are relevant to new values and new iconography.

After decades of accelerating consumerism we have moved into a severe recession which is more dangerous on the psychic than the economic front. In the sixties the name Welfare State International was acceptable to all political parties, but now it seems it is virtually a taboo!

It is not that the alternative culture of the sixties has become more worldly and cynical (and commercial), but that utopianism, generosity and caring have become unfashionable, communities fragmented and art a decorative mannerism.

We urgently need to look forward and regain confidence.

The challenge

The success of the TV series "Darling Buds of May" is, a sure sign that we are in a deep national depression. Maybe we should be pleased that after the Gulf war our escape hero is only PA Larkin the 'perfick' romantic tax dodger. England got the Larkins, whilst the United States got Schwartzkopf. Heroes, like wallpaper, reflect our taste.

Artists and administrators, politicians and businessmen, priests and newspaper editors, we all need to reflect on the nature of this cultural recession. It is a huge challenge. Large visionary and radical solutions are needed and it will not be enough to build a Canary Wharf Tower of Babel to get us out of this mess.

It has never been easy for the artist to focus on the essential. Grunwald dragged his Isenheim Triptych screaming from a syphilis hospital. Now we may have less disease, inequality, starvation and war and more worries about climatic change than in the Middle Ages but what there is we are made more aware of in a more vicarious way (and we witness more by living longer).

Dancing through this mortality boogie I am suddenly brought to my senses by slicing the end of my index finger on a kitchen knife. The pain of the subsequent typing, despite a new word processor, makes the creative process even more difficult than usual. But it is more real than the previous abstract anxieties and a reminder that underneath our technological and conceptual sophistication we are of the same flesh and blood as the earliest hominids.

Equally as isolated in the same discarded galaxy, those tribal people buried or burned the bones of their dead and made paintings in caves. They played, they created rituals, they marked the passing of their short lives, and they celebrated.

They made dreams concrete. And we call it art or poetry.

What is poetry?

Jamake Highwater, a contemporary American Indian, writes:

"If we mean by poetry a poetic sensibility, a sensibility that strives to make visible the invisible that strives to make visible the ineffable, the unfathomable and which fills the gaps between words and thoughts, then

poetry is more important than just about anything I can think of especially in this current moment of history.

"We are so tormented by the linear framework in which we exist in the dominant Western Culture that we have to evolve terms like 'poetic licence' in order to excuse any kind of creative, imaginative thinking which breaches an outworn, rigid notion of reality. Not even contemporary physics upholds the notion of reality which we are expected to embrace in our everyday political, moral and ethical lives. Poetry, the capacity to create metaphor in language or in visual imagery, the capacity to create alternatives to an outworn realism - these are the only bridges by which we can move through the enormous space which separates us.

"This is because the greatest distance between people is not space but culture and it is only through poetry in its most twentieth century manifestations that we have the slightest chance of making ourselves known to each other. In this way poetry is social change".

Henry Normal, a young English comedian similarly defines poetry as:

1. A form of magic concerned with conjuring up not facts but the truth.
2. An aesthetic pattern of sound and image conveying not just information but imagination.
3. A catalyst for the appreciation of the difference between life and existence.
4. A mirror by which experience can be seen at a new angle.
5. A vehicle of transport to greater awareness.
6. A structure from which to see more clearly the wonder of that which we take for granted. (Foreword to the Space Between Us, Kevin Fegan, A Twist in the Tail Publications, Retford, 1991).

My own definition of poetry in this context is more akin to magic too:

1. The poet gives us a glass bottom craft with which to view chaos.
2. Poetry is a generator to shift energy.
3. The poet objectifies the subjective in order to give us power.
4. The poetry gives us an aesthetic frame to contemplate the infinite.

Where do you rent a poet?

So, if we need such poets, and we clearly do, can you get them from the Arts Council? The latest communication I had from them offered our company a directory of consultants.

Eagerly I searched for dream weavers, guardians of the unpredictable, tricksters, shaman, demons of bituminous black, even pathological optimists but instead I am offered experts in marketing, planning and sponsorship.

Maybe any poets that remain are seeking to suck the outmoded dugs of the mother-artship in the categories of Drama, Literature, Art, Music etc., but possibly they have been driven away by bureaucracy.

An excess of planning may give us too little time for living in the moment. In the world of the primitive and the poet immediate experience is more desirable than long term abstractions, whereas in our civilised industrial society we are continually encouraged to live in a projected future.

A future currently dominated by the market economy where art is treated like any other commodity.

This does not seem to have lead to an excess of truth, beauty or imaginative perception but rather a proliferation of interpreters, consultants and middlemen.

We need to restore the primary experience of the poet and poetry.

And for the soul
in its bone tent, refrigerating
under the nuclear winter,
no epitaph prepared

in our benumbed language
other than the equation
hanging half-mast like the after-
birth of thought: $E=mc^2$

Formula - R S THOMAS

How hard is it now?

The music teacher

In an age of rampant individualism I have decided to develop my own latent talents - so, at the age of 52 I am learning to sing.

My music teacher is a middle aged retired opera singer of great gifts who has by chance settled in a small market town in S. Cumbria. She doesn't earn an easy living but once a week treks 60 miles by train up to Workington and back. Located in that noman's land between Wordsworth and Windscale this is a forgotten corner of England, where unemployment is very high.

Here there is no great provision for the arts, so the six singing lessons she provides are a rare commodity(!). Her work is inspirational and she has done it for some years, although she can only earn about £47 a day after expenses. And not every day.

Up till a few weeks ago she paid £5 for the hire of a room which includes an ancient piano with missing notes which bruise her fingers. Now the market economy has caught up with her. The hall committee, working under the shadow of a local authority who are working under the shadow of poll tax capping have put the hire fee up to £25 and British Rail are economising and soon there will be no train.

So the quality of life in that region has gone down a little and her gifts have been marginalised. Its only a tiny story. Unfortunately, there are similar stories in many places. In one case a room could be hired but without furniture because there was no surplus to pay the caretaker.

The lantern coach

Also in West Cumbria WSI used to tour a small mobile theatre, a red velvet and sequined Edwardian style proscenium stage mounted in the back end of an old single-decker bus. We used to perform 30-minute pantomimes to audiences of 35, six times a day in community centres, shopping precincts, long-stay hospitals and many places where national arts strategies or poetry are not commonplace.

On one desperate housing estate, one Christmas eve, where the major gift at a children's party was an orange each, one child believed we were a travelling TV set. They had never seen any theatre of any kind. Now that bus has gone too. There is no mileage in sponsoring imaginative excursions to the poor. They have no buying power and there is no prestige or glamour. The box office is minimal and there is no capital to replace the old vehicle.

So one "vehicle of transport to a greater awareness" (and fun) has gone. Not quite for ever though. The Bedford engine is now exported to India to another ready market, a market where it is worth rebuilding our discarded scrap. Maybe, globally, functional utility in the Third World is more necessary than flights of fantasy in decaying England?

But the chances are that in that village in India so anxious for our engine they will have a vernacular poetry as rich as anything in our culture. But in the West we choose to deploy our surplus rather differently.

Barrow-in-Furness

A little further down the Cumbrian coast is Barrow-in-Furness. A town of 60,000 people whose primary occupation is building Trident submarines. Here we have worked for seven years, generating creativity through a mixture of making films, operas, docu-drama, performed poetry, carnival bands, choirs and fire-shows.

In the summer of 1990, in a "Tapestry of Celebration" we produced a festival of 14 original plays, stories and events involving over 500 local people.

Ironically, in the same summer, VSEL announced 5000 redundancies. The national press picked up on the fact that with so much evident creativity in Barrow diversification must be possible.

'Helen Wall, arts reporter on the town's North West Evening Mail, confirms that Welfare State has transformed the town's self-confidence. "And they have opened up the questions. There is still resistance to what they are doing, but hopefully what's started now can't be stopped". The Golden Submarine is certain not to be a one-night wonder. It would even be the night the town wakes up to its uncertain future. Welfare State's options for change will need serious consideration.' Robert Hewison - Sunday Times.

'So will the festival help redirect the energy and talent of Barrow? If conversion is to take place, it clearly cannot be left to VSEL and the Government. New, lighter industries are needed. Much will depend on individuals and small groups. Last Wednesday at the festival nobody could doubt the talent of Barrovians or their energy. The show before a packed auditorium was witty, intelligent and earthy, with some rollicking songs.' Chris Bellamy - Independent

The creative skill needed to devise the miniature planet of a submarine, (a whole self-contained eco-system capable of hiding under a polar ice cap for six months) is extraordinary. But sadly it is not easy to switch a massive defence industry around and in this society at this moment it would be unthinkable to suggest that those huge resources could be re-deployed into producing art.

But why not? The amazing culture of West Coast N. American Indians for example was originally created out of a surplus of abundant wildlife and timber. All the time saved (the surplus from which all art has always stemmed) was put into carving transformation masks, painting, dancing and creating ceremonies. It produced one of the richest ever artistic cultures.

Barrow could become a centre for film making, recording studios, murals, carnivals, symphony orchestras and so forth. The only blockage is a deeply ingrained nineteenth century attitude of mind about real work and real jobs which in turn is based on a hidden curriculum of fear.

Now this fear has largely gone. So if vernacular art were to be perceived as essential as it once was in a pre-industrial world, or as essential as it still is in a typical village in India then there is no real reason why the evident creativity of Barrovians should not be harnessed to a life-enhancing explosion. It could provide as much work and certainly more pleasure than building weapons.

Although the amount spent on the arts in Barrow is now many thousands more than when we arrived the total amount is certainly no more than the cost of one warhead. For all the money still spent on the defence industry thousands of people could be given a salary for life and the option to play creatively at whatever they wished.

The problem is perception. If poetry were moved to centre stage as it has been in some cultures then entirely different patterns of living would emerge. Obviously such a shift would require a massive re-education programme and commitment, but it is not impossible given the right intention.

The old notions

Myerscough

Although, as Myerscough has argued, there is a case for the economic benefits of the arts in terms of urban re-generation, jobs, tourism and exports, this is really a rationalisation written in the jargon of the dominant culture of Grocerism.

The case for poetry runs much deeper and is better argued in terms of spiritual need, and the necessity to find new forms of ceremony and celebration in a society where individuals are becoming increasingly separated, isolated and old, and don't choose to go to church.

Big sporting events and music concerts provide some forms for congregation and participation, but they are not to everyone's taste and they can be commercial and exploitive.

The economic argument is only one way.

Wilding

In his wish to separate centralist cultural leadership from its social aspects, Wilding devolves responsibility for the latter to local authorities. But in any true integration of

artistic activity within society you cannot separate social roles from visionary artistic leadership.

Apart from the fact that central power retention (under the illusion of democratic benevolence) is a key principle of current Government, (monitor who signs the cheques) the underlying basis of this is still bureaucratic and elitist. There is no recognition that art can grow organically from the ground or that our current system of encouraging a stable of stars through outmoded categories is profoundly reactionary. The categories are maintained artificially. They do not stem from a response to need on the ground but are imposed by self-propelling quangos who choose to maintain the cultural status quo.

Relatively, very little subsidy is put into experimental and new work. Most of it reinforces museum culture with a loaded historical perspective. Subsidy should be geared to sparking up the new, and to helping us change gear, and it should be used to counter purely commercial exploitation where dubious values are often entertainingly maintained.

Where is carnival, fairground, sign-writing, puppetry, new circus, "cross-over" arts, (or multi-media as it was once known) or funerary furniture for instance? If they are represented at all within the Arts or Crafts Council it is only peripherally.

Elitism and centralism thrive on investment. It's the same ludicrous system which permits Van Gogh's Irises to end up in a high rise Japanese bank secreted away from public space and paid for with so many Yen that young art students believe that they too will strike it rich on the international art circuit.

None of them are trained to believe in a functional vernacular art where they could apply their craft to necessary domestic and public ceremonies for instance.

Which is one reason we go on accepting some of the worst funeral rites in the world and child namings dominated by the Christian Church.

The pursuit of excellence

The old Bloomsbury, Keynesian and Shaw/Hoggart ideas of excellence still permeate our cultural corridors of power, balancing uneasily on snobbery, taste, Oxbridge and a nauseating English class system.

Although a great deal of popular culture only offers shallow reinforcement, chances are that it is no more reinforcing or worse for you than a great deal of so called high art. Wedgwood and Elgar are not better than Tupperware and Bob Marley - they just belong to different clubs.

Surfeits of the "classics" be it Shakespeare or 19th century music (both often badly performed) can be as suffocating as the often targeted "mindless" television or commercial music. A lot of popular culture is innovative, skilfully produced, exciting, committed and rarely boring. Which is more than can be said of a great deal of "high art".

We have to re-examine all our notions of what "good" culture is and re-deploy all the available resources (be they commercial or subsidised) in order to maximise energy to produce a vibrant, living and above all necessary culture.

Towards a necessary culture

In an essay entitled "Surgery for the Novel - or a Bomb" (in Phoenix - the posthumous papers of D H Lawrence, Edward D McDonald (ed), Heinemann, London, 1936, pp.517-520) D H Lawrence wrote:

"Supposing a bomb were put under the whole scheme of things, what would we be after? What feelings do we want to carry through into the next epoch? What feelings will carry us through? What is the underlying impulse in us that will provide the motive power for a new state of things, when this democratic-industrial-lovely-dovey-darling-take-me-to-mamma state of things is bust?

"What next? That's what interests me. "What now?" is no fun anymore."

We live in constipated times. Our bellies are so full (or some of our bellies are) that we give no urgency to the problem of cultural recession, institutionalised neurosis or psychic malaise.

Or, as Kurt Vonnegut puts it in Galapagos:

"the big problem wasn't insanity but that people's brains were much too big and untruthful to be practical".

We are all responsible for a state of affairs where we have become complacent, instead of asserting the priority of the imagination's ability to influence the present and shape of the world as would like to see it.

Who is looking forward?

On the ground, artists working in the community have been turned (or turned themselves) into surrogate social workers, marginalised on inadequate pockets of guilt-money. They begin a process of dialogue but it is rare that they can carry the journey to an extreme edge or to a high standard, or beyond therapy.

Established artists tend to work increasingly with no real context other than the fin-de-siecle novelties of the international art market. The power of all the great art movements of the early part of the century - Dadaism, Surrealism, Constructivism and even Futurism - which took art off the gallery walls, has been lost in avant-guard post-modernist ghettos of chic good taste.

Art schools and art education, from the Royal College to the humblest secondary school, have been deprived of resources and subordinated to the prevailing philosophy of the market economy, where commodity design prevails.

So where are the young bloods who combine creativity, rebelliousness, and innovation? The wild unpredictable energetic research of primary art that was commonplace in the sixties and seventies has been anaesthetized in the competition of safe professional careers. It would probably be impossible for an equivalent group to WSI to start now in the way we did in 1968 and it is becoming increasingly impossible for us to survive.

The days are numbered for the kind of site-specific carnival celebrations we have been creating with communities for over 23 years. Finance is drying up, costs (particularly insurance) are increasing and local authorities and art bureaucracies demand more and more budgets and forward plans for smaller and smaller amounts of public money.

Art has become a business where agents, dealers, promoters, producers proliferate, and where the art corporate bureaucracy has reached mammoth proportions. This has far reaching consequences not only on the artist's view of himself or herself and on the kind of choices the audience are offered but also directly on the art work itself. On the one hand it becomes more bland and safe (especially to satisfy the needs of sponsorship) but on the other it becomes more vicariously extreme, dangerous, large scale, and gladiatorial.

To quote Keith Roberts' sci-fi story in *Machines and Men*, 1973, we artists can become:

"State-licensed buffoons treading the tight rope between creativity and dilettantism, between free thought and aimless posturing for applause. That's why we have lost and how; and that's why we've got to stop now before we burn ourselves up any further. If we etiolate right out of existence there's no hope left. Not for anybody They need us not knowing where we are, shall pop up next, the crazy things we do. They need people who have made lunacy a profession. Without us they'll forget they are living in Hell; they'll just sludge down into a sort of great doughy mass and forget how to think and how to eat and one day they'll forget how to breathe".

Where do we go positive?

When confidence fails we tend to shrink back into old models. Hence, old man Larkin and the heritage trail.

But the points could be springing into a more positive direction. Many people are sick of the eighties. In debt, unemployed, redundant, retired, and, disillusioned with politics, they are looking for inspiration. As our population gets older and life expectancy longer, enforced leisure is increasing. This has to mean more than negative work.

The popularity of ecology, holistic alternatives and worldwide media charity entertainments demonstrate that we are ready to respond to beliefs and causes. Incredible changes in technology (world satellite TV, Fax machines and Desk Top Publishing, genetic engineering) and the break up of the nationalist state etc, are already producing bizarre paradoxes and ethical dilemmas.

The meal is disappearing as a social gathering.

Answer machines answer telephones.

The profits of multinational companies exceed the Gross National Product of many third world countries.

As single parent families grow so does a new nomadism.

If the old forms of energy were the driving force behind the old forms of politics and art, how will politics and art change? And what will be the new forms?

If a village on an Indian mountain top can be powered by solar panels and communicate instantly with an Australian township; if cars may run on water and if holograms may be projected into the living room; where will the living room be and what will living be about? And who will hold the means and distribution of production?

The questions are endless but the solutions, energetically explored, could lead to exciting shifts in evolution - as long as we are as prepared as we can be to accept the changing pattern.

How do we go positive?

There is a useful, and by now cliched paper doing the rounds of alienated arts administrators:

"We trained hard but it seems that every time we were beginning to form teams we would ge re-organised. I was to learn later in my life that we

tend to meet any situation by re-organising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation."

Caius Petronius, administrative officer to
the Emperor Nero c70AD

The national arts strategy must lead to a fundamental re-think and not be a cosmetic re-jigging of the status quo.

Moribund structures and categories need to be rethought in the light of a new government(?) policy which should re-draw the guide-lines defining art, culture and work.

The pamphlet 'Economics Today. What do we need?' by Henry Skolimowski (1980 The Green Alliance) argues a clear case:- We have become the victims of economics and a narrow, materialist perspective. In more traditional societies it is the context and ideals of culture which delineate the place of economics within them.

"The consumerist society has developed a powerful machinery for promoting a great variety of artificial needs. Its fatal flaw lies here. It assumes that the greater the scope of our choices, the greater the scope of our freedom and consequently the greater the scope of our humanity. It fails to notice that so often these are false choices leading to the cultivation of needs which do not extend our being, but shrink it."

And so on ...

We need to look at the way we spend our time

In his visionary book 'The Art of Work' (Pluto Press, published 1988) Roger Coleman urges a fundamental reappraisal of the role of satisfying work to enhance the lives of the many rather than the few. If "the true function of Art is to shape, define, form and inform the ways in which we create our environment day by day", then we need to re-examine the way we perceive our normal reality, and if, when confronted by the insatiable linear growth momentum of our materialist culture we can begin to re-define real need and real satisfaction, then, maybe, art can take the centre stage once again.

Vernacular art

This section owes a great deal to an unpublished paper of Clarke Mackey, a Canadian film maker, whose Vernacular Project proposes a practical inquiry into the form, context and meaning of homemade art).

Working with non professional film makers Mackey discovered a great freshness in their vision which was intensely meaningful in the communities where it arose, such as housing projects and in correction centres.

"The films are extraordinary documents yet none is appropriate for general commercial distribution".

He came to believe that one of the features which made their films unacceptable to the mainstream was the fact that on the surface they appeared to be unsophisticated imitations of the mass-culture that the makers of the films had internalised. In 1973 he made a film with Cree children who at that point had never watched any television, and he found that formally this was the most interesting work. Yet it was also the one made by those people who had the least stake in mainstream culture. After making this film he worked as a primary teacher before writing:

"Watching children create art became, for me, a way of standing outside the dominant cultural order and viewing it with new and critical eyes. As Herbert Read has pointed out (in *Education Through Art*, 1974), art, dance and music are the natural paradigm through which children experience the world. Children literally 'make' their world-reality through artistic play. The psychological consequences of robbing them of this possibility are considerable - both in terms of their emotional and intellectual development. It occurred to me that depriving adults of this opportunity of creative world-making must also have profound psychological consequences for our psyches and the social order. But this is precisely what our commodity-oriented culture has done."

and going on to say:

"I have become increasingly interested in the activities people engage in that satisfy the basic human desire to participate actively in the artistic process - most of which take place outside the concert hall, art gallery or theatre (i.e., outside the market) ...

"The history of art and culture over the last few hundred years, when viewed in a global context, can be seen as a continuous erosion of homemade, local, participatory art, craft and ritual, and its replacement by standardized products fashioned by trained professionals for sale. Furthermore, these products are not ideologically neutral. They reflect the preoccupations and values or otherwise serve the interests of a relatively small group of people - the privileged within the industrialized western world."

He also quotes from Ivan Illich's 'Shadow Work' of 1981:

"Vernacular is a Latin term that we use in English only for the language that we have acquired without paid teachers. In Rome, it was used from 500BC to 600AD to designate any value that was homebred, homemade, derived from the commons, and that a person could protect and defend though he neither bought nor sold it on the market. I suggest that we restore this simple term 'vernacular' to oppose commodities and their shadow."

(i.e. commodity culture)

Other Welfare State experiments

With this concept of Vernacular Art in mind WSI began, in 1979, to create a series of Lantern Processions in Ulverston, Cumbria. The idea came after we had performed a carnival King Lear at a 'big art' theatre Festival in North Japan. On holiday afterwards we visited a small village to observe a Shinto Lantern Festival. Here large and heavy wooden constructions with lantern sails, each carried by fifty men and fifty drummers, were duly floated out to sea in a "blessing of the boats". Later we wondered: could anything of this be transferred to Anglo-Saxon rainy Cumbria in autumn?

Well in fact the transfer has been extraordinary. Nine years ago we started with a procession of three hundred people with one hundred lanterns. Simply made from dried willow sticks and white tissue paper and candles the lanterns were truly homemade and certainly vernacular. Now the procession has grown to many thousands and the lanterns have become large and wonderful sculptures of every shape and form. People who had probably never made anything in their lives are now accomplished artists.

If it were relevant this work would look elegant in any large art gallery, but it would be without the context of purpose and sharing which readily draws the community together in a great glow-worm river of light. It is unspoken but there is a sense of this being a secular religious festival staged at the time of migration filling "the gaps between words and thoughts".

Ulverston is a comfortable market town of 12,000 population and we had thought that this kind of event might only work in a rural environment.

But we tried it in Glasgow as well:

Here, using the "City of Culture" resources (and the shop window) of Glasgow 1990, we demonstrated that it is possible to make a symbolic community based around the making and parading of art objects. Over a period of 18 months we organised workshops throughout Strathclyde and Glasgow so that on the 6th October 1990,

10,000 people gathered with over 8,000 lanterns in four simultaneous processions. At the end of the parade a large percentage of these lanterns were hung on five wooden towers. The towers were constructed of hexagonal sections which could be raised steadily by large cranes. As they rose in the air the participants hung their lanterns on these rising pagodas so that before the final firework display they and we had constructed together five complex, celebratory sculptures.

Joyce McMillan wrote in The Guardian (7/10/1990):

"All Lit Up"

It was a rough day in central Scotland. By late morning the rain in Glasgow had reached monsoon strength. Low-lying bits of the city disappeared under water, the trains between Glasgow and Edinburgh were delayed by flooding but Welfare State International along with 250 schools and organisations throughout Strathclyde, had been planning for almost a year to get Glasgow "All Lit Up" on the evening of October 6th 1990. Nothing was going to stop them now.

Over 8,000 lanterns - ranging from tiny solo efforts to huge gloat-sized sculptures on the backs of lorries - were being glued and painted and given their finishing touches from Argyll down to the depths of Ayrshire.

The event was to be to centrepiece of the community programme of Glasgow's year as European City of Culture, the final answer to those who said that 1990 was all posh and Pavarotti.

At 6 o'clock as dusk gathered over the city, the rain obligingly drizzled to a halt. A big, noisy community choir assembled in a temporary bandstand at George Square - flanked by big, white lantern models of Glasgow Cathedral and the People's Palace - and began belting out popular rabble-rousers like "Fame! I wanna live for ever".

A crowd gathered; mums and dads and kids in little fluorescent green haloes, handed out by the stewards. And at half past seven, almost like magic, the first four huge processions - from the west, south, north and east of the city - suddenly materialised in the square, bobbing, dancing, gleaming against the dark trees.

There were the big floats of course, a gorgeous white reindeer, a huge unflattering image of the Prime Minister shoving a gunboat out to sea, a big Rabbie Burns contemplating a huge haggis with a knife still wobbling in its entrails. St Columdkill's primary school in Rotherglen excelled itself with a beautiful white Swan Lake float, and my personal favourite - a comment on the whole "city of culture" idea - was a huge light-sculpture of a reclining nude resting heavily on an arcaded couch, beneath which the labouring, straining forms of workers struggled to keep the

structure in place.

But in a sense, the big set-pieces were beside the point; what reduced one or two of us cynical old observers to tears, was the children, thousands of them pouring down West George Street and up Queen Street and down North Hanover Street, every one of them clutching a little lantern - not more than a couple of feet across, often less - skipping, running, singing, hanging on to teachers and parents, sedulously keeping their little jam-jar candles alight.

There were beautifully made lanterns and weak, battered messy ones. There were boats and space ships and churches and mutant hero turtles, and lots of simple triangular lanterns with nothing but gorgeous, blobby abstract patterns on. In recognition of Glasgow's strange crest - the tree, the bird, the bell, the fish - there were hundreds of brightly coloured fish from huge sharks to tiny tiddlers; Lochgilphead primary school brought a whole shoal 30-strong.

There was Noah's Ark, with little matching pairs of lantern bearers behind, each with an animal cut out and silhouetted against the surface of a simple white lamp - there were the kids from Milton primary spelling out MILTON in big growling letters. There were rock groups and pipe bands and brass bands and steel bands and an extraordinary group of punk pipers, who writhed like Mick Jagger in their kilts.

As the columns of light snaked out across George Square and along towards the High Street, toothless, well-poled old punters emerged from a saw-dust-and-spit pub called The Right Half and cheered and danced on the pavement, to the kids delight. The city beamed from ear to ear, and one visitor, watching near me, muttered, "Croydon, eat your heart out; we could never get a feeling like this in a million years".

Later, down at Glasgow Green, the ground was very squelchy and things went on a bit too long, as these events do. There were gorgeous 40 ft towers of lanterns, ice cream vans, hot dog stalls, and a big firework display; and Welfare State produced a kind of visual fantasia on the tree, bird, bell and fish theme, which ended with the tree burning down, and a gleaming white bird rising, - rather limp-wristedly, on account of the rain - from the ashes.

"Why's that tree burning and falling to bits dad?" asked a tot in the crowd. "Because it symbolises Glasgow, hen," answered the dad, with a feeling. But everyone laughed because we knew there would be a phoenix later.

So a phoenix is possible after all!

Final after-dinner-stories:

Before we become too optimistic its worth pointing out that British Gas Scotland would not make their contribution to this event unless we agreed not to use our name of Welfare State International!

Two more anecdotal horrors:

The burghers of Glasgow's "City of Culture" asked us to create a giant model lantern of their cathedral to be carried in the parade by the civic footmen of the City Chambers, which we duly did. It looked wonderful. Then they sent us a bill for the cost of the footmen's overtime!

Finally, a few hours before the event, a Scottish monsoon erupted on Glasgow Green - the venue for the climax of the parade. Suddenly all the park paths were impassable, flooded under two feet of water, which meant that ten thousand people would have been stranded at the entrance to the park. The blocked park drains were hardly our responsibility. Sludge-gulpers were hired and the flood went, but the bill came back to us.

So, here we are back where we started with the market economy, where cost-effectiveness is all and the artist is at the end of the line.

Conclusion and wilde ideas

The phoenix itself, a gamut of pigeons and a whole flock of polka-dot artist-birds will certainly rise if there is a change of attitude, and art is put onto the national agenda.

We have to establish a space in which original poetry is no longer marginalised and where the poet is genuinely welcomed onto the centre stage.

This is unlikely to happen, of course, until we change the fundamental premises on which we have built our society, its institutions and its economy, where people come before profit and long-term interest before short-term gain.

Signs indicate that some change is afoot. The work of ourselves and many other "outsiders" has produced positive results. Common Ground, for instance, with whom we are planning a collaboration, have conducted pioneering projects with parish maps, new milestones, planting orchards and so on. These experiments have worked in rural environments and with large firms. Marks and Spencer, for example, are now selling 25 different types of apples.

Optimism breeds optimism, but it does need 'pump-priming'. Maybe, eventually, if we are to set in motion a culture based more on mutual exchange of the gift than on commercial transactions, then the Government, the Treasury, artists and arts administrators might work together in sharing problems and finding solutions. And the

day will come when artists and Treasury officials meet for the annual bonanza potlatch when tribal loyalties to the common purpose of spreading art will be joyously celebrated.

- * Poets will do Cabinet placements.
- * Small gangs of energisers (creative administrators and administrative creators) will be handcuffed together to parachute into blocked social arteries, whenever the art 'tenderometer' dips below maximum involvement and maximum fun.
- * Every town will have its 'salon' bar, with a new art school attached.
- * Doctors will prescribe saxophones and sable paint brushes.
- * Undertakers will paint portraits on coffins.
- * Annual holidays are given to celebrate the insurgent imagination.
- * Wilde dreamings will gain wilde medals.
- * Theatres will be used for wedding ceremonies, namings and feasts.
- * Aircraft carriers will be converted into art centres.
- * Models of Utopia will be exhibited at railway stations, and the quality of living measured daily and reported on TV along with the weather.
- * Richard Hoggart will play the electric bass guitar (very well).
- * Arts Council officers will write poems (every Monday).
- * Our brains will move into our hands.
- * William Morris will be deified.

And the National Arts and Media Strategy will be hand written on vellum (with illuminated paintings), and faxed to every household.

- * **The phoenix will arise.**
- * **The disastrous mistake will be undone.**
- * **We will dare to begin again.**
- * **And poetry will make dreams concrete**

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