

Creative Communities

From Passive to Active

As the 20th century progressed, people became increasingly passive in relation to the arts and culture. Instead of singing around the piano and in church, making music in the pub, and going to the Palais de Danse, we gradually began to sit in front of a screen, first at the cinema and then in our living rooms with the television. Music was piped to us over the radio into our kitchens. Later, we bought it in various formats from 78s to MP3s so that we could listen to it at home or on the move.

One effect of our collective passivity was that it widened the gap between professional artists and musicians on the one hand, and the public on the other. Artists became producers and providers of something that the rest of us consumed. The proscenium arch and the mannerisms of the concert hall reinforced the divide, and when government began to fund the arts, the gap became wider still – because only certain types of art and artists were deemed fit to be supported. In turn that led to a growing gulf between ‘them’ – professional, trained artists and musicians – and ‘us’, who were dismissed as ‘amateurs’ and ‘hobbyists’ regardless of the quality of our work.

But today, technological developments are combining with new ideas to create a radical recasting of the relationship between arts professionals and the public. Why is this happening?

In the first place, of course, it must be acknowledged that public art-making never entirely disappeared: it was nurtured in Workers Education Association (WEA) and local authority adult education classes, and kept alive through am-dram and bell-ringing and craftwork. Incoming communities have strengthened this thread by adding their own ways of expressing their cultural identities, through such things as carnivals and melas. So the traditions and practices of volunteering, self-help and mutual organisation are well-established in the arts and culture.

On top of that, improvements in technology over the last fifty years have made it possible for many more people to develop their own artistic talents. Take the case of musical instruments for example. Until recently, learning the piano meant investing in a costly and bulky instrument, but now a novice can start with a cheap, yet impressive, electronic keyboard. Guitars too have plummeted in price and become widely available. It is hard to believe that less than fifty years ago, there was not one Fender Stratocaster in the U.K. – Cliff Richard imported the first one into the country around 1962 as a gift for Hank Marvin. Today they are on sale in any medium sized town in the country. Cameras and the moving image have followed a similar path, with easy-to-

use digital camcorders replacing expensive film, making it possible for amateurs to attain professional standards.

But the really revolutionary – and very recent – change brought about by technology relates not to the means of making of art, but to the sharing of it. In the last ten years, widespread access to broadband internet, and the invention of sites like YouTube (2005) and MySpace (2003) have enabled people to *communicate* their work amongst each other. This has produced an explosive growth in online music, dancing and film-making, and has fed back into more and more activity in the real world.

And back in the ‘real world’, lottery funded investment in new or refurbished galleries, theatres, music venues, dance studios, village halls and community centres is providing the spaces and places for people to develop their own cultural lives, whether that’s in the form of watching and listening, or learning, or taking part.

Add to that increasing numbers of private sector music teachers, the huge popularity of dance on TV translating into massive demand for dance classes, and more attention being paid – at last – to the arts in school, and the result is a new set of possibilities for mass participation in the production as well as the consumption of the arts and culture.

These ways in which people’s lives are changing in relation to the arts and culture find parallel expression both in the theories of writers about culture and in the practice of some artists and arts organisations.

There has been a steady stream of commentary about public participation in the arts over the last decade, much of it acknowledging that people are becomingly increasingly interested in taking part rather than just acting as spectators. The writer Charles Leadbeater has recently published *The Art of With*, arguing that people want three things from their cultural lives: to watch and enjoy, to socialise together, and to do things for themselves. There is no moral hierarchy implicit in these categories, but he suggests that the trend towards active involvement follows the logic of the internet, where people achieve things together (for example in the writing of operating systems, or in wikis), rather than having things provided to them or for them.

The ethos and spirit of participation on making art is firmly rooted in arts practice. In the 1960s and 1970s the community arts movement succeeded in taking art out of its customary physical

and intellectual confines into new contexts and for new audiences. Building on that tradition, many arts organisations are now trying out new ways to work with their users and publics in order to build the arts and culture together, rather than simply ‘delivering’ the arts to an audience.

A similar spirit motivates the work of contemporary artists like Jeremy Deller, who produced *Procession* at this year’s Manchester International Festival – a work that involved hundreds of members of the public – and Anthony Gormley, whose latest project *One and Other* gave 2,400 members of the public the chance to occupy the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square.

Artists working together with groups of people and communities raises the game for the arts. It tends to produce mutually beneficial relationships that stretch imaginations, develop confidence, and offer stimulus and surprise to everyone involved. This practice helps individuals and communities to grow. As Jude Kelly, OBE, says:

“There is clear evidence that the opportunity to express and be expressive, to be culturally engaged and to be able to make a cultural contribution is fundamental to the wellbeing of individuals and communities.”

In other words, building cultural capital also builds social capital.

Creative Communities is a good example of artists working with communities in such a way that the people themselves shape the collaboration. Firmly rooted in a sense of place and local life, it has offered people the opportunity – and the challenge – to create art and to explore themselves in ways that were previously little explored.

By John Holden¹



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