



CREATIVE RESEARCH

The Arts Debate
Findings of Research among the
General Public

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

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2 February 2007

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Table of Contents

	Page
1 Summary of Findings	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 What is art? What are the arts?	1
1.3 Accessibility of the Arts and Obstacles to Greater Engagement	2
1.4 Benefits of the Arts.....	3
1.5 Public Funding of the Arts and the Role of the Arts Council	4
1.6 Priorities for Arts Council Funding.....	5
2 Conclusions and Challenges	7
2.1 Introduction	7
2.2 The Value Placed on the Arts	7
2.3 Funding Priorities and their Perceived Value	7
2.4 Implications for the Arts Council.....	9
2.5 Implications for Fundees.....	11
2.6 Increasing Engagement with the Arts	11
2.7 What Do We Call It?	13

1 Summary of Findings

1.1 Introduction

In twenty discussion groups and ten interviews across England, some 170 people talked at length and in detail about their attitudes to the arts and the impact of the arts on their lives as the basis of this piece of research which begins the Arts Debate with the general public. The sample was structured according to a number of variables; socio-economic grade, lifestage and level of engagement with the arts principally. While people's attitudes towards and opinions of the arts were, to an extent, influenced by the first two of these, it was the third (perhaps predictably) that produced the sharpest differences. It was also notable that on a number of issues, there was a commonality of view that cut across all the variables.

This executive summary provides a brief overview of the findings according to the principal themes. In the following section, we go on to set out our conclusions based on those findings and some suggestions for what they might mean for the Arts Council. We appreciate that they are our personal views, albeit founded on the research findings, and but one contribution to the debate. We offer them as points for further discussion.

1.2 What is art? What are the arts?

The discussion around the age old issue of what is art proved very interesting and thought-provoking. Examples of what counted as art ranged from visual art or even simply fine art, through a broad range of 'traditional' art forms, design disciplines, crafts, artisan and domestic skills. Some respondents included types of sport, natural phenomena, intellectual pursuits such as science and maths, and everyday activities like playing games or socialising in their definition; a case could be made for considering all as candidates.

However, from the threads of the various discussions, there seemed to be three components to what truly made something a work of art; if something had all three in great abundance, then it might be deemed a great work but if

lacking in certain components, it might simply be art or perhaps a creative activity. The three components are: the original creative idea, the skill and effort that goes into executing that idea and transforming it into an end product, and the achievement of a response from an audience.

Other factors also came into play in deciding whether something was art; the distinction between art and entertainment, the context in which the piece is viewed, fashion and marketability, personal taste and the quality of the end product. Given its profile, it is perhaps unsurprising that the issue of conceptual art was raised early on and strong views were voiced. The attitudes of those for and against it can be seen in the context of their views about what makes something art.

'The arts', by contrast, prompt a far more closed and constrained response. They are not seen as a collection of things that one might call art but have a particular meaning that is focused on 'traditional', and what are perceived as elitist, art forms.

1.3 Accessibility of the Arts and Obstacles to Greater Engagement

Access to the arts was not identified as a significant problem. Except for some exceptions where there was a lack of provision for certain age groups in certain locations, and where cost prevented greater frequency of engagement, respondents felt they could access the arts if they really wanted to. For many among the low engaged, there was no need for the arts to be more accessible – they felt they simply would not take advantage of the opportunities.

Many older, more middle class respondents, felt that the arts should be more accessible to those who had few opportunities but they also recognised that any such attempts to engage such people might be rebuffed.

While people were able to identify many things that hindered greater engagement with the arts and these were often shared across groups, there was little sense that, in themselves, they were necessarily insuperable

barriers and a number admitted they were really excuses. The twin barriers were therefore shown to be a lack of motivation and inertia.

The obstacles identified as getting in the way of engagement with the arts and therefore contributing to these barriers divided into the psychological; the perceptions and preconceptions that reside within people, and the more tangible obstacles, the things 'out there' over which they feel they have little control. The former breaks down into

- concern that an event or performance or visit 'won't be worth it'
- peer pressure
- feelings of exclusion or being unwelcome
- uncertainty about dress code and etiquette.

The latter into

- cost
- time
- distance to travel and issues of getting there
- having someone to go with
- booking problems and uncertainty about seating arrangements
- awareness of what is on.

Except among the young, there was not a great call for more opportunities to actively participate in the arts. Many of the obstacles were the same but the most significant was that of a lack of confidence in one's ability and the fear of feeling embarrassed or stupid if embarking on something new.

Respondents were able to offer some suggestions for overcoming these obstacles.

1.4 Benefits of the Arts

There was broad agreement that the arts offer a range of benefits to individuals and society. Even though some of the low engaged felt those benefits were less relevant to their own lives, they acknowledged that they

applied to others. The most top of mind benefits were those that had personal resonance for people; the provision of entertainment and pleasure (universally appreciated), the enrichment of their lives, the opportunity to express oneself and communicate with others, a sense of identity for individuals and communities and the improvement of mental and physical health. Other social, educational, political and economic benefits were also acknowledged but they did not seem to have the same impact.

1.5 Public Funding of the Arts and the Role of the Arts Council

Only a few respondents had a fairly detailed picture of what the Arts Council does, of whom a few had either applied for funding in the past or considered it. Many had heard of the Arts Council but had little idea of its role and some misunderstandings were evident. There was some association of the Council with what were seen as the more 'traditional' arts and a perception that either the largest national companies received most of the funding or that funds were awarded to politically correct or simply 'daft' projects. There was also questioning of who might sit on the Council and how they were selected.

In general, the attitude was fairly neutral however and when participants were given some facts about the Arts Council, they responded positively and with interest. Its regional decision-making structure, independence from Government, priorities up to 2008 and examples of funded projects contradicted what people had suspected. However, its mission and the fact that it had been around for 60 years led some to feel they should have seen more evidence of the Arts Council in their local areas.

There was broad acceptance of the need for public funding of the arts; without it the arts scene would be much poorer in quality and less accessible. The level of current funding was unknown but at 39p per household per week, seemed very reasonable. However, the total annual spend was seen as significant and again, the expectation was that it should be seen to be touching people's lives. The key questions for most were therefore how were the funds allocated and against which criteria, questions that they found they had the opportunity to comment on.

1.6 Priorities for Arts Council Funding

When asked to take on the role of decision makers at the Arts Council, respondents did not find it an easy task and this led to some empathy with those that actually do the job.

When making decisions about which projects to fund, most of the criteria that were applied were those with a social purpose; they should deliver benefits to society, they should reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible, people should gain something positive from the experience and the benefits should last beyond the period of funding. It was not surprising therefore that many of the projects that respondents would fund were based in communities.

In addition, there was a strand of funding that was aimed at preserving flagship companies and organisations because of the excellence they exemplified, the source of inspiration they represented for young artists and the role they performed as part of England's heritage. This strand came with conditions however; the desire was to see such high profile companies become less dependent on public funding whilst justifying their considerable public funds by ensuring greater access for ordinary people.

The sorts of projects that respondents were reluctant to fund were those that seemed to support an individual in realising their own (often commercial) ambitions. It was felt that they, like certain more commercial organisations, should be able to raise funding from sources other than the public purse. For individuals, however, the idea of the Arts Council providing loans rather than grants or insisting on some community benefit was more acceptable. Public art was also an area that most chose not to support.

While many were impressed by the diversity of projects that the Arts Council funds and the audiences that they reach, questions remained about the balance of funding and how decisions were made. Some also felt that they had not seen projects that they felt were ambitious or exciting enough in terms of inspiring new audiences.

The Arts Debate
Findings of Research among the General Public

There was a call for greater transparency in the Arts Council's decision-making, the inclusion of a public voice as part of this, the sharing of good practice among potential and existing fundees, and consideration of how those that receive funds can be made accountable in a way that is not unwieldy, constraining or costly.

2 Conclusions and Challenges

2.1 Introduction

In this section we provide our thoughts on what the research findings mean – how do they answer the questions that were posed? We go on to suggest, as inputs to the debate, some of the challenges we think the findings present for the Arts Council.

2.2 The Value Placed on the Arts

We conclude that this research demonstrates that the arts are seen as offering enormous public value.

It shows that among the general public who are given the opportunity to explore their experience of the arts and discuss the place of the arts in their lives, there is an appreciation that the arts are of personal value to them, albeit of varying levels. They may prefer to call their chosen art forms ‘entertainment’ in order to distance themselves from more conventional art forms, but there is an acceptance that their lives are touched by the arts when a broader definition is applied.

More strikingly, there is overwhelming agreement that the arts perform an important and valuable role within society generally. A long list of benefits offered by the arts is readily accepted and those who are less engaged with the arts recognise their value to others, if not for themselves. The idea of ‘a world without the arts’ is abhorrent to all and there is widespread acceptance of the importance of supporting the arts with public money. There is an almost universal call for children to be brought up with exposure to the arts, for their own sake and for that of wider society.

2.3 Funding Priorities and their Perceived Value

Given its mission, ‘to put the arts at the heart of national life and people at the heart of the arts’, and the fact that the Arts Council distributes public funds, it

is not surprising that the criteria that are given top priority in making funding decisions are

- benefiting society at large
- reaching as many people as possible
- deriving lasting benefits.

Great value is put on community based projects that will deliver benefits for individuals and wider society whereas other areas of funding lead to negative opinions about the delivery of public value. The most contentious areas are

- high levels of funding for the large, national companies
- funding for individuals and
- public art (which often happens to be conceptual).

If these are to be areas of funding for the Arts Council, then their value needs to be communicated.

The problem for the national companies and organisations seems to be their ready association with elitist arts that much of the population is not interested in or if they are interested, are unable to access. There was little appreciation of efforts they are currently making to try to widen access or these are thought to be ineffective. Their principal role is seen as an exemplar of excellence in their specific art forms and in their ability to engender a sense of national pride. They represent a legacy for the future, something to which the young people engaged in the national youth organisations, for example, can aspire. While this perceived value justifies funding to a degree, there is a need to communicate how public funding is employed and what is achieved through it. Moreover, if the public are correct in their suspicion that access is not being widened as a result of current funding, then perhaps different techniques to encourage new audiences are needed.

Mainstream thinking is that public art funded by the public does not deliver value either because people find it hard to understand (and don't wish to find out what it is about) and/or the context in which it resides (e.g. outside a hospital, in the middle of a roundabout) affects perceptions of its value (the

money would be better spent inside the hospital). High profile and admittedly, semi-figurative works such as the Angel of the North seem to have more chance of being assigned value, even if they take time to ‘grow on you’.

The funding of individual artists was not seen as being of great benefit to society; the launch of a career and commercial success were not the outputs that the public envisaged from Arts Council funded projects. If this funding is to continue, then perhaps messages about the needs of the artist, size of the awards, the matching of funding and repayment if success results, may be helpful in changing perceptions.

Alternatively, given that the commercial motive is one of which the public is so suspicious especially when it comes to the use of public funds, then perhaps the Arts Council (and Government) should give the economic importance of the arts greater emphasis in communications on the subject.

2.4 Implications for the Arts Council

The first implication of the varying levels of approval for different types of ‘projects’, is perhaps to raise the question of whether the Arts Council should establish more clearly defined funding streams – possibly, community projects, national companies and individual artists. This might help public perceptions because they would see that each project was not competing for the same pot of money but was competing for funds against similar types of applications. The application and decision-making processes could also be tailored to the types of candidates. The real and ongoing challenge for the Arts Council would be to decide on the size of pot available to each funding stream.

The research revealed much latent interest in what the Arts Council is and how it uses public money. To combat accusations of ‘institutional exclusivity’ and satisfy this interest, there is a need for the Arts Council to build a higher profile for itself and step out from its role in the back office. This is not to say that it should market itself through costly campaigns but it needs to create awareness of what it is trying to achieve and what this means for the public, artists and arts organisations.

The Arts Council needs to become associated with the broad range of projects of a high quality that it funds and to inform people of opportunities open to them. It should publicise the fact that information, advice and guidance are available and be more proactive in providing this. The website is a starting point with tools like the feasibility check suggested by one respondent but there is an expectation of help readily available at the end of the phone as well as staff being prepared to visit applicant groups. This could have serious implications for staffing and the expectations of applicants will need careful management as they are likely to be high.

Greater transparency is required to offset the suspicion that exists about funds going to favoured people and companies. As groups begin to feel that the Arts Council is a potential source of funds, they will demand to know how and why funds have been allocated, both as initial awards and as continued funding.

The Arts Council, with its overview of publicly funded arts in England and its mission to increase access, will need to provide information about 'best practice' in the arts. While the arts go hand in hand with creativity and originality, information about the more mundane side of the operation of community projects could be usefully shared to ensure optimum effectiveness. This should include the sharing of lessons learned from less successful projects.

There is clearly a desire for members of the public to contribute to decision making at the Arts Council alongside the specialist expertise that they recognise as essential. The concept of a more democratic rather than collegiate approach would seem to have some merits especially for the community-based projects. Many of those that took part in the research seemed to have the local insight, the ability to be open-minded and a genuine interest in the arts and what they can offer, that would equip them to fulfil such a role.

2.5 Implications for Fundees

A requirement for there to be in place a clear statement of the aims of a project or group, the monitoring of the use of funds and an evaluation of the outcomes against aims, was seen as only common sense and as something demanded by other funding sources. There was no desire for this process to be complex, restrictive, costly or overly cumbersome and most assumed that something along these lines was already in place. If the Arts Council and its role are to become better known and its decision making is to be seen as transparent, then the meeting of these responsibilities by fundees will be expected and required.

2.6 Increasing Engagement with the Arts

Access to the arts is not perceived to be a major issue. Some feel that they have as much to do with arts as they would like; others would like to be able to do more and claim that if certain obstacles were removed, this would make it easier for them to do so. Certain of these obstacles are very tangible and seem very real – for example, the lack of provision for certain groups in specific locations, and the cost of access. However, if the twin barriers impeding greater engagement with the arts are more generally a lack of motivation and inertia, the question seems to be, would more people engage with the arts or do so more frequently if the various obstacles they cite were to be overcome?

We suggest that the most important obstacles, especially for those we have called the 'low engaged', 'unengaged' or 'anti-engaged' are the psychological ones, those that prevent people even considering attending or (god forbid) actively participating in some form of the arts. Central to any strategy for combating these obstacles and thereby having any chance of increasing engagement among these groups will be providing reassurance. People need to be reassured that, whatever the art form,

- 'it' is for 'people like them'
- they will feel at ease

- they will enjoy it.

This is not to say that the more tangible obstacles are unimportant. If some of these can be lowered, then perhaps they can contribute to creating this vital reassurance. Thus, the arts need to be

- available in a popular, familiar form where the emphasis is on fun and enjoyment
- available more locally
- well publicised in the sorts of places that reach the intended audience
- publicised in an appealing way that tells people what they will get out of it.

We suggest that an analogy could be drawn with the way in which museums have developed over the last twenty-five years. In the past, the focus in museums was on the collections and exhibitions were very object based, offered minimal interpretation and delivered very serious and academic communication that was inaccessible to most ordinary people. They have become places in which the emphasis is on the communication of ideas, where multi-media, hands-on experiences happen and where learning takes place alongside entertainment and having fun. Visitor numbers and a broader socio-economic profile attest to their success.

Some of the most popular and inclusive events that enable people to sample the arts seem to be the outdoor festivals (sometimes, but not always called 'arts festivals'), carnival and street performance. The open nature of these events means that anyone can wander through, they can move on if they are not enjoying something and there are other distractions like refreshments and the facility to socialise that add to the experience. There would therefore seem to be an opportunity to use such events as a means of exposing people to new and familiar art forms in a familiar setting.

Another tactic that might be exploited is using children to bring their parents into the arts. Parents say they will respond if their children request interaction with the arts so perhaps they should be given the opportunity to do so by making inexpensive, local events and productions available.

2.7 What Do We Call It?

Finally, we have noted the restrictive and even negative associations for many people of the term, 'the arts'. The options for confronting these seem to be

- to maintain and support the accepted meaning as the 'traditional' arts but make these more accessible
- to create another term with a wider meaning such as 'arts and entertainment'
- somehow to widen and popularise the meaning of 'the arts'.

We would favour the last of these because clearly, the arts world is always changing and new and emerging art forms are earning their place within it. Moreover, defining the boundaries between the arts and non-arts is not easy as the exercise looking at what counts as art, demonstrates. The arts therefore needs to become a flexible receptacle for a changing range of activities – perhaps defined according to the three requirements of the creative idea, effort and skill, and gaining a response.

We suggest that this shift in meaning is best achieved, not by a self-conscious campaign that risks alienating the very people it seeks to engage, but instead by a slow and more subtle repositioning of the Arts Council and its association with a broader range of funded projects.