

‘WE HAVE COME HERE TODAY TO BE PLURAL’: CULTURAL VALUES AND CAPITALS

Presentation given at Euclid Conference [‘Creative Europe in a time of Austerity’](#), Manchester 9 May 2013.

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‘We have come here today to be plural.’ That’s a line from a poem by the American poet [Bob Perelman](#), a poem he wrote, I think, during the era of Reaganomics. When Geoffrey asked me to talk at this conference, it was echoing around my head because I’d been thinking of its application to my work in developing people and organisations and sectors, facilitating conversations, planning and evaluating, and to this idea I’ve writing about of adaptive resilience.

To put it simply I have become more and become convinced that the creative diversity of approach, opinions and even values, within our shared purpose as a cultural sector, is the key thing we need to protect and develop most vigorously, and that even strong but essentially monocultural ‘efficiency’ based arguments about what we should be or how we should act, could be damaging in their illusions of comfort and return. One size cannot fit all till we’re all the same shape.

I want to talk about today a diverse and holistic sense of cultural values in the specific context of austerity that this conference has as its focus. I want to suggest some things that we might do at a sectoral level to ease this harsh passage.

I’d like to start with a few words about what austerity might mean. Austerity in the UK has tended to not simply squeeze public spending, but to add to the privatization of public and communal life – via a new wave of sell-offs, but also by shifting the burden to individuals, either directly or indirectly. Society will carry what we as individuals choose to afford to carry, is the implication. The rest we will shift into the ‘Fundraising’ budget line and hope for the best. We might point to things as seemingly different as food banks, free schools and fees or the lack of them for artists as three manifestations of this, just to mention things beginning with F.

There are a number of implication of Austerity UK of particular significance for the cultural sector

- Firstly, a reduction in public investment coupled with an emphasis on economic cost benefit analysis, volunteering and philanthropic or community-focused giving of time or money, leading to some winners, most working ever harder and some losing out.
- Secondly, a reduction in disposable incomes after 35 years of growth – with ONS saying a drop of 4% for middle income families in last 9 years. Interestingly audiences seem to be holding up – suggesting those that can afford it, need and want culture as much as ever
- Thirdly, stemming from the first two, and perhaps most profoundly, widening inequalities between the rich, the poor and the average can be seen in society

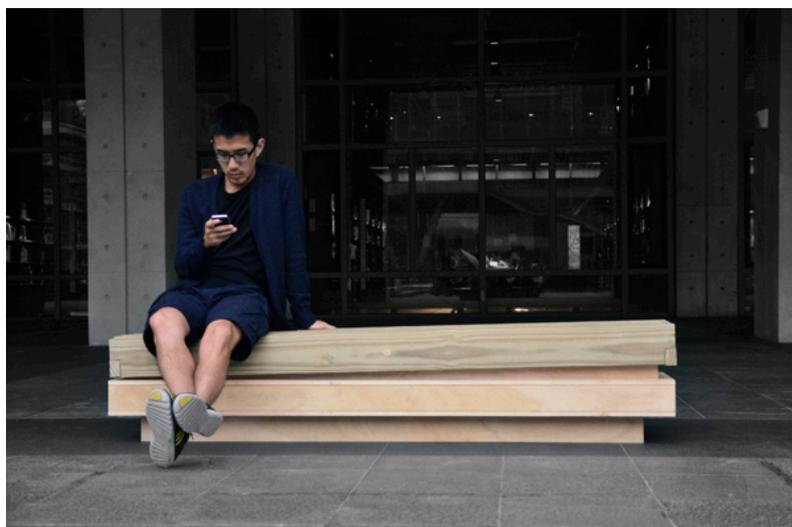
Why do I say, ‘perhaps most profoundly’ when many in our sector have historically proven extremely good at ignoring issues of inequality? Because the role of the cultural sector in making distinctions of class, power and privilege felt and concrete, in who gets to be an artist or creative, and who takes part as audience – and paradoxically in combatting those distinctions – is increasingly recognized, and policy and pragmatics may shift us in ways which will have profound long-term effects. We know the subsidized arts are enjoyed by people of all kinds, but disproportionately by the better off and the better educated. We know many people still feel excluded from arts and culture, despite our best efforts. We also know a huge share of public

funding goes to national art-form history-preserving institutions, almost exclusively in London, with readier access to big business sponsors and wealthy philanthropists. Regional and artist-led infrastructure is inevitably filed under the proverbial 'difficult decisions'. Even the arguments put forward for the economic benefits of the arts tend to underline the awkward truth of 'them that's got shall get / them that's not shall lose.' *War Horse* becomes an argument for funding the National, not for funding emerging novelists.

We need to respond to Austerity in ways that lessen inequality. We need, I want to suggest, to look to our cultural values, and what we might do with them.

I have been involved with some work with Mission Models Money, nef and Exchange¹, a group of performing arts organisations in Newcastle Gateshead which aims to start some arguments about culture in a sustainable economy and the role of artists within that. This included a literature review of ways of measuring cultural value, and workshops with artists and arts workers to identify interventions that would provide better and more sustainable livelihoods for artists, within a cultural ecology that was not eating itself, or contributing to a wider unsustainable and damaging growth agenda.

Attempting to review the cases made for and against different definitions of the value of culture as I did, is likely to leave the reader with a constant feeling of déjà vu lodged in the memory span of a goldfish, or as if in an unlikely cultural policy remake of HG Well's *The Time Machine*, with policies and reports flying around you as you hurtle through in time. Austerity does not yet appear to have changed the basic terms of the discussion. (Indeed, in much of the debate you would think austerity did not exist except in arts funding budgets, but that's another argument.)



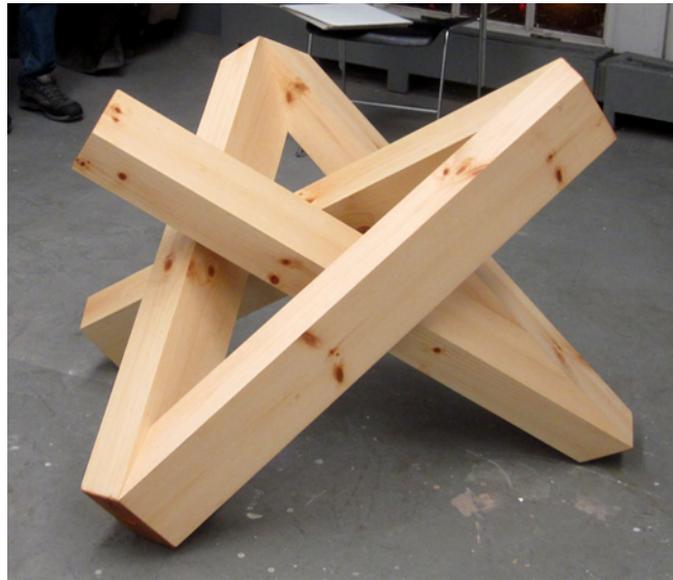
See-saw Bench by Chien-Chin Wang / Tien-Chi Chao / Yen-Ting Lin

The cultural value debate too often operates on a binary system focused on its own workings. It is like sitting on this bench, which is also a seesaw. Kind of fun, kind of annoying, all right if you're on your own (in which case you imagine it's not a seesaw.) But you are always liable to be jolted if someone heavy sits on the other end, or a gang of thin people with power on their side arrive.

These tensions can be presented as binaries, but they are usually present in some combination, rather than exclusively one or the other. Individual benefit or community benefit? Innovation or the continuation of heritage and tradition? Intrinsic and autonomous or instrumental and useful? A profession or priesthood or activity for amateurs too? A way to differentiate yourself from others

¹ Ballet Lorent, *The Empty Space*, NAME/Novak, Northern Stage

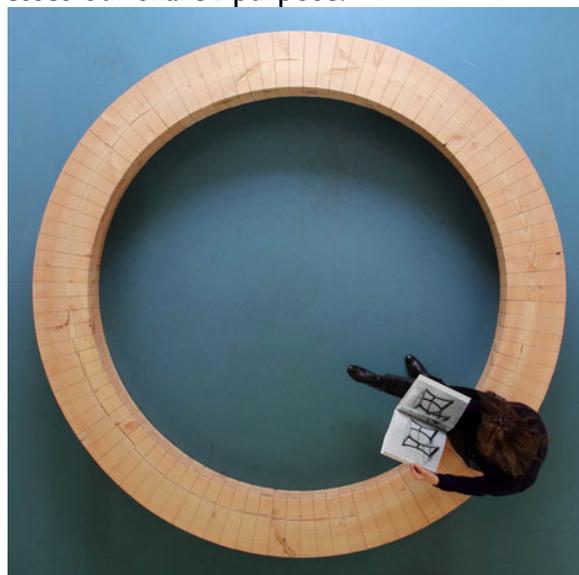
or to join with diverse but like-minded people? These binaries fight it out repeatedly. Too often that seesaw argument looks more like this to people not involved – a more uncomfortable bench to try and sit upon with others.



But like a seesaw, cultural value and artistic practice are energised by such tensions. The most exciting work is exciting because of it combines things that are hard to combine or to balance. That's a great thing about culture: it can do more than one thing at once.

Powerful examples of this can perhaps be found in arts and education. Perhaps the most iconic example El Sistema and its UK siblings 'In Harmony' and Big Noise, where the affects of poverty and exclusion – and of Austerity – are integrated with a disciplined and inclusive emphasis on the highest musical standards possible. These suggest we cannot properly make ourselves resilient if we do not address the lived experiences of those we work with and for.

It is unhelpful to suggest that culture is one thing which acts in similar ways in everything it does universally, or that our businesses can work in the same way. The diversity of intentions, values and outcomes must be respected. We don't need a seesaw, or institutional arm-wrestling: we need a bench more like this: –a holistic sense of what we could be, and a holistic circle of values and conversation that expresses our shared purpose.



Circular bench, Chris Kabeb

These then relate to the different values that people think arts and culture generates. Our research and conversation with artists describes how there are six elements found consistently:

Personal Development: the stories and images people take to their hearts and minds, in delight, bafflement, joy, anger and emotion, learning, expansion of perception, creation of awareness, empathy

can become an integral element of their

Well-Being: cultural activity has a role for many here, be that raising spirits, connecting to family, friends and community, stimulation, or indeed income..

Social Capital develops symbiotically with our individual well-being and development: building connections between people and the shared social norms that enable us to work and live together productively. Culture does this both physically, in venues and at festivals, for instance, but also intellectually and across time and space. It creates new norms. Some argue that the creation of **interdependencies** - the heart of social capital - is also at the heart of cultural development, which is why it is arguably an Anti-Austerity activity and enables the building of

Cultural Capital: The ability and propensity of people to take part in cultural activity, and for others to build the ways that make that possible – from libraries to theatres etc. The artists, organisations and audiences for culture create the ...

Economic impact: and ultimately even the **Community Sustainability** without which none of this can be genuinely long-lasting.

Using this whole spectrum, Culture stops being simple and single and becomes plural. No longer simply a pretext for the spending and circulation of money. Neither simply a pretext for the circulation of ideas, arguments or dilemmas. It stops being simply wonderfully useless beauty. It stops being simply a self-referential game of charades, dare or the dozens. It stops being simply personal catharsis, therapy or entertaining distraction, or social occasion for meeting friends and neighbours, family, lovers and potential lovers. It starts to seek its role in, well, what poet John Berryman called 'the whole business...vague, over-claiming and crude as it seems.' 'The whole business' – actually a useful and productive pun for our context.

Raising the stakes, it seems to me, is perhaps our most practical cultural response to Austerity. To reject any funneling, no matter how inadvertent, towards an ever more privileged audience – which could fatally break that circle of possible values in two - we have to think big not binary, plural not simple or single.

But what might this look like? I want to conclude by thinking about one aspect of this.

As part of the Exchange project, *The Art of Living Dangerously*, we identified a general lack of attention to the specific role of emergent and established individual artists in most models of cultural value and of resilience, except as the inhabitants of centres, studios and organisations. Artists felt that often the building-based infrastructure neither understood nor supported their needs as well as possible, meaning they could contribute less artistically, socially or economically. We looked at work done by DFID in developing a framework for sustainable livelihoods, mainly applied in developing countries, which seemed to suggest ways forward.

The model, which has informed sector development in Canada, building on work by Judi Piggot, defines 5 kinds of ‘capital’ that make up the assets upon which people can develop livelihoods:

- Human capital: skills, knowledge, health
- Natural capital: land, natural resources, environmental health
- Financial capital: savings, income, borrowing
- Social capital: networks and beneficial relationships
- Physical capital: infrastructure, buildings, equipment, energy.

Some of these we have defined for us, others we can build, others we share access with others.

That we must – if our future is to grasp the challenges of climate change and the need for a transition to a more *sensible* way of living – think of our activity as developing sustainable uses of those 5 capitals in the context of society, not just that sub-set of our activities called the economy or that other subset (to say larger or smaller would open another debate) called Culture, is key. There is no point growing your financial capital if you destroy your physical capital (be it environment or body) in the process. As philosopher Michael Sandel has argued ‘We have drifted from *having* a market economy, to *being* a market society’. We must avoid this happening within the cultural sector, by emphasizing the values of long-term productivity, diversity and inclusion rather than those of productivity and surplus.

Monocultures can be highly productive – for a while. Land used to grow cotton or broccoli as in the photo, gradually uses up the nutrients that made it so highly productive in the first place. We are at risk of doing the same to our key nutrients – artists and diverse audiences – if we let our policy responses to Austerity be constrained to Philanthropy, Squeezing Budgets and Reducing Dependency on Public Funds. I came across two statistics just recently that may be early signs of this.

The [most recent Arts Council RFO data](#) suggest that for the first time the sector spent more on ‘Raising funds’ than on ‘Marketing’. There may be statistical quirks, or urgent cases, but that cannot be healthy in the long-term – for use to devote more resources to chasing grants than to attracting people to our work?

Another figure in the new Arts Council [economic impact report by CEBR](#) hit me – that full-time earnings have risen by 6.8% in the last five years, whilst part-time earnings – freelancers and artists often, one might surmise had decreased by 5.3%. Are we squeezing our key nutrients – and widening inequality in our own sector?

There are, however, other ways – a kind of permaculture, as in this photo, if I may be forgiven a pun as a way of introducing a more cheerful photo to end on. *The Art of Living Dangerously* will argue there are 3 key areas where people across the sector can work together.

Firstly: we need to jointly develop approaches that sustain livelihoods by maximising use of those 5 capitals. This might be through initiatives such as Time Banks – as done by [CVAN](#), building on the [Leeds Creative Timebank](#) pilot – through networks such as What Next, or through arts-led initiatives that include promotion of work, such as [Without Walls](#), or by sharing expertise via things such as [CultureHive](#). We need to share experience and knowledge, especially as people enter the sector as, for instance, is done by a-n’s [Artists Talking](#) blogs and numerous ‘in real life’ meet ups.

Secondly: we need to pool our risks. This might be in the shape of collaborative working, of which there are many, many examples. [Juice Festival](#) is one I have worked closely with, identifying that joint working had practical benefits, but also helped shaped new understanding and skills. In a

period where the CPD budget line is sacrificed to Austerity, simply working with others may help protect actual professional development. The collaborative projects being funded under Arts Council's Catalyst scheme will be informative case studies. Joint use of different funding remains an aspiration.

Finally, we need to use our spaces to their full extent and with all our creativity, opening them up to as many different people as possible, from the youth theatre to the Entrepreneurs Forum. We have fantastic assets from the period before Austerity, in a generation of buildings funded by lottery, EU, local government and others. Truth be told, some are sometimes under-used. Every venue should have a scheme similar to [Northern Stage's Spare Room](#), providing free last-minute access to unused spaces to individual or groups. Every arts centre should have a scheme like Arc's [Arcade](#) for performing artists, supporting scratch nights, workshops with visiting groups, facilities. You will know of many other examples.

We need, therefore, and to conclude, to let no space, asset, idea or knowledge go unused in our becoming plural.

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