



Dundee Contemporary Arts

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Brian Holmes Talk

[Brian] Well, I think I'm a bit of the odd person out here first of all because I live neither in Scotland nor in the UK. Second of all because I don't run a cultural space, and I have nothing formally whatsoever to do with policy. I was born in the United States and I've lived in Paris for the last 20 years or so. I'm a writer and I do, basically cultural critique. And this has led me to be interested in arts policy, of course I'm quite involved with art itself, and I do work with artists and I must admit also with political activists. I thought I would be at once polemical and philosophical, and so I'm going to start with the polemical part and maybe begin from outside the frame of which we're discussing things.

The title was 'After the Creative Industries' but I decided to change that and make it 'After the Hothouse'. These are actually hothouses, they're greenhouses. I and my friend photographer Claire Pentecoste, went to Almeria in Southern Spain three or four years ago to see where our winter fruit and vegetables are actually grown. We'd heard there was really something quite amazing, a sea of plastic greenhouses that just stretches for miles and miles, kind of strange architecture, I'm afraid you probably can't see that well because of the light here but it's really the most artificial thing you could imagine. The soil inside is not soil, it's actually sort of crushed up stones, the water that goes through is full of chemicals and fertilizers and so on. The plants grow directly out of little bags, and they have little pipes that are actually metered by various complex devices to give them what they need to be what we want. That is to say tomatoes...(laughter)

You know, it's a tremendous working environment also, these are huge things, it's very hot, they require a lot of labour and maintenance, we wanted to see what this process I like, we were on an investigative documentary trip. We had heard about the conditions of labour there and indeed we found something like what we had heard about, people from Sub-Saharan Africa living in a small town with sometimes quite tense social conditions that this is a happy moment, there have been big fights in this town, it's really a typical example of a hardcore neo-liberal production facility where

you are taking people, paying them almost nothing, and pretty much using them as the bosses wish. This is something that we want to know more about, this is an example of places where people actually live. Apparently most people live in one or two of those big greenhouses, in big communal living spaces because it has become very difficult to live in the villages because of the social tensions.

But something else we saw that we weren't really prepared for was another kind of hothouse actually. These are greenhouses and down below what you have is what is close to Southern Spain is famous for, which is vacations. And this was the middle of the gigantic boom so building everywhere, fantastic amounts of cottages being put in, timeshare apartments, condominiums, resort facilities of course, and everything for that sunshine in the winter that makes the vegetables grow. And what it finally came to was this, this incredible oasis, this is a very dry area and you have this amazing oasis which has been treated architecturally in a lot of different ways, you've got ziggurat things back here and this is something that was actually a turning point for me, I don't know if it really transformed me but, I started wondering, what kind of dark glasses do you have to wear to not see, to go on vacation here and to not see that you're right next to people labouring under the conditions of 19th century exploitation. And how is it that you can go to a place like that and not see and not see feel as some kind of danger, the land, the water of that very arid land has been sucked out, they drill deeper and deeper underneath those hills to get the water to bring for the lawns but also for these massive amounts of tomatoes and bell peppers. And finally of course the question that we now realise and we can see in retrospect which is, how can we not see that this massive oval building on the southern coast of Spain was not going to need to just a bunch of useless and dangerous sort of debris on the landscape which is what it looks like now. So this for me, was as I say, was a moment of insight, where I started thinking about what I call the need for a politics and cultural politics of perception. How to learn to see some of the things that we don't see.

Now this, believe it or not, has some kind of relation to cultural policy in the UK. You can imagine that I'm somehow going to be critical. But I want to say first that I do come to London a lot and I do read a lot of things coming out of England, all kinds of different things. And I must say from what I've seen, and also what I've seen here, there are many positive things that have been done in the past ten years, quite a lot of positive things. And the degree of modernisation of the cultural facilities here I think is, from the

outside, is quite impressive. This ambition to open up the structures and make them multi-functional, as in the case is here and I think most of the places that we've been hearing about. And these attempts, even if they're sometimes fallaciously formulated nonetheless they attempt to open up processes of where more cultural choice is shared out and where there are more different ways to participate in culture which is definitely taking away the authoritarian nature of the old, what in France we think of as a Melrose, sort of way of creating temples to culture and stuff. To me it's very very striking and I think that a lot has been done. And I would even go so far as to say that's to say the neo-liberal model of treating the user like a client in terms of opening up the databanks of culture and institutions I think has been quite positive because they ought to be. What's publicly produced ought to be publicly usable and in the case of the digital side of it that's not so difficult to do so why not do it. I think that's very very positive.

However, beyond that, it's certain that I haven't lived through this thing, and you have and I'm quite fascinated to hear the talk here today and I think there will be more about what kinds of experiences that all of you have been developing. I have seen the policies of the creative industries much more from the outside and the most striking case of it for me was when I went to China actually. I went to China in the lead up to the Olympic games. And I went there with the idea that I would approach Chinese society through the lens of art because this was a set of contexts that I had and of course a set of ideas and so called expertise and whatever knowledge that I have. And what I found was, I couldn't believe it, what I found was the discourse of the creative industries was everywhere in China, it was really striking. Everywhere where new cities are being built and you, this is really creative industries; you could see new cities being built, new districts being created out of thin air. New ways of living emerging and almost, you feel like it's before your eyes because it's so fast. I was really struck by this project in Shanghai where the rhetoric of course is always quite interesting to come across. And they're renovating this big, used to be a slaughterhouse, it's called the 1933 building actually after the date. And they talk about it, they say 'inside the neurological influences are apparent' – this is this idea of neurons, intelligence, connecting people, networks and so on. The neurological influences are apparent. A five floor concrete structure supported by solid flowering pillars whose stands open out like petals at the point of contact with the ceiling. The funicular central building is linked to the square outer casing by a striking series of sloping concrete pathways and staircases. This is the grain of the building says the cultural manager of the group named Axons, Mr Paul Yo.

You can see the interlinking effect of the original walkways; you can use that to help carry creative energies throughout the whole structure. So we have this imaginary where the neural pathways of our minds become totally linked into the electronic networks of really world communication and commerce. All of that is meant to generate economic value by innovation, which is really the key word behind all of this, by the creation of the new product and so on. And this changes the city, and it's visible in China and that's visible everywhere. We've had a lot of discussion among the circles of culture producers that I'm part of, about the concept of the creative city and the question of gentrification. And this building where the building was treated somewhat as the famous million-dollar homepage where for one euro you could buy a pixel, you know? Well, for one euro you could buy a tile on the building, of course if you're a private person you buy a little tile, if you're Sony or google you buy an immense thing, it looks something like an artwork, it's promoting. It's promoted as an artwork, you know?

And as I read both the policy documents from the UK and also the sociologists like Anthony Giddens, I started to form a theoretical picture of what seemed to be going on here. Here and just here there was this discourse which was just really transnational which I think is characteristic of a time when borders are open and it has been relatively or more difficult for the state to carry on what used to be the concept of welfare. The idea that the citizens would all be taken care of somehow. The discourse of the creative industries seems to be aiming at actually preparing the citizen to take care of themselves right? Autonomy is another key word in this whole thing. And it seemed to be going to a place where the primary focus of intervention, this is myself writing for one of my articles, becomes high quality information access and lifelong education. In other words the grooming of the most productive citizens for innovation and transnational knowledge of image markets whose operations can no longer be regulated by a national state but only adapted to a close national regime which seeks, in so far as is possible, to influence the parameters within which productive individuals make free choices.

This was one sentence where I was trying to distil what seemed to be the meaning of this fusion between ways that we formally had about talking about art and artistic creation and of new ways of talking about value creation and economy. So we're getting to the key question, which seemed to be the question that Clive was trying to raise in his text, which is the question of value, the value of art, the value of creativity, and is this an economic value?

As I shift into the philosophical mode, this is a question which I want to raise. I want to raise the question of the place of culture in society, and what happens when you begin to defy culture as an economic value? In some cases certainly this is only perhaps a fantasy of some people, but as a purely economic one. I think that all of this discourse is now going to come to something of a crisis. And I'd like to remind you that a crisis in history is actually a medical term that refers to a critical state when a patient's life is in danger and when an intervention is called for. That's the background of the word crisis and I think that the crisis is exactly the moment that calls for critique and which calls for an intervention and I think in many many different ways over the course of the next few years we will have a first chance to do that, as has happened in the past of course many times, and I think it's going to be quite interesting, it's really an opportunity to take some of the best things that have been done in the last ten years and separate them perhaps with some of the other things, and start to think again about how it is that we can fit these best elements of culture into a sort of wider picture of what society is about.

Rather than going on in this direction where culture really becomes the provision of a sophisticated contemporary culture becomes something like a jumping off place for a kind of projection of the most able, the cleverest citizens, into, not just cyber space, but into this transnational economy which has flourished very much with the growth of financialisation. And which I think is, in many ways, has ridden on the back of, you know, you should have a really strong broadband wire. Clearly these wires have been laid originally to carry signals of exchanges of money around the world. The business that laid and funded the Internet was first of all the finance industry before the Internet even existed and they had other prongs of telecommunications so this is something that's been going on other... But anyway, at this point I want to move to provide just one reference that to me has been very very productive in understanding what kind of crisis we are now entering, what kind of a crisis this is by comparing it to other ones in the past. And the person that I'm going to refer to is an economic historian named Karl Polanyi, who is an author of a quite famous book called *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi was a Hungarian, he lived successfully in Budapest, in Vienna, in London during the 30s, and then during the war he moved to the United States, and it was on the basis of research he did in the 30s that he wrote the book *The Great Transformation* in the 1940s during World War II. What he did, what Polanyi did was to study, what he called, the place of the economy in society. More precisely he studied the dis-embedding of the economy from society. He studied the historical process

whereby, beginning right here in Scotland, whereby the notion of a self-regulating market came into being. The idea that prices would work out to a fair price where one could profit from investment, and get a return which would be a profit, a stable source, a fair source of money. So the way the market would regulate itself through the price mechanism to continue making investment profitable. This notion of self-regulation by the market means that of course you don't need government, right? So, the different ways in which people govern themselves, I would go a little further and say the many many ways in which people care for themselves, and care for each other become irrelevant to a market society which is actually regulated by the operations of the market. Which sounds familiar because we heard a lot about it in the 1980s. Our ancestors also heard a lot about it throughout the 19th century and this somehow culminated in a situation where you had a belief in the efficiency of the self-regulating market which gradually spread to cover every activity and therefore every activity began to be conceived as an investment which would necessarily offer a fair return in a situation which although it may have some mis-steps and some things go wrong the competition for a viable price would always iron out this mis-step and actually govern every activity. And of course that leads ultimately to the same conclusion that was arrived at in the 90s, which is that there really is no society. There are a lot of people transacting on the market.

For Polanyi the self-regulating market could only function to the creation of three fictitious commodities, what he called fictitious commodities. Which were land, labour and money itself. What he meant by calling them fictitious is that you know, land it's clearly not a commodity. Land was there before, land is actually nature, is actually that which produced us, there is no investment to produce nature. There's no way you can claim that the price of nature is correctly fixed by a self-regulating market. So what happens is that nature is appropriated, it's turned into a commodity, and any sort of damage that's done is simply pushed outside of the accounting books and left there. It's what economists now call that an externality. It's external to the accounting of profit and loss.

Similarly labour, or really human beings, aren't produced on the market and everything that goes into bringing a human being into life, and everything that goes into sustaining the health of a human being is not necessarily taken care of by the market. In fact, if you leave the market to do what it does you get what you got in extreme ways in the 19th Century where you can see today, usually less extreme ways because thankfully we have some aspects of the welfare state but you can easily see in the many sides of the

contemporary economy that the principle of treating human life as a commodity has come back and certain people are exposed to an extreme form of exploitation.

The third thing that Polanyi was particularly interested in was, what happens when money, the institution of exchange, that allows people to exchange the product of their labour for the product of someone else's labour and it allows people to also shape their relation to nature as well. What happens is that money is treated like a commodity, when money is bought and sold and bought and sold and bought and sold. Faster and faster until you get to our time where the same money can be bought and sold hundreds of times in a single hour across vast distances.

And what Polanyi really studied in his book, which is a fantastic history of this, was the rise of the gold standard, and then its actual self destruction during the course of time it goes from just before the first World War to the second one. So it's quite a precise and economic history that bears so much resemblance to what's happening now that its very striking to read it now at a time when excessive speculation on what isn't really even bank money but it's credit money, you know, money that Bankers create. It really is fictitious money you know. It's gotten to the point where it's partially destroyed the institutions of economic exchange.

Now today we have to add, it's become clear that what's developed in the past 30 years, and most people working in this vein agree, that we should add a fourth fictitious commodity. Which is the commodity that first people called knowledge, but I prefer actually to say culture. As something that moves knowledge and scientific knowledge, other forms of knowledge, and that more broadly is, offers us away to care for ourselves and each other, to care for our relationship to nature, which of course has been subjected to tremendous commodification in the form of intellectual property. So we get what Clive was talking about in his text, alienable property – ideas, language that circulates in the air, which has legal walls put around it, or legal perimeters put around it so it can be bought and sold on a market.

Polanyi thought that when all these things are treated as commodities that ultimately because the actual conditions that produce them are not factored in to the accounting profit and loss that is used to determine whether the market is functioning correctly that what happened was, those conditions were destroyed and grave dangers to society arose. And he followed, in history, the emergence of ecological problems – problems with the land, of

problems with health – with the people who worked, labour problems, which extends to very dangerous, political problems that arose principally through the destabilization of the economic systems splitting the world up into rival blocks and ultimately culminating in the second world war. More than that, he studied how the movement of the market, the extension of the market to the entire world produced what they called self-defensive attempts on the part of society, okay? A kind of counter-movement to the movement of market. And he therefore talks in *The Great Transformation* about the emergence of Socialism, about the emergency of Japanese Imperialism, about the emergence of the American New Deal, and of course about Fascism and Nazism in Germany. So he looked at the way that the liberal approach to the market produces different forms of reaction, some of which are extremely conservative, and some of which are in fact extremely dangerous and are kind of more dangerous than the alienation of the market itself.

And this is what really drew me into actually using Polanyi a lot because being American and having spent time in America these past five years particularly, I saw this transition from new liberalism to New Conservatism and I saw the two things working at the same time that continued to push to turn everything into the market. And at the same time, there arised in society these conservative discourses centred, not just around religion, but all kinds of authoritarianism and relying a lot on military and security discourses. So it seemed to me that something like this is happening in society now – I think it is. And I want to read you just a passage from Karl Polanyis so you get a flavour of what he really says and also what a great writer is because he's really a great writer and a very interesting man. So I'll read you a few paragraphs where he describes this double movement, the movement of the extension of the market and then the counter-movement.

He says: 'For a century, the dynamics of modern society was governed by a double movement, the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a counter movement, checking the expansion in definite directions. Vital as such a counter-movement was for the protection of society, in the last analysis it was incompatible with the self-regulation of the market and thus the market system itself. That system developed in leaps and bounds and engulfed space and time, and by creating bank money it produced a dynamic hitherto unknown. By the time it reached it's maximum extent around 1914 every part of the globe, all of it's inhabitants and the unborn generations, physical persons and well as huge fictious bodies called corporations were

comprised in it. A new way of life spread over the planet with a claim to universality and parallel since the age that Christianity started out. Only this time the movement was purely material. Yet simultaneously a counter-movement was afoot, this was more than the usual defensive behaviour of society faced with change. It was a reaction against a dislocation which attacked the fabric of society and which would destroy the very organisations of production... The double movement could be personified as the action of two organising principles in society, each of them setting itself specific institutional aims, having the support of definite social forces and using it's own distinctive methods. The one was the principle of economic liberalism, aiming at the establishment of the self-regulating market, relying on the support of the trading classes, and using largely laissez-faire and free trade as it's methods. The other was the principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as production organisation, relying on the support of those most immediately affected by the Of the market, not exclusively the working classes and people living in the countryside and using protective legislation, restrictive association and other instruments of intervention as its methods. The middle, or trading classes, were the bearers of the nascent market economy, their business interests ran on a pole parallel to the general interests with what regards to production and ... And the other hand the trading classes had no organ to sense the dangers involved in the exploitation of the physical strength of the worker, the destruction of family life, the devastation of neighbourhoods, the degradation of forests, the pollution of rivers, the deterioration of craft standards, the destruction of folk ways and the general degradation of existence including housing and arts as well as

Now what I find really fascinating there is this notion that the trading classes had no organ of perception to sense the danger involved in this incredible extension of bank money and therefore of the concept and really the governing mechanism. And that seems to be entirely true today the very pinnacle of our trading classes – the financiers. We're not able to see the dangers that are involved in the multiple kinds of operations that have led us to this moment of crisis. And what is more, it seems that perhaps not actually the individuals, but the structure, of governance that we have created is not able to see the urgency of the ecological crisis that has been set off by the continuing expansion of modernism and now this extension of industrial modernism to some 3 or 4 billion more people than it touched before, particularly to China and India and then the rest of the formerly under-developed world. And this, by all accounts, is leading us, within the lifespan of everyone in this

room, to massive changes. Changes that will make the current crisis perhaps appear small, even though I don't think the current crisis itself can really be counted as small.

So, you know, the very thoughtful text that Clive prepared for this, and perhaps in our conversations, because I came here last weekend and had some conversations with Clive in order to understand a little more about the situation, and Clive raised the notion of cultural ambition, which I thought was an interesting word. And I'm wondering if it would not be possible to work towards a cultural ambition which could be the ambition of a real politics of perception, cultural politics, perception and expression concerning that to which our governing structure and our governing leaders seem to.... It seems to me to be, in the UK, something that's already nascent; it's already actually beginning to be developed. Because although the UK, and I don't want to conflate Scotland and the UK, I just reference the UK because I know more about it but also because you are also part of it somehow in Scotland still. It's very curious because at once it has been perhaps not the leader, but from what I can see in almost every domain the UK cotafies what's done in America and exports it massively to the rest of the world – in terms of management in particular. Of course in financial terms the City of London is pretty much number one and the spectacle of this distribution of the creative industries thing, I mean it's really extraordinary. You may not know that because you may not spend a lot of time reading the policy papers of other countries but you would be amazed and how much this has been distributed. But at the same time as that's going on there's been this incredible upsurge in the United Kingdom of concern, and concern on different levels of society – this is what I find interesting. There are many different levels of society where there is great concern, not only about the expansion – the continuing expansion about the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia which is a nightmare on the horizon, with a possibility of Pakistan coming in front – and the war ... wider and wider and wider, but also and more intensely, the concern about the ecological crisis, acting far enough in advance to actually do something about it which is amazingly encouraging. And yet we see here, as is everywhere, this concern can't translate into the procedure of government.

So I'm wondering, when we talk about the crisis that we're now in, we talk about the possibility of redefining what the place of culture is in society, if it wouldn't be possible to start working more within this curious space which is the culture space because there's some very interesting about art, and we all know it. Art always has a problem of definition even a lack of definition, which allows

people to speak, and say things that they can't say in spaces that are more clearly cognified. Because through relation with an artwork you find yourself trying to express something which you can't quite express which leads you to formulate many many things and also we learn to feel differently, to express, to engage with people differently. And it seems to me that of course, for me it's quite clear that the kinds of art that I'm interested in are directly involved with perception of the world and with ways of reaching eyes and ears, noses and feet into realms of society that are not those of normal everyday habit and can reveal more the whole of society and what's happening in it.

Those forms of art end up being recognisable and you can say documentary, well it's a little more complicated than that, it's not just documentary, but then also this is only part of art and I'm not suggesting that all artistic practice should be. But what I am wondering is, there was something said about practice leading policy maybe instead of policy leading practice, and it seems to me that one of the things to do is to work a lot more on the question of expression and confrontation. Situations where people can't express, learn to express what it is they feel and learn to confront each other, learn to engage in something like dialogue, rich dialogue, a dialogue that can take place on several levels. Because I think when you appear in public with other people there's a lot which is at stake, and one of the things at stake is the very capacity to do this but the other thing that's at stake is the capacity to let yourself be changed by the interaction with other people.

It seems to me that if we get into a situation where the definition of art as an economic value starts to collapse. If we get in a situation, which is almost sure for you, where the government changes, you end up with a conservative government, certainly in England – I don't know about here in Scotland but that might be the case because there's going to be real crisis of legitimacy of the government here very soon.

Before we were talking about searching. On whom are we going to base? If we can't base it, as it was relatively easy to do for a while, we could base the legitimacy of culture on economy but this place of the economy as the lynch-pin of everything in society starts to go into crisis then we have to look for a new place for culture in society. And I don't think we can expect some sort of populist, kind of invocation of culture for everyone, culture for the people and so on.. I think what we could do though is multiply the forms of encounter, critical encounter and debate – expression and confrontation – around different kinds of art, and take advantage of

this multi-functionality, whatever you want to call it, of the art centres that have emerged in the last ten years. And really use it to multiply the places in society where culture comes to be defined as really the questioning of what is art? Because I think that's what art is really about, when it comes to any kind of definition. Art is that which brings into question what is valuable? What is value? Because there are many different kinds of value and the totalitarianism of economics is frankly dangerous. And what's interesting about art is that it asks, is experience valuable? – is communication valuable? – are relationships valuable? – is territory valuable? – is weightlessness and deterritorialisation valuable? These questions, multiple questions are raised by art and I think that's one of the places where it's value really lies is that it is a theatre, an emporium of value.

I don't mind saying in conclusion when Clive asked me to come here and give a talk, I said 'instead of just having a talk, why don't we have a seminar'. You know, get people together and actually reflect on the ten years of the DCA and of course that in turn also includes the ten years of the creative industries and I guess probably also a certain New Labour type paradigm generally. And probably also the ten years since the Internet and electronic communications have massively infiltrated the western societies and have launched a new phase, a new form of relating to one another.

So I wanted to bring this philosophical conclusion, I know it's a bit far, and I think as the discussion goes it will dissolve into other discussions and there's no need to hang onto it whatsoever. But since I couldn't bring to you anything specific about policy – certain not about the policies that you use in your arts centres or with which you struggle. I thought I would try this so

[Applause]