

This text has been written as an introduction to the Manufacturing Culture event on Fri 20th March. It was written for the main speakers in order to provide some context for the event, but is also posted on the DCA website for wider dissemination.

This alienated nation

This event, Manufacturing Culture, builds on another event I helped organise in 2002 which was titled 'Culture Castles'. This first event looked at the role of cultural centres as agents, sometimes beneficent, but also sometimes belligerent ones, but usually operating within a civic context to make some kind of a link between cultural activity and an audience. As many of these organisations were supported by agendas promoting some measure of social justice, one might cynically define these organisations as attempting to establish bridgeheads of quality in an otherwise barren cultural environment.

The event was based in Liverpool and was part of the development of the FACT Centre which was then under construction in the city. It drew on the rich metaphor of the nearby Welsh border castles, built by the English king Edward I in the 13th century as bastions of colonial power. That these castles in Conwy, Caernarvon, Harlech and elsewhere are now powerful symbols of Wales might be understood on many levels, but the crude metaphor remains that these buildings were architecturally ambitious statements that provided an effective mechanism to support a centrally endorsed and validated culture. You have to understand that in a city like Liverpool this was a metaphor that remained rich.

Both before and since that time I have been involved with many projects that have attempted to understand why we build these 'culture castles'; what is it that we want them to achieve - and which of them might be said to be really achieving this goal. Over recent years as the climate has changed and we see a more chilly wind blow away the lottery fuelled optimism of the late 90s we find ourselves having to consider the possible answers to this question more fully. This is especially the case as the optimism engendered by this easy cash dries up and many of the investors begin to examine more closely their investments.

Among these investors are the governments of Scotland and the UK who in successive political cycles have accumulated a concept of the economic salvation that lies within an amorphous concept of the 'creative industries'. The fact that this concept was previously traded casually by many of those in our sector is now coming back to haunt us. Promises were made (albeit with fingers crossed behind our backs) about the place that culture holds within the creed of economic prosperity. The bonds we offered for our indulgences are now being cashed and we find ourselves without any collateral in a form that makes any sense to our debtors or ourselves.

So what do we do - we thrash around looking for a magic rosetta stone that turns what we want to do into what they are saying we need to be doing. But it cannot be found, partly because the causality of this interventionism is impossibly hard to define - especially if the products required from the intervention are not those that we actually want to create - but probably even more because we just don't believe such a thing exists.

A recent discussion amongst funders and key agencies as part of the transitional development of Creative Scotland (the new state agency due to replace SAC and Scottish Screen) caused horror when a statement from the Transition body positioned all arts organisations as being part of something described as the 'creative economy'. The loss of the distinction between the causal and consequential relationship between culture and the economy is something that may lie at the root of this fear. What I mean by this is that, while we don't doubt that investment in culture will produce positive economic outputs, it should never be the intention of this activity. Take the example of being a parent – having children may mean that you will be looked after in your old age, but that is unlikely to ever be the motivation for having children. The implication is that there is a greater cause to the production of culture – a moral cause which may generate other forms of value, but which has its own intrinsic value which must remain pre-eminent.

Obviously this is not a new idea, but the fact that we must keep returning to this principle in order to defend and re-state it seems to suggest that, as a society, we do not have the confidence to accept it. It could also be taken that we do not have the confidence to accept any other value beyond that of the belief system of western capitalist economics. (I know that daring to use this 'capitalism' term in the context of culture plunges us back into the pit of reactionary 1970s politics in which tired ideologies continued to slug it out – but I should make no apology here – it's back in the dock right now).

If we need to re-state some core concepts of value in order to understand why public investment in cultural activity is a good thing and why we have got in such a tangle over competing concepts of the creative economy and the cultural industries, then an examination of the concept of property is one that is useful to address here. At the heart of the idea of the creative economy is the trade in that thing that is called intellectual property. The definition of intellectual property is *'legal property rights over creations of the mind, both artistic and commercial'*. The concept of intellectual property appears to be a relatively recent one and the lack of a clear set of historical antecedents for IP seems to suggest that it has grown from a market philosophy of the need to limit all that which can be traded in order to more clearly define its exchange value and its tradability.

The work of Bill Sharpe in articulating the difference between alienable and inalienable property seems very significant here. The difference being that one of the key values of art is its inalienability. The art object itself can be traded, but the experience of the art can never be traded – i.e if I experience an artwork it does not in any way diminish your ability to have a similar experience. Therefore the property of an artwork can be understood in two ways – one in which the property of the work relates to the tradeable value of the ownership of the artwork (alienable), the second being the property of the work as defined by its ability to affect the viewer – which cannot be traded. The trade in access to an inalienable experience – like buying a theatre ticket – is a further complication and while this perhaps creates an alienable right to access an inalienable experience it relies upon a social contract in which the fee paid for a ticketed event is seen as being an acceptable mechanism. This would not, for example, work for the values of good urban design or libraries where free access is seen as an essential element. It also positions much of intellectual property in a much more hazy space than might have previously been considered.

Bill Sharp also talks about how the notions of value inform much of our discussion in this area and that the goal of the whole exercise is to seek to generate a definable or agreed sense of value that will accrue through state investment in culture. While some of the value generated through the actions of the cultural sector as defined in the previous paragraph can be described as being alienable (i.e I generate 1,000 catalogues of an artists work and when I have sold them all I have no more to give), the more significant sense of value resides within the domain of the inalienable (i.e seeing this exhibition has changed my life, if I share that experience with you, I do not lose it, but you may also gain some of the same value). In other words cultural activity is capable of generating some measures of alienable value, but the real virtue of the cultural economy lies within its accrual in inalienable values.

The dilemma for most arts organisations is that they are founded on a principle of locating and sharing this second inalienable value of property in the art work, while increasingly being forced to operate in the world of alienable goods. The consequence is that while we have very high expectations of the quality of experience on offer we therefore require appropriate resources to achieve this quality. If the contract to achieve the resources required increasingly demands evidence of the success in alienation (in order to justify the position of culture within a dominant philosophy of market-led economics), then we work to alienate as much as possible from the practice of sharing the artwork – the shop, the cafe, the ticket, the catalogue, the corporate launch.

This of course rather neatly reintroduces the etymological closure of alienation as the consequence of alienation.

Fishing around to find some sources of guidance for the dilemmas that we seem to be encountering I tangentially came across the writings of Giovanni Vico, the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher. From an (albeit unredeemingly cursory) reading of his words a useful concept emerges - that of the cyclical transition undertaken by civic societies from poetic to rational consciousness – one which could be read as a reflection of our current dilemma. Applying this to the current moment it might be useful to acknowledge that perhaps we are entering what he defines as the period in which the ‘barbarism of reflection’ – or the tyranny of rationality - is informing the world that we are trying to shape.

At the moment it seems like we are not perceiving, let alone avoiding this tyranny, as we seem to be ditching the challenge of understanding the fuzzy and ill-defined shape of the present cultural landscape in order to focus instead on something which is perhaps clearer, but which only forms one stratum of this landscape. To echo Robert Livingstone’s presentation at a recent SAC event, we are increasingly trapping ourselves in a *class error situation* in which the terms of the problem we have set ourselves have no common value in which to arrive at a solution.

We can take the view that the problem can be represented as follows; that on one side of the equation we have a belief that cultural activity generates value for the nation, while on the other we have a requirement to make this belief serve a function which demands sustainable economic growth for the nation. The crux of the problem is therefore to resolve how cultural value can be translated into economic value. However this inevitably seems to lead us to a simple supposition in which we seek to identify the (limited) economic values of cultural activity and offer them across as the token of meaning that is required. This is then catastrophic as it carries with it the implication that

the elements that are measurable in the terms of the economic world are the only ones that have value within the whole equation.

So perhaps we can shift the argument towards the task of establishing a method by which inalienable values can be equated, creating an 'exchange rate mechanism' which will allow for value to be imported and exported between these two areas with some degree of equanimity. In some ways we already have half of the system set up. The arts funding bodies have a budget which they spend on cultural activity which results in a lot of *stuff* that happens. This provides us in the cultural sector with an exchange rate in which we receive payment for a set of cultural values which we distribute according to the agreed methods. However, the values that we export in return for this cash are mostly inalienable (i.e they have no explicit resource value). So the receipts on the part of government are in the form of a cultural significance which has no externally tradable value to them. Looked at in this way this trade is truly remarkable. It is conducted on a far more insubstantial basis than the conventional act of faith implied by monetary transactions, but ultimately it is just an act of faith (albeit with some cursory evidence gathering to validate this faith to unbelievers). A far more entertaining exposition of this concept is contained within the Monty Python sketch in which a charity flag seller attempts to sell a lapel flag to a share dealer who comments that the flag is a bit small for a share certificate.

However, we must acknowledge that times are changing and the values that informed this act of faith are understandably no longer as dominant as they once were. Ill-considered and under-rationalised parries, such as the McMaster Report seek to re-assert some of these values, but they do this in a way that is backward-looking and which obscures and fudges the current goal. If we return to Vico we may consider that this is part of the evolutionary process he defined - that we must seek a way to respond positively to the aggressive rationalisation of the moment in order to move forward. However, this is an area where we constantly fail because our tools of rationalisation within the cultural domains are largely made of shared values which we can barely translate into words, while the tools of the dominant ethic of rationalisation are made of hard numbers. While many have been trying to elegantly dodge the emerging debates of cultural significance for some time (The Beaford Declaration was written in 1973) by such acts as seeking to redefine excellence as an absolute concept, the terms of the debate have been changed by those who hold the cash and we no longer speak their language - and there are times when the ensuing confusion leads me to honestly doubt if we even speak *ours* effectively.

So where does this leave Creative Scotland? In some ways completely adrift, that in recognising a need to change and an inability to redefine the terms on which the trade that sustains us is carried out we simply fall victims to the terms that dominate - hence the clanging statement that we are now all part of the 'Creative Economy Sector'.

My own response to this dilemma is to examine more closely the question that is being asked of us. If we are to be judged by our ability to contribute to 'sustainable economic growth' then what are the terms of this judgement? We can all agree that there is *probably* a link between a rich cultural life in Scotland and its ability to contribute to sustainable economic growth for the nation. But can we ever establish that this link is causal? - can we live without a causal link? - and what if there were no state intervention - would that make any difference? If we cannot define causality is there even any point in expending any energy in attempting to make a link. All in all there is

probably no way to work out a definitive answer to any of these questions without resetting the counters (i.e returning us to zero in terms of state intervention in culture) and we would not want to progress our response to this question on this basis.

Alternatively – and more radically - perhaps we can consider how we might reinvigorate the act of faith that has sustained us for this long and stoically refuse to accept any inappropriate measures. We have a duty to service that act of faith and to provide it with the rich unapologetic rationale that is based on what we know, what effects we see and what we ultimately believe is the value of what we do. This would seem to be a standard to rally behind, but my more profound fear is that we seem to be losing a clear sense of what we actually *do* know – and that any common ground within the cultural sector, is not common, but merely co-tenanted.

We can also ask the economic question – what does sustainable mean ? – and at what cost to the broader terms of sustainability do we pursue economic growth - and (as others have done) how might we factor into any measure of this a sense of value that incorporates well-being, identity, friendship and quality of life. But perhaps the key question is to challenge the notion of economic growth itself – does this necessarily make things better ?, or does it just harness us to a process of resource depletion and fragmentation that ultimately destroys us in the name of efficient competitiveness. Significantly, if we can find a way to articulate more effectively the substantial inalienable value of the cultural – a value that cannot diminish however much it is shared - how much more of a return can we be seen to generate for this community that provides us with our means.

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