



Street arts healthcheck

David Micklem

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Between 2006 and 2008, we will invest £1.1 billion of public money from government and the National Lottery in supporting the arts. This is the bedrock of support for the arts in England.

We believe that the arts have the power to change lives and communities, and to create opportunities for people throughout the country.

For 2006 to 2008, we have six priorities:

- taking part in the arts
- children and young people
- the creative economy
- vibrant communities
- internationalism
- celebrating diversity

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Background

In March 2002 the former Arts Council of England published its *Strategy and Report for Street Arts*. The report described a growing but fragile sector and made a series of recommendations setting out a framework for future funding. Four years on much has changed. The former Arts Council of England and Regional Arts Boards have merged, extra money has been invested across the arts and the Grants for the arts programme has run its first three years. In that same period a number of external factors have shifted the climate in which street arts operates. This report summarises the health of the sector and explores the issues affecting street arts in England in June 2006. In autumn 2006 we plan to publish a strategy for street arts responding to the issues raised in this paper. This paper is drawn from informal consultation with artists, promoters, producers and Arts Council officers throughout 2005/06.

The Arts Council values street arts in all its diversity. It is one of the artforms we have identified to focus on, and we will continue to work with partners to help develop outdoor work in this country.

Street arts is a broad term that comprises a variety of forms including theatre, music, circus, dance, carnival, mela, installation, pyrotechnics and spectacle.

Street arts:

- is presented outdoors, usually in non-traditional performance spaces, and is often free to the public
- can be presented in a range of urban and rural contexts – on streets closed to traffic, in shopping centres, parks, village greens and town squares
- ranges from the epic to the intimate and can be presented across the widest range of scales of audience size
- enjoys a democratic relationship with its audience with people free to engage with work for as little or long as they wish

Outdoor work can have a transformational effect on its audience. As well as the intrinsic artistic value of much of this work, street arts has proven an extraordinarily potent force with regeneration, social inclusion, participation and tourism agendas. The very best work makes positive contributions to local economies and communities, reaching out to audiences and participants that more traditional forms of expression find hard to connect to.

The stability of this sector is predicated on the health and sustainability of three interconnected parts:

- 1 street artists – the originators of the work
- 2 festivals and producers – the infrastructure for street arts
- 3 creation centres – the facilities where the work is made

After an overview, this reports looks at the health of each of these parts in turn.

Overview

Status of the sector

Relatively, street arts has a low status within the arts in the UK. Among artists, producers, promoters, critics, funders and government, the perception is that the work of street arts is poor and carries little artistic value. 'Street arts' is a contested term, comprising a broad range of work from busking to pyrotechnic displays. The Arts Council has a funding relationship with only a small percentage of work within this broader range.

The absence of a critical framework further embeds a notion that this work has less value than other forms of artistic expression. However, in summer 2006 a number of coordinated press campaigns have come to fruition and, at the time of writing, previews, reviews and features are gaining a wider audience through national papers.

Position within Arts Council England

While street arts is one of the artforms that we focus on, representatives from the sector have stated that this focus needs actual funding behind it to be more than just rhetoric. Our recent spending review did not prioritise the infrastructure for street arts, and festivals are finding that project funding is either unavailable or inappropriate to fund core festival activity. Because street arts connects with several Arts Council departments, it is especially important that we talk across the organisation about the significance of this work and further develop a genuinely cross-arts and inter-regional approach to street arts in England.

Funding

Regularly funded organisations

Below is a list of the regularly funded organisations we currently fund in this sector:

| Company | Funding for 2006/07 | Type of organisation |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Centre for International Street Theatre | £80,000 | Proposed creation centre |
| Dodgy Clutch | £140,300 | Artist-led company |
| Emergency Exit Arts | £66,788 | Producers of large-scale work |
| Greenwich and Docklands Festivals | £46,238 | Festival |
| IOU Theatre | £163,010 | Artist-led company |
| Independent Street Arts Network (ISAN) | £30,000 | Membership body for promoters |
| Manchester International Arts | £58,000 | Outdoor event producers |
| Mimbre | £20,000 | Artist-led company |
| Natural Theatre | £140,337 | Artist-led company |
| Nutkhut | £20,000 | Artist-led company |
| Stockton International Riverside Festival (as Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council) | £95,000 | Festival |
| Thames Festival | £46,238 | Festival |
| Walk the Plank | £55,100 | Producers of large-scale work |
| Whalley Range All Stars | £38,500 | Artist-led company |
| x.trax | £42,028 (05/06) | Showcase organisers |
| Zap Art | £77,063 | Festival |

Other regularly funded organisations may occasionally work in street arts contexts (eg Kneehigh Theatre) or may be festivals with a street arts component (eg Norfolk and Norwich Festival) but these have not been selected for this analysis.

Grants for the arts

Individuals and companies, including street arts festivals, have enjoyed new support for their practice since the introduction of Grants for the arts in April 2003. The following figures show the total value of awards for individuals, companies and festivals engaged in street arts activity and an estimate of the value of these awards directly attributed to street arts:

| Financial year | Total value of Grants for the arts awards to those engaged in street arts activity | Estimated value directly attributed to street arts |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| 2003/04 | £1,125,378 | £805,898 |
| 2004/05 | £1,838,917 | £952,376 |

There is a lack of information on project funding levels prior to the introduction of Grants for the arts (pre-April 2003) and the creation of Arts Council England. However, there is anecdotal evidence that practitioners are finding funds easier to secure through the new funding system.

Work of scale is expensive to produce. While there are some notable exceptions (eg an award of £695,000 towards the presentation of Royal de Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant* through strategic, managed and Grants for the arts funds), work of scale is likely to continue to challenge the Arts Council's 'upper funding limits'. While the subsidy-per-head arguments can be compelling, the large sums involved for often one-off events can appear very large.

1 Street artists – the originators of the work

Artistic quality

There is a general perception from outside this sector that street arts work in the UK is of poor quality. There is also a parallel perception that work from mainland Europe (most notably France and Spain) is vastly superior. The reality is less dramatic.

English street arts relies heavily upon corporate events work to sustain much of this industry. Many companies and artists will engage to some extent with commercial partners who value visual impact over artform development. Consequently, much of the work produced in the UK makes little contribution to artform development. Inevitably, as this work forms the bulk of the sector, it is what most audiences have experienced. Like children's work which suffers from a saturation of poor quality 'entertainment', a profusion of street entertainment continues to damage the reputation of this vibrant artform. However, there is much to celebrate in English work, with a handful of companies and artists consistently producing high-quality, world-class art.

Much UK work fails to adequately describe a narrative. Many directors have developed their practice from a visual arts background creating compelling visual imagery but with acknowledged deficiencies in the ability to tell a story. It is notable that some of the more successful projects of recent years have tended to come from theatre companies with experience of narrative development.

Cultural diversity

The street arts sector has identified the lack of Black and Asian practitioners working in the UK as a weakness. Greenwich and Docklands Festivals has pioneered much Black and minority ethnic work and has engaged a black associate director for two years with Arts Council support. x.trax has supported a black associate producer and in the last 18 months has done much to develop opportunities for Black and minority ethnic artists to make work for outdoor contexts. Independent Street Arts Network (ISAN) continues to lead on a series of initiatives around cultural diversity in this field – there is much work to be done and festivals are keen to develop and promote quality Black-and-minority-ethnic-led work.

Internationalism

Street arts is inherently international. Without the confines of a formal theatre, dance or music setting, and often with little or no language, work travels well. The infrastructure to support street arts across mainland Europe is far better developed and more mature than in the UK. Consequently, many companies find that planning touring circuits across Europe can be financially and artistically beneficial. The following European attributes all contribute to the development of work:

- better resources with more festivals
- a developed network of creation centres
- a better climate
- the opportunity to engage with artists and audiences from non-English speaking backgrounds

These factors can also provide much-needed income streams for companies facing a limited infrastructure in their home country. Showcasing overseas is a proven way of effectively getting work into international touring circuits. A pilot programme of British work in Utrecht in May 2005 has led to a number of bookings for artists across the continent.

UK festivals have had some success working with international consortia (see the 'Venues and street arts' section below).

The International Artists Fellowship Programme has hosted two opportunities for British artists to engage in the creation of outdoor work overseas. Jane Pitt and Graeme Gilmour were in residence at L'Abattoir in Chalon-sur-Saône in 2003 and Mark Murphy was resident with Legs on the Wall in Sydney in 2005 and 2006. A fellowship with the French PECA (European Polycentre for Artistic Creation) is also now up and running, with Bill Mitchell the first artist to work in this context.

Different scales of work

A healthy street arts sector requires work to be made across a range of scales. Some contexts and events require large-scale work for tens of thousands of people. Other contexts are better suited to smaller and more intimate pieces for audiences of a dozen or less.

The artist and the infrastructure

With decreasing opportunities (see 'Festivals and producers' below) to present work (especially work of scale or ambition), opportunities for artist development are being curtailed. Without a robust infrastructure the arguments for investment in artists and companies are weakened.

Longevity of productions

With companies unable to sustain pieces of work beyond a single touring year, opportunities to develop work artistically or to operate in more commercial ways are lost. Opening UK work up to international contexts could enable companies to keep certain pieces in repertoire for longer periods.

Professional development

There are no formal training opportunities for street artists in the UK. Professional development opportunities are limited, with many artists experimenting with scale with little track record. A pilot programme supported by Arts Council England offering three established artistic directors the opportunity to work with theatre directors and choreographers over a two-year period has been deemed by practitioners to be a very positive experience. It is hoped that this continuing professional development will directly affect the way in which work is made and that this model may be replicated among other practitioners.

Networks

NASA (National Association of Street Artists) – formerly UK Street Artists' Network (USAN) – is a fledgling network for street artists in the UK. It currently exists primarily as an online resource enabling artists to exchange information and experiences. There are emerging plans for this network to develop specific projects to strengthen the infrastructure for artists working in outdoor contexts.

2 Festivals and producers – the infrastructure for street arts

A constricting sector

Following rapid growth in the street arts festival model in the lead up to the millennium, the last three years have been characterised by a reversal of this trend. Several festivals have been lost – Leeds' Rhythms of the City has lost its local authority funding after 10 years of growth, and Manchester International Arts have decided not to continue with the Garden of Delights after three years developing a festival in Platt Fields. While it is recognised that a number of new local authority festivals have emerged in the last five years, the growth in number of new arts-led festivals has been curtailed.

Sustainability of the festival model

Festivals are inherently expensive operations with little opportunity for sustained income generation or sponsorship. Most festivals offering free-to-public work do not have any earned income and yet they form the infrastructure and platform that enable street arts to be performed and developed. Many operate a year-round staff team focusing in on activity over a weekend, a week or a month.

None of the existing annual street arts festivals is in a healthy position. The better-funded festivals (eg Brighton and Stockton) rely on additional project funding and the less well-funded festivals (eg Winchester, Greenwich and Docklands, etc) continue to operate in a precarious financial environment. The promoters of Manchester's Garden of Delights decided in 2005 to no longer develop that festival context. The futures of Greenwich and Docklands, street arts festivals in Manchester and most recently the Streets of Brighton are far from secure.

VAT

With few opportunities for ticket sales or earned income many festival contexts find themselves unable to reclaim VAT (value added tax) on expenditure. VAT is a significant issue for street arts promoters and the cost of irrecoverable VAT puts additional pressure on project budgets.

Producers

Producers, working both within funded infrastructures and independently, are a critical part of the street arts sector. Along with many other fragile artform contexts, producers can and do play a significant role in developing and presenting outdoor work. Over the last few years producers have helped develop consortia, support emerging talent, and develop Black and Asian voices for this sector, as well as develop and present large-scale works and commissions.

Local authorities

Local authorities are essential partners in the development of street arts, and in many cases drive much of the activity within this sector. However, recent years have seen a number of local authorities withdrawing support from this type of activity. Leeds' Rhythms of the City has recently lost its local authority funding, ending an event that had been successfully growing for a decade. Changes in local authority control could have a significant effect on the sector. Some festivals supported by local authorities partner Arts Council England subsidy; others exist without Arts Council support. In either situation it is proving a challenge to influence local authority decision-making.

While there are many examples of Arts Council partnership with a local authority, few street arts festivals are in good financial health. Stockton International Riverside Festival provides the best UK example of this partnership. Now in its 18th year, the festival budget comprises core support of around £100,000 from the Arts Council and £250,000 cash and further in-kind support from Stockton Borough Council.

In many local authority festival contexts security of tenure for artistic and management teams is an issue. Many teams face annual, biannual or triennial tendering for local-authority-run festivals (eg Trafalgar Square, Stockton, etc), which reduces opportunities for longer-term planning.

Audiences

Audiences for street arts activity continue to be significant. The work is usually free and often located in public spaces that do not have the usual signifiers of a performance space. The relationship between the work and its audience is different to that in more conventional spaces. The work enjoys a democratic relationship with its audience who can and do simply walk away when the work fails to engage them.

The unticketed nature of the work makes estimates of audiences hard to corroborate. A festival over a weekend may attract hundreds of thousands of attenders; a single event can bring audiences of ten thousand or more.

Street arts have benefitted from changes in society and a culture which is developing a new relationship with the outdoors – the profusion of pavement cafes and music festivals are indicators of a change in English attitudes towards our climate. *The Sultan's Elephant* is estimated to have attracted audiences of one million people in May 2006. The public response to this work has been extraordinary.

Consortium working

There have been some good examples over the past five years of consortia working. A consortium of promoters successfully toured Dutch company *Vis à Vis* across England in 2002. A consortium was established between Bracknell, Newark and Bexhill in 2002 to commission and tour new large-scale work. Over three years this grouping successfully commissioned new work from the World Famous, Walk the Plank and the Strangelings. It is noteworthy that despite the success of this commissioning programme none of these three festivals operated in 2005.

At the time of writing, a consortium supporting UK performance across five festival contexts is finalising plans to bolster their infrastructure over the next five years.

Venues and street arts

Some venues have benefitted from producing a street arts programme alongside their indoor work. Most notably the National Theatre, the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry and the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill have developed programmes of outdoor work to complement their indoor programmes. However, these programmes are vulnerable in certain budget and operating environments.

The role of individuals and succession

Most existing festivals are reliant on the commitment of a small group of motivated individuals. The larger festivals particularly have been the product of the determination of a number of key individuals over a number of years. With limited resources the real cost of these individuals' efforts is not fully recognised. While there are some younger voices in the sector, the fragility of the infrastructure does not serve as a particularly attractive career opportunity for many. Many festivals are likely to face succession issues if and when current artistic directors decide to step down.

Showcasing

The UK has presented two showcase festivals in May through the Streets of Brighton and x.trax in Manchester. Brighton has developed an annual showcase over the last decade and x.trax delivers a biannual showcase in Manchester. Over time, showcases in the UK have enabled companies to exploit work more widely within domestic and international markets. The value of showcasing in the UK is a lively issue, and one that continues to be debated widely by artists, promoters and presenters.

Licensing Act

Administratively the Licensing Act 2003 is unlikely to hit street arts events as hard as circuses. As most festivals are partnered with local authorities, there should be little difficulty actually applying for licensing (although there are a number of unanswered questions about definitions of sites, etc). However, the introduction of exceptionally large events fees is likely to have a significant impact on street arts festivals. These fees are not discretionary, and they must be paid when an audience of 1,000 is reached – for example a license for an event attracting 100,000 people will be charged an additional fee of £64,000. At the time of writing it is too early to assess the full of impact of the new legislation on the presentation of outdoor work.

International consortia and networks

Two English festivals have joined separate mainland European partnerships of festivals. Stockton International Riverside Festival has partnered eight other festivals in Ireland and mainland Europe to form the EUNETSTAR partnership supported by Culture 2000 funds from the EU (see 'Bibliography'). The Streets of Brighton has partnered with a number of French creation centres to form PECA (European Polycentre for Artistic Creation) with support from the EU, with the aim of developing a network of creation centres across France linking in with a proposed development in the South East. While both partnerships are not without complexity and difficulty, they are successfully being awarded significant sums of money from European funds.

Health and safety

An increasingly litigious environment and stringent health and safety legislation is becoming a more onerous part of street arts production. As well as the administrative burden this places on promoters, the costs of infrastructure (eg stewarding) are eating into budgets that could be used to support artists directly. As financial support for festivals steadily increases, the percentage going directly to artists for commissioning and fees is decreasing. Increased threat of terrorism is also likely to have an impact on the health and safety and policing requirements of outdoor events.

Other sources of funding

Anecdotally since the millennium, other sources of funding from trusts and foundations are no longer prioritising arts and community causes. A fragile sector is being increasingly faced with only two potential sources of funding – the Arts Council and some enlightened local authorities.

3 Creation centres – the facilities where the work is made

Creation centres are production resources used by street arts companies for the construction and rehearsal of outdoor work. France has lead the way in developing a network of properly resourced centres across the country dedicated to the creation of new work. These centres are usually converted industrial buildings (engine sheds, an abattoir, etc) and are either festival or artist-led.

In the UK there has been considerable discussion about the role a similar model might provide in this country. There is a developing realisation that unless we are able to develop appropriate production facilities for outdoor work, quality and aspirations will not be given the chance to thrive. A low-cost new-build, the conversion of existing premises or the use of premises currently dedicated to theatre production could unlock resources for street artists to make more ambitious work with higher production values.

Any capital scheme needs to have appropriate revenue funding and management structures to ensure such facilities are well-used and linked to a festival infrastructure.

Currently there are plans to develop a creation centre in Stockton-on-Tees and in the South East. Consideration should also be given to the use of existing resources (including the English regional producing theatres) for the creation of outdoor work.

Conclusions

The street arts sector continues to display signs of fragility. While there is a growing community of artists keen to make quality work for this sector, the infrastructure that supports it is weak. All festivals are struggling with the resources available to them and some are being forced to cease activity. Arts Council England needs to work with local authorities to develop appropriate levels of support for many festival contexts and help develop more ambitious aspirations over the coming years. A number of important events over the next six years, building on an existing infrastructure, represent real opportunities for street arts to develop a profile and presence within UK arts.

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