



A Creative Future In A Changing World

A speech by Sir Nicholas Serota at No Boundaries

28 March 2017



Intro - acknowledgments

I am delighted to be speaking in Hull, where the energy and the imagination of Rosie Millard and Martin Green and the vision of the City Council, led by Stephen Brady, has created a spectacular success for the City of Culture.

No Boundaries is now well established as a forum for questioning our conventions, opening up new issues for discussion and proposing new models.

The combination of Hull (and Manchester) and No Boundaries made it natural that I should wish to make this the venue for my first speech as Chair of Arts Council England.

I'd like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessors Liz Forgan and Peter Bazalgette who left the Arts Council in such good shape. They have done so much to raise awareness, politically and publically, about the significance of the arts, museums and libraries in all our lives.

Along with Darren Henley and Alan Davey, Baz made a strong case for public investment in the arts through describing the benefits – personal, educational, social and economic – that are evidence of the power of art in society as a whole.

It was appropriate that Baz's last talk before leaving was about the arts and empathy – because the arts open our eyes to the experience of others but also allow us to express our common humanity.

So, I have joined an organisation with strong values and a belief that the work we do and the artists and arts we support can change lives for the better.

Coming from Tate, I share these values.



I want to see the arts, museums and libraries not only recognised as being vital to our lives; I want to see them have an even more prominent place in the life of all the nation.

Expectations of speech

A first speech is an exciting and significant moment.

There are so many aspects of the Arts Council's work that I want to talk and ask questions about.

For example - how do I see the Arts Council pursuing the two great aspirations of excellence and access?

My work at the Tate has strengthened my belief that both can be combined without compromise to either - and I have seen many examples among the work that Arts Council supports and invests in.

I'd also like to talk about the fantastic work done by individual cultural organisations, large and small; from theatre and dance to literature, the visual arts, libraries and museums; in concert halls, on the street and in the ever-expanding digital dimension.

I'd like to reflect on the work of individual artists and writers, composers and performers, directors and producers, curators and librarians.

Can the Arts Council do more to support them? And can we find ways to promote the flow of ideas and talent between the public and the commercial



sectors, creating opportunities that will result in a more resilient creative sector

I want to discuss the challenges we face in becoming more diverse and representative of society across our programming, audiences and staff.

As Britain prepares to leave the European Union, I want to talk about the positive role the arts can play on the international stage, bringing people together in dialogue and debate

I believe that cultural exchange across borders can generate some of the most exciting new art and can help us to understand and find ways to talk about the problems facing humanity.

And I need to voice long-term concerns around public investment, and especially the loss of local authority funding – which is now the most pressing issue, day to day, for many cultural organisations across the country.

All of these subjects need addressing - and I will come to them, in due course.

Content – three points

However, being my first speech, it's a unique opportunity to think about some guiding principles for our future.

So today I'd like to reflect on three areas that I want to be at the heart of our work the Arts Council, so that art and culture can have a growing and enduring place in our lives as individuals, as members of a community and in our national life.



First, I'd like to talk about how the experience of art, in its many different forms, can enable people to discover their own identities and to express their hopes and emotions to others.

Secondly, how these life-changing opportunities should be more available to those who now have little or no access to the arts.

And thirdly, I want to affirm the fundamental place of the arts and creativity in education.

I know this last is contested ground, but we should recognise that young people have a right to a broad, high quality education, which involves a creative as well as an academic training.

In a rapidly changing world, in which appearances cannot always be trusted, we will need people who can question, adapt and invent as well as analyse and use existing knowledge.

This will involve a new approach, and I'll be sharing some news with you.

The arts change lives – the importance of the encounter

First, the arts change lives.

I think that for everyone here today there will have been a moment when hearing a piece of music, reading a book, seeing a particular play or looking at a painting or a sculpture gave us a new insight into our own sensibilities, or stimulated new ways of thinking about the world, helping to shape our values.



I still remember the shock and thrill of seeing Peter Brook's radical staging of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, at the RSC in 1970; the wonder of first encountering the lyrics of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Leonard Cohen, whose words seemed to speak directly to my own experience and feelings about the world.

Many of these early discoveries came through chance conversations, recommendations of teachers and the exchange of postcards and messages with friends – what would now be social media.

My parents were not passionate about the arts, though I do have to thank my father for taking me to see the great Picasso exhibition at the Tate in 1960, an experience he was certain would discourage me from taking any future interest in modern art.

It was a cunning plan, but as you know it failed miserably.

I was entranced by the Blue period and social realism, puzzled by the language of Cubism and bowled over by the studies for *Guernica*, Picasso's cry of pain about the brutality of civil war.

We know that investment in art and culture brings benefits, socially and economically. That's what we are seeing in Hull.

But we must never forget that the arts are first about the magic of that individual encounter, the special experience that changes our view of the world or our understanding of ourselves.

The chance to have this kind of encounter should not be limited by social, educational, or economic privilege.



I believe that our job at the Arts Council is to identify and support the best of art and culture, whatever discipline and form that assumes and to create opportunities for everyone to step beyond their own experience – whether by taking part or as a member of an audience.

Sharing the opportunities of the arts

Which takes me to my second point - the important role we can all play in areas of the country where the level of engagement with the arts is still very low.

Opportunity should not be limited by where you happen to live.

This is especially relevant after the European referendum, which exposed greater differences of belief and opportunity in society than we had fully recognised.

There were many complicated reasons why people from different social groups and constituencies voted the way they did.

Conflicting opinions are uncomfortable, but the arts can play a vital role in expressing and exploring these frictions, helping us to appreciate other positions.

However, the frustrations expressed in the referendum have to be addressed, notably in those communities that have lost out economically in the past thirty years; places where there is a sense of having been left behind.

These are often the places that haven't had a great deal of arts activity or cultural investment - places such as rural areas and the margins of big cities



Investment in these places can do important things – it can galvanise civic life, it can stimulate economic activity. And – my first point – crucially, it can give a voice to individuals who feel they have not been heard.

We have seen this in Hull, and in cities, towns and villages across England.

The Arts Council has long recognized that we need to invest more outside London, especially in areas of most need.

But we won't do this in a way that jeopardises London's status as a world centre of the arts.

To reach people who don't currently don't have access to the arts, we must look at where - and how - we invest.

Historically, the Arts Council has tended to be a largely responsive funder, waiting on applications from individuals and organisations that are best able to present a case.

But in the twenty-first century we have to be more pro-active and fulfil our role as a development agency.

We must become a greater catalyst for change, taking the initiative by encouraging individuals, organizations and communities to start as well as sustain cultural projects in hitherto neglected area across England.

One example of such work is the Creative People and Places programme.



Most of you will know about this. It began in 2013 and is a £50 million programme with 21 projects across the country, in places where people don't generally have access to the arts.

It helps communities to discover their own creativity; to develop the kinds of projects and events that articulate distinct and relevant ideas of local culture. That show how the arts can make a difference in people's lives.

I recently visited Stoke-on-Trent, the 'six towns' that have been much in the news, given their emphatic vote to leave the EU and the by-election caused by Tristram Hunt's move to the V&A.

Stoke has a population of nearly 400,000; but for many years, its only regularly funded arts organisation has been The New Vic Theatre in Newcastle under Lyme.

This theatre has been a brilliant contributor to its community. When I recently visited, they were about to kick-off a performance of *Beryl*, a play by Maxine Peake about the celebrated Yorkshire cyclist Beryl Burton.

The theatre-in-the-round was filled with racing bicycles and there was an excited buzz from the audience .

But its directors, Theresa Heskins and Fiona Wallace, know there are parts of a community that a building-based organisation can't reach.

So, over the last three years the New Vic has worked with community organisations, the local authorities, the universities, 6-Towns Radio and numerous other partners to shape a programme called 'Appetite' for which a series of festivals, performances and participatory projects are funded by the Arts Council as part of Creative People and Places.



‘Appetite’, led by Karl Greenwood, encourages people to participate in and sample the arts in their community - building their appetite. The public has a say in devising the work, using the experience of the Appetite team, and inviting artists and ensembles with national and international stature to Stoke.

In the first three years, Appetite’s work across the Potteries has attracted 45,000 participants, including many volunteers, and audiences of more than 300,000. It’s reached out to refugees and asylum seekers, using the arts to help them become part of the community

I was also struck by the contribution Appetite has made to regeneration projects in the centre of Hanley, which are beginning to draw businesses and people back.

Appetite has been part of a growth in cultural ambition that has encouraged the council to bid for UK City of Culture in 2021.

This bid has brought together many local partners, including both universities; whatever the outcome, the city has gained a greater sense of purpose and a richer cultural life.

This is important work.

I want us to talk more about this kind of work - and do more of it.



Finding common ground for arts in education

My third point is about achieving engagement in the arts for all young people, both in and out of school and in the curriculum itself - what we call cultural education.

This is an area which Darren has done so much to promote; we are indebted to him for the way he has worked to keep the issue on the political agenda.

There are many differing opinions about the state of the arts in schools and especially in our secondary schools

We are constantly trying to assimilate new surveys and reports.

Last autumn, for example, the NUT's report "A Curriculum for All" gave us a pretty pessimistic view.

And at the beginning of March a report by Sussex University found that nearly two thirds of teachers interviewed thought that the EBacc had led to a drop in pupils taking GCSE music.

One of the report's authors talked about music 'facing extinction' as a subject.

But, on the other hand, last month a report for the New Schools Network argued that the proportion of students taking at least one arts GCSE in England was higher in 2015/16 than it was in 2011/12, as was the total number of arts GCSE entries, provided that you ignore the figures for design and technology

Who to believe? Everyone's perspective on this issue is heartfelt, and matters.



Encouragingly, the New Schools Network report suggested that, whatever the statistics might show, the presence of arts in schools was important in creating a fully-rounded education for pupils

And, significantly, this aspect of the report was endorsed by the arts and education ministers, Matt Hancock and Nick Gibb.

There is therefore a growing, if debated, view that the arts can make a valuable, even necessary, contribution to education. Many would now agree that the best education is a broad, confident one - with a strong arts element.

That's the case internationally, as has been pointed out by ED Hirsch, whose work has inspired much recent education policy. And that's what the best schools in this country offer, both in the private and public sectors.

So I think that we are all closer together on this than we realize, but there remains a wide spectrum of ideas and beliefs about how to make the arts a part of every child's experience.

While there has been a running debate about the place of the arts in the national curriculum, most arts and cultural organisations now see learning as an integral part of their work.

There have been many complementary programmes designed to encourage young people to engage with the arts.

Creative Partnerships was an early attempt to bring young people into contact with the best of the arts. More recently, In Harmony, the Music Education Hubs, the Sorrell Foundation's National Art and Design Saturday Clubs, the work of our Bridge organisations and the Artsmark and Arts Award schemes have all played a part in raising awareness and participation.



But it remains the case that too many pupils lack access to a high-quality cultural education and too few universities ask applicants to show that they have an appetite for the arts and the broader humanities as well as the core academic subjects

Debate is necessary but we must now come together to develop programmes that will stimulate self-expression and confidence in young people or the next generation will lack the skills that they will need in a changing world.

Given its historic responsibilities, and its obligation to the future, the Arts Council must do more to create opportunities for young people to engage with the culture that they inherit, to which they will contribute, and which they will leave as a legacy for their own children

We need to encourage everyone in this debate to look for common ground.

The Commission

So today, I'm announcing a commission.

It will be a joint enquiry, led by The University of Durham and supported by Arts Council England.

Called The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, this commission will draw on international evidence and expertise.

It will bring together a full range of voices, opinions and perspectives from the worlds of education, the arts, science and culture



It will look at practice and evidence worldwide, examine the record of those ‘pilots’ that have been tried in different parts of the country over the past twenty years and suggest how we might provide an inspiring and creative cultural education for all young people, wherever they live.

It should tackle some of the big questions and not shy away from the difficult ones. For example:

What do we mean when we talk about culture for young people?

What should be our goals in the education of a child in England at a time when we face big economic, social and cultural challenges?

What kinds of knowledge would be most useful? What skills are young people going to need?

Do we want to encourage skills in expression, creative writing and drama, music and dance, design, painting and photography, alongside mathematics, history, English and the humanities?

What works and what does not among the various initiatives and schemes we currently have? And how far can we take these across the country?

What role can our theatres, galleries, museums, concert halls and libraries best play in broadening the horizons and lifting the aspirations of young people?

I’m looking forward to this Commission beginning its work in the early autumn, with the aim of reporting back in 2019.



I believe this work will establish firm intellectual and practical foundations for future involvement of Arts Council England with education.

It will provide an overarching context for our existing work with children and young people.

This includes the Cultural Education Challenge, through which we are working on the ground to increase the extent and quality of provision.

And the 25-year Creative Talent Plan, a significant partnership with de Montfort University, which will explore how a series of planned cultural opportunities that are specific to place, can help provide a road map for young talent.

The Durham Commission will contribute to the work that the Arts Council is beginning this autumn in setting its strategy for 2020-2030.

And if it does its job, it will also contribute to a national debate about the way we are preparing our children for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

These three areas that I've talked about to-day are all concerned with the fundamental, intrinsic value of what we do - the belief that an encounter with art and culture can be a catalyst for change in all our lives.

I believe that it is through having, and sharing these experiences that we become stronger, as individuals and as communities, and become a fairer nation.



Public investment in our arts, our museums and our libraries is investment in a shared cultural language, with many different voices and accents. I want that language to be available to everyone.

The Arts Council must continue to listen and talk to those who remain sceptical about the value of the arts. But, above all, it must listen to the voices of creative artists, and imaginative producers and directors.

These are the people who open our eyes, delight our ears, stimulate our minds and appeal to our hearts. They tell us about the traditions, hopes and aspirations of our fellow citizens and can help us to negotiate the modern world

We live in a shifting, exciting but perilous age; but I have always believed that challenges have to be met with imagination and bold action.

And I will look to the Arts Council to take a lead.

Thank you

Ends

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