

“What if?” - The creative power of a question

Transcript of the speech given by Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England, at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland on 21st September 2016.

Thank you for coming today, and thank you to our friends at the University of Sunderland and the National Glass Centre for hosting us.

It's been a tumultuous few months, which has left us with plenty to reflect on as a nation.

So much of how we think of ourselves as a nation is shaped by our art and culture.

And so, this seems like a good moment, and an important one, to think what that referendum result might mean for artists and arts organisations.

I think it's also fair to say that change, and the challenge that brings, also offers opportunities.

And at this historic time, I think that events have thrown the focus on some cities, and Sunderland is one of them, that need to be thought about, and portrayed in a different light, to that which we've recently seen in the media.

These cities, like Sunderland, Stoke, Hull or Coventry, may not be the first places that spring to mind when people talk about important cultural centres.

But I've come to know them all well.

And now, as the spotlight has been on them, I think it's an opportune moment to highlight the extraordinary creative traditions of these cities and their people.

And the way in which art and culture should work with these communities, to spark a revolution in how we think of, and use, our national creativity.

There's no better place to talk about this than Sunderland.

Because it exemplifies that family of British cities I referred to, in which the artist and the artisan, the scientist and the entrepreneur, have historically come together, so that the work of one can inform the work of the other.

This is a city that has led the way in ideas, in trade and technology: in building ships and cars - and in the art of glassmaking.

I think that two of the most powerful words in the English language are two simple ones - “What if?”

This question is the key to creativity, and it unites the artist, the scientist, the engineer and the entrepreneur.

The results of that fusion are all around us in this building: you should look at that work, if you haven't already.

Here you can see how the artist and the artisan came together to produce blown glass, pressed glass, cut glass, – work that was both beautiful and useful, and found its way into homes across the world.

This kind of creativity once made cities like this leaders in world trade.

These cities were made for making: and I think that if we, in the art and culture sector, can work with this native creativity, and ask “what if?”, these cities can again be at the forefront of British success.

The ambassadorial and economic roles of art and culture

I'll return to this theme.

But first, it's important that I say that I believe art and culture will have vital roles to play in Britain's post-referendum future.

We have an ambassadorial role as Britain redefines itself upon the international stage; and an economic role.

Our national culture has long been a source of soft power, the means to make friends and build relationships.

It shows the world we are open for dialogue, and open for business.

While the creative industries are the fastest growing area of the economy and a driver of growth: we have a truly international reach and are major exporters.

This was underlined by the recent figures from the music industry – which saw exports rise to 2.2 billion pounds in 2015.

That's up 11% since they first began compiling data in 2012.

We should be confident that our contribution is recognised.

I've been encouraged by the words of the new Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Karen Bradley, and the new Culture Minister Matt Hancock.

They are clear that the Government appreciates the value of public investment in art and culture.

And they recognise the commitment of the Arts Council and all our partners to ensure that everyone, everywhere can share in the benefits that art and culture bring.

We extend a warm welcome to them, and look forward to working with them.

The values of a shared national culture

But, moreover, I think that we also have an irreplaceable part to play in strengthening the values by which our society functions – those values of tolerance, empathy and understanding.

These are British values that we should all be proud of, and they are needed now.

Shared values are built around a shared culture.

And William Shakespeare is one of the mainstays of our culture.

In this, the 400th anniversary of his death, it has felt that we have been living in Shakespearean times - you can pick your play depending on your perspective.

Shakespeare, as with all great art, speaks to all times and all people.

Great art speaks truth to power, and gives power to those who are dispossessed.

The freedom of artists to express themselves according to their conscience is our guarantee of our freedom as a people.

A nation is built around its shared culture: equality of access to that culture strengthens those progressive values.

It gives everyone a chance to succeed, no matter where they start in life.

Everyone should be a cultural insider, understanding what is said, and being familiar with what is meant.

And if we truly wish to use all our talent, offer opportunity for all, and increase social mobility, then access to art and culture must remain high on the agenda, whether in-school or outside school.

Secondly, I'd like to reflect on that national creativity.

The British have always been creative people.

And one form of creativity encourages another.

See, discuss, experience, sing, dance, draw, play, make.

Whatever you do, it will enhance your life and the lives of those around you.

If you have time, I urge you to watch the film they have here, produced by the glassmaker Jobling's, which shows glassblowers at work in the 1960s - set to a jazz soundtrack.

These men are musicians of their practice; the production of glass is a performance of grace and skill, delicacy and fine judgment.

So it's wonderful and appropriate that this creative energy is now emerging through a new generation of musicians, led by such bands as the Futureheads and Field Music and Frankie and the Heartstrings, with passionate advocates for the city's culture like the Brewis Brothers, Marie Nixon and Ross Millard.

Music, as I pointed out earlier, is a major national export, just as glass once was.

We have seen an industrial revolution and a digital revolution, and now we need a revolution in the way we think about creativity.

We know that creative practice is intrinsic to our personal and social wellbeing.

We need to recognise that creative practice of every sort can contribute to bringing prosperity and helping us solve the big questions.

We face global challenges.

Social, economic and environmental orthodoxies are being tested.

We need people who ask "what if?"

Higher education is taking a leading role in thinking about this 'creativity revolution'.

What's happening in Sunderland is being driven by a partnership that involves the local authority, the University of Sunderland and the Arts Council.

- In Derby, the University now runs the theatre as part of its hands-on approach to learning;
- On Teesside, MIMA, run with Teesside University, is becoming a creative making space, exploring the industrial heritage of Middlesbrough;
- In Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire University is helping to reinvigorate the city's infrastructure, with plans to build a brand new multi-million pound National Centre for Ceramic Education and Research. As well as researching new technologies, it will train the next generation of skilled workers.

How can the art and cultural sector encourage this?

For the art and culture sector, I believe that this emerging direction presents a real opportunity to show our relevance in the lives of many people, who need the opportunity that creativity offers.

As the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, Rufus Norris, remarked: we have to listen more.

We need to come more out of our comfort zones and conversational bubbles.

We need to recognise that one city's tradition and history, and hence its idea of culture are not quite the same as its neighbour's, and perhaps not like our idea of culture at all.

But the idea of a shared national culture and a distinct local one are not incompatible.

It's not a binary choice between Shakespeare or the Futureheads.

One encourages the other; creative practice encourages creativity.

For some time, the Arts Council has recognised the need for this direction of travel – focussing more of our investment on people, in places that need that spark to ignite their own creativity.

That's why we have committed to spending at least 75% of our money from the National Lottery outside London by 2018.

That's why we have put £37 million into the Creative People and Places scheme, which works in communities where people are less engaged in art and culture.

Between 2013 and 2015, more than one million people attended arts events or participated in activity as a result of Creative People and Places.

And the majority of audiences were from among those who generally wouldn't turn out for art.

There are now 21 Creative People and Places projects – including one here in Sunderland, the Cultural Spring, run in partnership with the University.

Their work is ingenious and inclusive.

Last autumn, they supported a programme called Inventors.

It encouraged 450 schoolchildren to think of inventions and realise them on paper with the chance to see their ingenuity brought to life in a workshop.

All of these ideas were brilliant.

Here were six year olds submitting plans...

- for reverse binoculars that let you see behind;
- for family scooters;
- a lampshade with adjustable venetian blinds;
- a leaf catcher to put around trees;
- a high-five machine to encourage you when there's no one else around;
- and even a war-avoider.

One day, one of those children from Sunderland will have an idea that will change the world.

That's the creativity I'm talking about.

What conditions do we need?

What we're doing should be the start of something bigger, of that creativity revolution.

What local conditions do we need to make this happen?

We need good projects that we can invest in; strong bids that will show that they can make a difference to their communities.

This goes hand in hand with partnerships that will ensure that our investment will have a lasting impact.

That was the case in Hull, where our investment levered in other public funds and private investment to demonstrate how culture can swing the fortunes of a city.

So, I am delighted that Sunderland – along with Coventry, Hereford and Stoke – is following Hull in competing to be UK City of Culture for 2021.

We wish them all, all the best.

Sunderland has strong partnerships – the Arts Council has a relationship with all three of Sunderland's principle cultural stakeholders: the University, the Council and the Music, Arts and Culture Trust.

And in Sunderland we also find another vital element in this vision - leaders who believe in the potential of a place and its people, and make the difference in mobilising opinion and resources.

Working with our partners in the Cultural Spring, we've recently held listening sessions in Sunderland.

From these, we heard that there is a real belief that culture has a major role to play in the future of the city, and that people want to see their city and their culture championed.

So Sunderland is fortunate to have voices such as Paul Callaghan, Shirley Atkinson, John Mowbray, Graeme Thompson, and John Kelly.

What broader conditions do we need to set free this creativity?

Well, we need sustained public investment.

The value of art and culture to our nation and to its economy was acknowledged in the last Autumn Statement, and we believe that the current government also understands the contribution we can make.

I'd ask all our stakeholders to look at what art and culture are accomplishing with what they have, and to think what they could do, with more.

And what opportunities we might lose if we had less.

We need certainty, too, and recent events have raised some questions.

We asked the organisations we invest in, how they thought they might be affected by the referendum.

We're now pulling our findings together.

The picture that is starting to emerge confirms some things that we know – and raises things that we need to know more about.

We know for example that the sector accesses EU funds for a range of projects and programmes, and that a number of smaller organisations are particularly reliant on EU funding.

I'm encouraged by the promise of the government to cover funding for arts and cultural organisations that may be lost as a consequence of Britain leaving the EU.

The sector reminded us that freedom of movement plays a crucial part in ensuring the cultural exchange that underpins our relationships with other nations.

And it's clear that we would like to know more about how the existing Legal and regulatory frameworks may be affected.

And, of course, we will need to know what all this will mean for trade.

We have a strong export presence and a majority of our funded organisations work internationally, and not only within the EU.

The biggest single export destination is the USA.

But as yet, we don't know the conditions governing our withdrawal from the EU.

The strategic conversations are happening.

So, meanwhile, it is business as usual, for us, as with the rest of the country.

So, in this light, I have to say that the most immediate concern to the sector continues to be the loss of local authority funding.

Local authorities are the biggest investors in arts and culture in Britain.

Many of them are reducing funds for art and culture substantially.

This has been a tough era for public finances – and we don't yet know what the Autumn Statement may bring.

The Arts Council does understand the tough decisions faced by local authorities.

But we urge them, before they reduce investment, to talk to us.

We cannot fill the gaps: our resources are finite.

But we have shown consistently that where there is a will, there is a way.

We can find ways to work together to ensure that there continues to be a bright future for art and culture.

To artists and arts organisations, I say, let us continue to make the case.

And show how we contribute to the life of our communities.

This is too important to be left to chance.

Cultural assets – our theatres, venues, museums, galleries and libraries – contain the blueprints to the future.

They can all be places of shared creative practice, where artists, engineers, and scientists come together to ask “what if?”

Conclusion

So today, I've talked about how I believe art and culture must be at the heart of a shared national culture, bringing us together and protecting our progress as a society.

I've reflected on the ambassadorial role we have in ensuring that Britain is open to the world.

And the growing economic contribution we make, both locally and in terms of exports.

The referendum has made these roles more important than ever.

And I've described how the power of creativity can open a new chapter in Britain's history.

I think this is beginning to happen.

But the time is now.

There's an opportunity because there is an energy and appetite for change in the streets of cities like Sunderland that needs to be appreciated and used.

What would Shakespeare say?

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune...”



So I'd like us to end with a challenge to each of us.

If we want a creative nation, we need creative schools and homes.

We need creative communities and cities.

We need creative people.

How can each of us think creatively about this? What can we offer?

Let's go out of here and look at the work on display here, in the National Glass Centre.

Let's ask "what if?" and start a creativity revolution.