

Creating Community in the Global City: Towards a History of Community Arts and Media in London

This short piece presents some key ideas from a research proposal I developed with Andrew Dewdney of South Bank University in 2013-14. Our empirical focus was on community arts and media in London, from the mid-1960s to the end of the Greater London Council in the late 1980s. To some extent, we wanted to document and to interrogate a history that we had both lived through, albeit from different perspectives; but we also felt that this history had something to say to the present. We didn't actually apply for funding in the end, but somebody should certainly do so!

Questions about the social role of the arts have a very long history, but they have been on the political agenda ever since the early years of New Labour. While the discussion has faded somewhat in recent years – and the arts in general have suffered significant cutbacks under the Coalition government – the questions never disappear. What are the arts for? Are they simply a luxury for the few, or an entitlement for the many? What contribution do they make to society, and to the economy? To what extent can they help to tackle specific social problems? And how far should they be judged in such apparently instrumental terms in the first place? Robert Hewison's recent re-evaluation of New Labour's cultural policy in his book *Cultural Capital* (2014) returns to the topic, presenting a scathing (and by no means unjustified) critique of the failure of 'creative Britain'.

However, one very relevant aspect of this wider debate that is often neglected is that of community arts. There is an extensive history of work in this sector, across a range of art forms, dating back to the 1960s. The aim of such work is not primarily to create works of artistic merit, although it is not necessarily incompatible with doing so. Rather, the emphasis is centrally and directly on the question of social benefit, especially for people who may be defined in various ways as disadvantaged or 'socially excluded'. As such, it provides an important test case for thinking about the social functions of the arts more broadly. So how might we understand and evaluate this history, and what lessons can we learn from it? This article arises from some initial attempts to explore the early history of community arts and media, specifically in London, and to identify some issues for further research.

Defining terms

As numerous commentators have noted, defining 'community arts' is fraught with difficulties. There is arguably a continuum here, variously signaled by terms such as 'alternative', 'public', 'amateur', 'informal' and 'independent'. There is also diversity in terms of the art forms and media employed, the scale and motivations of the work, and the locations and institutional settings in which it takes place. However, a working definition might include the following:

- Community arts provision entails active participation in artistic and cultural production by non-professionals.
- It addresses socially marginalized groups (defined in terms of age or ethnicity, for example), and/or takes place in economically disadvantaged areas.
- It often has broadly social or political aims, as defined through notions such as empowerment, democratic participation and community action.
- It typically entails collective or collaborative ways of working, and informal, learner-centred pedagogic methods.

To this extent, we can differentiate between community arts and, for example, attempts to make traditional art forms accessible to a wider audience, or artists' attempts to create radical alternatives to mainstream arts, or more individualised forms of amateur artistic production.

Even so, community arts and media have some kind of relationship, albeit often a marginal one, with established art practices such as theatre, music, literature and the visual arts, as well as media such as film, photography and print. In these areas, there is often a continuum, moving from the community outreach dimension of professional arts organisations towards the specific hybrid forms developed through community-based practices. In the case of drama, for example, this is apparent in the case of theatre-in-education and community theatre; or in the visual arts with approaches ranging from community artist-in-residence schemes to collaborative mural painting to artist-run amateur art classes.

In the current context, such binary distinctions between traditional and radical, mainstream and marginal, or amateur and professional, have arguably become problematic, and are in need of re-examination. Meanwhile, the participatory possibilities of new social media also appear to challenge such distinctions, and to provide new resources and possibilities for community arts practice – although this may in turn require some rethinking of the concept of 'community', as something that may no longer be bounded by a specific geographical location.

Why research?

Community arts and media has remained a relatively undocumented and under-researched field. Much of the existing literature is written by and for practitioners themselves. In addition to advice and descriptions of practice, much of it seeks to provide advocacy for the sector, and some of it is frankly celebratory. While this is understandable, it can result in a lack of critical interrogation. There is often an unwillingness to address the ways in which funding and political imperatives constrain and produce particular forms of practice; and there can be a failure to explore the gaps between aims and outcomes, or between rhetorical prescriptions and the realities of practice.

Academic work remains sparse, although there have been some valuable studies, for example of community media and community music, as well as some useful ethnographic studies of specific projects. However, much of this work focuses on single art forms. As a result, what is often missing here are opportunities for comparison: different art forms self-evidently present different opportunities and challenges in this respect. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of historical perspective: while some have claimed that New Labour's approach effectively 'depoliticised' community arts, there has been very little critical examination of the politics of the sector as they have evolved over time.

In recent years, there have been several attempts to create online archives of 'alternative' arts of the period, some of which include material specifically relating to community arts. These include Radical Printshops, Unfinished Histories (on alternative theatre), the Whitechapel Gallery's Reclaim the Mural project, and the Rewind project on artists' film and video. Several leading practitioners in the field have recently passed away or are no longer active, and there is now an urgent need for some oral history to be conducted. A new project has recently begun to record the work of the community-based writing and publishing organization Enterprise (founded in 1971, and closed in 2012). But in London alone, there are several other key organizations whose work needs to be documented. These would include: Oval House Theatre (established in 1963); Notting Hill Carnival (1966); the Albany, Deptford (1966); InterAction (1968); the Cockpit Arts Workshop (1970); and Four Corners/Camerawork (1973). Some of these organizations have recently ceased to exist, and their archives have already been dispersed. While a nationwide

research project is certainly necessary, there are some good reasons to focus on the specific context of London, as a diverse 'global city', in which community arts enjoyed significant support from central, regional and local government during the 1970s and 1980s.

Understanding contexts

The origins of community arts in the UK can be found within what is loosely called the 'counter-culture' of 1960s. There are also self-evident connections with youth subcultures, ranging from the utopianism of the hippies to the DIY ethos of punk. Meanwhile, in claiming to challenge traditional art forms and institutions, alternative or avant-garde artists of the period were often committed to working with 'ordinary people' or 'non-artists'. As such, it is important to locate the development of community arts in the context of these wider forms of cultural politics.

However, community arts also needs to be seen as an *educational* practice, albeit one with a collective rather than an individual emphasis, and with an explicit political motivation. As such, it needs to be understood in the context of educational history – and especially that of the radical or progressive pedagogies of the time. Much of the impetus (and indeed the funding) for community arts initiatives came from teachers and youth workers working in or around the formal system.

In respect of both cultural politics and education, the changing climate had particular consequences for community arts. During the 1980s, the wider move in Left politics away from arguments based on class towards more diversified forms of identity politics – reinforced by more individualistic tendencies within the wider political arena – raised difficult questions about how 'communities' were to be defined. Likewise, in education, the shift away from progressivism towards more instrumental approaches has had particular implications for community arts, not least in respect of evaluation and funding.

The sense of location is also vital to understanding community arts and media. 'Community' in this context may be quite narrowly defined (as a physical neighbourhood) or it may transcend geographical limits; it may be as much imagined as real; and it may be more or less historicized and indeed romanticized. It is therefore vital to trace how specific organizations have conceptualized the communities they both serve and seek to bring into being; and how this relates to the constraints and possibilities afforded by their geographical location. In the case of London, a 'global city' that has always been a focus for migration, but which has steadily become more culturally diverse, this means addressing the changing relationships between the global and the local, and how these are manifested in artistic and educational practices.

Policy

National and local policy obviously plays a key role in defining, enabling and constraining the work of community arts and media organizations. In the case of London, it is especially important to look at the role of local government during this period: the Greater London Council (which was created in 1965 and abolished in 1986) and the Inner London Education Authority (created in 1963, made permanent in 1965 and abolished in 1990). While the 1970s and 1980s are sometimes regarded as a high-water era in municipal radicalism, the GLC was actually led by a Conservative administration for quite long periods (1967-73 and 1977-81). However, under Labour and especially under the leadership of Ken Livingstone (1981-86), it espoused a new political rhetoric about democratic access to culture, and government-subsidised cultural initiatives were seen to play a key role in promoting urban regeneration and the local economy. This in turn led to new rationales and mechanisms for public funding of the arts, which subsequently influenced other local

and national policies, for instance in the work of the Arts Council (which established a 'New Activities Committee' on community arts as early as 1974) and the regional arts associations across the UK.

While these developments have been widely debated – not least in relation to New Labour's cultural policy, and the more recent emphasis on participation and creativity – the specific role of community arts has not been the focus of much discussion among academics or policy-makers. The role of the Inner London Education Authority, which sponsored many of these initiatives, and the educational dimensions of cultural policy more broadly, have also largely been ignored.

Analysis here would need to consider how the policy imperatives governing the funding of community arts and media were defined, and they changed over time; and to what extent, and in what ways, these aligned with other imperatives. For example, it would be interesting to explore the different definitions of community, and of the functions and characteristics of community arts; and how these were (or were not) manifested in establishing criteria for funding. In addition to analyzing the formation of policy, it would also be important to consider how policies are interpreted or enacted on the ground: how did funded organisations perceive these imperatives, and how did they seek to accommodate them?

Praxis and pedagogy

The work of community arts organizations is essentially premised on the need for social change. Yet practitioners typically make some very diverse claims about the kinds of change that they are seeking to bring about. For example, there may be claims about *political* change, via notions of empowerment, democratization, and emancipation; *social* change, for example in terms of community development, social cohesion or civic engagement; and *personal* change, in terms of personal growth, wellbeing, creativity or self-expression. These claims are likely to overlap and prove mutually reinforcing, although they may well also be ambiguous, contradictory, or serve to conceal underlying tensions.

These tensions may well be manifested in diverse and contrasting forms of practice. Different practices will reflect different conceptions of value (social, political, aesthetic), constructions of community (as, for example, more or less fluid or bounded, diverse or coherent) and notions of civil society (in terms of public space, democracy and participation). Practitioners also take account of what they perceive as the specific characteristics of particular art forms, or particular genres or artistic styles, in respect of their political potential. They may make more localized claims about the value of specific approaches to artistic production: for example about the importance of face-to-face collaboration, the use of popular forms (for instance the use of circus in community theatre), or the nature of creativity (for example in relation to improvisation).

Underlying these differences are implicit theories of teaching and learning. Practitioners may espouse both implicit and explicit theories, as well as more academic and 'lay' theories; and as I have suggested, these also need to be located within the wider development of educational thinking, for example in the form of ideas about democratic, student-centred pedagogy, self-expression, empowerment and 'consciousness-raising'. These ideas will also be manifested in key aspects of practice – for example, the structuring of workshops, the roles of facilitators, the relations between artists and non-artists, the importance of exploration and improvisation, the role of public performance or exhibition, and so on. They are also likely to vary in relation to different art forms and genres, where different pedagogic approaches may also reflect different cultural traditions and expectations: for example, the teaching of African drumming is likely to use a very different pedagogic approach from teaching Indian dance or improvised drama.

Both historical and contemporary debates in this area tend to hinge on key tensions, for example between exploration and instruction, between technical competence and creativity, and between process and product. The wish to adopt a student-centred pedagogy may well conflict with explicit political commitments, and with the need to impose authority. There may be contradictions as practitioners seek to reconcile these political and pedagogic objectives, both with each other and with the imperatives of funding bodies. These issues are also played out in relation to evaluation, for instance in the relative importance given to specific artistic skills or outcomes as compared with wider personal or social outcomes.

Conclusion

This brief article has attempted to set out an agenda of issues for historical research. There is a history here that urgently needs to be documented, although it is vital to avoid nostalgia, or the mere celebration of past traditions. On the contrary, there needs to be a critical dialogue between past and present: current practice and thinking may have much to learn from history, but contemporary perspectives can also help to re-evaluate and critique earlier approaches.

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