

Championing Artistic Autonomy

The Manifesto Club

There is a legendary exchange between Michaelangelo and his patron, Pope Julius, over the painting of the Sistine Chapel. Famously secretive and diligent, Michaelangelo lay working on his back alone upon the scaffolding, in great physical discomfort, for twenty months. The Pope was an impatient man and regularly demanded to know when the project would be complete. On one famous occasion, the artist answered, “when it satisfies me in its artistic details”. Irritated, the Pope remarked, “And We want you to satisfy Us in Our desire to see it done quickly”. The threat of being hurled down from the scaffolding was enough to cause the artist to immediately finish up and unveil the masterpiece on the morning of All Saint’s Day, when the Pope came to sing Mass before the whole city.

Artists have never had the luxury of complete freedom. Even those great Renaissance patrons of Rome and Florence, who lavished such praise on their creative servants, made bratty and impatient demands. In each age, artists must wrestle with the tension between their imaginative spirit and more base matters of money, time, and politics. Artistic freedom is always an ideal that lies between what the artist seeks to create at a particular moment in time, and the social, economic and technological means available to them. History shows that artists are often forced to compromise their work according to what the buyer wants, what they can afford, and what they can get away with.

Few artists today have as much to fear as Michaelangelo did from the Vatican. Indeed, the freedom to create art is arguably greater than ever before. Censorship is largely non-existent (except with regard to blasphemy law, of which more later), and state funding (theoretically) gives individual artists and organisations the financial stability to develop risky ideas. The development of public subsidy was supposed to liberate artists, galleries and museums from the commercial and populist tastes of the market, whilst the ‘arms-length’ principle that underpins the establishment of the Arts Council, was intended to guarantee freedom from political interference. Although artists still had to finish their work on time and deliver as they promised, they were also trusted to pursue their creative impulses.

Yet, there has been much debate within the arts sector over the past decade about the lack of autonomy artists have over their

creative vision, and this is something our culture seems wary of celebrating.

The Manifesto Club is an independent organisation campaigning for freedom across numerous areas of public and private life. We have launched a group to campaign for greater autonomy for those working in the arts and cultural sectors. This means challenging growing policy regulations, instrumentalism and market-based thinking, all of which contribute to a culture of restraint. We are individuals working in the arts and cultural sector. Through events, research publications and regular campaign strategies, we want to tackle a number of areas briefly explored here.

Instrumentalism

Public funding of the arts is at an all-time high, but as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has repeatedly stated, this subsidy is not ‘something for nothing’. Individual artists, arts groups and cultural organisations are now expected to deliver a range of beneficial effects for society: social inclusion, urban regeneration, improved health and education, community cohesion, crime reduction, youth services and even psychological wellbeing. In 2002, DCMS even called museums and galleries ‘Centres of Social Change’. Undoubtedly the arts can have a positive impact on people’s lives but it is dubious how far these effects can go in transforming society.

Furthermore, the instrumentalism of current policy tends to measure the value of art primarily in these social and economic policy terms. Ideas of artistic quality and value are often secondary, whilst notions of the ‘transformative effects’ of the arts are imposed – with little discussion – as fact. This creates an extra burden on arts professionals to produce ‘research’ that ‘proves’ the beneficial effects of their work in order to receive funding.

There are two serious problems raised by this instrumentalist approach. The first is that the research undertaken about the effects of the arts in dealing with social problems is inconclusive and (very often) unreliable because it is driven by advocacy or funding requirements. Grand claims about the social impact of the arts need to be put into perspective. Whilst they may have many positive knock-on effects, artistic activities and organisations have a very limited effect in dealing with the structural, social and economic problems faced in deprived areas. An arts centre cannot be a substitute for proper economic regeneration, improved public infrastructure and local democratic engagement.

The struggle for artistic autonomy from physical, political and financial restraints is important precisely when it allows the artist to realise a creative vision

own practice. Artists, gallery professionals and curators have come to express a profound anxiety about state subsidy and the demand to ‘prove’ their value in terms other than artistic ones. Whilst there has been a welcome rise in public funding for the arts and culture, this has also come with strings attached. Artists and arts organisations have to show their work will generate social and economic effects, as well as prove the ‘relevance’ of their work to ‘diverse’ communities. Perhaps more worryingly, people working in the arts often lack the confidence to challenge the tick-box culture and argue for their independence.

Artistic autonomy is often caricatured as a childish rejection of rules, or a license to produce bad, expensive art that no one understands. Freedom can certainly be abused, but why emphasise this, as opposed to its potential to be used towards constructive ends? The struggle for artistic autonomy from physical, political and financial restraints is important precisely when it allows the artist to realise a

Second, the pressure on the arts to be socially ‘useful’ means the artist is less free to determine the content of the work they wish to pursue. The purpose of state subsidy was to empower the artist to explore areas and questions that had no immediate commercial value. This set-up was only possible because art was seen as the bearer of truth, beauty, pleasure and even moral or political conscience, all of which were seen to have long-term value for society. This is no longer the case – art has been repackaged by government as just another agent of social policy.

Whilst many working in the arts are sceptical of current policy, their scepticism is muted by the general acceptance of the idea that a cultural policy that attends to the positive social effects of the arts must be preferable to an elitist approach which ignores the public and places the arts in an institutional ivory tower. This neglects the fact that artists and arts organisations are forced to produce that social engagement from the top down, rather than

to freely explore the ways in which the arts can engage with wider society.

By demanding such engagement, current policy condemns those working in the arts to a passive and bureaucratic involvement with the public, denying them the autonomy to develop spontaneous, organic and sustained explorations of what the arts can do in today’s culture. Perversely, such an approach further deadens the potential for a living exchange between artists and the public, by proscribing and regulating the relationship between the two. Without the freedom to act and think independently, the arts risk becoming a lifeless and bureaucratic exercise in consensus building amongst an equally passive and unquestioning public.

Instrumentalism is not solely driven by external government diktat. The loss of faith in the power of art and the demand to be ‘socially useful’ runs throughout many arts institutions. Even though the vast majority of the public believes in subsidising the arts, there seems to be a crisis of confidence in the sector as a whole. We want to challenge the bureaucracy of tick boxes and evidence-based arts policy, but true autonomy cannot be achieved unless we also have a wider public discussion about the value of art in society.

Diversity and Inclusion Policies

The Arts Council recently stated that its plan over the next decade was to ‘put people at the heart of the arts’. Such a statement implies that ‘people’ are usually marginalised in the arts sector. It is now regarded as common sense that the arts should be more inclusive and affirm the value of different cultural tastes within the population.

The current government’s decision to make national gallery and museum galleries free – one of its more laudable policies – demonstrates this desire to make art accessible as part of the spirit of a democratic culture.

However, the policy concepts of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ as they are put into practice are not really about ‘opening up’ the arts, so much as narrowing our horizons. Museums and galleries are told to reconsider their collections in order for them to appeal to ‘non-traditional’ visitors. Theatres are encouraged to present plays that will attract local diverse communities. Individual artists are asked to identify which ‘vulnerable group’ they will be targeting. The assumption behind these demands is that the public has very limited tastes and cannot be expected to transcend the familiar. Whilst there is a serious problem in the provision of high quality arts education in state schools (for instance, with regards to skilled teaching of visual culture) ‘inclusion’ policies rationalise the deficiencies in our education system by saying that all cultures are equal and judgements are inherently ‘elitist’. New legislation that criminalises ‘incitement to religious hatred’ adds to an ever-growing anxiety that art should not cause offence to vulnerable groups or individuals. The power of art to shock, surprise and disturb is today increasingly stifled.

Diversity and inclusion policies have also further politicised the running of arts organisations. Managers are told to support ethnic minority artists because of their cultural background, rather than the rigour of the individual artists practice. In the one sector where people are supposed to be unpredictable and challenging, people are constantly pre-judged according to their ethnicity. The UK is a favoured destination for artists from around the world, but when they arrive they discover very quickly that the public funding system prefers to accommodate them on the basis of their ethnicity, as ‘diverse’ artists. They are expected to represent a particular community’s interests (and reinforce a sense of identity), based on the sole qualification of their skin colour or place of origin. This is equally true for UK born artists from ethnic minority backgrounds.

We champion a universalist approach to the arts, where people are encouraged to transcend the familiar and aspire to understand the complex. The public value of art cannot be determined by the number of people who consume it, or the kinds of ‘labels’ attached to it. Artists should be free to create work that means something to them, not to comply with an institutional quota. We need to challenge the low expectations set out in current policy and free the artist and audience from this pigeon-holing.

Art Schools

Art schools are today in trouble. At a time when more students than ever are enrolling on

Fine Art courses, there is a tangible sense of confusion about the purpose and aspirations of training to be an artist.

At first glance, these difficulties reflect the consumerist transformation of higher education in general. Tutors now find that they have too much paperwork – and too little time to develop a proper engagement with students. However, problems of organisation and resources don’t fully explain the tangible sense of disorientation and drift in art schools today. Rather, these problems express the despirited, professionalised, risk-averse and bureaucratic culture in wider society that has encroached on the ambitious, speculative, experimental and progressive spirit that once informed the best artistic practice and teaching.

Increasingly, for example, students are encouraged to think as entrepreneurs, or to see art-making as a career like any other. Art students spend much of their time proving themselves through modules on ‘professional development’ or on student placements in the community. They no longer sense the purpose or value of risk-taking and experimentation. It is a frequent complaint of teachers that students are becoming increasingly cautious and conservative in their attitude towards the education they receive, being ever more preoccupied with ‘making the grade’. Students-as-consumers are also sceptical and oversensitive to robust criticism of their work.

True autonomy cannot be achieved unless we also have a wider public discussion about the value of art in society.

More broadly, we have an educational culture that sees knowledge and learning as primarily vocational and utilitarian. Society is increasingly risk-averse and pessimistic about the capacity of humans to develop new ideas that take us beyond the familiar.

There is no textbook for the ideal artist, but we want to champion an art school training that is focused on the development of truly inquiring, independent subjects and not just the assimilation and reproduction of pre-existing disciplines. The creative edge is led by those who have the confidence and insight to push it beyond its conventional languages, forms and attitudes. We want to act as a rallying point for art students, tutors and others who are concerned about these problems, and to open a debate about what a genuinely free art school might look like.

Where next?

The arts sector has a long history of political agitation. Today the battleground must surely be in our own backyard. The teaching, funding, and regulation of the arts are informed by a culture of low expectations and uncertainty about their value. This has led to a climate of distrust, where artists and organisations are subject to ever-greater restraint. Whilst the sector undoubtedly brims with creative energy, intrusive policies and a risk-averse culture have also had a deadening effect. Artists are increasingly bound to a range of social policy targets, economic imperatives and expectations which limit their creative freedom.

For those who are passionate about the arts and believe they have a public value, a first step is to come together publicly and challenge the more immediate restrictions that limit autonomy. This must also go hand-in-hand with an open debate about the value of arts practice and institutions. Arguing for autonomy for artists and their organisations is not simply a defence of the creative freedom of artists. It also tells us something about how we value our ability to participate in and create a living culture, one in which we are free to question, argue, agree and disagree over what makes our society worth being part of. Many individuals in the arts sector live in fear of losing their funding if they upset the apple-cart.

Unless we make our voices heard, we will always live under threat of being hurled from the scaffolding.