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EXPRESSIVE LIVES

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5 Expression and engagement: a creative life

Sandy Nairne

As to that leisure, as I should in no case do any harm to anyone with it, so I should often do some direct good to the community with it, by practising arts or occupations for my hands or brain which would give pleasure to many of the citizens; in other words, a great deal of the best work done would be done in leisure time of men relieved from any anxiety as to their livelihood, and eager to exercise their special talent, as all men, nay, all animals are.

William Morris, 'How we live and how we might live', 1888

Morris saw work at the centre of his new vision for life and, whether paid or unpaid, it would be (after the political and economic revolution he sought) purposeful for all. When questioned about the many people, women and men, condemned to menial repetitive jobs, he proposed that all work should be given some elaboration, with appropriate adornment and decoration. The creative and the productive combined together. Morris's utopian vision included an expressive life as part of everyone's common rights, along with health, housing and education. And Morris insisted that everyone had a special talent of some kind – everyone could be creative.

Morris had little time for the 'fine art' end of the art market, recognising that commercial pressures worked to limit the distribution and enjoyment of art to the few rather than encouraging participation by the many. Although Morris was part of a revolution in ideas before state socialism emerged, his inspiring role in the Arts and Crafts movement remains relevant to how definitions of the cultural field can be expanded and made more inclusive today.

After many years of repetitive debates in Britain around access vs excellence in the arts, renewed thinking is certainly needed, not least to dismantle the assumption that institutions

are either stuck in a narrow elitist model or dedicated only to the local and amateur. Brian McMaster's report of 2007 for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport tried to shift thinking by proposing a new drive to excellence, which would include learning, outreach work and engagement with contemporary issues.¹ But this has led to little new government policy, and for the visual arts – in museums and galleries – there are significant cultural forces already operating and marking significant change.

For art galleries, Joseph Beuys was an artist of enormous importance in shifting debate away from the stylistic division between the figurative and the abstract. But he became equally influential in his ideas of 'social sculpture', demonstrated in the Free International University presented at *Documenta 7* in 1982. Beuys questioned the very idea of singular, unitary works of art seen as objects for appreciation separated from their political meanings and removed from wider social participation. Performance (including his self-styled lectures and debates) was central to his public engagement. His emphasis on myth and narrative was not about looking back but about seeking a more intense experience of life now. And his spirit lives on.

In Britain, the visual arts world in the 1970s was challenged by the growing community arts and public art movements seeking recognition (and funding) while championing the place of participative practice. And feminist artists and thinkers also criticised not just a male-dominated art world, but a narrow and competitive view of what art had become. By the 1980s feminist artists were joined by black and Asian artists pressing strong claims for recognition and organising their own exhibitions and events.

Over the past 25 years a plethora of artists working in unconventional media – including performance, environmental and digital work – have deconstructed and extended the public art gallery, often turning it inside out. Many smaller organisations such as Artangel in London or FACT in Liverpool have emerged to become influential. They have proved essential for the refreshment of the visual arts as a whole. The contemporary art world has both contributed to an expanded art

market (until the recession) while also shifting practices of presentation within and beyond art institutions.

In the realm of museums – from science to history and the decorative arts – the biggest shift has seen education departments steadily advancing from the periphery to a more central position. In part, this was a re-engagement with the Victorian legacy of educational access and opportunity for all. In part, museums and science centres were determined to find new processes within museum displays that engaged visitors without simply ‘dumbing down’. This momentum gathered pace in the 1990s in a larger shift from education programmes to a broader concept of engagement and interpretation, exemplified in the Dana Centre at the Science Museum, or the approaches of Tate Modern, the work of regional galleries and museums in Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow, and equally in annual events such as The Big Draw, now in its tenth year and organised by the Campaign for Drawing, which uses museums, galleries and public spaces to offer everyone the chance to make art.

Such change in the work of museums has not just encouraged participation but also affected governance, encouraging greater transparency and accountability. As different communities and cultural groups have staked claims and made links to the content and design of displays, as cultural diversity has become an increasingly central concept for western museums in their thinking about collections and audiences, and with a broader shift, encouraged by Unesco, to recognize intangible heritage, such as dance, music and ritual, as well as the tangible, so the understanding of who the museum serves as an institution, and how it serves them, has become more critical. The continued growth in museum visits over the past decade and higher visitor satisfaction rates demonstrate some success, but there is much to do. And there is a vital balance to be struck between immaculate presentation and an interpretative approach.

An important new report, *Learning to Live*, a collection of essays commissioned by the National Museum Directors’ Conference and the Institute for Public Policy Research, gives

higher-level individual contributions. Payment at the door is deeply discouraging to making open, participative institutions, but a combination of ticketed elements, paid courses, and more extensive members' and subscription schemes is likely. With public value objectives clearly expressed, a central part of the creative economy should include museums and galleries in their most dynamic form. This is where William Morris's ideas of creative work come round again and a shared vision can reinforce the claims for more local or state funding.

Sandy Nairne is the Director of the National Portrait Gallery.

Notes

- 1 McMaster, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*.
- 2 Bellamy and Oppenheim, *Learning to Live*.
- 3 Rogers, *Get It*.
- 4 Holden and Hewison, *The Right to Art*.