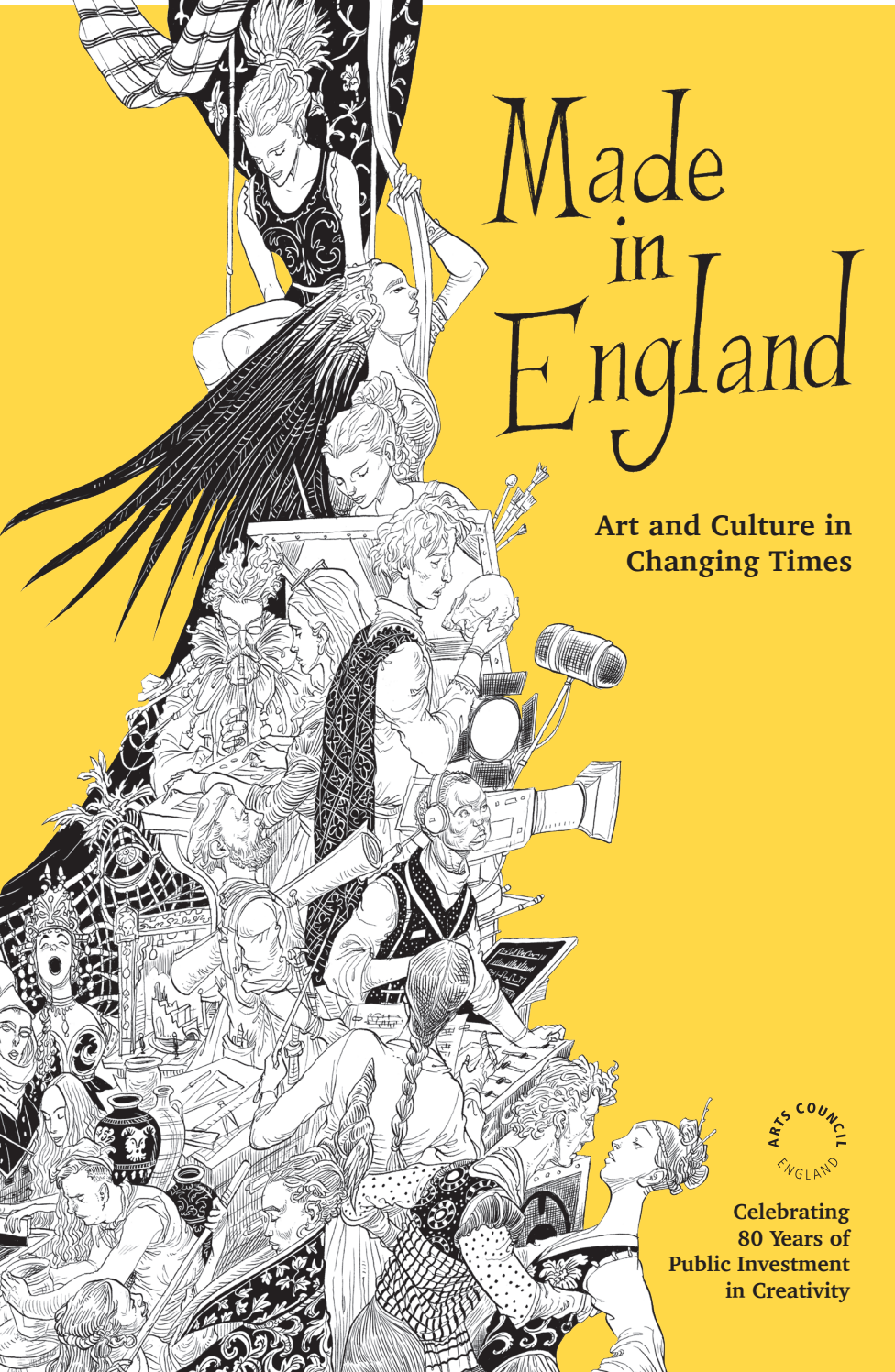




Made in England

Art and Culture in
Changing Times



Celebrating
80 Years of
Public Investment
in Creativity

Culture and creativity are at the heart of England's story. Our writers, artists, producers and creators are world-leading. For the last 80 years, since the Arts Council's creation, public investment has underpinned a national commitment to artistic freedom, excellence and access, fuelling economic and civic success, supporting education and wellbeing, and helping successive generations to discover talent, share stories, and find wonder. This anniversary is a moment to reflect on everything public support for art and culture has achieved for our country – and why that support matters now more than ever.

Made in England gathers essays, arguments and creative contributions from artists, leaders and critics. Spanning personal reflection, practical case studies and big picture analysis, this book explores the unique role of art and culture in changing times – and casts its gaze forward to consider how that role will evolve over the next 80 years. Contributors examine how public funding of culture has shaped vibrant communities, nurtured global talent and enabled thrilling experimentation. Together, they celebrate what's been built, make the case for how it can be improved upon – and argue passionately for ongoing investment in the creativity of generations to come.

MADE IN ENGLAND

First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Comma Press.
www.commapress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-10: 1917093365
ISBN-13: 9781917093361

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A



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Made in England

ART AND CULTURE
IN CHANGING TIMES

CELEBRATING 80 YEARS
OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN CREATIVITY

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHRIS RIDDELL



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Introduction

Sir Nicholas Serota

AT THE END OF World War II, barely a month after VE Day, the Arts Council of Great Britain was born.¹ Its creation was one of the Coalition Government's final and most radical acts, emerging from the great wave of postwar civic and social investment, and signalling a recognition of the irreplaceable role of the arts in national life. For the first time in this country's history, our leaders made a formal commitment to public funding for culture, through an organisation charged with investing in individuals and groups whose work would stimulate and nourish a growing appetite for music, theatre, dance and the visual arts.

That vision built directly on the wartime work of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA) – an initiative devised by John Maynard Keynes, the economist who would go on to be the Arts Council's first Chair. CEMA's task, as Maynard Keynes saw it, was 'to carry music, drama and pictures to places which otherwise would be cut off from all contact with masterpieces of happier days and times'. But what began as a morale-boosting emergency response soon developed into something far more enduring. 'At the start,' Keynes said, 'our aim was to replace what war had taken away; but we soon found that we were providing what had never existed, even in peace time.'²

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Sometimes, only the chaos of catastrophe allows us to imagine a better future. Keynes' audacious wartime vision – of permanent peacetime cultural provision – informed the Arts Council's founding aims. The organisation's purpose, as set out in its 1946 Royal Charter, was 'to increase the accessibility of the fine arts to the public... to improve the standard of execution of the fine arts... and to advise and co-operate with Government Departments, local authorities and other bodies.' Eighty years on, remarkably, those aims continue to resonate. The definition of the 'fine' arts has broadened into a more inclusive understanding of contemporary culture, but apart from that evolution, the Charter's language would not have sounded out of place in the 2025 Jennie Lee Lecture, in which the Secretary of State, Lisa Nandy, spoke of embracing 'excellence, everywhere, for everyone.'

And Keynes' vision for the Arts Council and its work did not end with provision. He saw freedom of artistic expression as a foundational democratic virtue and was adamant that the newly formed Arts Council should operate at 'arm's length' from government, free to use its own judgment in deciding which artists and organisations to support without political oversight or interference. That principle has been challenged from many quarters over the course of the last 80 years – but it has been resolutely championed by writers, artists, theatre directors and curators, and ultimately defended and upheld by successive governments.

This combination of aims – the determination to promote both 'excellence' and 'access', coupled with the arm's-length principle – has remained at the heart of the Arts Council's remit, and its reason for being. It is a model that has been adopted in other countries, and is deeply admired, and envied, in those parts of the world where the arts depend more heavily on private support, or where political interference stifles artistic expression and chills creativity. Together, these principles have shaped a uniquely public-minded cultural

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infrastructure – one that champions artistic risk, widens participation, and affirms the vital role of the arts in a healthy democratic society.

In the nine years that I have been the Chair of Arts Council England, I have seen how those founding essentials continue to endure, even as the sector changes around them. I've had the good fortune to attend great performances and exhibitions on stages, in concert halls, in museums and galleries, and in public spaces in cities, towns and villages across the country. I have watched as programming has become more inclusive, and a far wider range of stories and experiences have been given voice. There is still some distance to travel, but I have seen our sector's leadership and workforces becoming more reflective of the society they serve. And I have watched Arts Council investment reach parts of the country that were once overlooked. The core commitments Keynes helped establish remain constant, but within that framework there is both the need and the scope to adapt – to deepen inclusion, broaden access, and respond to new social and cultural realities.

But those commitments have always sat alongside a more sobering, practical reality: our sector's health depends on money. Over the past 80 years the economic context for culture has changed profoundly. Public funding has at times surged, enabling bold expansion and new institutions, and at other times stalled or retreated, leaving organisations exposed to rising costs, shrinking local support, and greater reliance on earned and private income which, while increasingly valuable, can be less reliable. The result is that while the Arts Council's aims remain constant, the financial landscape in which they must be realised has shifted repeatedly, with major consequences for capacity, risk-taking and long-term planning.

Since the Arts Council's founding, public investment has repeatedly risen and then been frozen, or reduced in real terms, shaping the sector's capacity to grow, innovate and

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reach new audiences. Large injections of funding – Jennie Lee’s 1960s ‘Housing the Arts’ boost that helped build regional theatres and the National Theatre; the National Lottery’s capital largesse in the 1990s and 2000s that created new galleries and cultural buildings across the country; the increase in grant-in-aid in the early 2000s which allowed national museums to re-open their doors for free – acted as catalysts, sparking confidence and creativity and allowing artists and organisations to reach new audiences. On the other hand, periods of constrained grant-in-aid or real-terms reductions (notably after the late 1970s funding squeeze, the long flatlining since the 2008 financial crisis, and cuts to local authority support) have left many organisations more vulnerable, exposed to economic headwinds despite rising demand for and international recognition of the excellence of England’s culture.

Recent history underlines the point: decisive government support through the Cultural Recovery Fund during the pandemic helped to prevent widespread closures and accelerated recovery, while subsequent modest increases and persistent funding pressure show how fragile progress can be. The pattern is clear: targeted, sustained public investment unlocks artistic ambition and public benefit; prolonged stagnation corrodes capacity and opportunity.

So, as we look ahead to the next 80 years, what can we learn from these examples?

First, that we must plan for the long term, and invest consistently. Too often a productive increase in funding has been followed by years of standstill, during which green shoots cannot be nurtured and there are no resources to invest in the next generation. Start/stop funding is not how the arts – or the economy – grow.

Second, that the world will change in unexpected ways, but that public investment – carefully targeted and delivered at scale – will encourage artistic experiment and will bring a

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financial return far greater than the original investment. The returns show up immediately in the resilience of organisations, the livelihoods of staff and freelancers, and the vitality of local supply chains. They also appear in improved health, stronger community cohesion and civic pride. A town with a thriving library, theatre, museum, gallery or performance space is a town that breathes. It brings citizens together and attracts people and business from elsewhere. It is a place with a sense of purpose, and a future.

Third, that support must be set at a level and for a duration that gives organisations the confidence to plan: to build long-term programmes, to invest in training and skills, and to reach out into the community to create opportunities for engagement in the arts for all ages, from nursery schools to sheltered housing.

Fourth, that we must do more to find and fund talent wherever it exists. Investment in individual artists is often the hardest to advocate for, because the return is not immediate, and the criteria for selection are complex. But it is also the most fertile. We must rely on artform specialists, and the advice of arts professionals with local knowledge in the Arts Council's network of NPOs, to identify talent and to direct the attention of funders so that guidance and support comes early and when most needed. Mentors and role models are essential, as is an appetite for adventure and risk.

Fifth, that we must teach for creativity across the curriculum – not only in music, art, design and dance, but in the humanities, maths and sciences – so future generations can meet the challenges of new technologies and media with supple, creative minds. The recent announcements about a reinstatement of the arts in the curriculum are very welcome, but funding and determination will be needed to offset a long period in which only the STEM subjects have been valued.

In marking 80 years of sustained public investment in art and culture, we celebrate a nation made richer, happier, more

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inventive and more successful because of it. That long-term commitment has seeded institutions, companies, festivals, touring networks, projects and artworks of every conceivable scale. Over eight decades, that legacy has strengthened our communities, shaped our shared imagination, and helped define who we are.

As we approach this milestone, then, two things are clear. First, while the benefits of 80 years of public investment can be seen, heard and felt by people in every community in our country, the case for that investment is still frequently challenged. In fact, as the cost-of-living crisis continues and demands on public finance grow, public investment is increasingly under threat. We must take the opportunity offered by this anniversary to make the case even more strongly – a challenge that I know will be picked up by my successor, Dawn Airey. Second, an anniversary is not a moment for nostalgia, but for ambition. We can all point to a performance, a work of art, a musical composition, a poem or a play that would not have come into being without public funding, and we can explain how poor we would be without it. But that is not enough. We owe it to future generations to do now what Keynes did for all of us in 1946: to make the case that public investment is the irreplaceable cornerstone of our cultural sector, and that it should be sustained and increased over the *next* 80 years. We need to ensure that artists can flourish and contribute to an inclusive society that values freedom of expression and creativity in all its forms. We need to argue for future generations, and for the art that does not yet exist.

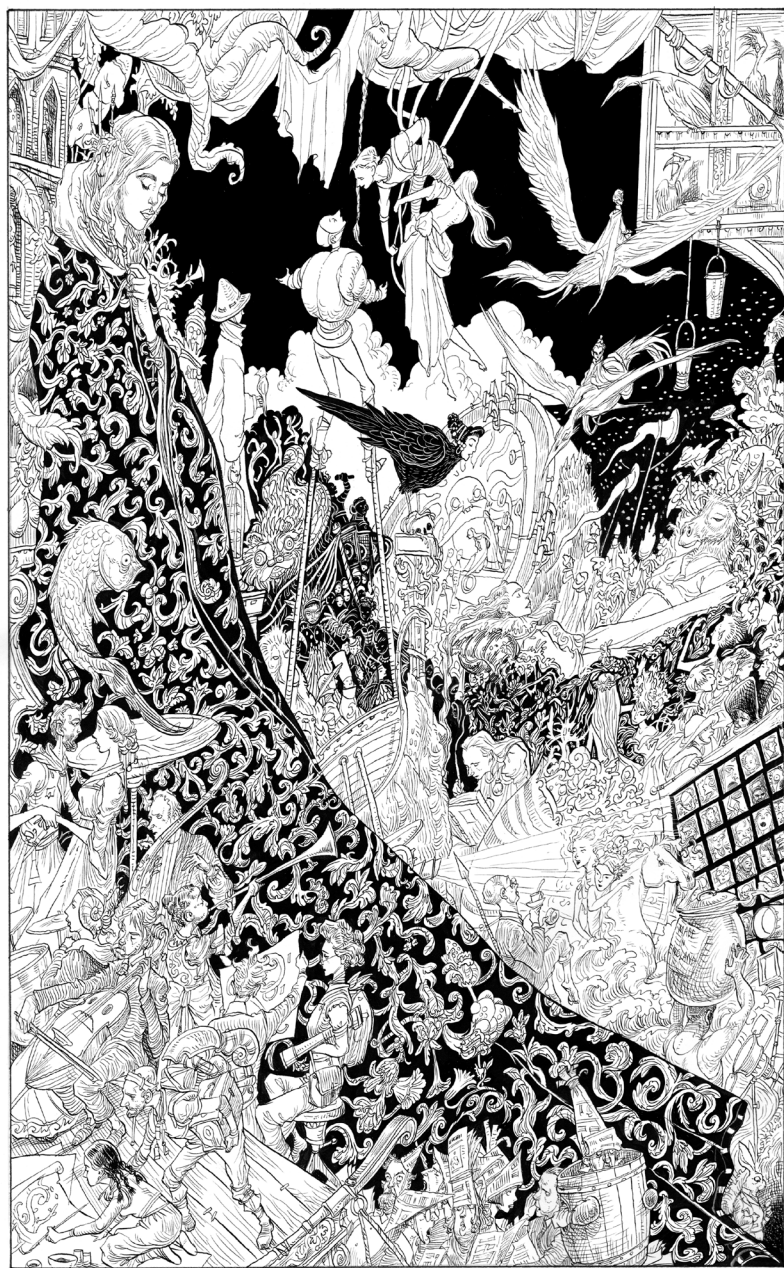
*Sir Nicholas Serota,
July 2026*

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Notes

1. In 1994 this would become Arts Council England, Arts Council Scotland, now Creative Scotland, Arts Council Northern Ireland, and Arts Council Wales.
2. Lord Keynes in a broadcast on the BBC Home Service, reprinted in *The Listener*, 12 July 1945.

PEOPLE



Where Do We Go From Here?

Art For – And From – The Next Generation

*Award-winning actor **David Harewood** reflects on his journey from the streets of Birmingham to RADA's presidency, and argues that public investment in access to the arts is essential in creating pathways for diverse talent and securing the future of British culture.*

THIS IS THE TALE of a working-class Black boy from Birmingham, who dreamed about telling stories, creating characters and working with Hollywood stars.

It's a tale I'm writing at the start of my third year as President of RADA – and the writing of it gives me the opportunity to reflect on what it is to be an actor and artist starting out now. I was excited to take up the role of President, because of the unique position it gave me to share my own experiences of the acting industry: the good and bad; the glamour and the challenges. I wanted to pass all of this on, so that the students would know what to expect from our industry, and how best to prepare themselves for it. Since being at RADA, I've welcomed in two new cohorts of students, and each time I stand in front of them, offering words of advice as they begin on their journeys, I can't help but reflect on my own. How unlikely it felt, how fragile it was, and how easily it might never have happened.

For me, storytelling and performing began on long family

car rides to the beach as a kid; on nights gathered in front of the telly; or over the dinner table at home. When my parents were out, my siblings and I would turn the house into a playground, dressing up for laughs or, in a favourite game, bashing each other with rolled-up newspapers in the dark.

Later, it carried on in the bar where I worked: I'd mess around with my mates, breaking out in impromptu song or performing characters for my boss while the punters became my audience, or sometimes my co-stars.

These were the stages on which I first started to learn to play.

But it wasn't until the final weeks of my time at secondary school, 40-odd years ago, that I had any idea this playing could lead anywhere. One of my teachers, Mr Reader, asked me what I planned to do with myself after I left school. I truly had no idea. I'd visited the school careers library on several occasions, but nothing had really piqued my interest. To be honest, I'd quietly resigned myself to a spell on the dole while I figured out what to do with the rest of my life. 'I don't know, sir,' I said, shrugging my shoulders in a bid to seem carefree.

But Mr Reader's next words to my rudderless younger self set in motion a journey that has seen me chart the most extraordinary path from the streets of Birmingham to the bright lights of Hollywood, living inside characters I could never have imagined, and joining a creative community I didn't know existed. 'Well, we've been talking in the staff room,' he told me, 'and we all think you should be an actor.'

His throwaway line lives in my memory to this day; in fact, if I close my eyes and listen closely, I can still hear him say it. From that moment, I was on a journey – a journey I'm still on all these years later.

Shortly after Mr Reader's intervention, I found myself heading to London. I'd auditioned for and won a place at the National Youth Theatre. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by like-minded, imaginative people who, just like

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me, found joy in the creative space. This community, as full of excitement and passion for playing as I was, lit a fire in me, and at last I felt as though I had a direction. I began to realise that acting was something I could do, something that felt right, and what was more, the people around me seemed to be agreeing with me.

I remember speaking with the head of the National Youth Theatre at the time, who took me aside after a performance to give me some advice. ‘Get yourself to drama school if you can, and get some training,’ he told me. ‘They’ll be able to help you shape your talent.’

How do I do that? I thought. For the first time on this fledgling journey, I worried my path might end in a brick wall: I had absolutely no idea how on earth I’d be able to afford to take the next step. My parents were hard-working people, but they didn’t have the funds to send me to drama school; the idea of it was incomprehensible to them. My dream might well have died there, if it hadn’t been for a helping hand from the state, in the shape of an Arts Council grant.

It was this grant that allowed me to fund a place at drama school – and to continue on the journey I’d set out on. Put simply, without it, I wouldn’t have had the career I’ve had. And just as importantly as money, it gave me confidence: in myself, and in the idea that a life in acting could be for me.

Those two needs – financial and emotional – are something I am acutely aware of in my role at RADA now, when I meet young people standing exactly where I once stood: full of potential, but often unsure of whether there is a place for them. The fact is that those moments which, for me, started with playful discovery and joy – those powerful moments of community, of sharing and self-recognition – might not have gone anywhere without support.

I was drawn to the transformative power of acting as a means of discovering who I might want to be; of expanding myself and my horizons. Through my first experiences of

acting – through the camaraderie you share when working together – I found a community. I found new joy, in working as an ensemble. I found that being thrown together with different types of people meant I was able to bond, discover a new sense of myself, and in turn make sense of others, through theatre and through work. Sharing this with an audience meant I got to make this community, this sense of understanding, go even further. And the sharing doesn't stop there. At a national level, British theatre, music and film are among the country's most powerful exports.

It's a common misconception that arts funding is purely social expenditure, with little economic return. In fact, the evidence tells us otherwise. The creative industries contribute £124bn to the UK economy each year, and employ millions of people, generating far greater returns than any initial public investment. Yet, despite this, our industries are undervalued, and specialist arts training has been caught in the crosshairs of wider underinvestment in higher education. Cuts, real-terms freezes, and short-term thinking have put some of our most valuable training grounds at risk.

It's time to change the conversation. Investment in the arts and in training is not a drain on public resources. It's an investment in talent, in jobs, and in an industry where, globally, the UK punches well above its weight. From individual grants that opened the doors for people like me, to support for companies and venues up and down the country, the Arts Council provides vital funding that has allowed for the development of countless careers both on and off the stage, enabled theatres to thrive, entertained and enriched audiences, helped shape communities, and brought people together in ways that both enlighten and educate.

And what's more, Arts Council funding enables work that reflects the full breadth of the human experience. Talent exists in every corner of this country, but for many people – me included – talent without financial support cannot ever be

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realised. If we want an inclusive, innovative, and economically resilient creative sector that impacts all sorts of people and industries, we must give the arts and specialist training the recognition, and crucially the investment, it deserves. I owe my own career to that investment.

Sometimes I marvel at how far this working-class Black boy from Birmingham has come.

It hasn't always been plain sailing for me. I've spoken publicly about the struggles I experienced with my mental health as a younger actor. Coming out of drama school and experiencing racism and harassment from audiences and the media was such a deep shock that it led me to a breakdown. Finding my path through that became a huge part of who I am, as an actor, mentor and human being.

I have dug into this part of my story, exploring issues of mental health and race through essays, television and documentaries including *Psychosis and Me* on the BBC, and my book, *Maybe I Don't Belong Here*. I am proud of this work and the impact it has had and continues to have. But I wouldn't wish those experiences on anyone, and I see funding and financial investment as a key part of enacting change and ensuring well-supported artists and communities.

Growing up, my siblings and I didn't see many Black faces on the TV, so the rare occasions we did were much celebrated. I remember one time, when my brothers and I were playing football in the playground near the back of our house: my sister came tearing out of the kitchen and down to the bottom of the garden to scream through the fence, 'there's a Black man on the telly!' We abandoned our game and ran hard, knowing that whoever it was wasn't likely to last long. More often than not, on these occasions, it turned out to be the fabulous ex-American football star Woody Strode, a wonderful actor known for playing Draba the Black Gladiator in *Spartacus* with incredible presence, who always died a noble death well before the credits rolled in service of the movie's white hero.

So perhaps the most important argument for Arts Council funding, as my story demonstrates, is the role it plays in making the arts genuinely accessible – both to audiences and aspiring artists. Without public investment, there is no pathway or access to the arts for people like me. And without people like me, there isn't fair representation, and the arts risk becoming the preserve of the privileged: those who can afford tickets, those who can afford training and unpaid experiences, those whose backgrounds are already represented on stage and screen. Funding creates pathways into the industry for young people from diverse backgrounds, helping to address the well-documented lack of socioeconomic and ethnic diversity across the creative professions.

When I was starting out on my journey, my parents thought a career in the creative industries would be impossible due to the evidence on their television screens every night. It was only the support of Arts Council funding that enabled me to not just get a foothold in the creative industries but to go on to play my own part in inspiring others. We need to make sure there is a range of people at the table, so we can share stories and experiences from all walks of life. So that art can be meaningful to the whole of society, not just a privileged few. So that people hoping to enter the industry can imagine their place in it. Because art doesn't exist in a vacuum. It speaks to who we are, where we come from, and how we understand the world around us.

As President of RADA, I now have the extraordinary pleasure of seeing the next generation of diverse young people begin their own individual and wonderful creative journeys, and imagining the impact they will have in the future. The role is deeply meaningful to me because it brings my story full circle: from a young man who wasn't sure he belonged, to someone now tasked with helping others see that they do. I'm there on the first day of the new intake each year, reliving my own first day. I get to stand on the stage and welcome the

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fresh-faced next generation, and talk one-on-one with new students. The excitement and energy I see in them as they gather at the start of their training – having come from all over the place, with all sorts of experiences and backgrounds, and with journeys ahead of them that will take them across the world on stage, on screen and in formats I haven't even imagined yet – truly dazzles me.

We live in an age when the value of culture is sometimes questioned, and budgets are constantly under pressure. But I believe that making the case for arts funding is not just worthwhile, it is urgent. The arts enrich lives, strengthen communities, drive economic growth, inspire the young and give voice to experiences that would otherwise go unheard. If we are serious about asking 'where do we go from here?', then we must look at those coming next and ensure they are not shut out before they even begin.

I think that's something worth investing in.

Dance Has Been My Salvation

Carlos Acosta, former Principal Guest Artist at The Royal Ballet and now Director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, talks about the twists and turns of a lifelong relationship with his art form: how he first came to dance; the sadnesses and joys of moving from on-stage to off-stage; and why he believes public support for art in general, and ballet in particular, is vital.

The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

On Finding his Feet

I was very poor as a child. We lived in a deprived area on the outskirts of Havana, far from the prosperity of the centre, and I was brought up in a complex environment: when I was nine, my father, who was a truck driver, went to jail after a traffic accident, and my mother had a brain haemorrhage. All of a sudden, I was in a situation where my fifteen-year-old sister was the one doing the cooking and the washing. It was very gloomy. And I was already heading towards an uncertain future. I was a restless kid: I was into a life of petty crime; I was stealing mangoes. But I was also into dancing.

Downstairs, we had a neighbour who had two sons in ballet school. And because I had started to make a name for

myself on the breakdancing scene, she recommended to my father that I should go, too: the three of us could go together on the bus. In the ballet school system they give you free meals, and an education – they really take care of you. My father said: ‘Free meals, my god!’ He forced me to go to an audition, against my will. He chose this art for me.

I had talent, but I was totally unreliable. Whenever there was a show, I would miss it. People would be saying: ‘The ballet isn’t complete; where is Carlos?!’ Well, Carlos was off somewhere full of mud and mango trees, doing whatever. I found ballet boring; I didn’t like it at all. After three years, they kicked me out, and after that I went from school to school until finally, when I was thirteen, I went to a boarding school in Pinar del Rio, and that was the turning point for me. While I was there, I saw the Ballet Nacional de Cuba for the first time. The dancers were athletes. I saw these men performing huge jumps, lifting the women with one hand, and I thought: That’s cool, I want to do all that. From that point on, I never looked back. I began to work really hard, and soon began to get the attention of teachers: they saw something in me; they would pick me out and choreograph things for me. And when there was a show in the school, I would dance. It started to make me feel good.

Then finally I managed to graduate. Graduation was held in the school that they’d kicked me out of in Havana. I was in really good shape at that point – they were very surprised – and I ended up with the highest score. The head of the National Ballet School [Ramona de Saá] saw me, and a year later, she selected me to go to Italy with her as part of a cultural exchange with the Turin Ballet. While I was there, a Romanian choreographer said to her: ‘That kid is very talented. Would you consider him for the Prix de Lausanne [the premier ballet competition for sixteen-to-nineteen year olds]?’, so she worked with me to prepare me for that. I just made it into the competition – I was the last one to get in out of 127 kids – but I won. And that was that.

On the Meaning of Dance

I found the winning ticket when I was given the opportunity to dance. It became my shelter; my refuge. It was joyful, but it was also a necessity, a means of survival, because of the challenges of my upbringing and my childhood – that's perhaps why my passion for it is so intense. When I'm performing, it's a way of saying: I exist; I have a place in the world. My relationship with my art form goes beyond something I just do: for me, personally, dance has been my salvation.

And it's different to other art forms, because it's all about the being. In other art forms, you can hide behind your instrument, but in dance, the instrument is the human body. When you read a book, you get to know the artist through the words, but there's still a wall between you; with music, you close your eyes and hear the artistry, and you don't need to be in the same room. But with dance, you have to come to a space to share it, and that's irreplaceable. In the world of AI, a lot of things are going to disappear, but never dance. That coming into a space and witnessing human energy and emotion, connectivity, through the body – the need for that will never go away. It's natural to us because we are pack animals, we're tribal. Everything for us is connecting and sharing, for the benefit of those who are coming to witness and enjoy.

On Stepping off the Stage

Ballet was my greatest friend; the only friend that would never let me down. Whenever everything was dark and I felt like I was lost, I could always dance; I could always go into a studio and listen to my body. Even now [ten years after his retirement from classical ballet in 2016] I have this sense of loss, and I feel like I'm not 100% complete. I retired in 2016, but every time

I see a chance to, I go back on stage. People say to me: 'Have you forgotten? Didn't you retire years ago?' I say: 'Yes I did, but I carry on trying – because for me, it's a necessity, it's how I lived.' In this time that I'm facing now, it's about everybody else: it's about the company, the dancers. My joy now is dancing through others – but for myself, I miss it. I miss it a lot.

On the Next Generation

I'm aware that I need to be careful how I advise young dancers, because their journey might be different from mine, and therefore, the passion and that necessity of dancing in the first place might not be as intense. It's unfair to try to get the same tenacity when you haven't had the kind of journey that I had. But in any group, you always have somebody who really wants it, who really lives by it. You can just see it. Then what you do as a director is give those people the opportunity to escalate and prove themselves. Those opportunities are essential. I had my own career because of them; because somebody said to me, 'You could be Romeo,' even though there'd never been a Black Romeo before [Acosta made history as the first Black dancer to perform the role of Romeo in the Royal Ballet's production of *Romeo and Juliet*]. Coming from Cuba, I had no idea how to behave like the son of a lord. But that person believed in me, and now I'm in the position to do the same for the young dancers I work with.

What I want most of all is to leave a tangible legacy. I feel, now, like a builder: building things from nowhere; bringing people, communities, and teams together to help dance and dancers to flourish. I formed my company, Acosta Danza, and then I formed an academy; ten years on we're still around, doing amazing work. And every one of the dancers in the company, now, came from the academy: we built these dancers 100%. I can remember them all when they were little kids,

DANCE HAS BEEN MY SALVATION

when they first came into my office – and now they're principal dancers. It's an amazing thing.

And some of them are so inspiring. There are times when I think, wow: it took me until I was 35 to be able to do what this guy is doing, and he's already there at sixteen – what a future! But of course, potential is just part of it; when you're dealing with human beings, there are so many uncertainties. You don't know if they're going to have an injury, or fall in love, or go on a different trajectory, or just get bored. At the end of the day, as the teacher, you can advise, support, but finally it all comes down to that individual and what they want to get. It's a personal quest. It's art.

On Bringing the Story of Black Sabbath to Birmingham Royal Ballet

I think everybody understands that ballet needs to proactively find ways to connect with and bring in new audiences, because otherwise it cannot survive. A ballet is one of the biggest shows on earth: as well as 60 or 70 dancers on stage, you have around 70 musicians in the orchestra, and then behind the scenes you have the crew, the costume designers, the makeup artists – it's an ecosystem. If you're in the audience, you might be sitting down and watching a single dancer on stage, but 300 people will have contributed to that experience. So it's expensive. We cannot live with an empty theatre.

But the great classical ballets like *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* are very much of the 19th century, and as life keeps moving forward, they recede further and further into the past. If you look at the core audience of the ballet world, it's shrinking, and there is not a replacement. What's it going to look like in the future? We need 20-year-olds and 30-year-olds to follow us – but they'd much rather go to the Arena, or do something that has more to do with technology, because that's the world that they embrace. This is where the danger is for us,

and that is why we need to present ballets like *Black Sabbath* [the groundbreaking 2023 collaboration between BRB and Birmingham's legendary heavy metal band], to bring people in and give them the opportunity to know who we are, with the intention that next, they'll be watching *The Nutcracker*. It's this kind of forward-thinking, cutting-edge repertory that brings people in, and keeps our ecosystem healthy. If we don't think that way, there's a danger we cease to be relevant.

It was a fantastic treat to create *Black Sabbath*. It's about a world that's completely dissimilar from the world of ballet – a working-class world, a heavy metal world. But it is spectacular, and ballet is spectacular. And Black Sabbath are essential to Birmingham. We took [the ballet] to Luxembourg, to Hamburg, to Rotterdam, to the Kennedy Center in Washington DC – and everywhere we went, we brought Birmingham with us. By delivering the work of two of the city's most important institutions – Black Sabbath and BRB – we were acting as ambassadors of the city. In the city itself, it attracted a lot of people that don't normally consume ballet. Our hope was that they would return, and I can tell you, there is evidence that that worked. Last year, we broke our ticket sales record. Boom. And this year we're doing even better. I think it has played a very important role in our ability to build new audiences.

On the Importance of Art in Troubled Times

We need art in the world. It breaks boundaries. When you go to see a work of art, it doesn't matter where you come from: you're united for that work of art. And that does something to you: seeing a Picasso painting, sharing a song, watching a ballet. I think in circumstances like we're facing now, we have to fight for art's place in the world, and what it does for humanity. The ability to create art, to communicate without words: it's the true expression that separates us from the animal kingdom.

DANCE HAS BEEN MY SALVATION

From the perspective of the dancer, it's salvation. Dance takes the mind away from hardship and hostility; it gives dancers the ability to just perform, to be. The artistry becomes a bubble: it allows you to forget for a moment; to put down your worries about life or money or where your food is going to come from. I always tell my dancers to value and treasure the work, and to take joy in what we all have, because it's a tremendous opportunity.

On the Money

There are many forms of dance, and many different types of company, and that's wonderful; that's diversity. But you cannot ask ballet to become something it is not. In modern dance, you can have a company of six dancers, and you can create magic, but in ballet, we can't – and if we try to do so, then we cease to be ballet. More and more, we have to make tough decisions: not going here, or not going there, or not putting on a particular ballet because of its high cost. But if we keep downscaling, there'll come a point where what we're doing isn't recognisable as ballet anymore. It will disappear, and we will all lose the chance to witness the greatest show on earth. It's a very gloomy, doomsday-like outcome, but that's what we're facing – and that's why our sector is fighting for support, and for a chance to survive. We have to ask ourselves: what is it going to be? What's important? Are we going to fight for the chance of the young people, those who have yet to be born, to experience ballet? Or not?

For us, we cannot charge higher and higher ticket prices, because if we do, nobody will be able to afford to come. So if we believe that art matters, that ballet matters, and we want to make it accessible for everybody, we need to invest in it. Government needs to invest in it. We need to protect the art.

... and on Why that Matters Here, More than Anywhere

One of the things that made me come to England in the first place was the art. I'm Cuban, and I think it's always good to bear in mind how people like myself, those from different countries, view the UK, and what makes us dream of coming here. At the age of eighteen, I came because I admired so much the English National Ballet, The Royal Ballet, Frederick Ashton's style, MacMillan's, Shakespeare, the metropolis that is London. I wanted to be part of it. The pinnacle of anybody's career is to come and train and make art here in the UK.

The UK is synonymous with art. For centuries, art here has been at a very, very high level, and the country's support of the arts has been an example to other nations. If we lose that – if we're no longer competitive – if we're no longer the place where people want to come to test their skills against the best in the world, I think we will all miss out on the tremendous opportunities this soft power brings.

Art is what we have to give to the globe. If politicians aren't looking at it that way, they're missing the point. It's what makes this country different; it's what sets it apart. If we allow our cultural sector to go into decline, we'll be poorer, and we'll be ordinary. And that would be a big mistake. I'd say: support *more* of the art because that's what will continue to set us apart. Just like it's always been.

The Arts Council Collection

A Personal History

*The artist and curator **Lubaina Himid** reflects on a four-decade relationship with the Arts Council Collection, from the moment one of her works was first acquired, to the challenge of curating a touring exhibition from its pieces. Along the way, she probes questions of representation, selection, and visibility – and argues that for the Collection to meet audiences’ needs, it must continue to grow.*

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ARTS Council Collection goes back nearly 40 years, to around 1988. A work of mine, *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* – a series of fifteen watercolours depicting the life of Toussaint Bréda, the enslaved man who led the 1791 Haitian Revolution – was acquired. The work resists singular heroism by reintroducing marginalised figures, most notably his wife, exposing gendered omissions embedded in historical narratives. This truly momentous moment in my career was undercut somewhat by the fact that the letter notifying me of the acquisition referred to the work as *Two Cent Overture*!

A man overlooked by history was reduced to a cheap tune by careless mistyping.

In 2003, an Arts Council Collection publication, *Acquisitions 1989-2002*, did not feature my *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, or my name in the list of artists in the collection. I was hurt and upset, and even had the bravery to ask for an

explanation from the author. Needless to say, this was not forthcoming.

In 2006, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Collection, the anniversary publication, *How to Improve the World: 60 years of British Art* (2006) did not feature my *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*. I was hurt and upset again, and even had the bravery to ask for an explanation from the author. Needless to say, this was not forthcoming either.

The work seemed, at the time, to have disappeared from the records – but of course it hadn't.

It had simply become one of the 1000 Arts Council Collection works out on loan.

The Arts Council Collection is one of the less well-known aspects of Arts Council England's work – but it's an aspect that matters deeply, and as the years pass, its significance grows and grows. Like the Arts Council itself, the Collection is 80 years old this year; it was set up in 1946 to purchase contemporary British art and share it widely rather than keeping it in a single museum. Today, it has around 8,500 acquisitions, by nearly 2,200 British artists.

I didn't know how the Collection acquired work when they bought *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* in 1988. I assumed that the curator of *Depicting History for Today*, the group exhibition for which I had made the series, asked the collection curators to visit the exhibition. I presumed that they often visited shows and artists' studios. I think I thought then that they were inclined to make fairly undemocratic decisions about what to acquire, based on who they knew and what they liked. It never occurred to me to find out more about the process because it seemed to me to be similar to that used by almost everyone working in the cultural sector at the end of the 20th century. I was wrong.

The Arts Council Collection doesn't simply buy what a curator personally likes, or what their contacts recommend. Acquisitions are made via formal curatorial processes, not

personal preference. Since the Collection was brought into the fold of the Southbank Centre in the 1980s, new advisors apply and are chosen to join the Collection committee (which decides whether to acquire work) every two years. Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, purchasers included John Lyons, Susan Hiller, Shirazeh Houshiary, Adrian Searle, Greg Hilty, Sacha Craddock, Cornelia Parker and Mark Sealy. I didn't realise until many years after the fact that in 1987 and 1988, when *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* was selected, the groundbreaking British Afro-Caribbean artist and educator Sonia Boyce was a member of the advisory committee. In those years, the committee also selected work by Veronica Ryan and Sutapa Biswas for acquisition, and in doing so, changed British art history for ever.

Once works have been acquired by the Collection, they are then conserved, catalogued and loaned, for free or at low cost, to museums, galleries, universities and touring exhibitions across the UK, and occasionally abroad. A dedicated team manages acquisitions, documentation and condition reporting, arranging short-term loans for exhibitions and longer-term placements so pieces can be seen in a range of contexts. While ownership remains with the Arts Council, the practical stewardship has been managed by Southbank Centre since 1986 as they work with venues around the UK and internationally to display the work.

The art from the Collection spreads its wings in surprising directions. In 2015, when my mother, aged 87, was very ill, I accompanied her on regular visits to the outpatients facility at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London. Our days were brightened each time we saw my *Toussaint* series on the walls outside the Children's Ward. The work, on loan from the Collection, was hung at a height especially designed for eight-year-olds.

Two of my friends, who at the time didn't know each other, also found comfort in the series moments after they had

experienced the deaths of their elderly fathers at Chelsea and Westminster. They talked to me about seeing children being delighted by my painted story of Toussaint and his wife, planning the future of their coffee crop in the days before the Haitian War of Independence.

And my relationship with the Arts Council Collection didn't stop there. In 2017, the Walker Arts Gallery in Liverpool invited me to display several figures from my 2004 installation, *Naming the Money* (which had been acquired some years before by Liverpool Museums). It was hugely important for me to work on this project, in which the painted cut-out people were shown amongst the Walker's vast collection of paintings and sculptures, furniture and ceramics.

To coincide with that opportunity, I was invited to create a parallel exhibition, *Meticulous Observations*, for one of the Walker's small galleries, using works from the Collection. I saw this as a brilliant chance to select and highlight works made by women acquired by the Arts Council Collection, in which the artists revealed some kind of quiet, or at least very private, inner conversations detailing their personal observations through the prism of the everyday.

I loved the idea of these two collections in dialogue: not competing with one another, but giving different perspectives on what collecting and displaying can be.

The starting point for my project was a sculpture of Henry Longfellow by Edmonia Lewis, from the Liverpool Museums Collection. I placed it in close proximity to a punch bowl celebrating the Africa Trade. Then in the same space I wanted to see what happened when Claudette Johnson's large scale yet somehow intimate pastel drawings of her close friends were located in the same space as work by Bridget Riley. What did the colour do? How would an oil painting of cutlery called *Silverware* (1983) by Lisa Milroy talk to my *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, which leans into domestic intimacy while speaking of a broader worldview? What had *Birdbox* by

Avis Newman to say – via a photograph by Tacita Dean named *Wasp* (*Bug series*) – to the work *Green Beak* by Alison Wilding?

And later in 2017, a second artwork of mine was acquired by the Arts Council Collection, nearly 30 years after the first. *Cotton.Com* (2002) is a multi-component piece about the Manchester cotton workers direct involvement in the abolition of the worldwide trade in enslaved Africans. It consists of 85 small paintings of African and European patterns in black and white acrylic on linen. It is accompanied by a long thin brass plaque with the words – *He said I looked like a painting by Murillo as I carried water for the hoe gang just because I balanced a bucket on my head*. This piece has been out on loan several times during the past nine years, encountering new audiences as a result of its place in the Collection.

I had always wanted to curate a really substantial Arts Council Collection touring exhibition, and in 2021, I was invited by the then-director, Deborah Smith, to do just that. The obvious starting point for me was to think about a project showing the range of work by Black British artists that had been acquired over the previous 35 years, from the point when my own work had first entered the Collection. This was scuppered from the off, though, because so many of the pieces I would have chosen were either out on loan or promised during the period my project was due to tour – leading me to conclude that there aren't really enough works to meet the needs of the huge variety of organisations who would like to show them.

With that option off the table, Beth Hughes (the collection curator assigned to the onerous task of actually making my project happen) and I embarked on a series of conversations about our ideas that would span the following three years. I have always been interested in the range and experimental nature of the creative practices devised by women who are artists, and finally we decided to investigate how those artists in the collection had tackled their relationships to the concept of the city.

The exhibition we created, and its accompanying

programme, was called *Found Cities, Lost Objects*.

We chose works from the Collection, then contextualised them with work from the permanent collections of the touring venues. Some places had little history of collecting work by women, and therefore didn't have much to offer, while others had been developing their collections in this way for decades. We borrowed from several collections and archives, making connections between the art in the galleries and the histories of women having an impact on the understanding of what a city can be.

A couple of venues disagreed with our choices of artists from the Arts Council Collection and wanted more control. One wanted us to change the title of the show; another insisted on charging an entrance fee and at the same time wanted to show examples of my work, which was never going to happen! At least three, however, absolutely embraced the opportunity to be part of something radical and connecting, genuinely leaning into this massive project and its far-reaching ideals.

It also became increasingly important to us to make clear that we felt that women artists living and working in the cities on the tour needed an opportunity to be seen; to become a part of the project and not simply passive consumers of the art on display. As a result, the venues we worked with found themselves connecting with artists living and working on their doorsteps. We devised a mini-project which was, in a sense, an open call inviting artists to propose ideas for paper and digital posters to be displayed across the city, directly relating to their experience in the place.

Unfortunately, there was never the funding available for a *Found Cities, Lost Objects* catalogue, or for the print portfolio we wanted to make to celebrate the artists we had commissioned for the poster project. So sadly, our project may disappear from the official records in much the same way my series, initially, vanished from sight. Luckily, though, artists can always be relied upon to take advantage of connections and exposure outside the gates of the establishment.

Finding Every Child

Culture, Childhood And The Future Of Arts Education

Jacqui O'Hanlon, *Deputy Executive Director and Director of Creative Learning at the Royal Shakespeare Company, draws on historical case studies, a growing evidence base, and her own experiences to argue that access to high-quality arts and cultural education should be a universal entitlement, not a matter of chance.*

‘Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.’¹

ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN LUCKY enough to hear the brilliant Geoff Barton² speak is likely to have heard him cite this quote from author and theorist Neil Postman’s *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Children, it points out, represent our legacy: they bear our values, actions, and hopes into a future we will not personally experience. It’s always sobering to hear. And it tends to make us reflect on the messages we ourselves have brought into our present – as adults shaped by our own childhood experiences.

Personal stories often define professional ones. Mine is like many of the era I was born in – brought up in a working-class household by parents who left school at fourteen with no qualifications. Theatre and other arts experiences weren’t part

of my childhood, until the arrival of an English teacher – Miss Higgins – who introduced drama to the curriculum. I came to life in those lessons in a way I simply hadn't in any other subjects. It was pure chance that Miss Higgins happened to take a job in my school, at the point when I was there. But that chance set me on a path to a career – in fact, a whole life – I couldn't otherwise have imagined.

Over 40 years on from that encounter with Miss Higgins, I find it strange to talk about the importance of culture in the classroom: not because it isn't essential for human thriving (it is) but because, incredibly, we are still having to make the case for it. Whether or not you have access to arts subjects and experiences at school remains a matter of chance, dependant on the coin flip of where you live and which school you go to. How can that be? How is it that in 2026 we have still not found a universal system of opportunity that ensures every child, regardless of background, can encounter the arts, and can fulfil their potential?

We owe it to ourselves, and to the children who will carry our legacy into the future, to change that – so that, by 2106, a cultural education is no longer a matter of chance. But in looking ahead to the next 80 years, we should also look back at the past 80 to test what, if anything, has shifted in our understanding of the case for culture in the classroom.

The Past

*'Our capacity to interrogate the present with any degree of wisdom or any likelihood of creating a more fulfilling future rests on our knowledge and engagement with the past.'*³

Looking back to 1946, when the Arts Council of Great Britain (which would later become Arts Council England) was born, it's impossible to say definitively what role the arts played in schools across the UK. No data survives (if it ever existed) on the numbers of young people with access to arts subjects or

what kinds of experiences were on offer. (We should note that, 80 years on, things aren't much better: we still lack many of the basic data sets we need to give us this information, particularly for primary education.) But, in addition to individual stories, there do exist some tantalising examples of schools making extraordinary commitments to the arts, and building whole-school curricula around them.

It's therefore possible to construct micro-histories of schools that, for shorter or longer periods of time (and usually under the influence of enlightened leadership), developed radical new visions of how the arts and humanities could be embedded in school life. These micro-histories offer us (with thanks to Professor Michael Fielding of University College London) 'critical case studies of possibilities'.⁴

One such study I find myself returning to again and again (after first being introduced to it by Professor Ian Grosvenor from the University of Birmingham) is the story of Steward Street Primary School in Lozells, a working-class area in the heart of Birmingham. The Steward Street 'experiment' (as defined by Grosvenor and Catherine Burke) took place in the 1940s and 1950s. Over a fifteen-year period, two consecutive headteachers placed creative arts at the centre of the school's curriculum – and in doing so, turned it into a point of reference for all those who believed in the transformative power of the arts in education.⁵ The school's visitor book reveals that it played host to luminaries such as Rudolph von Laban (a Hungarian dance artist and movement theorist whose work still influences contemporary dance studios and rehearsal rooms), as well as a host of international researchers and education officers. In 1941, there were seven official visits to the school to observe its approach; by 1948 this had shot up to 247.

In 1949, the Ministry of Education published 60,000 copies of a pamphlet written by the then-headteacher, Arthur Stone. Stone's belief was that children are inherently creative

and should be encouraged to paint, build, make and dance – a highly unusual philosophy for the headteacher of an inner-city school full of children from working-class families who were likely to be heading to work in one of the many factories that dominated the Steward Street skyline. *Story of a School: A Headmaster's Experiences with Children Aged Seven to Eleven* gives a detailed account of the kind of arts-based curriculum he and his staff were leading.

Stone was succeeded in 1945 by Ken Scott. Scott built on his predecessor's legacy, noting on his arrival at the school that '[the children's] academic standards were "above average" in most subjects,' and choosing to capitalise on this by using the energy of arts-based learning to teach all subjects. He announced the abolition of 'all forms of punishment' in the school, and 'all comparisons of individuals by class lists of examination results and the like were done away with, since they encouraged feelings of superiority in some and inferiority in others.' For the same reason 'no Artwork was exhibited until at least six months after its execution'. Unusually for the time, Scott also introduced provision for pupils with special educational needs. Contemporary reports show that academic achievement increased under this system, and pupils' efforts appeared to intensify (they wrote booklets of stories, gave lectures, held debates, and contributed to school policy through class councils). As Burke and Grosvenor state, 'Steward Street's "story" can offer "signs" of how radical educational experiments could be possible today.' But the experiment did not continue once Scott moved on from the school. 'It is likely' Grosvenor and Burke note, 'that, like other experiments located in English elementary schools, the prioritisation of the arts over the basics could not withstand the introduction of the examination at 11+ for selection to secondary schools.'

(The question I'm left with, by the way, is: what happened to the Steward Street children as they grew into adults? Were there differences in their attitudes, aptitudes and life choices

compared with their peers who didn't have those experiences? Before it's too late, we need an intensive research study to find the remaining pupils of Steward Street and discover more about their adult lives. That's a PhD begging to be written.)

Individual cases of enlightened leadership and commitment to the arts were brought together in a landmark 1982 publication from the Gulbenkian Foundation: *The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practice and Provision*. The report was the culmination of a four-year inquiry into the state of the arts in schools in England and Wales. Its lead author, Ken Robinson (later knighted for his services to education), was just beginning a distinguished career championing the value of the arts in education nationally and internationally. The report inspired many professional arts organisations to engage with the education sector for the first time, and paved the way for the arts to be included in England's first National Curriculum in 1988.

That triumph was, unfortunately, short-lived. Ofsted and the school inspections process began in 1992, school league tables were introduced in the same year, and the breadth and quality of local authority arts services (which had to be purchased by schools, who were now the budget holders/commissioners) was gradually eroded. After a moment when it looked as if access to the arts in education might become a given, we returned to a situation in which the level and quality of arts provision was left once again to chance.

But the news wasn't all bad. The tug-of-war over the arts in education coincided with the period when Arts Council England committed itself to more explicit involvement with children and young people, issuing its first policy statement on education in 1982. This was the green shoot that grew over time into a wide range of Arts Council interventions in cultural education, including the launch of Creative Partnerships (a programme designed to put creativity at the heart of school life) in 2002;⁶ the requirement for National Portfolio Organisations to deliver education and learning commitments;

and more recently the advent of Bridge organisations,⁷ and the creation of Music Education Hubs⁸ and Local Cultural Education Partnerships.⁹

So what can we learn from all this history? I'm struck by the fact that the same challenges continually assert themselves and we haven't yet found an answer to them. Take, for example, this excerpt from the 1943 White Paper on Educational Reconstruction: 'Instead of the junior schools performing their proper and highly important function of fostering the potentialities of children at an age when their minds are nimble and receptive, their curiosity strong, their imagination fertile and their spirits high, *the curriculum is too often cramped and distorted by over-emphasis on examination subjects...*'¹⁰ We might use different words today, but we see the same things being written, about both primary and secondary school curricula.

And while, today, we also have case studies of possibilities – stories of individual school leaders who create arts-rich learning environments – what we still fundamentally lack is universal integration of the principle of an arts-rich education for every child.

The Present

*'Subjects we have always seen as culturally important will increasingly become the preserve of private schools because state schools can't afford to teach them.'*¹¹

In 2023, a little over 40 years on from the original Gulbenkian *Arts in Schools* report, the Gulbenkian Foundation and A New Direction published a new version, reviewing what had changed, what had stayed the same. and what had declined.¹² The updated report had three key findings:

Arts subjects and experiences have an evidenced role in contributing to improving outcomes for children and young people, providing them with skills for life and skills for work.

Despite all that we know about the value of arts subjects for children and young people, there is a lack of value ascribed to the arts within the state education system in England.

Many of the current problems identified in the report are as much about the wider context in which learning takes place as about the specific challenges for the arts in schools, and there are now widespread calls for education system change.

When the updated report was published, I spent time talking with Sally Bacon and Derri Burdon, co-chairs of the Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA), about the impact of arts subjects and experiences on learning outcomes for children and young people. This question, which has become something of a hobby horse of mine, probably stems from a conversation I had with a man I tremendously admire: Brian Anderson, the now-retired headteacher of Springhead Primary School in Stoke on Trent. He told me very simply that if an arts education programme wasn't making a difference to children's learning, he couldn't justify doing it. When I first started working at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) more than twenty years ago, we couldn't say what difference exploring Shakespeare's plays through embodied, theatre-based forms of learning made to outcomes for children and young people. We can now. Thanks in part to Brian's challenge, we have used randomised control trials and longitudinal studies to help us understand the value, impact and relevance of Shakespeare's work to children, from nursery age to sixth form. Studies consistently show improvements in children's literacy, particularly their speaking and writing; they write more, use more complex sentences, and *want* to write – especially those who have previously been reluctant writers. And children's academic self-concept improves, too: when a child feels confident about Shakespeare's work, they feel differently about what they can achieve.

In terms of the wider evidence base about the differences that arts subjects and experiences make to learning outcomes

for children, the RSC and the CLA co-commissioned three Rapid Evidence Reviews (RERs) in Dance, Music and Drama¹³ to sit alongside an existing review of Art, Craft and Design which had been undertaken by Professor Pat Thomson. Pat also oversaw the writing of the three new RERs. We published the findings in 2026. Collectively, the four RERs provide a substantial evidence base. They represent a total of 1,176 studies spanning different methodologies, contexts, age groups, and geographic locations, though primarily focused on English-language research from the US and UK.

Art, Craft and Design	463 studies (2000–2021)
Dance	71 studies (2004–2024)
Drama	351 studies (2004–2024)
Music	291 studies (2004–2024)

Aggregating the findings across all four RERs, we see the following impacts consistently reported:

Agency and personal development were the most significant benefits. Agency is a key attribute for entry into adult life. We need to know we have the agency to make changes – that we aren’t ‘done to’ – that we have a voice and can make active choices that in turn make a difference to our lives and the communities or workplaces we are part of. Agency is also an essential component of wellbeing.

Wellbeing – all four RERs document substantial health and wellbeing benefits, spanning both physical and mental health dimensions.

Collaboration, Communication and Empathy – there is strong evidence that all four art forms powerfully foster social connections and break down barriers. These kinds of connections relate to basic needs for human happiness and belonging.

Cognition and Interpretation – remarkably consistent cognitive benefits were reported across all art forms, with enhanced concentration, memory, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking.

Creativity – expressive arts subjects and experiences develop creative problem-solving, imagination, and analytical thinking skills that are valuable across all areas of learning and life.

I'm also struck by the fact that in 2020, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published a Rapid Evidence Review led by Professor Daisy Fancourt into the relationship of the arts to health and wellbeing.¹⁴ The results, graded for reliability, included strong A-grade evidence for the arts in supporting social cohesion, and strong B-grade evidence for the arts in supporting wellbeing in children and young people. A and B grade evidence is considered good enough to inform policy decisions. As far as I'm aware, no new policies have yet emerged from this research.

I have spent hours – probably weeks – of my life in discussion about the intrinsic versus instrumental value of the arts. Some colleagues in the sector feel reticent about ascribing outcomes and measurement tools to arts subjects and experiences on the basis that they are of intrinsic value and to measure them is reductive. Although I respect that point of view, I don't agree with it. I believe in the intrinsic value of the arts, but I also believe you have to experience them first to understand that value. Many people haven't had that experience – which means, in practice, that we need to articulate their value in other ways first. If we can't describe to a headteacher what contribution arts subjects and experiences will make to the children in their school, and if we can't evidence that, why should they believe us? Why should their families?

It was on this basis that Sally and Derri invited me to chair an Evidence and Value Narrative Group for the CLA. The group consisted of colleagues from the cultural, education and higher education sectors, including Professor Pat Thomson from the University of Nottingham who has led some of the most significant international studies into the place and value of the arts in education. Our job was to craft a value narrative

about expressive arts subjects and experiences, supported by research and evidence. We started our work in September 2023. I naively imagined we'd crack it in two or three meetings; I thought we'd all easily agree on the kind of language needed to describe the value of arts experiences. I was wrong. Some eighteen months later, we finally had a draft value narrative and what had emerged as a Capabilities Framework. It took that long to debate, disagree with and challenge each other, and ultimately to wrangle the different perspectives that colleagues brought into a coherent and compelling evidenced narrative.

In our deliberations over that eighteen-month period, we kept coming back to the example of sport. The sports sector is incredibly good at articulating the importance and benefits of sport in terms of wellbeing, enjoyment and connection. The arts sector is less good at doing that because we don't have a shared language to describe the difference experiencing arts and culture can make – in the classroom or outside of it. The Capabilities Framework which came out of our work is built around *three pillars* that describe the capabilities which expressive arts subjects and experiences develop: Being, Becoming and Belonging; Relating; and Critical and Creative thinking. These in turn encompass *seven capabilities* that have personal benefits for the child, and which also result in societal benefits: agency and wellbeing, communication, empathy and collaboration, and creativity and interpretation. We hope the Framework can provide that shared language.

The Future

'Human resources are like natural resources... you have to go looking for them... you have to create the circumstances where they show themselves.' Sir Ken Robinson

This essay is asking why we need culture in classrooms. Through a performing arts lens, I've focused on the

overwhelming, irrefutable evidence of the difference that accessing the arts and culture make to a child. On the question of whether arts and culture belong in the classroom, there is no longer any case to answer. What we need to ask ourselves is: where do we go from here?

I believe that we must now put in place ideas for a future that will see every young person in every hamlet, village, town and city able to make, shape and participate in the arts where they live. And I believe we must ensure that those experiences are of the highest quality in terms of process and practitioners. This isn't about what kind of art form or even what kind of art children have access to. It is about the *necessity* of that provision being of the *best possible quality* – in terms of safeguarding, representation, pedagogy, inclusion, access and artistry.

In the very near future there will be a new National Centre for Arts and Music Education. We have also recently had the results of a long-awaited Curriculum and Assessment Review, and government responses emphasising the role of arts and culture in education and in developing young people who feel they belong and have the conditions they need to thrive. There are reasons to be cheerful. But for myself, as I look to the future, I hope to see the following things happen:

That the arts and cultural sector can focus on learning and improving its work with schools and young people, as opposed to proving, once again, the things we already know.

That we have an arts education evidence hub that contains the best quality research from the past twenty years to ensure the narrative about the value of arts subjects and experiences is understood, robustly evidenced and confidently articulated.

That policy-making is empowered by robust data telling us which children in which schools are getting access to which kinds of experiences (from early years to Year 13). That these datasets then shape decisions made by the National Centre for Arts and Music Education to ensure the areas of the country with least access are prioritised and supported. (On this point, I was struck by someone telling me recently that the sports

sector has access to datasets which can tell them, for example, how many young people in schools in a particular region or town took a particular sport in any given period. Wow.)

That we have an arts policy (with a National Centre for Arts and Music Education) which addresses both universal *and* targeted provision. This has to be the basis of national and regional policymaking; it's been the basis of our strategic decision-making at the RSC. If we only focus on universal provision, we will always serve the same people.

The psychologist Donald Woods Winnicott said: 'It's a joy to be hidden, but it's a disaster not to be found.' This work is about finding children: about children discovering their own potential; and the adults in their lives recognising different possibilities for them.

For some children – and I was one of them – arts subjects and experiences offer them access to their potential in a way that simply does not happen via any other means. Urgent questions remain about how we secure an arts-rich education as a core entitlement for all children – but one thing is clear: that entitlement should not and must not depend on the chance recruitment of a Mr Stone, or a Mr Scott, or a Miss Higgins – no matter how wonderful and impactful those people might be. It should be made available to every child in this country on the grounds of the essential role the arts play in human thriving and human happiness. It should happen because we have systems of opportunity in place in every school that enable every child to realise their potential: to find out who they are now and who they want to become.

Notes

1. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*
2. Geoff Barton: former General Secretary of Association of School and College Leaders; Chair of the Oracy Commission; Chair of IPPR inclusion taskforce

3. Fielding, Michael. 'Putting hands around the flame: reclaiming the radical tradition in state education.' *Forum*. vol. 47, no. 2, 2005, pp. 61–69.
4. Fielding 2005
5. Burke, Catherine, and Ian Grosvenor. 'The Steward Street School Experiment: A Critical Case Study of Possibilities.' *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 148–65.
6. Creative Partnerships was the UK government's flagship creative learning programme, established in 2002 and which ran to 2011.
7. Ten Bridge Organisations operated through ACE funding 2012 – 2023, tasked with connecting the cultural sector (arts organisations, museums, libraries) with the education sector (schools, youth groups) to improve arts and cultural opportunities for children and young people.
8. Music Hubs: partnerships that support, deliver and enable high quality music education for children and young people within a local area.
9. Local Cultural Education Partnerships: place-based collaborations connecting schools, arts organisations, and community partners to provide high-quality creative opportunities for young people.
10. Burke, Catherine, and Ian Grosvenor. 'The Steward Street School Experiment: A Critical Case Study of Possibilities.' *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 148–65.
11. Geoff Barton: *The Arts in Schools* report 2023.
12. *The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future: A New Direction*
13. The Dance, Drama and Music Reviews will be published in 2026 and will sit alongside an existing *Rapid Evidence Review of Art, Craft and Design* (published in 2022).
14. *Evidence Summary for policy: The role of arts in improving health and wellbeing* – GOV.UK

What is Art?

Simon Armitage

Well, on the way from Tan Toft to Cloverstones
the lane steers left then kinks right
then sort of summersaults into a hollow
before lipping over the plateau
and rolling towards the coast.
There's no glacial erratic to skirt around
and no camber, contour or pitch
to navigate, as far as I know. Instead,
the swerves, bends and dips
serve up a view of the hillside –
pinkish bluffs edged with squiggly hawthorn,
then show off the river below –
flowing tinsel draped in the valley bottom,
clouds drifting upstream,
before the big reveal of estuary, bay,
horizon, the edge of day.

The new road gets there in half the time,
A to B more or less, a velvet surface,
the destination always in sight up ahead.
But the mind shimmies and veers
and there isn't a right angle, level plane
or straight line to our being.
No Cloverstones either, or Tan Toft,
just the song and shape of their names
and the made up lane between them,
the universe overhanging the highest ridge
on the hill, a single cormorant
longboating down to the shore,
sky and ocean fused by a molten dusk or dawn –
the golden unknown.

PLACES



This Is England

The Stories We Tell About Ourselves And Why They Matter

*From football stadiums to theatre stages, the stories a country tells help shape how it understands its past, present and future. Writer and playwright **James Graham** reflects on identity, memory and the vital role of publicly-funded culture in helping communities find their place within a shared national narrative.*

IT SHOULDN'T FEEL LIKE A contentious image: a large cross of St George – England's national flag – being unfurled and laid out on a raked stage.

But at that time, in that place, and in this way, you could feel one of those unique, intake-of-breath moments that happen sometimes in the theatre.

The place in question was the Nottingham Theatre Royal in the East Midlands; one of my local theatres, growing up. The play – forgive the self-aggrandisement – was my own play, *Dear England*, about Gareth Southgate's tenure as England men's football manager: the first production in the country to receive funding through Arts Council England's Incentivising Touring scheme, designed to support large-scale work to get out on the road. And the time was the opening night of the play's nationwide tour, in September 2025.

The England flag – seen by some as a legitimate expression of national pride, and others as an intimidating rebuke to

perceived liberal immigration policies – had long been fought over in the culture wars that had come to dominate our discourse. But its controversy intensified after a guerrilla campaign to hang St George's Crosses on lampposts was waged across England's towns and cities during the summer of 2025.

The flag – as you would expect, in a show about Southgate's quest to revitalise the national game – featured heavily throughout *Dear England* in its initial run at the National Theatre and in the West End in 2023 and 2024. But in the course of a year, it had become a toxic hot potato. Discussions took place on stage and off about how to handle the passionate reactions the scene and the symbol might provoke when the actor playing Gareth simply asks, 'What is this?'

'These things can be emotive, and complicated,' he says. 'We know that. So let's uncomplicate it. What do you think of as the place you come from, or *want* it to be?'

And this is what I love about theatre. Its superpowers have always been nuance and empathy, even when the world around it is reductive, polarising and unkind. Theatres are story factories which offer, within our communities and nationwide, a lens through which we can see ourselves and our lives, and feel our lives seen and heard.

But I can take little credit for the healing capacity of the scene which (on this night, and on a tour which managed to draw in non-traditional theatregoing audiences and thousands of young people seeing a play for the first time) felt entirely uncontroversial and even humorous in its execution by the cast. That capacity is rooted in the Southgate project itself.

When Gareth Southgate took on the role of England manager, just months after the divisive Brexit referendum which had done – and would continue to do – so much to challenge social cohesion, he was taking charge of a team that had fallen to new lows, in terms both of its results and its connection with fans. His response to these circumstances was to state explicitly to his squad that he wanted 'England to write itself a new story'.

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Gareth recognised that, although his young players had a clear sense of their club identities (Spurs, Arsenal, Man City, Liverpool), they had little or no connection to the idea of ‘England’ when they put on their Three Lions shirts. As a result, they were not united as a team. No one had asked them what they thought England *was*: its history, its rituals, its character. All they had was the pressure of a bygone era – the intimidating idea of this country as the ‘home of the sport’ – and the impossible expectations that came with that.

It took a shy England manager to recognise that sport, like theatre, serves as more than just a distraction in the busy rhythm of our lives; that it can also be used as a vessel to interrogate and understand ourselves better. That these big moments, in stadiums and on stages, can become markers in our ongoing island narrative.

‘All the world’s a stage,’ Shakespeare said. ‘And all the men and women merely players.’ ‘I tell *my* players,’ Southgate wrote, in his remarkable letter to the country in 2021, ‘that what they are a part of, what we are all a part of, is an experience that lasts in the collective consciousness of our country.’

I’ve long believed that contributing to this collective consciousness, as well as encouraging and enabling everyone else to contribute something creative, is as much the role of any playwright as it is a football manager. And it is, I believe, the role of Arts Council England, too.

That opening night of the *Dear England* tour in my own hometown of Nottingham was one of enormous personal significance. Growing up in the north of the county in a former pit village, during a period of mass de-industrialisation and the social deprivation that followed, culture and art were far from widely available.

It was through my comprehensive school and some passionate drama teachers that I first got a taste of the visceral power of live theatre.

I remember when I was sixteen my mum took me and my

twin sister down into the city to see a production of *Macbeth* on the stage *Dear England* was eventually performed on, because it was on our school syllabus. It was my first ever experience of live professional Shakespeare: a tour from Bristol Old Vic, the first regional theatre in Britain to be granted direct funding from the Arts Council (or, to be precise, from its brief forerunner, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art), in 1946. It starred Pete Postlethwaite, and I found it mesmerising.

Later that summer, I applied for work experience in the same theatre, and years down the line, when I came back from studying drama for my degree, I became its Stage Door Keeper. One of my jobs was to lock up the building at midnight, and I would sometimes allow myself a moment to sit on the empty stage of this great, Victorian, green-and-gilt palace, imagining all the shows that had passed through, and maybe even hoping to create my own work there one day.

Naff sentiment aside, I do want to recognise and acknowledge the role that our unique, publicly funded cultural sector – whose 80-year history is being marked this year – has played in my own development as an artist from an unlikely background. In the 1960s, the very first Arts Minister, Jennie Lee, described art and culture as public goods, which should be available to ‘everyone, everywhere’. But this mission didn’t begin with her: it was, in fact, launched by someone less likely, on the face of it, to become the nation’s preeminent storyteller than even a football manager.

It began with an economist.

John Maynard Keynes drove the foundation of the Arts Council, drafting its Royal Charter and securing funding for it to invest in the arts from government, before his death in 1946. And it has always given me great personal delight – not to mention political ammunition, whenever one finds oneself having to defend the notion of a subsidised arts sector – to note that the 20th century’s most impactful economist saw no contradiction between fiscal discipline and state investment in

culture for its citizens' long-term happiness and wellbeing.

As Keynes stated at the Arts Council's inception, its task was 'to carry music, drama and pictures to places which would otherwise be cut off from all contact with the masterpieces of happier days and times: to air-raid shelters, to war-time hostels, to factories, to mining villages.' And this son of a mining village is certainly able to attest to its benefit.

The Arts Council's original aim, 80 years ago, was 'full access to culture for all citizens'. How close any of us are to succeeding in that aspiration ebbs and flows through time, but it's an aspiration that remains, eight decades on, worth fighting for: not only to provide the 'enjoyment' that culture and entertainment self-evidently offer, but to give a voice to communities; to support them to write themselves into our shared national story.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the opportunity for this revolution in art and its role in our national life was born out of the ashes of the Second World War, when all eyes turned to the new country that could be built in the aftermath of such destruction. The country was in search of a post-war consensus that could knit us all together, and art had to play its part. New stories were needed, for a 'New Jerusalem', in England's green and pleasant land...

London's Southbank, now home to the National Theatre and the Southbank Centre, was carved out of the bombed-out rubble that the conflict had left behind: the Festival of Britain launched there in 1951, with the Royal Festival Hall (the first permanent structure of the Southbank Centre) built to accommodate it. Both were funded by the Arts Council. But the Arts Council also funded events and commemorations across the country. My local leisure centre, the 'Festival Hall' in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, was built and named after this national moment of art-fuelled optimism, and it remains a rare hub within the community. It's the place where I played table tennis and badminton, badly – but also where I took part in a talent contest with school friends, performing for the

community in a self-produced version of Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*, and winning the prize that began to convince me I might be able to forge a path in the exotic, far-away world of theatre and show business.

I had to wait until the age of 21 to see my first ever piece of 'new writing' in the capital: *Fallout* by Roy Williams at the Royal Court Theatre; an unflinching look at gang violence and loyalty after the murder of a young Black British lad. I'd never seen anything like it – theatre that was aggressively modern; a searing reflection of a specific community from an authentic voice within it.

My first visit to the National Theatre followed soon after, this time to see David Hare's *The Permanent Way*, which turned the privatisation of the railways into a sweeping and poetic analogy for a wider decline in British values. It was another lesson, for me, in theatre's power to mark national inflection points, good and bad; and in the way live theatre allows us to make collective sense of those inflection points in the company of thousands of other members of our community. The importance of political provocations; the power of proximity.

I witnessed this happen on a massive scale during Hull's tenure as the UK's City of Culture (also ACE-supported) in 2017; I studied drama at the University of Hull, and was excited to come back and create work for the yearlong festival. Such events, like football tournaments or even the Olympics, can be viewed simply as opportunities to crassly 'sell' your area on the national or international stage, in order to increase tourism (which is certainly one of the outcomes: Hull saw nearly a 15% increase in visitors, with five million extra people coming to the city as a result of 'the culture', as locals called it). But the power and the positive effect of the City of Culture wasn't merely an exercise in using arts investment to make things look pretty for outsiders. It was yet another example of how storytelling can empower a place, by giving its people a voice, and the tools for exploration: of legacy, of

traumas, of failings, and of hopes. Work produced in Hull that year covered everything from the human cost of the collapse of the fishing industry, to Hull's role in the slave trade, to the impacts of environmental change on a coastal city, to the somewhat farcical part the city played in the English Civil War.

A monitoring and evaluation team strove to quantify and measure some of the impacts of 'the culture' on the people of Hull, throughout the year and beyond, and the results are testimony to the power of an honest, locally-focused, grassroots programme of work. Three out of four residents felt an increased sense of pride in place. Self-esteem went up markedly among young people. And even people's belief in 'magic', which was tested as a tongue-in-cheek outlier question, increased throughout the course of the year. There's no concrete understanding of how those responding were defining 'magic', but as a general belief that something wonderful can be conjured from surprising places, it seems a pretty apt – if unscientific – definition of art to me.

My own key memory from that time was standing in Queen Victoria Square in the heart of the city on a cold January night, for the opening event. A video installation that covered 100 years of the city's history – from the maritime legacy to the explosive bombing during the Blitz – was projected onto the buildings around the square. An elderly man standing next to me said, with some emotion in his voice, 'We just don't normally get this sort of thing round here...' To have the story of your home told back to you, and for you to be invited to participate in its telling, is a profoundly moving experience.

342,000 locals made the trip into the centre of Hull during that opening event. For the local caf  s, bars, pubs and restaurants, it was a real-world example of what Keynes identified as the multiplier effect, when it comes to investment in the arts. And for everyone there, the experience of physical proximity felt like a revitalisation, amid the wider loneliness and isolation of our atomised digital age.

For my own community back in Nottinghamshire, the story is coming full circle too.

A decade ago, a report identified my constituency of Ashfield as ranking 647th out of the country's 650 constituencies in terms of access to art and culture. The wider East Midlands, meanwhile – as well as being at the epicentre of the combustible political mood that was identified earlier, in the market towns and villages of the so-called Red Wall – has traditionally been bottom of every table when it comes to investment, public or private.

That trend is now, thankfully, being reversed. In July 2024, the Arts Council invested £1m – the largest grant of its kind locally – in Ashfield Creates, a three-year Place Partnership programme designed to transform access to, and participation in, the arts. It's a very Keynesian intervention into the *laissez faire* model of commercial investment, channelling funds where they would not normally go.

And as another example of something coming full circle, it was one of the privileges of my creative life, hailing from that deprived pit village with little culture, to be asked – following the success of *Dear England* – to write the BBC montage for the England final at the Euros 2024 in Germany. From a play about the national game, at the National Theatre, to writing words that might capture this national moment (our first 'final' on foreign soil), for our national broadcaster.

No one believes that stories alone have the power to fix all social ills. But time and again, across 80 years, they have proven to be disproportionately effective instruments in supporting us to better know ourselves, and see ourselves as part of a bigger picture. So with the lessons I'd absorbed over the years about the potential and power of story, I did my best.

'A country is only the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves. A series of moments, seared into one memory, stitched together across time.

'Nothing is ever really "final". England is a story we're all writing...'

Dear Library...

*In a love letter to public libraries, **Bobby Seagull**, former UK Libraries Champion for CILIP and current Reading Agency ambassador, reflects on how Saturday afternoons in East Ham Library made him who he is and urges for sustained national investment and a joined-up strategy to protect them for future generations.*

DEAR LIBRARY,

AT THE end of November 2025, a letter landed on my doormat bearing the words ‘On His Majesty’s Service’. On the front of the letter was written URGENT + PERSONAL in bold font. The cream-coloured paper felt heavier than usual. Instinctively, I thought: jury duty. But when I opened the letter, my eyes widened. I had been recommended to His Majesty the King for an MBE in the 2026 New Year Honours List. For services to public libraries.

I squealed.

And yet, as the pride washed over me, one thought cut through the noise: this honour really belonged to little Bobby. Primary school Bobby. The boy who spent every single Saturday afternoon in East Ham Library in east London – week after week, month after month, year after year – becoming, slowly and joyfully, the adult I am today.

‘I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.’

With those words, the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges captured something that millions of library-goers have

felt in their bones. And as Arts Council England marks its 80th anniversary – eight decades of championing culture at the heart of national life – I want to take the opportunity the occasion presents to make the case (with every ounce of the enthusiasm my students know all too well) that, in a rapidly changing and increasingly challenging world, the public library is not merely a cultural amenity. It is the architecture of the future. It is connective tissue. And it must be protected.

This anniversary prompts us to ask a fundamental question: what role can arts and culture play in creating our future happiness? My answer, grounded in a lifetime of Saturdays, is this: libraries are where that happiness begins. And where it can and must be kept alive, for generations to come.

My Library Story

Transport yourself back to the early 1990s. Fluorescent tracksuits. Ten-pence Freddo chocolate bars. Mr Motivator bounding across our TV screens.

My parents had emigrated from Kerala in south India to east London in the late 1970s, and every one of our family Saturdays followed the same beautiful ritual. After a lunch of Mum's extraordinary Keralan chicken biryani – fragrant, spiced, unfailingly delicious – Dad would take his four boys down the high street to our red-bricked, Edwardian East Ham Library.

We would sprawl on the carpet for hours, utterly absorbed: the Aztec civilisation, Victorian feats of engineering, the fantasy fiction of Tolkien. Then we would head home, minds buzzing, a shopping trolley stuffed with books to keep us busy until the following weekend – arriving just in time to check whether West Ham had lost on *Final Score*. (They usually had.)

That library made me. It built my curiosity, my empathy, my sense of the possible. It gave a boy from a council estate in east London access to the same universe of ideas as anyone else. No membership fee. No academic qualification required.

DEAR LIBRARY...

No appointment necessary. Just walk through the door and the world opens up.

And I know my story is not unique. Across the country, millions of people carry their own version of it. A building; a librarian; a dog-eared paperback that changed the course of a life. The specifics vary. The magic does not.

From Saturday Afternoons to a National Platform

My journey as a library campaigner began, perhaps fittingly, with a quiz show. As captain of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, on *University Challenge* in 2016-17, I went somewhat viral for my enthusiasm for knowledge.

The BBC gave me a television series, *Monkman & Seagull's Genius Guide to Britain*, in which I travelled around the UK exploring science, history, and the brilliance of Britain's cultural life. Even in that first series, overnighing in Gladstone's Library in Flintshire was the highlight. I stumbled past the opera books section and burst, with pure unbridled joy, into a West Ham chant to the melody of Verdi's *La donna è mobile*. Some moments simply cannot be planned.

During the press rounds for the show, I shared my story of those Saturday afternoons in East Ham. CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) heard it, and invited me to become UK Libraries Champion, following in the footsteps of polymath Sir Stephen Fry and classicist Dame Mary Beard. I accepted without a moment's hesitation.

Since then, I have taken a ten-point manifesto to the steps of 10 Downing Street, campaigned alongside grassroots movements in defence of local library services the length and breadth of the country, and spoken to anyone who will listen about something I believe with complete sincerity: that libraries are engines of social justice. That as well as being where books live, they are where communities breathe.

The Life-Changing Magic of Libraries

Let me offer a small piece of maths to set the scene, since I am, after all, a maths teacher. Roughly one in two people in the UK holds a library card: there are around 34 million cards in circulation. Each one is 0.76mm thick. Stack them all up and you reach 25.8 kilometres. Three times the height of Everest. That is the scale of the library's footprint in British life. The public library.

But the picture around reading is more sobering, and parliamentarians ought to sit up at this. 2026 has been designated the National Year of Reading, the biggest campaign in a generation. It has been set up to reverse a profound decline in reading enjoyment.

According to the National Literacy Trust, almost 70% of children report getting no pleasure from reading. In a world where shortform video, gaming, and streaming compete for every spare second of attention, this is not, perhaps, surprising. But it is alarming.

Because the research is overwhelming: reading enjoyment in childhood is the single greatest predictor of academic success: more powerful, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), even than socio-economic background. Let that sink in. More important than where you come from. Libraries are where that enjoyment is born, nurtured, and kept entirely free of charge.

And while libraries will always be built on and around books, depicting them as quiet rooms full of shelves sells them catastrophically short. Modern libraries offer warm spaces, digital access, early-years programmes, homework clubs, mental health drop-ins, job search facilities, benefit application support, 3D printers, coding clubs, VR headsets, dementia groups, and baby music sessions. There are libraries with business and intellectual property centres supporting local entrepreneurs. Some have nurses on site administering basic

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health checks and linking directly to local GP surgeries.

One community library in Scarborough recorded 42,000 visits, 550 events, 6,000 attendees, and 1,500 individual IT support sessions in a single year. That is not a library in the old-fashioned caricature. That is social infrastructure. That is a community's beating heart.

During the pandemic, when lockdown was announced, digital library audiences rose by 600-700% in some areas, as people reached for free eBooks and online resources. In the moment of greatest national crisis, people turned to libraries. That tells you something profound about what they truly mean to us. They are not a convenience. They are a lifeline.

Not just repositories of books, but places where communities can breathe.

A Crisis We Cannot Afford to Ignore

I wish the story ended there. But the truth is that, while our need for libraries is as great as ever, our stewardship of them has faltered. Everyone reading this needs to hear what has happened to libraries on our collective watch, and what is still at stake.

Since 2010, staff numbers in libraries in England have been cut by almost half – falling from 18,000 to around 9,500 full-time equivalent roles by 2024/25. Over 800 libraries have closed. Investment from local authorities – who are responsible for funding library services, while Arts Council England looks after their development – has been reduced by more than £232 million. And the damage has not been spread equally. The poorest communities have been around four times more likely to lose their libraries than wealthier ones. These vital institutions are being taken away from the people who need them most.

When my own east London borough of Newham found itself facing a proposed 50% cut to its library service, I threw my weight behind the grassroots Save Newham Libraries campaign. Their tireless advocacy reversed most of the

proposed £1.6 million in cuts: jobs were saved, opening hours protected, buildings preserved. This happened because a community spoke up loudly enough. It can happen everywhere, if people are given the tools and the confidence to fight.

And public libraries aren't the only services we need to defend. I was genuinely shocked to learn that there is at present no legal requirement for primary schools to have a library. One in seven primary schools in England does not have a library at all – and this figure rises to one in four in disadvantaged areas. An estimated 750,000 children are currently without access to the books that could transform their futures.

Following powerful campaigning by the National Literacy Trust through their Libraries for Primaries initiative, which Arts Council England has supported with crucial investment, the government in 2025 finally committed to ensuring every state primary school in England will have a library by 2029. That is what sustained, passionate advocacy achieves. That is what becomes possible when people refuse to be quiet.

The Future: Libraries Are Already Evolving

And here, finally, is what gives me genuine and irrepressible hope: libraries are not standing still. They are racing forward.

Physical visits to public libraries rose by 13.5% in 2023/24. Online visits climbed by nearly 37%. When libraries are properly resourced, people come to them. They always have done, and they always will do – because the human need for community, for knowledge, for a warm and welcoming space that belongs to everyone, does not go away.

Libraries today host 3D printers and coding clubs alongside story time and reading groups. They bridge the digital divide for those who would otherwise be left behind. They host salsa classes and seated zumba. They are, in the most literal sense, for everyone – the only public institution where no ticket, qualification, or appointment is required. You simply walk in.

DEAR LIBRARY...

The National Year of Reading 2026 is a powerful collective moment. It's an invitation to 'go all in' on reading; to discover how books can unlock the things we already love. Libraries are the natural home for that movement. Not just because they hold the books, but because they hold the community.

So on Arts Council England's 80th anniversary, I want to articulate a simple, urgent, and deeply felt truth: libraries need fair, sustainable, long-term funding. They need a joined-up national libraries strategy, something the government has committed to publishing later this year: one that recognises them not as a soft cultural add-on, but as infrastructure as essential as roads or broadband. The arts and culture sector, central government, local authorities and communities must work in concert to make this happen. The stakes, as I hope I have made clear, could not be higher.

Happiness Is Not Found Alone

Where do I spend my weekends now, as a rather more grown-up Bobby?

After my Saturday morning spin class (slightly sweaty, I freely admit), I head to my local library in Stratford, east London. And what I find there never fails to move me. Parents with young children in the picture book corner. Teenagers with their textbooks spread across a table. Elderly residents settled in their chairs. Vulnerable people finding somewhere warm and safe. A dance class spilling out of one room, a chess club hunched over boards in another. It is, every single time I visit, a window into the whole of society. It is the very fabric of our high streets, our neighbourhoods, our sense of who we are as a community.

There is a quote on the back of the ten-pound note, beneath the face of Jane Austen, that reads: 'I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading.' These words are, of course, spoken by the rather duplicitous Caroline Bingley in *Pride and*

Prejudice: a character who, in fact, has very little actual interest in books. But I have always thought: what a thing, for a country to inscribe those words on its currency. They reflect a simple truth. A curious mind must be in want of a book. And a book must be freely available to all.

As C.S. Lewis put it, ‘We read to know we are not alone,’ and libraries are where that ‘not alone’ is made beautifully, warmly, and freely real. But that reality doesn’t exist by accident. We have to make it happen – and every new generation needs to commit to it all over again.

So in two decades, when Arts Council England marks its 100th anniversary, I want us to look back and say that we rose to meet this moment. That we chose to invest in libraries not as a nostalgic act, but as a visionary one. That we understood – in a world of rapid change, rising inequality, and fraying social fabric – that the future of happiness is communal, curious and free at the point of entry.

And if I could travel back in time to the early 1990s, I would want to find little Bobby sitting cross-legged on the carpet of East Ham Library – surrounded by books about the Aztecs and hobbits, waiting to go home and check the West Ham score – and tell him: these institutions that changed your life? We’re going to make sure they change the lives of the next generation too.

We just have to fight for them.

As physicist Albert Einstein rightly understood, ‘The only thing you absolutely have to know is the location of the library’.

With love and gratitude,

Bobby Seagull, Year of the Arts Council LXXX★

★I first learned about Roman numerals in my local library.

Behind the Scenes at the Museum

Curating Our National Memory

Ann Dinsdale, *principal curator of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, reflects on a career of caring for the sisters' home: tracing how recovered manuscripts, household relics and conservation campaigns keep the Brontës' legacy alive, and arguing for museums' vital role in preserving our shared cultural story.*

MY EARLIEST IMPRESSION OF THE world-famous home where the Brontë sisters lived and wrote is that there was something haunting about the house's setting: flanked by the semi-wild churchyard, and perched on the border between bustling town and lonely moor. Instantly, the Parsonage captured my imagination.

That first visit to the Brontë Parsonage Museum at Haworth took place when I was a small child, on a school trip from nearby Keighley. I knew nothing about the West Yorkshire Parsonage where Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë lived for most of their lives, and wrote some of the most famous novels in English literature.

But when I stepped inside, their story came to life. Here were the three portable writing boxes used by the sisters; the dining room sofa on which Emily died; the miniature

manuscripts the sisters wrote with their brother Branwell as children. As I wandered around rooms set out with the Brontës' original furniture and possessions, it was as if time had dissolved. That first experience stayed with me – and when I started working at the Parsonage in 1989, it felt like my dream job. I'd read all the Brontë novels and many biographies of the family over the intervening years. I was hooked.

Passionate and original as their novels are, the story of how the three daughters of a Yorkshire clergyman produced works that enthralled and scandalised the Victorian reading public is equally compelling. Most of the events that shaped the Brontës' lives and laid the foundations of their fiction took place at the Parsonage, and now that history is overlaid with my own memories. Museums are, above all, a repository of our human stories.

As Principal Curator, I feel the past enriching the present through every single evocative item in the Museum's collection: a collection I have helped to develop and preserve for 37 years. If I did not believe that the Museum had a critical role in our national consciousness, I would not have made it my life's work.

Many visitors to the Parsonage assume that the house came complete with all the Brontës' household goods when it was purchased in 1928, but in fact, every single object on display has been acquired by the Brontë Society. Every item in the Museum today comes with a story. The family's ink-stained mahogany dining table, at which the sisters produced much of their writing, is a case in point. One of the most mesmerising objects in the collection, it was the focus of the Brontës' domestic life. An 1837 diary paper by Emily (also part of the museum's collection) provides a glimpse into the everyday world of the Parsonage, and includes a sketch of herself and Anne seated at the table with their papers scattered before them. Each night, after their father retired to bed, the

sisters used to walk around the table, reading aloud from their work and discussing their writing projects.

Charlotte and Anne continued the nightly ritual after Emily's death. After Anne died, the family's servant, Martha Brown, told the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell that Charlotte was unable to break the habit and could be heard each night 'walking, walking on alone.'

The table, both ordinary and extraordinary, is one of a host of items in the collection which have the power to move visitors to tears. It is fundamental to the Brontës' story, and it was fundamental to their lives in the Parsonage. But it was only brought back to Haworth just over a decade ago, in 2015, thanks to a generous grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. There was great excitement on the snowy January day when it finally returned: although the Parsonage was closed, most of the staff and volunteers came in to witness the historic occasion, while press and TV crews awaited its arrival in the cold outside.

Brontë family furniture, clothing, personal possessions, books, manuscripts and artworks that were scattered after their deaths have been painstakingly returned to their former home over generations. The table itself was included in a sale of the Brontës' household effects, which took place at the Parsonage in 1861. The sale, which was not widely advertised, was attended mainly by local people following the death of Patrick Brontë, the sisters' father, who outlived them all. The handwritten catalogue of the sale is also part of the Museum's collection, and it provides a tantalising record of the items sold over the course of two days, often including the names of purchasers. We still use it now to trace the provenance for items entering the Museum collection – and it shows us that the table had remained within the same family almost from the time of the sale, until they decided the time had come to return it.

Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the first of many Brontë

biographies. Her best-selling book, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, was published in 1857, just two years after the death of its subject. Gaskell's tale of three lonely sisters seeking refuge in a world of their own creation, their staggering literary achievements, and their premature deaths – all set against a backdrop of bleak moorland – captured the public imagination.

Even before its publication, the Brontës' home was becoming a place of fascination. The sisters published their novels under pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, and speculation over their identities was rife. By 1850, rumours had begun to circulate that the three notorious authors, frequently attacked for their coarseness and dubious morality, were actually the daughters of the Parson at Haworth. By this time, Emily and Anne were dead, and Charlotte, the last of the siblings, spent the remainder of her life being pointed out in church, with some of the more persistent visitors contriving a visit to the Parsonage itself.

But it was Gaskell's biography that cemented the Parsonage's position in the Brontë story, not only making Haworth a place of pilgrimage, but creating a market for relics of the famous family. Charles Hale, one of many Americans inspired to visit after reading it, arrived shortly after the sale of household goods had taken place, and was disappointed to have missed the chance to purchase a piece of Brontëana. He didn't leave Haworth empty handed, however. His visit coincided with the refurbishment of the Parsonage in preparation for Mr Brontë's successor, and he was able to take away the wire and crank of Mr Brontë's bell-pull, as well as the whole lower sash of Charlotte's bedroom window, as souvenirs. It seems that nothing relating to the Brontës' lives was considered unworthy of acquisition.

Wealthy collectors soon found their way to Haworth, seeking out the Brontës' former friends and associates, who were sometimes willing to sell their pieces of memorabilia if the price was right. But while Haworth was a rich source for

acquiring everyday items used by the family, and personal relics such as shawls, scraps of dress fabric and locks of hair, it was the manuscripts, letters and inscribed books which were considered the trophy items.

All of these were inherited by Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte's widower. Charlotte had been the only one of the Brontë siblings to marry, dying within a year of her marriage. Nicholls had come to Haworth as Mr Brontë's curate, and after Charlotte's death he remained at the Parsonage to care for his elderly father-in-law. He had hoped to be offered the living at Haworth, but when that didn't happen, he returned to his home in Banagher, Ireland, taking with him bundles of the Brontës' manuscripts and as many mementos of the family as he could carry.

The years passed, and into the story steps Clement Shorter: a journalist who had written an introduction to a cheap edition of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. He had plans to follow this up with a biography of the Brontës, and had sought out Charlotte's close friend, Ellen Nussey, who owned several hundred of Charlotte's letters. Shorter persuaded Ellen to sell her letters to his friend and associate, Thomas James Wise, a well-respected bibliographer and book collector, who would be willing to make the letters available to Shorter for his biography, and who offered Ellen an assurance that her letters would eventually be deposited in a national collection. Ellen, frail and living in genteel poverty, gratefully accepted Shorter's proposal along with a cheque for £125, and her precious letters passed into the hands of Wise and Shorter. But Shorter knew that copyright in the content of the letters rested with Arthur Bell Nicholls, and that if he wished to make use of them, he would need Nicholls' permission.

Nicholls was tracked down to Hill House in Banagher, where Shorter arrived on the 40th anniversary of Charlotte's death; the 'precise psychological moment', to use his own words, in which to persuade Nicholls to part with his

manuscripts and the permission to publish them. Once again, the deal was financed by Wise. Although considered one of the most influential book collectors of his generation, Wise in fact lived a double life, having established a lucrative market in manufacturing 'pre-first' editions of famous works, which he passed off as having been privately printed by the authors themselves for circulation amongst their family and friends. He would gradually release these into the rare book market, often donating a copy to important collections. In one instance he paid £52 for one of his own pamphlets at a Sotheby's sale to inflate prices for his forgeries.

This dubious pair came to own most of the Brontës' surviving manuscripts and letters, and soon set to work producing expensive limited-edition booklets of material by both Charlotte and Branwell. Within a year, Charlotte's letters to Ellen were turning up in auctions, and the miniature manuscripts, now encased in handsome Rivière bindings, were being disposed of by Wise among wealthy collectors. In the end, Wise's greed, combined with developments in the chemical analysis of paper and typography, led to his downfall. In 1934, three years before his death, he was exposed as a forger and his reputation was ruined. But by this time, the Brontës' letters and manuscripts had long since been dispersed.

Only seven of Charlotte Brontë's manuscripts remained in Wise's collection of literary artefacts when it was purchased for the nation. With many of the Brontë manuscripts having disappeared into private collections in America, there was a growing awareness among admirers of the sisters' works of the need to collect and preserve what remained of their possessions. It was in response to this situation that the Brontë Society was founded in 1893. Less than two years later, the Society's first museum opened above the Yorkshire Penny Bank at the top of Haworth's steep Main Street. Virginia Woolf (or Stephen, as she was then) was an early visitor to the Museum, in 1904. In her account of the visit, which became her very first published

piece, she writes, ‘the most touching case... is that which contains the little personal relics, the dresses and shoes of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer.’

By 1927, the Society’s collection had outgrown its Main Street premises. Haworth Parsonage was purchased from the church trustees by Sir James Roberts, a local boy-made-good, who then presented the house to the Brontë Society, along with the funds required to set it up as a museum and research centre. On 4 August 1928, thousands of people thronged the village streets to witness Sir James, who described himself as ‘one of the fast-narrowing circle of Haworth veterans who remember the Parsonage family’, hand over the title deeds to the Society. The Brontë Parsonage Museum was officially open.

The acquisition of the Parsonage was hugely significant to the Brontë Society. Owners of Brontë memorabilia identified the house as the rightful home for their treasures and were prompted to return them. Other material entered the collection by more circuitous means. Shortly after the acquisition of the Parsonage, a large collection of over 300 rare books and manuscripts was shipped to England from America, gifted by the multi-millionaire Henry Houston Bonnell. In an interview with the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* in 1916, Bonnell had expressed a wish that the wonderful collection he had built up over many years should eventually be returned to Haworth. ‘It will be a splendid gift,’ the journalist commented, ‘but what a loss to America!’ Following Bonnell’s death, his widow oversaw arrangements for the shipping of the collection, which arrived in the newly opened Parsonage Museum in 1929.

The decade which saw the foundation of the Arts Council

and the post-war drive for the public funding of arts and culture also coincided with a surge of interest in the Brontës. During the dark days of the Second World War, many people sought solace in literature. The Brontë novels were hugely popular, with highly romanticised film adaptations attracting large cinema audiences and leading to a dramatic rise in visitors to the Parsonage.

Today, film and TV adaptations of the Brontës' lives and works continue to play an important role in the life of the Museum. February 2026 saw the release of Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights*, starring Margot Robbie as Catherine Earnshaw and Jacob Elordi as Heathcliff. A bracelet in the Museum's collection, once owned by Charlotte Brontë and made from a band of braided hair, became the inspiration for Robbie's gown for the film's London premiere. The interest generated by the film had been phenomenal, and although safety and security meant it wasn't possible for the original bracelet to be worn on the red carpet, such an opportunity to make the Museum's collection known to a wider audience was not to be missed. The Museum worked in partnership with Haworth manufacturers Wyedean Weaving to create a close replica, which Robbie wore instead.

In my years at the Parsonage, the collection has continued to grow, and there have been several high-profile acquisitions. In childhood, the Brontës created a sequence of plays and stories around a set of toy soldiers given to Branwell by their father. The soldiers' adventures were chronicled in tiny handwritten books, no bigger than a matchbox, whose minute scale and miniature details – such as title pages and advertisements – make them particularly fascinating and memorable. In 2019, the Museum acquired one of these famous 'little books' at auction in Paris. The book, produced by Charlotte in 1830, first came to light in a sale at Sotheby's in 2011, but the Brontë Society was outbid by the Aristophil collection in Paris. It went on display only briefly before the

entire collection was impounded when Aristophil came under investigation for fraud. The Paris judiciary then authorised the sale of the collection, and the process of fundraising began again. This time the Brontë Society was successful in its bid to bring the little book home to Haworth, thanks to several grants and a crowdfunding campaign, supported by more than a thousand literature lovers from around the world.

In recent years, the Brontë Parsonage Museum was at the vanguard of a staggeringly ambitious campaign to save the Honresfield Library. The Library, which had belonged to Sir Alfred Law, included works by Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, Lord Byron and Jane Austen, but at its heart was a collection of letters and manuscripts by the Brontës, as well as some more of Charlotte's little books. The Library had been kept at Honresfield, the Law family home near Rochdale, until Sir Alfred's death in 1939, but for the 80 years following his death, its whereabouts were a mystery.

In the years that I've worked at the Parsonage, I've often been asked which missing treasures I would most like to see returned to Haworth, and my response had always been 'the Honresfield Library'. When Sotheby's announced that the Library had resurfaced and that they had been instructed to sell the entire contents over three auctions, it seemed almost certain that this wonderful collection, which had remained intact for a hundred years, would be broken up and dispersed to private collectors around the world. The Brontë Parsonage Museum became part of a consortium of literary house museums and libraries, spearheaded by the Friends of the National Libraries, which joined forces and raised over £15 million – including significant public grants – to ensure that this astonishingly rich collection of manuscripts, letters and rare books would remain permanently in the UK. These marvellous works have been allocated amongst authors' house museums and libraries, so everyone can enjoy this treasure trove of literature.

Without this ongoing, steadfast quest to locate the contents of the Brontë home, from the end of the 19th century to the present day, we would understand only a fragment of the Brontës' lives. The history of the Brontë Parsonage Museum and its collections is one of concerted public commitment to honouring and remembering the family, in the home where they lived and created their extraordinary novels and poems. Their enthralling story continues to inspire visitors from all over the world to beat a path to Haworth to see for themselves the sisters' home, and the landscape of their imaginations. To stand where the Brontës stood, in the rooms as they knew them, surrounded by their belongings, is an experience countless visitors describe as both profound and deeply memorable. Without these tangible, material witnesses to our human history, we cannot keep our collective memory alive into the future. Without museums, and the public funding that sustains them, national treasures would disappear into private collections, forever dispersed and lost from public access.

The entire Brontë family, with the exception of Anne, who died in Scarborough, lie in a family vault inside Haworth Church, within sight of their former home. The wind Elizabeth Gaskell described as 'piping and wailing and sobbing round the square unsheltered house' still roars down from the moors. Visitors in 2026 can inhabit the Brontës' world and experience the emotional frisson of encountering their manuscripts and personal treasures firsthand. As I write, a researcher on her first visit to Haworth from Chicago, tells me of how the Parsonage has 'lived in my head for all of my life'.

I don't live at the Parsonage, of course, but I do know how it feels to spend a night in the Brontës' former home. In 2015, a BBC immersive history documentary, *Being the Brontës*, was filmed at the Parsonage. Three presenters, each representing one of the sisters, sought to understand more about their lives. For a week, they had to live like a Brontë, and it was arranged

that one of the presenters would spend a night at the Parsonage, sleeping in a replica half-tester bed in Mr Brontë's bedroom. I'd often worked late at the Parsonage, but as part of the security and curatorial arrangements involved, I had to spend the entire night on a makeshift bed in the room where Charlotte died. Fortunately, there were no ghosts to keep me awake, only the ticking of the longcase clock on the stairs and the winter wind howling round the house.

In 2028, we will celebrate the Brontë Parsonage Museum's centenary, proud of our generation's stewardship, and certain that the next hundred years will see that same untiring determination to preserve and celebrate our shared Brontë heritage. As with the Arts Council, our commitment to our human creativity and culture means that in another hundred years, another Parsonage curator will be making the case for museums as inseparable from our understanding of who we are, then and now.

Lifeboats In A Storm

Building The Arts Centres Of Tomorrow

*Arts Council England chief executive **Darren Henley** is joined by **Annabel Turpin**, chief executive of Storyhouse in Chester and co-director of Future Arts Centres; **Dave Moutrey**, director of culture and creative industries for Manchester City Council and honorary research fellow at the University of Manchester; and **Jess Prendergrast**, co-founder and director of East Quay Arts Centre in Watchet, to talk about the history, significance and future of Arts Centres in England.*

The following transcript of their conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

DARREN HENLEY: So, arts centres have changed over time. Dave, I know you've been thinking specifically about this [as part of your research for a book on Arts Centres]. How have they changed over the last few decades?

DAVE MOUTREY: Arts centres came out of the Arts Lab movement, and the community arts movement: their origins were typically in grassroots, place-driven, civic intervention work. Over time, we moved into language about place-making, social impact, the creative economy. But actually, it's just different language for the things these organisations have always done.

There were different types of opportunism in the development of arts centres. In some places, it was to do with the fact that there was a building, and somebody was looking for a purpose, or a new town was looking for an anchor, creatively. In others, universities wanted to develop a creative offer for their students. One of my favourite case studies is the Portland Project in Stoke: a group of artists moved into the area because they could buy a house for a pound, and because their practice was socially engaged, they started to develop conversations with their locals, which resulted in them buying a derelict pub and turning it into a mini arts centre in the middle of an economically very challenged community. That's opportunism, but it's also brilliant art practice and a great way to bring about inclusion in a way that isn't about being missionaries.

DH: And I suppose your arts centre, Jess, is opportunistic as well?

JESS PRENDERGRAST: Maybe more edge-walking and experimental and tenacious. I guess for us, it's more about participation: that's a key part of what makes community arts centres different. It's about slowing things down and letting people experience things: a different kind of rhythm, a different kind of settling practice. It's about providing stability from which extraordinary things can happen.

DH: You used the word 'tenacious'. How does that show itself?

JP: I mean, you need to be [tenacious] if you want to build a brand new arts centre, that looks like ours, in a tiny harbour town...

DH: Describe it to everybody?

JP: It's a crazy, eclectic, higgledy-piggledy assemblage of buildings, in different materials and shapes and structures, that reflect the landscape. It's thought through, of course, but it looks like it isn't – kind of how towns and villages are. These places that we live in, they're not neat; they're a bit added here, and something else there, and a route through there. The building represents that, and it also represents what goes on in the building. It's not finished, and siloed; it's like: let's see what's around this corner; let's find something else. No one thought we'd get planning permission, but because we talked with the community over and over again, we only had one objection. So that's also really important: where it came from is also really embedded in the community, as well as what it looks like.

DH: Annabel, at Future Arts Centres, you have members of all shapes and sizes. Paint a picture for us of what that looks like.

ANNABEL TURPIN: We have about 185 members now: one of the smallest is Crediton Arts Centre in Devon, which is tiny, right through to the Southbank Centre. Some are purely volunteer-led; some are hugely professional, expansive buildings.

DH: So if it's not a physical look, is it an ideology, an attitude, a pedagogy? What makes you a Future Arts Centre?

AT: I think the ethos Dave and Jess have been describing absolutely sits in those arts centres. They're all multi-disciplinary; they tend to be multi-space; members tend to have performance and participatory programmes. They're public-facing, so not just artist studios. That porosity with the community is really important. I think it's ultimately about being audience- and community-led, not art form-led. That's one of the key distinctions for me.

Arts centres need to reflect the place that they're based in,

and they need to be relevant to people's lives. If we want to mean something to all the people in our place, all the different communities, we have to do different things, and be different things, to different people on different days. That breadth of activity is really important and, of course, it needs to be shaped by those communities – what one arts centre does will be entirely different from what another does. It's about using the expertise and creativity that exists within art centres and the broad creative teams they work with to build on what communities are looking for.

DM: There are three things common to arts centres. One is that they're clearly cultural venues. Another is that they're community infrastructure in a very meaningful way. And finally, they're creative incubators. I believe strongly that there's a lack of understanding at a national level about the role arts centres have played in developing artists.

DH: So is there a snobbery about arts centres, in the cultural sector?

DM: I would say so. I think they're massively undervalued. It's interesting the number of places that don't call themselves 'arts centres' because of the pejorative look they get; because they're not seen to be serious or important. Yet they're absolutely vital, and they produce great, high-quality work.

JP: I think art centres are important on loads of different levels, because they provide all these different touch points that we've been talking about. On the same day, you can see extraordinary work on the walls by an Indian artist about migration, then go and sing folk songs in the café in the evening, and you can do printmaking, and can make paper... so many different things in one place, and you don't know you care about any of them until you wander in. So many people come to East Quay for

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an outdoor event, or for a coffee or a beer, three or four times before they make it to the galleries or to something that's more like theatre. A whole world of people come in, who wouldn't go into more institutional, siloed organisations. It's that stepping stone into something. And it's also common sense: no one lives in cultural silos; your brain is constantly mixing. It just seems clear that the way to help people in is by having a complex mix, where you can find your little bit.

DH: What I was hearing you describe there was everyday creativity, alongside professional work. There's a duality.

JP: Exactly. That's totally vital – the connection is what makes it work. And it's not just [the connection between] different disciplines within the arts. Because of being rooted in a place, conversations in arts centres are just as likely to be about community as about culture – about land justice, or alternative education. A farmer will meet a poet, a teacher will meet someone who's doing woodwork, and all these connections are crossovers, not just within art forms but within the community. You get collaboration and new ideas and encounters – which is what we all want from the cultural sector – much more broadly than you do in places that aren't set up for a whole community. And as we go forward into a world that's ever more turbulent, that connection really matters. People talk a lot about [sociologist and author] Eric Klinenberg – he wrote about 'palaces for the people', and we take that to mean he was saying this kind of social, cultural infrastructure really matters. But what gets forgotten is that he's really talking about cultural or social infrastructure in times of turbulence. When it gets hard: that's when we need these spaces.

DH: Annabel, when you go into your building [Storyhouse], you see people who have a real sense of ownership of it...

AT: That's what we're trying to create. It's a space that doesn't belong to the people running it; it belongs to the people in that place. Arts centres are really good at creating a sense of belonging. Everyone in Chester knows Storyhouse; everyone knows they're allowed in. It's a safe place. There's something really critical emerging from the research we're doing about the conditions art centres create – non-judgmental, open all the time, consistent. Those conditions enable people to be themselves, and from that point, they can start to explore. And when you were describing your organisation, Jess, the word 'explore' was really coming into my head.

JP: I think this point about somewhere safe from which to explore is really fundamental. The world is too much, too complex; everyone's burnt out, and you can't explore or find new possibilities when you feel like that. I think one of the things arts centres do beautifully – in a way elitist organisations often don't – is help people settle their nervous systems. You feel: Okay, I know these people. I've been here loads of times. This feels like home. I belong. *Then* you can enter into everything art has to offer. Because you're calm, you can explore; you can experiment. No one ever gets expansive new ideas when they're feeling intimidated; you need to settle people and make them feel safe. That seems to me to be our role. I talk about it as craft and art. Craft is repeated, slow, come back to it, keep on. Embodied touch, feeling. Art is challenging and experimental: it pushes you, and sometimes you're uncomfortable. But you have to have them both; one without the other doesn't work. Art without craft is scary and alienating, and craft without art can become too conservative or not forward-moving. But when you've got conditions of safety, *then* you can explore. To me, that feels like the point of our building and what we're trying to do.

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DM: The underlying thing I'm hearing for both institutions is something about the starting points, not the transaction. These are not transactional organisations. There might be a transaction down the line, but the transaction is not the reason for being there. I think that's a fundamental difference. It's all about making the space open and enabling people to feel safe. One arts centre I went to visit, when I parked, there were two people shooting up outside the building. This institution sits on the edge of a postcode with one of the worst drug problems in the north of England, and it's full of young people who are there because they know it's safe. That safety is the starting point – but they go on to make really interesting, exciting work, and they come and see really good quality work. And I'd take anybody on who tried to tell me the artistic quality of this place was inferior. It isn't.

DH: Do you think people would be surprised to hear you describing arts centres as homes of artistic excellence?

DM: Some might, because they've never taken the trouble to find out what goes on in them, I did an interview with a Turner Prize-winning artist who talked about the importance of arts centres for Black artists, particularly in the 70s and 80s: they were prepared to show their work when they couldn't get in the door of major galleries. I see that consistently: arts centres investing in early-career opportunities for artists to hone their practice. They play a fundamental role in the ecology that's really undervalued in the UK.

DH: So they're engines of R&D?

AT: I think they are, but part of the reason they've been seen to underachieve is that they're not invested in to produce. Arts centres have only ever been invested in, really, as receiving houses, so they haven't had the opportunity to push beyond

emerging talent and get things into the public eye. Often, by the time people are seen as really successful, they've gone beyond the arts centre that nurtured them to start with.

DM: I would say arts centres overachieve for the level of investment, for artist development work.

JP: And we can take loads of risks. We're on the periphery, and that's challenging, but it's also really useful. That's where interesting, under-the-radar things happen; where you get experimentation. But we're [talking] as if the outcome we're all seeking is that you go from *here* and end up *here*, in the elite gallery. And that's uncomfortable, because that's not what art is doing where we are, and it's not what *artists* are doing where we are. This rural, peripheral place I'm from is packed full of artists, not *despite* it being a rural peripheral place but *because* of it: because it's a place where you don't have to conform to a linear, patriarchal, capitalist version of what it is that counts, and is art. We get a different kind of practice, and a different kind of connection with the work, and we talk about different things: about land and weather and community and relationships. And these things might sound parochial, but they're not: they're the core of most people's humanity. So I'm always a bit nervous about the trajectory question.

AT: I agree, the trajectory isn't about getting bigger and better and leaving your place. It's about being bigger and better *for* your place; being able to really value the stories and voices that are coming through that place; and being able to export them to other places, too.

DM: There's also a lack of recognition for a lot of the participatory practice that's been developed in arts centres.

AT: We're all feeling that arts centres are overachieving and

under-recognised. Why is that? Is it because we feel we can measure the quality of the art, but we can't measure the quality of the impact it's having on people – and ultimately, that's what arts centres are really good at?

DM: I think that's a really good question. I've worked in this business for over 40 years now, and we keep having to come up with data that proves the impact of culture on people's lives. But we *know* it makes people's lives better. We see it every day. I think it's time for a conceptual policy shift in how we view cultural infrastructure. I got very interested in the notion of the foundational economy: this idea that, actually, the work we see in arts centres is *not* a creative industry; it's part of the foundational economy. It should be valued and treated in the same way we treat the health service, education, the blue light services. It's about making life worth living. We keep trying to refine the economic data, and we're just missing the point.

DH: So if we had an opportunity today to reframe the future narrative for arts centres, knowing what all three of you know, and the story you're telling, what would you be saying?

JP: I think Dave's point is true. Arts centres are really important social infrastructure – but what they're *doing* is making life, or remaking the way that we will inhabit things; keeping stories going, but rebuilding them collectively. It's world-making, but in this local, grounded, situated way that really matters. Imagining together, rebuilding together, connecting, feeling safe together – that seems to me to be where the next iteration is.

AT: I'd want a national policy that enabled everyone to access an arts centre in their place. I think they should be seen as an essential part of local civic infrastructure. But the important

thing is to recognise that arts centres achieve what they achieve because of the *art*. They're not a service in the way the health service or an educational institution is. We talk so much about civic infrastructure because they *are* playing such an important part in that, but we forget to say: they can only do that because of the art. That mustn't get lost.

DM: I'm thinking of them as the core processor of local cultural ecosystems. I do think they are core civic infrastructure. And I don't think they should be discretionary cultural provision.

DH: I'm hearing you describe arts centres as simultaneously at the centre and on the edge. How do you rationalise that?

AT: I think they're at the centre of their place, but they're reaching the people on the edge.

DH: Place has been very important – all three of you have talked about it. Unpack that for me.

AT: When I talk about the place-making role that somewhere like Storyhouse has, what we're always trying to do is to reach all the different communities – of identity, and need, and action, and interest – within our geographic area. But it is also about helping to give our place its identity. That's what we can do as part of that core infrastructure: draw out the distinctiveness. Because we are where those conversations happen.

JP: For us, it's almost like the place is the co-author of everything that happens. It really matters to us as human beings that we're *from* somewhere – it matters in this context of creating safety in order to be able to explore. The thing that's really interesting about arts centres, though, is that they combine local groundedness with universal ideas. I was

reading the other day about something called cosmo-localism: the idea that you can have local, dirt-through-your fingers practice, but the ideas and concepts can be universal and shared. [Arts centres are] places that hold us in our areas and make us feel stable and safe, but combine with everything that art is, which is open and exciting and global.

DH: So what I think you're arguing is that there's no hierarchy of art form or artist, and a community-based arts centre is just as valid, as important, as a multinational venue?

JP: Of course. The lack of hierarchy is fundamental. Who, where and when did someone decide that there was an order of culture that was allowed to matter, and that people were going to be put into different places based on which kind of art they liked? It's so obviously unreasonable. But I'm pretty confident that 50 years from now, the world will have moved to break down those hierarchical structures in art form, as well as in other parts of the economy. We're moving away from an understanding that we should sit in hierarchical systems and accept them. Why wouldn't we do that with the stories that are being told and the art that's practiced?

AT: I think the rigidity around art forms is quite anti-exploration. If you don't know anything about arts and culture, what I want to do is to invite you in and allow you to explore: not via a particular art form, but via something that relates to you, something that's relevant to you, that you connect with and that might take you on a journey through a whole range of different art forms. I don't want to invite you in just because I think you might like theatre, because that feels really reductive. That's not allowing you to have a stake in this relationship. I think we will see a shift away from that more and more. Of course, there are people holding on to that power, to those resources, but the more we can show

alternatives, the better, because I think that will create that shift. And I think that's where audiences are.

DH: I'm interested in that power dynamic. All three of you represent organisations, and yet you're telling me that the power is with the people. There must be some tension in that?

AT: In what way? I'm not sure there is.

DH: Well, organisations tend to have budgets and targets. Sometimes that might be at odds with what people want. How do you resolve that?

AT: One of the things that's key to art centres is the mixed income model, and that is where the tension is often found: somebody wants to hire a space, and someone else wants to put a show [that requires subsidy] in there. But for me, that can be a real driver. It's about valuing every type of engagement that happens in an arts centre equally, not just by financial return, and finding the right balance. When I started my career, there was a hierarchy of: that person's paying £20 for a music ticket; they're of higher value than the person who's just sitting in the café. I think shifting that has been critical to changing the mindset and the culture – to actually embrace that tension in a way that people go, 'Oh, it's brilliant, isn't it? We're doing all these things.'

DM: It's hard to see any great projects that have come out of everybody agreeing. I don't see tension as a problem; I see it as a fuel. In my experience, if communities, artists, are given infinite possibilities, they spend a lot of time trying to find out where the walls are. Also, there are a lot of tensions in our communities, and arts centres are well equipped to enable those tensions to be explored in a safe way.

LIFEBOATS IN A STORM

And talking of business models, I think arts centres are intrinsically more resilient than single art form venues. They tend to have multiple strands to their portfolio that support each other, so you can stand a time when theatre attendances fall off because you've got a cinema or a café. And they've also spent a long time working with very limited resources so they're entrepreneurial, and flexible, and they know how to reuse things. They've got more levers to pull.

JP: I think the tension-in-communities question is fascinating. I'm always sceptical of anyone who tells me what the community thinks – as if there is *a thing* the community thinks. Of course there isn't. Anyone who says 'the community was totally behind this' – they're either lying, or they haven't asked everybody, or they're just not doing anything interesting enough to generate any kind of response. So the tension is sort of the point, right? Otherwise, what are we doing? We're not having the conversations. We're not pushing the boundaries. We're not talking about anger or grief or frustration or what's going on, and if we're not doing that, we're not really performing any kind of function. And I don't mean that in an angry way; it's just a recognition that communities are complex, made up of different people with different views, who like different art forms, have different amounts of money, and care about different things. And that's the messy beauty of the whole thing. Wouldn't it be awful if that wasn't the case? We should just embrace it, rather than worry about it too much.

DH: We live in increasingly complex times. I'm not one for trying to pit one art form or one sort of arts organisation against another. But is there something particularly special about the role arts centres can play now? Does it make them more relevant?

AT: Yes. I think it goes back to what we were saying about the

safety we provide. Not safety as in playing safe, but a place where you can build your confidence to engage and explore and express yourself, or enjoy someone else's expression. Now, more than ever, people need these conditions to do that. We've not yet used the word 'imagination', but that's also really fundamental: arts centres are places to use your imagination and encounter other people's. The other thing is the diversity of people we're reaching, and the ability arts centres have to change who gets to make art, and who gets to experience it. And the final thing is that resilience you mentioned, Dave; that ability to be entrepreneurial. There's a whole set of things that make us go: 'Now is the time to be an Arts Centre.'

JP: I always think I'm a bit apocalyptic, and I don't mean to be – it's just that I think tensions are growing, the world is getting harder. Things might get worse, quite quickly. We need to get ready for that. But we've actually spent the last twenty years removing most of the spaces that provide that kind of support. In lots of places, arts centres are the community anchor that's left – and they're able to provide support with joy and laughter and fun, not just with anxiety. So they become really important. We're a new building, open five years, but we're already thinking: what adaptations should we make? How are we going to retrofit so we can manage if there's no power for a week, or we can't get food for three weeks, or the sewage system breaks, or any of the other disasters set out in the government's risk assessments? Can we do the stuff that makes us that lifeboat in a storm, for our community?

This isn't the natural job of an arts centre, but actually, if you look at disasters the world over, where do people go? They gather in the places where they feel safe. So we're taking that quite seriously. Are we ready to protect this community in a turbulent time, both in the physicality of the building, but

also in knowing how to support people through grief, tension and anger? Are we able to get people to work together and find ways to do new things? That kind of role, which is probably quite a long way from the frame of what you think an arts centre is, is what I think we'll be doing, Twenty years from now.

DM: I don't disagree with you, but I think the lens we have to use is art, because that's where our skill base is. I think arts centres are uniquely placed because, as I've said, they're not transactional: they can be a place that takes on difficult issues and discusses tensions. That doesn't mean to say other art forms aren't capable of doing this. But I think in recent years, we've seen a retreat from issue-based work in single art form institutions, for a couple of reasons. One, economic: people desperately need to keep the doors open, need stuff they know people are going to buy, and for the most part, that's going to be stuff that's entertaining and not rocking the boat. Whereas exploring difficult ideas is a big part of what we do; we're not seeing that retreat as much, if at all, in arts centres. The other thing is cancel culture. As a society, we've lost our ability to have a civilised conversation about differing ideas. But arts centres continue to be able to do that, because they're doing it out of the public eye, and quite often in micro rather than big canvas ways.

DH: Annabel, you mentioned imagination. For many people, their first artistic spark will have happened in an arts centre. How important is that?

JP: West Somerset, where we are, has the lowest social mobility in the country. Disadvantaged kids here have less chance of changing their future than kids from anywhere else. So for us, children's access to the arts has always been fundamental. When we started this work fifteen years ago, we did a piece

of play-based research with the kids in the local primary school, seven, eight years old. We asked them what their dream job was. And they almost universally wanted to be on the stage or be an architect, or an artist, or a singer: these great dreams. And then they also almost universally said: but I'll probably do what my dad does, and be a builder; I'll work at the power station. So they had the dream job – creative, cultural – and then 'I've already accepted that I can't do that'. That was heartbreaking. What we're trying to do in a very slow way is change the perception of some of those children. Not all of them, of course; many will do those jobs, which are also wonderful and important. But for the ones who want to be on the stage but wrote themselves off at seven, maybe they won't anymore. Because they come and see 600 people singing along to a drag show on the quayside in a town that voted 70% Brexit. Maybe they'll think, 'Actually, I can be me. I can do my thing. I can find my different route.' That is so fundamental to what we're doing: providing those opportunities for young people to have a place where they can come, see something different, be something different. That's life-changing stuff, in tiny microcosms of a seven-year-old coming in and starting by drawing a funny picture.

DM: The sad thing is that because of the withdrawal of arts from the school curriculum in the last fifteen years, the work Jess is doing is no longer just a nice-to-have. It's the only place those young people will get the opportunity to see and do that sort of thing. Even if they never, ever want to set foot on the stage, the confidence they'll get from being part of a creative process will serve them well in their future.

AT: I think there's also something about what children, young people, get to do in an arts centre that might be different from going into a theatre and watching a show. I always got very cross when I heard teachers shushing groups of young people

when they came to the arts centre I ran in the North East. Don't tell them this is a space they're not allowed to talk in! That's not going to build their lifelong sense of belonging and entitlement to culture. They need to come in; they need to see their work on the walls. They need to see people like them, people they know, working there, doing things there. I think there's something about the breadth of activity that arts centres offer that goes back to those multiple points of entry. Yes, you can come and see a professional theatre show. Yes, you can come and perform on the stage. Yes, you can have your pictures on the wall in the foyer or the gallery. Yes, you can come and take part in something. I think that's very different from watching a show, or even from being part of a youth theatre.

JP: Our building has multiple routes of entry – it's intentionally designed so that you can come in this way or that way, or if you're not sure, you can go around the corner and there's another way. Lovely: until loads of teenagers on BMXs arrive in different directions. I remember showing the Police Commissioner round right at the beginning, and they were like, you've built all these little places where kids can hang out; what are you going to do about that? And I was like: that's why we built this; we want it to be like that. Of course, the reality is, it's complex. It's tension filled. For every person who feels safe enough to be there, someone else feels unsafe. But for me, when I see the kids on their BMXs, it's like: oh, we did well here. Who would have thought five years ago that these kids who are widely regarded as being really difficult would come and sit in the galleries? Partly because of the Wi-Fi, partly because they know our staff will be nice to them – but eventually they're like, what's all this art about then? And you start the conversations. I'm not saying it's easy; it's not. It's really hard. It's a balance of care with staff and other members of the community. But it's also the point. That tension and care together is the bit that defines some of it.

AT: I think you're right. We deal with antisocial behaviour all the time – we need to create a safe space for everyone, and that sometimes means asking people to leave, but it's always through an explanation of: 'this is why, and if you want to come back, this is how you need to be'. There was an example a while ago of young people we'd had to exclude because of the disruption they were causing to other people. But then they experienced a first aid incident outside, and they came in to ask for help even though they were excluded, because they knew that ultimately it was a safe space. It's just another form of safety, isn't it, allowing those young people to come in and use the Wi-Fi or stay warm or dry? It's another way of providing that safe environment that eventually, for most people, will allow them to go off and explore the art.

DH: Final question for each of you. We're here celebrating 80 years of the Arts Council. If you were to look into your crystal balls, 80 years from now, what will art centres look like? What will they do? What will their impact be?

DM: They'll continue to sit at the core of their communities, and be a place for local creative interaction, whether that's incubating artists and ideas, or just building safe spaces for people to debate. The technologies will change, but I think they'll still have a range of engagements across art forms. It feels to me like there's a slow development of a more inclusive, democratised management practice in arts centres, where they're moving to a much greater engagement of the community in the way that they're run. I think that tide is unstoppable.

AT: I'd like them to be seen as places of artistic innovation, because of their openness to blending art forms and disciplines, but also innovation in how you make art; how you manage a space that enables people to come in and experience art.

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That's also, of course, shaped by the people that come there, whether that's audiences or participants or artists. That diversity hopefully will be really changing how art looks.

JP: I think there's this increasingly important role in climate and transition and local community resilience; keeping us all safe in some way, and helping us dream. I've articulated quite a pessimistic view of what the next 20 or 30 years look like, but perhaps what I haven't articulated is that, beyond that, I have a really optimistic view. I genuinely feel we're going to go through some turbulent times: the trouble is going to be bad. But on the other side of that, if we're not all floating in the Atlantic or cooped up in ChatGPT hell, will be a new version of how humanity discovers itself and behaves. And I think the way arts centres work – their practices, the way they work with the community, the care, dignity, relationships, all of these things – it's almost like they're practising some of that way of living differently. Rehearsing it, perhaps. So if the last 80 years have been about participation and access to culture, maybe the next 80 are about how culture becomes a means to reimagine how we live.

DH: Jess, Dave, Annabel, thank you.

slalom

Daljit Nagra

where are your mystical sympathies
for the elevated earth, the enchanters
you love for their rhymes of holy dome
so each coffin seems lit for reprieve

you believe in the irretrievabilities
of sinew when your dearest disappear
in the mist, the loss that can sieve daybreaks
shimmerless in the pan

than a rankle with high talk and heyday
mansions of the air, the lionized

sooner laud the ballet tuck at the barre
the young muddy studs in a slalom drill
the pen licence of a newborn blue
with which you'd still babble the sky salmon

SOCIETY



The Case For Culture

Six Good Economic Reasons For Public Investment

*We underestimate the economic value of the arts and culture, argues **Nigel Higgins**, chair of Barclays and of Sadler's Wells, as he outlines six areas of direct material economic impact from the performing arts, and the positive economics of the wider impact of the arts and culture on society.*

PUBLIC POLICY DEBATE TODAY is often characterised by consensus in diagnosing problems and a wide range of conflicting opinions on the appropriate solutions, reflecting the breadth and often acerbic nature of the political spectrum. The crisis in the funding of culture, and the performing arts specifically (which I will focus on here), is different. There is a reasonable consensus on the things that could be done to secure the financial future of the many organisations that contribute to the arts and culture in Britain. What seems to be missing is a consensus as to whether this matters enough for government, and society as a whole, to do something about it.

The UK now spends one of the lowest percentages of GDP on the arts of all countries in Europe,¹ a fact noted in Baroness Margaret Hodge's recent Independent Review of the Arts Council. It is a paltry sum: central government spending on the arts and culture is equivalent to just ten bat

tunnels under HS2.² Baroness Hodge makes the case for a strong and independent Arts Council in a very straightforward manner and sets out a wide menu of courses to follow in order to improve its impact and efficacy, something which every organisation needs from time to time. The question however remains as to whether, as she also recommends, the money will be found to put the funding of the arts and culture on a richer, more secure and consistent footing. The Arts Council is right to make rising to this challenge, working with DCMS and HM Treasury, one of its five priorities in its response to the Review.

There is a myriad of arguments to support the answer ‘yes!’ to the question of whether the performing arts should be properly funded. They lie at the beating heart of our societies – local, regional, national, international – both shaping and reflecting them. They inspire us, comfort us, make us think, develop our empathy and deepen our social connections. Although all these arguments should be considered when policy decisions are made, for the purposes of this essay, I am addressing the question of the *economic* case for investment in the performing arts, leaving the poetry to others.

This case is not complicated to make. I will set out six good reasons as to why the economics are compelling.

First, however, a word on data – or rather the lack of a consistent and compelling pool of available numbers and methodologies to underpin the economic case for cultural investment. There is no clear consensus as to how best to measure the output of the cultural sector, nor even a clear definition of what ‘the sector’ constitutes (SIC codes are variously regarded as imperfect and/or inconsistently followed). Discussions and papers can move apparently seamlessly between the Creative Industries and the arts and culture, with performing arts somewhere in the mix as a small part of the whole. In this piece, I try where possible to focus on the

performing arts, and specifically, where data is readily accessible, the not-for-profit performing arts, given their density of cultural gross value added (GVA) and employment. This is not to diminish the overwhelming importance of the Creative Industries generally, nor their interdependencies with the wider arts and culture ecosystem – but it is the case that they are dominated by for-profit organisations involved in everything from software to film, video games and online entertainment. Nor is it to diminish the importance of the for-profit performing arts sector in the West End and around the country. But I am focusing here on the impact and benefit of *public* investment which takes us, at least initially, to the realm of the publicly funded performing arts.

Having defined which part of the cultural economy we are talking about, do we focus on contribution to GDP, GVA, revenues, employment (direct and indirect etc) or some combination of these? There are lots of good studies available (see the non-exhaustive bibliography below) but organisations and their researchers tend to use different models, and the methodology behind them is not always public or at least easily accessible. And if we want to make the case for investment, where can we find measures of return on (central and local) government investment, making sure that those capture not just economic activity but also returns to the government through all sorts of taxes? Too often, large numbers are bandied around without rigour, or without any statement of the investment needed to get to those large numbers, making calculation of returns challenging.

This is complex territory and it would be more easily navigated if the not-for-profit performing arts had a dedicated advocacy/trade body that could help pull the data, and the arguments, together – with vital assistance, of course, from the Arts Council and DCMS, HM Treasury, and the great organisations and individuals who specialise in this area (several of whom have helped me for this piece with their insights).

Notwithstanding all these caveats around the data, the case for investment in the performing arts is clear, compelling and easily made. Turning then to the six good reasons...

First, *the level of economic activity is material*. The wider arts sector contributes GVA of £29bn, or £49bn including suppliers.³ That is equivalent to one quarter of the GVA contribution of the financial sector, one of the largest and most lauded contributors to the economy, and more than that of the life sciences.⁴ Music, performing and visual arts alone generate GVA of £11.2bn,⁵ nearly 10% of the total for the Creative Industries. Getting to a GVA number for the performing arts and the not-for-profit subset of that is unfortunately not straightforward; at best, from outside the government's data collection machine, you get a patchwork of numbers for different sub-sectors. For instance, for the commercial performing arts sector only, we have a direct GVA estimate of circa £2.5bn back in around 2016,⁶ and for the UK theatre ecosystem, commercial and subsidised, of £2.4bn (direct, indirect and induced) a few years later.⁷ These are big numbers but, when it comes to grasping the scale of economic activity, it may be easier to relate to concrete calculations of revenue. The performing arts generate £10bn;⁸ the theatre ecosystem generates direct, indirect and induced turnover of £4.4bn;⁹ and the National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) alone earn income of £1.3bn.¹⁰ The government raises £4.9bn in taxes on employment and VAT from the activities of the publicly funded arts and culture sector.¹¹ It is also worth keeping in mind the sheer scale of the broadest definition of Creative Industries because we will return to the question of interdependencies and the argument that that sector, with well north of £100bn of GVA contribution to the UK economy and higher than average productivity,¹² benefits in a still-hard-to-quantify way from the generation of talent, from the artistic to the digital, in the performing arts world.

Secondly, you have *employment*. Music, performing and

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visual arts employ 283,000 people, 12% of the total in the Creative Industries.¹³ In the theatre ecosystem alone, UK Theatre/SOLT¹⁴ identify around 135,000 direct workers (of whom 70% are freelancers/self-employed), plus another 40,000 in the supply chain, and over 30,000 in work as a result of induced spending.¹⁵ With multiplier effects across the music, performing and visual arts spectrum, we are talking about government investment being part of a support system for some 500,000 livelihoods. A recent study by McKinsey,¹⁶ based on a wider definition of the UK arts sector, identified 970,000 workers in the arts, roughly one third of whom were self-employed, and 139,000 enterprises of which 95% were sole traders or micro enterprises of fewer than ten employees. However we define the sector and look at the numbers, this is material. Equally importantly, the arts have one of the highest SME concentrations of any economic sector and nearly three times the average rate of self-employment.¹⁷ This flexibility, and the applicability of skills to many tasks, contribute to the cross-fertilisation essential to the arts and culture ecosystem,¹⁸ as well as providing people with the opportunity to diversify and enlarge their portfolios of activities: an important buttress against the inherent precarity of much work in the cultural sector.

Thirdly, *the impacts are wide*. Available assessments (whether looking at revenues or GVA) point to a multiplier effect of approximately 2.1x, meaning that for every £1 of activity a total of over £2 is contributed to aggregate national turnover or GVA^{19,20} (these estimates tend to cover broad groups such as arts and culture or the theatre ecosystem because the indirect and induced impacts of the performing arts sector on the UK economy cannot be easily disaggregated from wider cultural life).

These multiplier effects take several forms. All organisations have a supply chain and in the arts, the supply chain is one of real talent, from engineers to set designers, to accountants and

lawyers. The performing arts, importantly led by the subsidised sector as a beacon of excellence, are acknowledged to be a material factor in encouraging overseas visitors to Britain, yet this impact is not always included in the standard multiplier calculations; including revenue generated within the tourism-related industries by non-local (meaning both UK and international) visitors/audiences would take the multiplier effect to nearer 3.0x.²¹ Tourism contributes £48bn in direct GVA and £106bn including indirect impacts to the UK economy and, while we cannot prove the reasons for visitors to come, four in five London visitors cite ‘culture’ as the main reason (we cannot of course break that down between heritage, museums, and performing arts).²² In employment, estimates suggest that for every job in the arts and culture industry, an additional 1.6 jobs are created.²³ Again the data is challenging, causation is difficult to prove and public and private value creation are co-mingled. However, it is indisputable that the economic benefits of sector activity go well beyond the supply chain, the spending power of those employed directly and indirectly in the sector and attracting overseas visitors; all this is well set out in the ACE report from April 2025 *Spillover impacts in the publicly funded arts and culture sector*.²⁴

There are other important multiplier effects at work when you look at the sector, which takes us to *philanthropy*, the fourth good economic reason for supporting the performing arts. Philanthropy does more than help fill the funding gap. Organisations raise funds from individuals in particular to underpin the creative risk-taking which lies at the heart of the vitality of the sector. This money is a gift to society, and just because it is free does not mean that it is not immensely valuable. Nor is it guaranteed; performing arts charities engaged in fundraising seek and need artistic and organisational credibility, and for that, government support can be critical. Philanthropic contributions to creative and cultural non-

profit organisations within the Arts Council's remit²⁵ total £948m annually, of which £357m goes to the NPOs.²⁶ The ACE report *Leading the Crowd* sets out very clearly the role of public investment in 'crowding in'; in other words, fuelling private contributions to the arts. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of capital projects where public funding de-risks investment and forms the foundation on which a fundraising campaign can be built – but it is true also when it comes to annual revenue grants. Although the average suggests that private funding is only around just under a quarter of all revenue for the organisations surveyed and around 15% for all NPOs, a higher proportion is generated by the principally London-based leading NPOs, reflecting the greater wealth in the southeast of England.²⁷ In the case of the organisation which I have the privilege to chair, Sadler's Wells – 26 years ago the beneficiary of one of the first National Lottery grants for the new theatre in Islington, London – we benefit from around £6.2m of Arts Council support and raise approximately £3.6m from philanthropy.²⁸ In my experience, the long tail of private individuals and trusts and foundations which are so generous to the performing arts regard the support of government as a kind of kitemark indicating a level of artistic excellence and governance probity that make it 'safe' to support such organisations.

Fifthly, *these multiplier effects multiply themselves, and throughout the country, whether in placemaking or skills development.* This is most obviously the case with regional regeneration projects and festivals. Government investment in places and projects such as the South Bank in London, the Lowry and the biennial Manchester International Festival, the Liverpool Biennial, the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, and East Bank in Stratford (the fastest growing culture and education district globally) has generated local revenues, created jobs and attracted visitors, with an overall economic benefit that dwarfs the cost of the initial public investment²⁹ – and in some cases

underpins a step change in the economic, as well as social, vibrancy of previously disadvantaged parts of Britain. At Sadler's Wells in Stratford in the East End of London, half of the employees come from the local community and, since 2017, we have had some 50 interns or apprentices, of whom all are now in employment, 88% of them in the Creative Industries. The theatre both represents the success of the Stratford regeneration and acts as a catalyst for its continuing success. In an economy such as ours, where we need more jobs where housing is more affordable than within the M25, capital investment in culture is invaluable. Indeed, there is a strong argument that no place is truly vibrant without an active arts and culture scene, an argument that underpins approaches to place-based creative policymaking and indeed the case for creative corridors in the UK.

Those five reasons should, in themselves, be more than enough, but we haven't even touched upon what may well be the biggest multiplier effect of all, albeit the hardest to measure and to prove. The *connectivities nurtured within the publicly funded cultural sector* drive the success of the Creative Industries – in their widest sense responsible for 2.4m jobs, 5.5% of GDP, 10% of all high growth potential firms³⁰ and 14.6% of service exports.³¹ The Creative Industries benefit incalculably from the talents that exist and skills development that takes place in the performing arts – whether drama, dance, music and indeed the wider arts sector – and sparked in the first place by public funding and education. We should think of the not-for-profit performing arts and in fact cultural institutions generally as a kind of R&D lab, allowing people to transfer their creative skills and networks to new working milieus,³² in the commercial performing arts and beyond in the wider Creative Industries. The crossover of skills is particularly apparent in video gaming or what is now called CreaTech (creative businesses developing new technologies) but there is also emerging research to illustrate the role of social networks,

including networks of skilled freelancers, around arts and culture in the development of clusters of broader creative industry economic activity.³³ In a country where skill-building has long been a challenge, this is invaluable. Demand for the creativity and interpersonal skills fostered in the arts is reckoned likely to grow by over 25% in coming decades.³⁴

The life- and value-enhancing connectivities of the arts and culture ecosystem are the central theme of the McKinsey report referred to earlier³⁵ – but more research is needed in this area. We have plenty of *stories* of skilled workers – technical, digital, artistic – working within the Creative Industries ecosystem, and some good work on talent flow in the theatre world,³⁶ but it would be good to stimulate more comprehensive research on the *data*, such as a census of workers in the Creative Industries, to quantify *connectivities and career paths within that ecosystem*. These connectivities constitute the sixth and most compelling national economic benefit from the arts, and arts education in particular.

The six good reasons above, collectively and individually, are powerful indicators of the economic importance of the arts and culture. However, do all these visible if hard-to-calculate effects amount to a strong economic *case for public investment* in the performing arts? Here there are two questions – causality and rate of return. While *government investment is foundational to the success of the performing arts and creates value way ahead of the support provided*, these are nonetheless legitimate challenges to the cultural investment case. It has surprised me how often papers on the economic contribution of the arts fail to address them. We would not make the case for a new railway without examining its benefits relative to its costs (and if we could learn to calculate the costs properly we might not always build that railway). In the performing arts, we cannot *prove* that the level of activity is a direct result of government investment in culture nor can we *prove* that the absence of such investment would significantly diminish the

sector, but it is hard to imagine how the success of the performing arts would continue without the multiple layers of central and local government support – whether in supporting specialist education and training institutions, investing in flagship organisations across drama, music, opera, and dance, lending material support to cutting edge arts initiatives up and down the country and perhaps most compellingly, kickstarting regional cultural development initiatives as itemised above. This investment should be seen as a conscious decision to provide seed capital for a vibrant sector, not as a subsidy – but can we also measure the returns?

The economic impact numbers, whether measured through revenue, GVA or employment, can be set beside central government investment in arts and culture of approximately £1.05bn³⁷ (comprising £548m ACE Grant-in-Aid,³⁸ £188m ACE National Lottery grants,³⁹ £311m in theatre and orchestra tax reliefs⁴⁰ and other funds). Local authority revenue and capital expenditure for the performing arts is harder to quantify but clearly declining at a pace. In 2023/24 local authorities' revenue expenditure was just under £1.0bn⁴¹ to support archives, arts support, heritage, libraries, museums and galleries, theatre and entertainment, with only a proportion of this directly supporting not-for-profit performing arts. Again it is hard to align all the data; for instance, commercial theatres receive theatre tax relief, so any measure of return on investment for the performing arts should logically include the commercial sector too. It is perhaps easier to illustrate the return on investment with confidence by looking at the numbers for the NPOs under the ACE umbrella. In the current National Portfolio, which began in 2023, NPOs collectively receive £446m⁴² each year and generate £1.35bn of GVA. One recent study, commissioned by ACE, looks at this question in detail and measures, amongst other things, the impact of an enhancement to theatre tax relief on economic activity, identifying a GVA benefit-to-cost

ratio of 4.5 to one.⁴³ So not only do the performing arts contribute material sums (direct, indirect and induced) to GVA, and employ thousands, but we can also point to the relationship between these benefits and government investment and to the *positive economic returns on that investment*, even though the sector, in partnership with the Arts Council, needs to do a more consistent job of properly analysing and quantifying these effects.

All of that is of course just the numbers talking. We know that the case for supporting the performing arts rests on much more than the coldness of accounting. But enriching lives, improving health and wellbeing, fuelling creativity, meeting the aspirations of hundreds of thousands and providing pleasure to millions have a numbers dimension, too. If the purpose of the arts is to ‘wash the dust of daily life off our souls’⁴⁴ let’s not ignore the economic benefits of that enlightening and purifying experience. That we should not put a price on the role of culture in our lives does not mean that its societal value is non-economic. This is what I call *the ‘moral economic case’*. As eloquently put by both the Secretary of State and the Chief Executive of the Arts Council, ‘talent is everywhere, opportunity is not’⁴⁵; it follows from this that government and society need to provide opportunities for all, including those whose brains and bodies are more wired to dance than to computer science (there is no space here to develop the specific case for deeper and more consistent funding of performing arts education, a separate tale of under-investment in itself).⁴⁶ Supporting the performing arts reduces social inequalities, opening up routes to meaningful activity and paid livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people – livelihoods, by the way, which are likely because of their high dose of creativity to be more resilient than most to the march of the machine over coming decades.⁴⁷ While the prevailing narrative suggests the advent of artificial intelligence will prioritise technical and STEM skills at the expense of others,

in the longer term the creative skills nurtured through the performing arts (from storytelling to ethical judgement) may provide a point of resilience. Not only will human creativity become a source of valuable differentiation in an AI-led economy, but the Creative Industries train skills that are simply harder to automate.

Furthermore, and as in sport, many of the performing arts offer the physical activity so crucial in a sedentary world. In fact, dance has been shown to outperform other forms of exercise in improving health and wellbeing.⁴⁸ Helping people thrive at what they love or do best delivers physical and mental health benefits which recent DCMS/Frontier Economics research values at £8bn (perhaps four times government investment in the performing arts).⁴⁹ This research is supported by on-the-ground studies in Rotherham and Brighton, which directly connect prescribed cultural initiatives to a reduction in GP appointments and A&E attendance.⁵⁰ As Professor Daisy Fancourt puts it: ‘Can you imagine if a drug had the same catalogue of benefits as the arts? We would be... investing trillions into further research and development’.⁵¹ To take dance, one of the most accessible and popular art forms, nearly 5m people in England participate in community dance annually and the communities with the highest levels of participation report higher than average levels of well-being and social cohesion.⁵² At Sadler’s Wells, more than 30,000 people aged between two and 90 take part in our community engagement programmes every year, increasingly up and down the country. Looking only at the obvious economic benefits leaves out all these positive impacts – on skill-building, people, communities, and places – and yet there is also a real *economic* benefit to getting these things right, and certainly a material opportunity cost to not doing so.

Britain today faces many challenges and aspires to do better in many fields, including some in which we find ourselves a way behind our international competition. The

Creative Industries are not such an area, growing one and a half times faster than the wider economy.⁵³ Nor are the performing arts. In fact, they are an area of national strength – look at the music, dance and drama conservatoires, the depth of the theatre world,⁵⁴ festivals including the world's largest theatrical arts festival,⁵⁵ the British stars who have made it internationally, the creativity that wends its way into the worlds of film and digital. If we invest in the performing arts, and the cultural sector more widely, we will be investing in an activity that we know we do well, one that is not just societally invaluable but fundamentally employment-rich and economically productive. The economic case for cultural investment is clear. I suggest we act on it.

Acknowledgements

I am responsible for all errors or poor generalisations in this piece. I am grateful to many more expert than me who have given me their time: Professor Hasan Bakhshi, Ross Burnett, Eliza Easton, Andy Haldane and Martin Prendergast. In addition, I have benefited enormously from the help of Matira Wheeler (Head of Advocacy, Sadler's Wells), Sir Alistair Spalding and Britannia Morton (Co-Chief Executives, Sadler's Wells), and several of my fellow Trustees at Sadler's Wells, Maria Albonico, Clare Connor (also Chief Executive of The Place) and Baroness Thangam Debbonaire.

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Whose Art?

50 Years On From The Arts Britain Ignores

*Half a century after the publication of Naseem Khan's seminal report into the 'the arts of ethnic minorities in Britain', journalist and arts consultant **Amanda Parker** reflects on the report's legacy and the progress it drove – and proposes alternative strategies for increasing equity in arts and cultural funding.*

FOR THOUSANDS OF BRITISH PEOPLE, Naseem's Khan's report, *The Arts Britain Ignores: the arts of ethnic minorities in Britain*, commissioned by Arts Council England in 1976, is almost as significant a work as Jennie Lee's White Paper, 'A Policy for the Arts', published a decade earlier. But unlike Lee's paper, neither Khan's report nor her recommendations have received unequivocal support across the cultural sector.

Lee's White Paper is widely seen as having fired the starting pistol for an expanded and embedded approach to public funding of the arts, and for government investment in cultural infrastructure. It persuaded the Labour government of 1965 both to recognise arts and cultural production as a public good, and to invest in its growth; and it remains easily accessible online, alongside the reflections of various arts organisations on its contents. Its impact was – and is – profound: the annual Jennie Lee Lecture, most recently

delivered by the National Theatre's Artistic Director Indhu Rubasingham, is proof of its ongoing relevance to the fundamentals of arts funding.

Naseem Khan's report, on the other hand, proposed that government consider the specificity of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity within the wider cultural infrastructure. It made the case for a national acknowledgement of, and investment in, arts and culture produced by ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse communities living in the UK.

But where Lee's paper continues to inform policy and debate, Khan's has slipped from view. The report's title turns out to have been both prescient and ironic: as I write, it is out of print, and unavailable to read or purchase online. There are no copies for sale in the UK, Europe, the US or Africa, nor could I get hold of one from dealers in out-of-print books. Only a small handful of UK university libraries hold a copy; I eventually sourced mine from a US university. *The Arts Britain Ignores*, indeed.

It's unsurprising that a government minister's archives are better maintained than a journalist's. But it *is* surprising that Khan's work is *this* hard to get hold of, given its seminal contribution to an ongoing dialogue about the funding of culture in multicultural Britain. Cynics might argue that its inaccessibility is emblematic of the arts and cultural sector's current position on inclusion of ethnic diversity: frequently discussed, but slippery to pin down. Half a century on from the publication of *The Arts Britain Ignores*, I want to explore the impact and legacy of Khan's report, and its relevance today.

Before giving my thoughts, however, I want to acknowledge the debt this essay owes to others. While Khan's report itself is hard to obtain, reflections on it are easily available online, and highly recommended. A 2024 blog by White Pube, a collective of artists who centre the perspectives and politics of ethnically diverse and marginalised artists in their work and writing,

informed my thinking. I also want to give credit to conceptual artist Rasheed Araeen, who published a response in 1984, and to Jerri Daboo's 2016 provocation paper. My reflections unapologetically and gratefully lean into the arguments contained in these writings. Whilst I strive not to duplicate their points, the nature of the enquiries in common mean there will unavoidably be overlap. Where I've quoted from other sources, I've used the terminology used by the author(s).



In its preface to Khan's report, Arts Council England set out the context for the commission. 'Migration into Britain has introduced cultures new to our society, but we have paid little attention to the contribution they are making to our artistic life,' it says. 'Because of this, we asked Naseem Khan to investigate the actual and potential contribution of ethnic minorities to contemporary British culture.'

The Arts Britain Ignores is Khan's response. It's an enquiry into the grassroots activity created by, for, and about a wide and diverse range of minority-ethnic communities living in the UK: cultural activity that, at the time of publication, was largely unsupported by public funding. It contains in-depth field research, including in several Asian countries and the Caribbean as well as throughout Europe – a serious and extensive feat which also highlights the decline of arts research funding available in the years since publication.

The report focuses on community-based and grassroots art – meaning any reflection on professional artistic practice, which would be critical to considerations of arts funding today, is beyond its scope. Thus, it unwittingly exemplifies a conflation that remains today: whilst community-based, grassroots arts activity is of vital importance to the wider cultural sector, and faces financial and infrastructural constraints, 'community arts' is not synonymous with what Khan might term 'ethnic arts'.

While some migrant artists, and those with diaspora heritage, work in or are concerned with community-based, grassroots arts-making, this is far from true for all. Yet, years after Khan's report, debates about ethnicity and cultural engagement are frequently, lazily framed around grassroots, community-based activity. This inaccurate conflation adds to the barriers experienced by artists seeking to access funding and opportunities in mainstream and commercial arts and culture.

Terminology Then and Now – and Why it Matters

As society evolves, so does language. Funding distribution reflects these changes, especially in straitened economies. The 'hierarchy of priority' is never more prevalent than when public funding is constrained.

Khan's report refers throughout to 'ethnic minorities'. Since its publication, commentators have questioned the use of the term 'ethnic', with some finding the fusion of European, African and Asian migrant experiences problematic (the report confines itself to these continents). More recent dialogues about diversity in arts and culture might question the use of the term 'minorities': the 'global majority' is one of several terms used today. Terminology reflects the perpetually evolving nature of language and societal perspectives.

In Khan's introduction, she acknowledges feedback from communities who felt misunderstood and inadequately represented in the report. This critique still resonates for many working in the arts; there's ongoing debate over the degree to which funding for ethnically diverse creatives should reflect the experiences of recent *migration*, or the impact of *racialisation*. As an example, Khan's report references proposed support of work made by displaced Europeans in the UK. A similar undercurrent remains today: there's disparity of opinion on whether cultural and ethnic visibility or assimilation in white, English-speaking, mainstream cultural environments should

be reflected in decisions regarding access to arts funding and infrastructure support.

Arts policy continues to shift between different objectives: advancing multi-culturalism, promulgating inclusion, and addressing anti-racism are frequently used as interchangeable concepts. But with shifts in terminology come shifts in priority, urgency, and focus. The context of arts funding for diverse communities is arguably more complex today than in 1976.

Is ‘The Arts Britain Ignores’ Relevant Today?

Khan’s report landed at a time when politicians and policymakers were applying financial resource and intellectual flexibility to the needs of a reconfigured, post-war Britain.

In 1976, mass-migrancy to the UK included people from newly-independent nations: Bangladesh was five years old; Jamaica a teenager. But mass migration was not confined to Britain’s recent and former colonies. It’s estimated that over 30,000 Ukrainians settled in the UK in the years immediately after the end of the war,¹ and the Polish Resettlement Bill – the first mass immigration legislation passed by the UK Parliament – was drawn up in 1946. It offered more than 220,000 Poles the option to remain in the United Kingdom (around half chose to stay).

The nation’s leaders viewed mass-migration as an aid to national recovery. Cross-government efforts included programmes to build not just production, but social cohesion: as well as advocating for Arts Council funding, Khan’s report confidently recommends that support for the arts should include disbursements from the Home Office and Foreign Office; from the (then) Race Relations Commission; within local authority funding; and in education and youth services provision. It’s a recommendation that today’s arts lobbyists would hardly dare articulate.

In her report, Khan notes that, ‘only 2.5% of the adult working population is non-British’. Britain looks very different now. The most recent census (2021) confirms 16% of the UK population to be non-UK born. Almost 76% of the UK identifies as White British – some 24% of the population does not.

This significantly increased percentage illustrates Britain’s ethnic and cultural diversity today – and at first glance, the percentages may seem to suggest that Khan’s report is more relevant than ever. I believe, however, that it evidences a more compelling – and entirely contrary – point: that in fact, Britain’s demographic changes render moot the argument for funding of ‘ethnic arts’ as a discrete category. It would be hard to justify public funding of cultural activity that excludes or ignores almost a quarter of the population.

Legacy and Impact

So where did *The Arts Britain Ignores* get us? Its most enduring impact is that it successfully – and critically – provided ACE with the impetus to address its engagement with community groups.

The recognition and funding of community-based arts-making is Khan’s central legacy. Even today, it echoes through arts funding policy: Arts Council England’s 2020 strategy, *Let’s Create*, puts community-based creativity on the same footing as professional practice, recommending ‘the creativity of each of us’ be valued and supported to flourish. It can be argued that Khan prepared the ground for Arts Council England’s facilitation (through funding) of collaborations between professional and community-based, often non-professional arts practitioners.

Khan was also one of the first people to document multicultural creative activity and lobby for investment and support for ethnically diverse creatives (she went on to lead

the Minority Arts Advisory Service (MAAS), the UK's first advisory network for ethnically diverse creatives).

And she prefigured recognition of artistic excellence in culturally and ethnically diverse practitioners. In reporting on classical Indian music and dance, and arguing for British-based practitioners to have increased access to India-based artists, Khan sowed the seeds for UK policymakers to broaden their perceptions of who, or what, comprises world-leading creative talent.

How Diverse are the Arts Today?

Many of the changes Khan anticipated or advocated for are visible in the cultural sector we have today. Contemporary mainstream arts production includes art made by, with and for those with a wide range of cultural, religious and ethnic heritages. Publicly funded arts organisations routinely programme ethnically diverse artists; there's high visibility of ethnically diverse creatives and creativity across mainstream venues and in big-ticket productions in all disciplines, especially in on-stage roles.

We also now see state-funded provision for arts specific to migrant communities, reflecting languages, practices and cultures distinct from the UK's ethnic majority. One such example, Teatro Technis, was referenced by Khan as an important venue for the UK's Cypriot community. As of 2026, there are plans for a multi-million pound redevelopment of the venue to form a 'national Cypriot theatre'.

And the composition of the cultural workforce has changed in the 50 years since *The Arts Britain Ignores*. UK Music's 2024 Workforce Diversity Survey confirms, for example, that Black, Asian and ethnically diverse representation across the music industry has risen from 15.6% in 2016 to 25.2% in 2024.

There are more diverse arts leaders than ever: the number

of National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) with a Black, Asian or ethnically diverse chief executive rose from 10% in 2018/19 to 20% in 2022/23 – doubling within a single portfolio period. The proportion of ethnically diverse artistic directors also increased, from 11% to 15%.

And there's evidence of increased participation by ethnically diverse individuals in arts and culture. The government's primary evidence base for arts and cultural policy is its DCMS Participation Survey. The record for 2024–25 suggests adults from the Black African (42%) and Black Caribbean (43%) ethnic groups are more likely to engage with the arts digitally than the England average of 35%.

But while these gains are impressive and worthy of celebration, it's debatable whether today's diverse cultural landscape can be said to constitute a direct legacy of Khan's report – not least because of her focus on community arts, rather than all arts participation and engagement.

The Legacy of Omission

Because it concerns itself with community and volunteer-led activity, *The Arts Britain Ignores* didn't interrogate the experiences of professional arts practice. Nor did it analyse the cultural, religious or ethnic diversity of those decision-makers who facilitate the growth of cultural activity; there's no mention, for example, of how diversity in leadership and decision-making roles might affect funding decisions.

This community focus, as White Pube eloquently points out, leaves space for stasis, obviating dialogue about how ethnic diversity in arts leadership and funding decision-making might influence investment and infrastructure support of artists with cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds different from those of the majority of (still) predominantly white leaders and decision-makers.

In Rasheed Araeen's 1984 response to Khan's report, he acknowledges her valuable contribution in persuading Arts Council England to recognise and value community arts – but he also notes that she does not respond to the Arts Council's brief to 'investigate the actual and potential contribution of ethnic minorities to contemporary British culture'.

Why does this matter? Because, by diverging from the brief, Khan's findings, laudable and relevant as they were, inadvertently perpetuated a patrician, paternalistic, quasi-colonial view of the cultures of those migrant communities – one that lingers today. It presents a landscape of creativity that looks to its geographical forebears, retaining and possibly preserving practices indigenous to the lands from which diaspora communities originate. It doesn't recognise the potential (and actuality) of original creative practices which are born from diaspora experiences, but are neither confined to nor defined by them. It misses an opportunity to examine the contribution to contemporary British culture that these recent migrants could make *as part of that British culture*, with the right investment and infrastructure. And this omission has ramifications 50 years on.

In this sense, Khan's reports unwittingly prepared the ground for a systemic reinforcement of marginalisation, brought about by an absence of strategy to incorporate these new cultural perspectives into the funding and governance structures of Arts Council England, and of arts leadership more widely.

Diversity and Cultural Provision Today

Despite comprising almost a quarter of the population, the experiences of British people of diverse ethnic and cultural heritage differ from the experiences of their white British counterparts – across creative production, cultural consumption and engagement, arts funding, and infrastructure support. This

difference is most stark amongst racialised communities.

Moreover, while ethnic diversity is a common aspect of British society today, it is not an uncontested aspect. In recent years, the UK has experienced a rise in religious and ethnic intolerance, demonstrated in polls, mass demonstrations, and widely documented downgrading of business activity aimed at increasing diversity in the workplace. Diversity, equality, equity and inclusion have, in the years since Khan's work, become politically contested, as has the debate around arts and culture. When Khan was writing, the notion of 'identity politics' was not explored in the public domain in the way that it is now. The Arts Council itself faces more scrutiny of its decisions and operations than ever before.

Infrastructure Imbalance

Disproportionate disparities can be seen in the limited investment in infrastructure available to ethnically diverse arts organisations, and through the challenges many experience in securing suitable premises and local authority investment. Arts Council England's own data confirms ethnically diverse art makers are less likely to have their own venues or performance spaces.

Research commissioned by the Greater London Authority on barriers faced by underrepresented groups in securing and sustaining space confirms organisations led by underrepresented communities, including ethnically diverse leaders, struggle to secure long-term, affordable premises, which in turn undermines their eligibility and competitiveness for public funding.² London's largest black-owned music venue, Soul Mama, was set up not through public investment but through crowdfunding from African diaspora communities – just as was the case for the arts centres for ethnically diverse communities founded in Khan's time.

Artists and Visibility

Artists from ethnically diverse backgrounds are vastly more visible today than at the time of Khan's report: one can list a plethora of first, second, third and fourth-generation visual artists who, since 1976, have become world leaders in their craft. But this is often in spite of, rather than because of, investment. And they have encountered other barriers, too – producing culturally significant works despite paradoxical constraints of being considered 'too Black', 'not Asian enough' or 'not African enough' by funders and, at times, audiences, on account of their appeal beyond minority communities.

There are legions of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Middle-Eastern practitioners, who've found themselves snagged, and their careers adversely affected, by the patrician paradigms and paternalistic confines of funding bodies and decision-makers.

There are also those performers who have begun careers in the UK but, when the UK has failed to invest in their skills, have gone on to success in the US and elsewhere. One of many such examples is RADA-trained Marianne Jean-Baptiste, who recently performed in UK theatres after a ten-year hiatus, while enjoying an award-winning screen career in the US.

Visibility, in short, doesn't tell the full story.

Workforce Disparity

Analysis of the UK workforce by Creative UK³ found that 17.3% of the creative industries workforce is not white, comparing favourably to the 15.9% of ethnically diverse labour in the wider UK workforce. But the data here is for the creative industries, as opposed to the cultural sector specifically, where just 12% of the workforce is not white – a figure that's well below the national workforce average. In museums,

meanwhile, only 6% of workers identify as Black, Asian or ethnically diverse – with curators from ethnically diverse backgrounds forming an even smaller fraction.

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre's 2021 report confirms the existence of a White, middle- or upper-class, frequently privately educated, cultural workforce. The prevalence of unpaid or low-paying jobs, and the comparatively informal nature of hiring in arts and culture, where social capital and networks are significant factors in career progression,⁴ contribute to this cultural hegemony.

The Leadership Gap

And while the arts workforce has become more ethnically diverse over time, progress is less evident in positions of authority. Leadership of arts and cultural organisations and venues remains predominantly white, at levels disproportionate to the diversity of the UK's workforce.

Creative UK's Diversity Leaders report, pooling data across cultural subsectors, shows significant underrepresentation of ethnic minority leaders in senior roles (for example, only 9.8% of managers and directors across the cultural sector are from ethnic minority backgrounds against 15.9% of the UK workforce).

Where diverse leadership exists, those leaders commonly work in organisations that are project-funded, rather than in receipt of core funding. Diverse-led arts organisations that have sustained funding, meanwhile, tend to receive funding at the lower levels of investment funding tiers.

The Funding Gap

There's an undercurrent of paternalism in Khan's report that is entirely absent from her findings and recommendations, but which reflects the context in which she wrote. The legacy of

that paternalistic thinking can be seen most vividly today in the asymmetry of funding disbursement decisions.

Analysis of Arts Council England's diversity reporting data⁵ confirms ethnically diverse-led organisations received a smaller share of longer-term investment in the decade 2010 – 2020. Less than 3% of NPO funding went to organisations led by Black, Asian or minority ethnic creatives.

Arts Council England's conditions for funding include requirements for grant recipients to support ACE's ambitions in removing barriers that discourage access to creativity and culture.⁶ Research data suggests larger, more economically resilient organisations show a lower commitment to diversity than smaller and less resilient organisations, which appear to bear a heavier burden than legacy institutions in catering to groups traditionally excluded and underrepresented in the arts. There is little incentive in current funding criteria for the larger organisations to make meaningful change at scale.

As the toughening economic climate results in falling public investment in culture, it's become increasingly critical that arts organisations seek alternative funding where possible. But a growing emphasis on philanthropic investment also reinforces the disproportionate access to funding and infrastructure: while creative success continues to be linked to the aesthetic values of (predominantly) white elites, the inequity of resource concentration will be reinforced.

In summary, the inequity of access and opportunity – through infrastructure support and funding; through employment and engagement – continues to sustain an environment in which ethnically diverse artists feel if not ignored, then overlooked, marginalised or pigeonholed.

The Future

What is most striking about Khan's report now, 50 years on from its publication, is her hope that the findings would be

implemented, and that the report wouldn't become one of many that ended up gathering dust on a shelf. In the last decade alone, more than fifteen reports relating to diversity, equality and inclusion have been commissioned or written by ACE, and are available on its website.

What, then, might the next 50 years bring?

The UK might shift cultural focus, and arts funding might follow. Continued migration to the UK and increased digital connectivity may serve to decrease prevailing Western-centric perceptions of cultural value. Korean arts, for example, have not been a priority in cultural funding over the last twenty years, but they continue to strongly influence the mainstream aesthetic, and build commercial success.

Alternatively, the UK might shift political focus, and arts funding could face further challenges. Compared with their predominantly white peers in larger scale organisations, UK arts organisations which have ethnically diverse programming and leadership have already been significantly affected by recent race riots in the UK, and their creatives, workforces and audiences are also disproportionately affected by the impact of the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. Continued political polarity may further exacerbate inequities, with particularly detrimental effects for ethnically diverse creatives.

We may continue to enquire, and investigate. Going by current rates of publication, ACE might, in the next 50 years, commission a further 75 reports about diversity in arts and culture. More schemes may be created addressing tangible aspects of inclusion, such as securing entry-level access, or increasing backstage engagement.

But what might the Arts Council do *instead*, to reduce the number and need for reports? It might implement a systemic, incentivised approach to diversifying decision-making – through a range of routes from flat hierarchy ‘town-hall’ systems of arts management that hands decisions to local communities, to retrospective, increased investment for large-

scale organisations that successfully sustain diverse senior leadership. What truly perpetuates the inequity of arts funding distribution is the paucity of diversity in decision-making roles. Fifty years on from Khan's report, funding decisions are still largely made by individuals unfamiliar with the communities they are assessing. Notions of quality and excellence continue to be critiqued by their proximity to mainstream or elitist white arts production. Infrastructure support for ethnically diverse creatives and arts organisations still lags behind that available to others.

Parity of distribution, notions of who is within and who is beyond the mainstream, all become unremarkable – ignorable, even – once senior arts leadership and funding decision-makers share the sensibilities, concerns, experience and perspectives of the audiences they seek to serve.

In the last half-century, a lot has changed. Let's be ambitious for the next 50 years.

Notes

1. <https://www.ukrainiansintheuk.info/eng/01/evw-e.htm>
2. <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/arts-and-culture/space-culture/barriers-faced-underrepresented-groups-securing-and-sustaining-community-led-and-cultural-spaces>
3. https://pec.ac.uk/news_entries/national-statistics-on-the-creative-industries/
4. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/92581/3/Social_Identities_draft.pdf; <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/article/2024/may/18/arts-workers-uk-working-class-roots-cultural-sector-diversity>
5. <https://createequityuk.com/2022/07/11/is-aces-diversity-strategy-and-reporting-fit-for-purpose/>
6. Arts Council England, Equality, diversity, and inclusion A data report 2021–2022

Beyond Barriers

The Might And Meaning Of The Disabled Arts Revolution

*Disabled artists are shaping culture in powerful and transformative ways, yet their work continues to be constrained by systemic barriers. **Jo Verrent**, director of Unlimited, explores the history, impact and future of disabled-led art – and the changes needed to sustain it.*

ONE IN FOUR. TWENTY-FIVE percent of the population. Living in one of every three houses. The number of disabled people in the UK is huge. In 2010, the percentage of the population with a disability was 18%; now, in 2026, it's 25% – about 16.7m people. That proportion keeps on growing – partly because our population is ageing; partly because of COVID and its after-effects; partly because of evolving definitions of what disability actually means. And yet, if you look at our stages, our gallery walls, our funding panels, our boardrooms, and the places where arts funding goes, you'd be forgiven for thinking disabled people barely existed at all.

That absence is not an accident. It is not an oversight. It is the result of centuries of erasure, exclusion and a cultural imagination so narrow it has consistently failed to see disabled people as anything other than a problem to be solved, a tragedy to be mourned, or at best, an inspiration to be briefly celebrated before moving on.

I'm arguing something different. I'm arguing that the disabled arts revolution – and it *is* a revolution – is one of the most creatively vital, politically urgent and structurally transformative forces in contemporary culture. It has been building for decades. It is happening right now. And if the mainstream hasn't been paying attention then that is, frankly, the mainstream's loss.

The revolution is real. The barriers are also real. Both things are true simultaneously. And holding that tension is exactly where we need to start.

There have Always been Disabled Artists

Let us begin with a history lesson that most people haven't been taught.

In the asylums and hospitals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, disabled people made art. They painted, drew, wrote, composed. And then the doctors went ahead and put their own names on the work. The institutions claimed ownership. The artists – the real artists – were unnamed, uncredited, reduced to their diagnoses. The shrinks got the glory – and the cash. The patients got nothing.

In freak shows, disabled people performed. Whether that was exploitation or entrepreneurship depended entirely on the company you kept. Then the same as now.

In Nazi Germany, disabled people were among the very first to be targeted for elimination. We were labelled 'Useless Eaters' and Hitler himself reportedly suggested that wartime was 'the best time for the elimination of the incurably ill'. Disabled people are still the least remembered victims. Still the least memorialised. Still the most forgotten.

But even there – as everywhere – there were disabled artists.

There have always been disabled artists, because there have always been disabled people. And some disabled people will

always be artists, because artists are human and disabled people are human. When you strip everything back, it is that simple.

Some disabled people were able to minimise their impairments. They pretended; reduced who they were; passed as non-disabled to survive in a world that had made very clear it did not want them. They funded their own access solutions or, more frequently, struggled without support. Others couldn't hide. They were for the most part ignored or ridiculed – or conversely, hailed as geniuses and held up as spectacle.

Fast forward to the present, and the erasure has not ended. It has simply put on a more respectable face. Disability on screen remains overwhelmingly acted rather than authentic – a plot device, a dramatic shortcut, a metaphor for something else. Impairments are deployed for narrative convenience by writers and directors who have rarely spent time with the communities they are supposedly representing. The stories that are most commercially successful still, too often, call for us to die. Or to overcome. Or to inspire. Rarely simply to live.

When we succeed in our own right – for example, Nnena Kalu's victory at the Turner Prize – the headlines are often about our impairments rather than our art (*Guardian* headline, 9 Dec 2025: 'Nnena Kalu becomes first artist with a learning disability to win Turner prize'. Standfirst: 'Chair of 2025 judging panel says win "begins to erase that border between the neurotypical and neurodiverse artist"').

The message is simple: on our own, our work isn't enough; we aren't enough. That is the baseline. That is what the revolution is pushing against.

What Disabled Artists Bring

Here is what the deficit model misses entirely: disabled artists are not asking for inclusion out of charity. They are bringing something the sector desperately needs.

Think about what it actually *means* to make art from a

body and a mind that the world was not designed for. To encounter inaccessible spaces and find routes through, anyway. To communicate in forms that fall outside the dominant register. To have a fundamentally different relationship with time, with energy, with the body as a creative instrument. That experience does not diminish creative work. It expands it.

Claire Cunningham uses crutches not as props but as exquisite dance partners – redefining what a dancing body can be, what movement can mean, what choreography is for. Chuck Close’s pioneering work in photorealism emerged as a way of combatting the impact of prosopagnosia. Naomi Lakmaier spent hours as part of her own installation, in which 20,000 helium balloons were attached to her prone body, asking a simple and devastating question: what does it take to lift someone like her off the ground? Christopher Samuel’s archives address the imbalance of representation – just where are the people like him? Jess Thom says the word ‘biscuit’ approximately 16,000 times a day as part of her Tourette’s Syndrome, and has built an entire performance practice from it — turning comedy inside out, making the audience confront their own discomfort, their own laughter, their own assumptions about who gets to speak and how. *whatsthebigmistry* (Priya Mistry) spans roles and art forms bringing all aspects of themselves – mental health, neurodiversity, feminist politics, sex, queerness, colour and culture – to a deconstruction of language and an investigation of human bodies as sculptural propositions. All of these artists’ work makes visible just how narrow our collective assumptions about normality actually are.

This is not peripheral work. This is not niche work. This is work that changes how we perceive art forms. Work that expands the aesthetic possibilities of entire disciplines. Work that challenges the assumptions baked into every creative form we have inherited.

The UK has, for a period at least, understood this. We have led the world in this field for many years. Graeae Theatre

Company, Heart n Soul, Candoco Dance Company – these organisations have built internationally recognised bodies of work over decades. Visual artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Tony Heaton and Suzie Larke are working around the globe, while in music Paraorchestra, Ailís Ní Ríain, Ruth McGinley, John Kelly and others show that there is no genre – from classical piano to folk – in which disabled artists can't excel. With its mission to commission disabled artists to create extraordinary work until the rest of the cultural sector does, Unlimited has supported artists from across the UK in collaborations stretching from India to Palestine, from Brazil to Japan; artists who are fierce and bold, ambitious and varied. There is not one type, not one style, not one art form in which disabled artists don't excel. The work is nuanced, high-skilled, and frequently world-class. We aren't 25% of the cultural output of the UK yet, but there are exceptional, boundary-pushing artists out there who collectively and individually produce incredible work.

And yet we are losing our status. Brexit, austerity, and reductions to benefits and Access to Work support mean disabled artists who once thrived in this country are now struggling. The world is turning – quite understandably – to brilliant work by disabled artists in other countries who are forging ahead with their careers because they have access to the support they need.

Disability arts is not a community of artists that is marginal. It is art by a community that has been marginalised – an entirely different thing.

The Barriers are Not Accidents

So if the artists exist, if the work is exceptional, if the community can grow – what stands in the way? It's a simple answer: barriers. But let's be specific, because simply saying 'barriers' can be a convenient way of making structural

injustice sound like the weather: inevitable, no one's fault, something we simply have to endure.

The barriers that stop disabled people achieving their potential are not inevitable. They are systemic. They have been created by those who created the system, the structure, the process, the practice. The arts sector has systemically excluded disabled artists. We have created the barriers that stop the potential. But the good news? Because they are built, they can be taken apart.

Physical and structural barriers are everywhere, and they are relentless. Inaccessible buildings. Uncaptioned video content. Banking systems that assume everyone uses phones to verify accounts or can see to sign documents. And it's not just the lack of access here that excludes, it's the assumptions. The assumption Deaf people and others who do not use phones will just appoint a family member as their 'hearing link' – as though their family are their carers (thank you, Co-operative Bank). Or the assumption that a blind trustee who cannot access the basic information they need to govern an organisation will have someone available to physically transport paper to them and support them to sign it with a pen – something many people haven't done since primary school (thanks, Charity Commission). And so it goes on.

Financial barriers have been knowingly sharpened by successive governments. The replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments – a process that has been widely described as humiliating, punitive, and regularly just plain wrong (as of mid-2025, approximately 67% of PIP appeals to tribunal hearings were overturned in the claimant's favour). Caps and repeated cuts to Access to Work, the government scheme that is supposed to help disabled people get into and stay in employment, now operates with waiting lists of a year or more, and requires a process so demeaning that many have stopped pursuing it. (Recently Jenny Sealey, artistic director of Graeae, received a 50% cut

with no explanation. Jess Tom, director of TourettesHero, had hers cut by 61%.) Universal Credit arrangements effectively penalise disabled people, and others with non-standard earning patterns. Austerity, in short, has not just bitten. It has chewed up a generation of disabled artists who had talent, ambition, and the specific misfortune of living through a political era that decided their needs were dispensable.

Attitudinal barriers are perhaps the most corrosive, because they are the hardest to name and the easiest to deny. A survey by Scope found that two thirds of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people. Four in ten disabled people have been denied a job because of an employer's attitude. This is not ancient history. This is after the 2012 Paralympics. This is after decades of legislation, campaigns and cultural programming designed to shift exactly these numbers.

During the Covid pandemic, something unexpected happened. When the world went online, many disabled people found themselves, suddenly and surprisingly, 'more equal'. The travel that exacerbates fatigue was gone. Captions made meetings accessible. The kitchen table became a viable professional space, and the greenhouse – where you could put your feet in a paddling pool if they swelled – was just outside the door. The infrastructure that should always have existed was, briefly, available. And disabled people, with decades of expertise in adaptation, in working around inaccessible systems, in finding routes through barriers that the rest of the world hadn't even noticed were there, were suddenly the ones with the knowledge everyone else needed. That expertise was not accidental. It was hard-won. And it is a reminder that what gets framed as a disadvantage – having to navigate a world that was not built for you – produces skills, resilience and creative problem-solving that the broader culture badly needs.

Yet less than six years on from lockdown, few cultural organisations provide online access to their work, and the push to 'business as usual' is relentless. Perhaps we shouldn't be

surprised how quickly our needs have been forgotten: Covid also showed us how those in government viewed us, with too many negatives to list here. The impact? The death rate for disabled people from Covid was up to eleven times higher than for non-disabled people.

Another systemic barrier adversely and disproportionately impacting disabled people is *the cultural sector's overwork mentality*. The romantic notion that 'the show must go on' – that sacrifice is proof of commitment – is structurally discriminatory. If you can only work part-time because of your access requirements, or if you work differently because your body or mind requires it, a sector that equates long hours with dedication is a sector that is telling you, quietly but clearly, that you don't belong.

So much labour never gets counted, never gets funded, never gets acknowledged. Eighty-nine percent of disabled artists and arts workers are regularly asked to contribute their labour for free. Not just the labour of making art – the labour of responding to ableism. Of sourcing access support that should have been in place already. Of briefing, contracting, chasing, evaluating. Of sitting in meetings that weren't designed for them, and doing the work of making them accessible while simultaneously trying to do the job they were actually there for.

At Unlimited, we calculated that in an average twelve-month period we spent roughly £40,000 ensuring meetings and processes were accessible for our disabled-led board, and disabled-led staff, and around £60,000 on providing access to meet and support our disabled artists. That is £100,000 more than an equivalent non-disabled-led organisation would have to spend. This is not the cost of disability. It is the cost of ableism. There is a difference, and it matters enormously.

These barriers are not the inevitable consequence of disability. They are the consequence of systems designed by people who didn't think about disabled people, or couldn't be

bothered to, or actively chose not to. Every single one of them can be removed. The question is whether there is the will to do it.

Disability-Led is Non-Negotiable

Having disabled artists working within mainstream organisations matters. Of course it does. But it is not enough. Context is not neutral. Who controls the context changes the work, changes the culture, changes what is possible.

The history here is uncomfortable, but necessary to examine. There is a long tradition of non-disabled directors, choreographers, curators and collectors building substantial careers on the work of disabled artists – and ending up far more prominently acclaimed, and far better paid, than the disabled people they collaborate with, or whose work they benefit from. It happened in the asylums. It is happening now. And still in some cases the names of the disabled artists go unrecorded, while the names of those who mediated, curated, or simply took credit appear on gallery walls and in award nominations.

Disability-led organisations – where staff, boards and core decision-making processes are led by disabled people at a minimum of 51% – are not a luxury or a gesture. They are a structural necessity. When disabled people have genuine power, not just presence, policies change. Culture changes. Work changes. The questions that get asked are different. The assumptions that get challenged are different. The standard that is set is different. Power includes financial power – choosing what work to fund, whom to work with, what partnerships to pursue. If you hold the purse strings, different people suddenly want to talk with you, and the conversations take on a more serious, purposeful and deliberate tone.

The most recent Arts Council England reporting shows that 10% of artistic directors, 12% of board members and 13% of NPO chief executives are disabled – all increases on

previous years. But how many organisations define themselves as disabled-led? For the 2023–2027 National Portfolio Organisation cohort, there were 32 disabled-led organisations. *That's 3% of the total portfolio.* Funding-wise, organisations meeting the 51% definition *receive* investment of approximately £7.25 million which is less than 1% of overall funding; 1.7% by a wider self-definition.

Running a disability-led organisation in an ableist world is exhausting. I will not pretend otherwise. It means taking an organisation out into a world that was not built for it and meeting, constantly, the accumulated weight of systems and attitudes that push back. The more times you hit a barrier, the more dangerously easy it becomes to internalise the message. To start to wonder whether the barriers are there because they need to be. To feel, despite knowing that you are in the right, that you are too much; that you are asking for too much. Intellectually, I know that barriers exist because people setting up systems don't have the knowledge, time, resources or care to make them accessible. Morally and legally, I know I am correct to push for reasonable adjustments. Emotionally, I start to feel like a burden. Personally, I am exhausted.

This is why community matters so much. The comradeship of disabled-led peers and allies: people who understand; places where you can take off the armour. And this is also why I have to remind myself, more often than I would like: first, be kind. To my disabled kin who are as exhausted as I am. To people who are fighting the same battles from different angles. To those who don't – yet – know better. We sometimes turn on each other – publicly calling out where we could privately call in; allowing envy to bleed into snide comments when budgets are tight and fear starts to rise. We can also turn on others – letting our anger lead rather than our skills at negotiation. We are human. And the world is hard right now.

But the response to that hardness is not to stop. It is to be strategic, to be kind, to be consistent and clear. We have to

keep pushing for what we need to keep building the organisations and the infrastructure that will make the next generation's fight a little less gruelling than ours.

The Revolution is Already Happening

Here is what I want you to hold onto: the revolution is not coming. It is here. It has been for a while now. Disabled artists have been claiming territory across every domain of influence – as creators, as digital innovators, as advocates, as leaders – and they are not waiting for permission.

Disabled artists and cultural leaders have repeatedly formed alliances and demanded that disabled voices be heard as society plans for whatever comes next. Across the world, disabled artists are doing the work of demonstrating that there are many, many ways to lead – that leadership does not require a single standing figure, usually tall, male and white; that you do not need endless energy to lead; that you do not need to do it alone.

Many parts of the sector have listened. There is change happening within theatres, within museums, within galleries around England. But the financial crisis facing most organisations is limiting this work, turning the tide back rather than enabling people to surge forward.

Back in the 1980s, the Direct Action Network – the grassroots disability rights organisation whose members chained themselves to buses and crawled up the steps of Parliament – had a slogan. It was a riff on the Star Trek introduction. 'To boldly go,' it said, 'where everyone else has been before.'

It was brilliant because it was devastating. Disabled people were not asking to go somewhere new. They were asking to go where everyone else already was. To access what everyone else already had. To be included in what was supposed to be a shared society.

Forty years on, we are still asking. The legislation has changed. The language has changed. The visibility of disabled artists has improved – slowly, unevenly, with enormous effort and at enormous personal cost. But the fundamental demand has not changed. Don't build barriers and then celebrate us for overcoming them. Just stop building the barriers in the first place.

I want to live – and work, and make art, and lead organisations – in a society where disabled people's contribution to culture is proportional to our numbers. Where the 25% of the population who are disabled are represented on our stages, in our galleries, in our boardrooms and in all arts funding, at something approaching 25%. Where access is not an add-on, not a last-minute adjustment, not a reluctant legal obligation – but a baseline assumption, designed in from the start. Because, of course, it should be.

I want a sector where human rights sit above financial consideration. Where nobody has to fight simply for a place at the table. Where the question is not whether disabled people should be included, but how we can best resource and support the extraordinary work they are already doing.

The disabled arts revolution is not a moment. It is not a programme, a festival, a funding round, a five-year strategy. It is a permanent, necessary, generative force in our cultural life – one that has existed for as long as disabled people have existed. Which is to say: always.

There have always been disabled artists. They have always made extraordinary work. The revolution is simply the insistence that this time, finally, the world catches up.

We have to push forward, and we have to let two things guide us. First, be kind. Then be fierce. The work continues.

New Rules

AI And The Future Of Creativity

*The real threat posed by AI tools, argues **Professor Jack Stilgoe**, is not their ability to imitate human imagination, but the way in which they are reshaping the economics and ownership of culture – risking a world in which abundance devalues artistry.*

‘No Instrument Needed, Just Imagination’

THE HEAD OF SUNO, an AI music start-up, wants us to know that his company ‘has, like, an incredible deep love and respect for music’. But he feels that making music is ‘not really enjoyable... it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of practice.’¹ He thinks most people are passive consumers of culture when we could all be active producers. He wants to set us free: to give us the ability to compose, to orchestrate, to create and to remix. He is letting anyone with a smartphone seize the means of music production. With just a few words of prompt, the Suno app will produce plausible snippets of new music, lyrics and all. As part of a pitch to investors, he claimed that users of his app were producing millions of new songs every day. This was, he said, ‘the future of music’: ‘no instrument needed, just imagination’.²

Faced with innovations such as this, many musicians are understandably affronted. Most would say that music is as

much about process as outcome. The work *is* the art. Unlike the tech industry, they do not see a global shortage of digital music; nor do they crave efficiency. They are more interested in the friction of a bow against a string, or an unpredictable experience with a room full of warm bodies. But it can be hard to articulate the value of an art form to people who don't seem to care. One of the frustrations surfaced by the new wave of AI is that various groups feel forced to mount a defence of their existence. In response to fears about AI, musicians, like the rest of us, tend to retreat to some idea of human essence. The reflex is often solipsistic – to ask what this technology means for me, or to claim that the machine will never be able to do what *I* do. It's a game we should try to avoid playing.

AI technologies have their roots in game-playing. AI's first major victory against Team Human was the dethroning of the world's then-greatest chess player, Gary Kasparov, in 1997. Chess was, according to the historian Nathan Ensmenger, AI's model organism – the guinea pig on which new hypotheses were tested.³ Demis Hassabis, who recently won a Nobel prize for his company Deepmind's AlphaFold software, was himself a chess champion. In 2016, Deepmind announced itself to the world by beating Lee Sedol at Go – a game far more complicated than chess. Deepmind's approach to AI, shared by all of the companies currently controlling the technology, is known as 'deep learning'. The idea is that, rather than trying to teach a computer the rules of human intelligence, AI developers feed a deep neural network all the data they can find, with as much computer power as possible, to enable it to work out the rules for itself. When Deepmind's AI beats human players at Go, it doesn't care about the game. Through a process of trial and error known as reinforcement learning, it simply works out its own way to succeed. The same is true of Suno. Their system crunches through its bountiful data until it produces something that persuades listeners that it counts as music.

But technology does not change the world by winning games. The truly transformative effects of technology come from changing the rules of the game. Game-changing technologies, and society's responses to them, do not just offer new means to ends; they take us in new directions to new places. For creative people, these new directions make them interesting. But we need to ask who's driving.

The hype that surrounds AI systems should be seen as a form of misdirection. While we are mesmerised by what the machines can do, we often ignore what they are actually doing: to reshape culture, industry and society. The risk is that, while we fixate on the quality of AI's magical outputs, we fail to see tweaks to the rules of the game. Suno is more interested in the quantity of music than its quality. Despite the company's protestations of deep love and respect, its profitability hinges on devaluing music. It is not just designing a tool. It is trying to manifest a world in which it becomes unnecessary to commission or license music from musicians.

'The Menace of Mechanical Music'

Musicians' anxiety about technological innovation is not new. Over the last three centuries, pianos, pianolas, metronomes, flutes with metal keys and, most recently, Auto-tune have all been seen as assaults on 'real' music. At the turn of the 20th century, the most popular musician of his day, John Philip Sousa, led a campaign against what he called 'the menace of mechanical music', by which he meant recorded music.

We can learn a lot from the history of the drum machine. Rhythm is ripe for automation. It is easy to see why misanthropic tech companies – and some musicians – might look upon drummers and see the sort of monotonous, repetitive work that could be easily replaced by a machine.

In the 1950s, the first usable, affordable drum machines were marketed as a way for musicians to do away with one of

their bandmates. The Wurlitzer Side Man, launched in 1959, was brilliantly simple. It turned its metal arm in a circle across a disc of metal contacts. The musician could select which contacts would be activated, changing the groove from a waltz to a beguine to a cha cha. Speeding up the arm would increase the tempo. It provided, the adverts said, 'A full rhythm section at your side'. Despite its tinny sounds, it caused consternation. The British Musicians' Union called the Side Man a 'stilted and unimaginative performer' – but the concern of some drummers was that audiences and other musicians might not care. Subsequent machines were embraced precisely because of their synthetic novelty. Sly Stone, Herbie Hancock, Marvin Gaye and others saw potential in devices such as the Maestro Rhythm King, the Roland 808 and the Doctor Click. When Brian Eno heard Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love' he reportedly told David Bowie it was 'the sound of the future'. For that song, the producer Giorgio Moroder created a drum track with a Moog synthesiser.

As drum machines improved, it became harder for the average listener to tell the difference between authentic and synthetic drumming. By the 1970s, session musicians, drilled by the demands of the recording studio, had become more precise and metronomic. Recording techniques deadened their drum sounds as the studio machine cranked out hits. Roger Linn's drum machines sounded eerily authentic. Not only did they contain real sampled drum sounds, they also let producers add 'swing' to the beats, tweaking the distance between notes to make the rhythm dance as if it were conjured by human limbs. Despite this, Linn always insisted that his aim was to give musicians new options rather than put them out of work. He was disappointed that the first song using one of his inventions to become a hit was the deliberately industrial-sounding 'Don't You Want Me' by the Human League. He went on to invent samplers that, in the hands of producers like J Dilla, would redefine the sound of hip-hop

and, according to Dan Charnas, change our collective sense of rhythm.⁴

More recently, drum machines have offered something extra. Record producers no longer need dedicated hardware because, as Donald Trump artfully put it, ‘everything is computer’. Apple’s Garage Band software now offers an AI drummer that doesn’t just play a groove, but also composes it, having analysed other parts of a piece of music. Drummers pride themselves on not just being able to play the beats, but also knowing what beats suit the music. Apple seems to have opened up a new front in the war against musicians.

The evolution of the drum machine shows an encroachment into various aspects of musicianship. The first technologies gave other musicians access to simple timekeeping. They were then given access to sounds and patterns that would previously have required a skilled practitioner and an expensive studio. Finally, technologies like the GarageBand Drummer obviated the need for musical taste. Producers no longer need to know what they want.

With drum machines, the inputs were relatively uncontentious (some relied upon some sampled drums) and there was never any question that the creative outputs would belong to the composers and performers. As sampling technologies improved, arguments began about how to divide the spoils when songs were remixed. But – other than in the case of a few exploitative managers – composers, players and producers took ownership of the music they produced. The toolmakers merely sold tools. With AI, on the other hand, the question of who should get the credit has expanded to include both the makers of AI systems and the people whose data, often invisibly, feeds those systems.

In his recent book on ‘enshittification’, Cory Doctorow offers a bitter taste of a potential future.⁵ The internet has changed the possibilities of ownership, and some companies who produce creative ‘tools’ have smelled new opportunities.

In the world of video games, Unity, the creator of a game design engine, became sufficiently jealous of some designers' success that it started a programme called 'shared success', demanding a cut of successful games' royalties. It's easy to see how AI music companies might be tempted in the same direction.

Musicians' concerns about technology and musical authenticity always have an economic flavour. Sousa admitted that his concerns about the phonograph were in part because it let people listen to music at home instead of coming to see his Marine Band or buying his sheet music. To understand what AI technologies mean for music, therefore, we need to see them in the context of a rapidly changing music industry.

Pop and Slop

Eric Drott has described how, for many consumers, music now appears to be essentially free.⁶ After Napster threatened to radically decommmodify music by sharing everything, streaming companies such as Spotify looked as if they might be the music industry's saviour. The additional hope was that the extraordinary diversity of available culture would let new niche music flourish. This optimism turned out to be naive. In a 2006 book, Chris Anderson argued that the 'long tail' of digital culture would spell the demise of blockbusters as consumers embraced diversity.⁷ His prognostications were proven very wrong. Of the ten highest grossing films in history, nine have come since Anderson made his prediction. The same appears to be true in music, where the reality has been that recommendation algorithms have narrowed many people's musical horizons. The world of streaming is one in which much more music is accessible, but inequalities in what is actually accessed have grown. The superstars benefit, while the long tail of musicians receive little attention and even less money.

Meanwhile, behind the curtain, platforms such as Spotify

make it easy to game the algorithms that allocate revenue.⁸ Recent data fraud convictions have involved fake accounts, fake music and fake listening bots. While they try to crack down on fake listening, Spotify seems more relaxed about fake creation. In 2024, Spotify was found to be commissioning music on the cheap to pad out playlists, under a programme they called Perfect Fit Content.⁹ The economic benefit for Spotify is that the company doesn't have to pay the artists when this content is listened to, and many listeners may not be paying enough attention to notice. With generative AI, the cost of such commissioning plummets.

According to some estimates, a third of the tracks now uploaded to Spotify are AI-generated. And in many cases the provenance is ambiguous. Some 'creators' have been able to use controversy to attract attention to their acts without clarifying if the faces on the platform are real people. Where we were once outraged that manufactured pop acts such as Milli Vanilli didn't sing their own songs, we're now expected not to care that much if what we hear may not have a human behind it at all. But this glut of content is crowding out musicians who rely on the attention that now translates into streaming services' (in most cases, measly) revenue.

Spotify finally seems to be waking up to public concerns. A new policy admits the threat: 'At its worst, AI can be used by bad actors and content farms to confuse or deceive listeners, push 'slop' into the ecosystem, and interfere with authentic artists working to build their careers.'¹⁰ Its competitor, Deezer, has sought to differentiate itself by labelling AI-generated tunes.

We have seen a mushrooming of companies offering 'functional music' as aural wallpaper: sold, sometimes with spurious scientific justification, to help us focus, relax or exercise.¹¹ So while we can argue about whether AI composers will ever compete with Mozart, AI is radically cutting the cost of producing ambient chill playlists and lo-fi

beats that are not made to be listened to in the conventional sense. Musicians' understandable concerns about both AI music and drum machines are not just about immediate threats to their livelihoods. They are also about whether technologies devalue music as they make it cheaper. As the quantity of music goes up, people may care less about its quality.

Taking Back Control

Ultimately, this debate is one of ownership and control. Who gets to set the direction of culture? We have already seen how unlikely lobbyists such as Dua Lipa have persuaded the UK Government to revise its plans to allow AI companies to treat creative outputs as a free feedstock for AI. A 2026 report from bodies representing the UK's creative industries reveals creators' sense of injustice and betrayal. The fear, as with previous waves of automation, is less about machines surpassing human skill than the prospect of cheap and dirty technologies flooding their markets. Technologies don't have to be better; they just have to be cheap enough to persuade companies that investing in capital is easier than investing in people.¹² While AI company leaders speculate on AI's future existential threat to humanity, for many creative workers, the existential threat to their careers has already arrived. More than a third of the writers, musicians, photographers, translators and artists surveyed by the Society of Authors, the Independent Society of Musicians, Equity, the Association of Illustrators and the Association of Photographers report they have lost work as people turn to generative AI for everyday visuals or audio. Almost all report having had their creations used as AI training data.¹³ And while professionals are fearing for their own jobs, they are also concerned about what it means for encouraging the next generation to learn their crafts when AI systems are designed to shortcut skills and the effort required to build them.

In a recent case, Suno was taken to court by major record labels for copyright infringement ‘at an almost unimaginable scale’. The labels accused Suno of using their artists’ work to train the company’s AI, which was then producing music that was essentially plagiarised. When pressed in this way, the AI companies engage in a form of defensive misdirection. When it suits them, they claim that their software is listening to and learning from music in the way that humans do. But when challenged in court that they are breaking the laws that say people cannot make copies of music for profit, they claim that, far from copying, they are merely using music as data to develop statistical models.¹⁴

In drawing tactical comparisons with human creativity, AI companies want to have their cake and eat it. But these disputes are not really about whether humans or machines make better music. Rather than providing tools to help musicians open up new creative frontiers, AI companies seem to be enclosing the commons.¹⁵ Suno allows us each to create our own music, with no need for shared culture. The dystopia is one of live artisanal acoustic experiences for those who can afford them, and personalised slop for the masses.

And yet for all this, there are reasons to be hopeful. As AI systems have become good at churning out passable essay answers, we academics have been forced to ask whether essays are always the best way to see if students are learning. With music, although the price of streaming has plunged, the UK’s live music industry has bounced back since the pandemic and is now bigger than ever. Musicians, not content with being reduced to mere content, have found new ways to reach audiences. They understood the gig economy long before Uber drivers had to. It is as hard as ever for musicians to make a living, but at least the internet has made it easier than ever for human musicians to find humans who appreciate their endeavours.

And many musicians are using AI tools in their creative processes. In the face of a technology that seems inevitably

disruptive, artists are doing what they always do, in finding new means of expression – but they can also offer something more, which is to imagine new directions for the technology itself. The AI currently on offer is not as good it gets. We must not be fatalistic. The story from companies such as Suno shows how thin their imagined future is. Suno has given musicians something useful: a vision that is easy to reject. New technologies never live up to their own hype. But they can, in the hands of others, become more interesting than their inventors could ever have imagined.

Companies' attempts to automate human craft have historically prompted reactions that can clarify what we really value. The hype surrounding AI could – and should – prompt us all to reflect on what we mean by intelligence and creativity. If we fail to respond, we risk having the tech industry impose its definitions on the rest of us.

Notes

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Somebody Saw it Before it Existed

Victoria Adukwei Bulley

Pen between my fingers and even the page it kisses with ink.
Notebook and the desk upon which the notebook sleeps.
Wood floor on which I lay my feet, restless. Somebody saw
each of these before they existed. Not out in the world
but in the mind's sharp eye, first. Green walls, clear bright glass
of windows that let in the light by which I see and write a poem.
This poem which, like all the above, was also imagined.
This poem which, being written, looks back, imagining me.
Isn't it inescapable in everything, everywhere all the time?
The *madeness* of things, the signature of art. Even that
which can't be touched but touches anyway. Like the song
I hear now, which keeps on singing me. Like this song
that someone heard long before it was ever sound, let alone song,
or what a song can sometimes be: a pair of arms sent to my beloved
to hold her from a thousand miles away.

THE NEXT 80 YEARS



Dear People in Power

(and people who want to be in power)

*Whoever you are, **David Joseph** writes, and wherever this finds you...*

IN 2025, NICK CAVE stood in the O2 and watched Radiohead play to a crowd of 20,000. All around him, people were dancing, crying, holding each other. Writing about it afterwards, he reflected that what the crowd was responding to was not only the music, but also the courage of the performers. The sheer nerve it took to stand before that many people and offer up their souls. To declare, without apology: this is what we think. This is what we feel. This is who we are. And 20,000 strangers connected with that vision as if it were their own experience.

He called it ‘a reparative force’. Something that improves matters.

He wasn’t being poetic. He was being precise.

That is what art does. Yet right now, we are doing something, quietly and incrementally, to destroy it.

You know these moments yourself. The song playing through a speaker in an ordinary room that takes you somewhere you haven’t been in twenty years. A person, a summer, a version of yourself you’d almost forgotten: suddenly you are completely elsewhere. The book you stayed up until

I am finishing, heart going, because something in it knew you better than you knew yourself. The play where everyone stood up at the end, all at once, without anyone calling it, because something had happened in the room that needed to be acknowledged, and your body knew that before your brain did.

These are not small moments. They are the moments when we are most alive, most human, most connected to each other. And least alone.

Artists don't choose to be artists. It is a wiring. It can be a gift, and it can be a burden, and most of the time it is both at once. They did not weigh up the options and settle on painting, theatre, or music. The work chose them. And let's not forget the people who support that work: who run the theatres, the choirs, the libraries, the youth arts programmes. They chose to be near it, to give their professional lives to something they knew mattered.

We treat the creative industries the way we treat a mobile signal – assuming it's there, assuming it works, only noticing when it drops. We cite the same names – you know the ones – in the same speeches, as proof that England is still a creative nation, still punching above its weight, still the envy of the world. And then we carry on defunding the soil those names grew out of.

We are entering a world where machines can write the report, draft the brief, schedule the meeting, and summarise what you missed. They are very good at this. What they cannot do – what no amount of processing power will produce – is stand before a crowd and offer up their souls. They cannot be undone by a painting. They cannot be wired into a song the way you are: the way it plays, and you are simply gone, back to somewhere you loved.

Those are human capacities. And like any capacity, they atrophy when we do not use them. They have to be practised. They have to be taught. They have to be, if you will forgive the word, funded.

DEAR PEOPLE IN POWER

The arts are not a luxury that we can turn to when everything else is settled. They are where we learn to be citizens. Where we learn to imagine lives that are not our own. Where a kid from an overlooked, underserved town discovers that someone, somewhere – maybe a hundred years ago, maybe on the other side of the world – felt exactly what she feels. That she is not strange. That she is not alone. That she matters.

You went into public life to do something. So here is the question you need to ask yourself: not whether you appreciate culture, not whether you can name the right buildings and the right artists, or talk about the creative industries' economic multiplier effect, but whether you are willing to treat the funding of the arts as the serious public investment it is. Whether you are willing to fund the buildings. To stop rotating ministers through the brief so fast that nothing has time to take root.

We know how to build those creative spaces. We know how to fill them. We know what happens to people inside them.

The only question is whether you think that's worth protecting.

I hope you do. Because the alternative is a society that has decided that none of this is a priority, that the market will provide, that culture is what happens after the serious work is done. That society is not one I recognise, and I do not think it is one you want to be responsible for. It is not one I want for the generations coming up behind us.

Yours, in hope,
David Joseph

Keep, Create, Renew

The Future Of Classical Music

*Classical music's power to move, inspire, and connect has endured for centuries – but today, the sector faces a landscape of technological upheaval, funding pressures, and challenges to the talent pipeline. **Sam Jackson**, Controller of BBC Radio 3 and the BBC Proms, explains why public funding matters now more than ever – and why he believes the future remains bright.*

EIGHTY YEARS AGO, ON 29th September 1946, the BBC launched The Third Programme: the precursor to Radio 3. Just over a month earlier, a Royal Charter had been granted for the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain – which became, in 1994, the Arts Council of England, the Scottish Arts Council, and the Arts Council of Wales.

Over the eight decades since, many of the ways in which audiences encounter classical music have remained unchanged. Millions still love the works of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. The BBC Proms continues to thrive as the biggest classical music festival in the world, drawing hundreds of thousands to the Royal Albert Hall every summer, with additional Proms now taking place across the UK. And fans of the genre still listen to a vast range of recorded repertoire – albeit increasingly via streaming services, in place of the LPs that adorned many an aficionado's living room shelves back in the 1940s.

But despite the constancies, our industry has gone through the most remarkable amount of change over the last 80 years. And the pace of that change has quickened dizzyingly and, at times, alarmingly in the first quarter of the 21st century. Technology continues to introduce new ways in which to experience classical music and opera, while the number of people choosing to study music has fallen to alarmingly low levels. And the narrowing of that talent pipeline for young people brings with it the risk of an ever-smaller future audience of informed enthusiasts for a genre which, in the Arts Council's most recent funding round, was allocated £220 million of public money, alongside just under £130 million given to festivals and venues with an element of classical music and opera in their programming.

A key question for those who care about classical music is this: given the myriad of funding challenges this country faces, the seeming assault on creativity from Big Tech, and a lack of musical literacy among the young (other than those whose parents can afford to pay for the music lessons that now risk looking like a privilege), is the prognosis for classical music over the next 80 years a bleak one? It's easy to see the world in which the Arts Council was born – when Yehudi Menuhin and Kathleen Ferrier were household names, and the 1944 Education Act led to a widespread uptake of musical instruments in state schools – as a halcyon era. But is mourning for a lost past really the best that we can do?

In short: I don't believe so. Tempting as it might be to suggest that the end of the classical music world is nigh, I suspect that this enduringly popular, resilient and exciting art form will still be thriving up to and beyond the year 2106. What's more, while technological advancements and an ever-more diverse array of routes through which to experience this music will no doubt continue to present themselves, one prediction I feel confident in making is that long-form, large-scale classical music and opera will continue to draw very

large crowds, not just here in the UK but around the world.

Inventive ways of attracting audiences, whether they be commuter concerts, family Proms, or performances in unusual places have been a mainstay of the classical music scene for decades now – and happily so. But in our desire to broaden access and reach out with creativity to those outside the classical music ‘club’, I feel we sometimes miss a fact that is staring us in the face: namely, that full-length concerts still have immense appeal to audiences old and new. In addition, amidst the eagerness of some organisations to declare they are doing something bold and innovative, there is a risk of failing to realise the long-term strength and popular appeal of the art form they house.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music at London’s Southbank Centre, claimed in an article in Arts Professional in February 2026 that classical music audiences today engage with the genre ‘at home, but in highly personalised and more digestible ways. Rather than listening to entire symphonies, they take a pick-and-mix approach.’ He continues: ‘If classical music is to compete for time and attention, we must be willing to engage on [the audience’s] terms... By being bold together, we can tell a different story about classical music.’ I don’t doubt the sincerity of Arts Council-funded organisations to reach beyond the core but as we look to the next 80 years, I believe it would be foolish of us to infer that classical music needs some kind of makeover, and that its long-lasting and popular ‘story’ will not be robust enough to ensure its future. Moreover, while it is of course true that many people ‘snack’ on classical music via streaming services, is that really so different from when, fifty years ago, people of my grandparents’ generation listened to their *Classics for Pleasure* cassette, or put Radio 2 on to hear Alan Keith presenting *Your Hundred Best Tunes*?

In an era when many are insisting that classical music must be about brevity, I’d caution against the idea that this is the

only way to preserve the art form's appeal. After all, you don't need to look very far to see the degree to which new commissions, full-length works and semi-staged opera attract a very large and diverse audience. Each year, we typically sell over 300,000 tickets for the BBC Proms. Every night each summer, I witness thousands of people of all ages, enthralled by world-class music-making. We must never presume knowledge or imply that classical music is only the preserve of a small coterie of the privileged – but it is equally important not to patronise. Concertgoers at the Proms can most definitely cope with classical music being presented to them in a time-honoured fashion, and I therefore fully expect such experiences still to be the mainstay of publicly-funded performances in eight decades' time. As the Chief Executive of the Royal Philharmonic Society, James Murphy, wrote in *The Guardian* in January 2026, 'Performing sublime music that's sometimes centuries old, classical musicians reassure us that good things endure. They remind us that, if they can find meaning and resonance in what a composer had to say generations ago, we can surely find commonality and connection with each other in today's world.'

We've therefore established that the old ways are still valued. Why, though, do classical music and opera matter? And why should they continue to receive so many millions of pounds in public subsidy? Quite simply: because they are life-changing. They offer an astonishing, perhaps unparalleled depth of experience to those who choose to invest their time in them. But it is an undeniable fact that live, high-quality classical music is largely unviable commercially. Without meaningful levels of public investment, very few concert halls or opera houses would be able to stage their work, thus depriving audiences of the opportunity to encounter bold, engaging and often deeply relevant repertoire. And that, in my view, is a key reason why this music must be championed for the future.

This isn't, by the way, to suggest that there's a hierarchy

within music, with classical music at the top of the tree. Personally, I believe that comparisons between musical genres are reductive, and largely futile. I love listening to both Rachmaninoff and Radiohead, and am as at home at Ronnie Scott's as I am at the Bridgewater Hall. But at the same time, we *should* be unashamed about standing up for classical music's intrinsic value. For one thing, it asks more time from us, as listeners – while from practitioners, of course, it requires decades of practice and dedication. And if we believe, as I do, in the oft-repeated politician's phrase that 'talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not', we need to make sure people across the country can be inspired by music-making of the highest possible standard – not just in large cities but in our towns and villages, too. It is this breadth of access – this opportunity for people of all circumstances and backgrounds to connect with classical music, which public funding critically supports – that's at risk of being lost. And it is this that we must defend with unashamed zeal.

I had a very happy childhood, but didn't come from a wealthy background. Along with my two younger brothers, I went to my local state school and was only able to learn musical instruments thanks to the financial generosity of a family friend. Music gave me an identity – a purpose. I vividly remember my first experience of opera, aged around fifteen, when my school took us to the Royal Opera House to watch a rehearsal of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. The visceral thrill of seeing the performers up close stayed with me, and when I had the opportunity to become the first person in my family to go to university, I immediately chose Music as my subject. Today, I hold a job that brings with it a huge amount of privilege, and an element of status. That could all vanish in an instant, of course, and I don't define myself by the job I currently do for a living. But the effect of live classical music on my life has been nothing short of profound.

And throughout it all, the Arts Council was there. I didn't

realise it at the time, but many of my happiest and most formative musical memories – from experiencing the Proms for the first time as a teenager, to eagerly heading to the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival as a student, to seeing ENO’s astonishing run of Britten operas in the early 2000s – were only made possible through public funding. And I’m far from alone in this. It’s impossible to put an exact figure on the number of people who have been captivated by classical music in this way but I’d hazard a guess that, over the last 80 years, it’s in the millions. Technology will change in the coming decades, and audience expectations will inevitably shift – but I refuse to believe that this will come at the expense of our hunger for live music. And that’s why continued support for our artists, ensembles and venues will remain as vital as it’s ever been.

I mentioned earlier the frankly depressing statistics about the study of Music. These are, unfortunately, part of a broader narrative: since 2010, uptake of arts subjects at GCSE has fallen by over 40% – and in 2023, it was reported by the Cultural Learning Alliance that 43% of state schools were no longer entering any pupils for GCSE Music. Of course, studying music academically is by no means the only way to fall in love with it, just as you don’t need an English Literature degree to enjoy Shakespeare. But these figures are indicative of the extent to which society values the arts, and the extent of political support they attract. One of my concerns about the coming decades is that unless we have a political class who truly value artistic endeavour – and the effort required to attain excellence – we will see opportunities continue to narrow for all but the well-off few.

I’ve seen firsthand the effect this reduction has on the talent pipeline. As a Governor of Trinity Laban for over ten years, I watched in dismay as an ever-dwindling number of state school pupils applied to study at this world-leading music and dance conservatoire. This was not, to be clear, because of

any issues with the institution, but simply because fewer students were taking the subjects Trinity Laban offered beyond the stage at which they were compulsory. Scepticism and a general sense of weariness about the state of music education are, of course, nothing new, and nor are the calls for emerging talent to be supported. But the marked erosion of the curriculum over recent years appears, to me, to put the entire ecosystem at risk. Now is the time for those of us who care about classical music to articulate more clearly and passionately why it requires proper, long-term funding. And while those of us in the classical music sector need to continue to urge ACE to sustain its funding for our art form, that alone isn't enough; we must also press government to expand overall cultural funding.

Another change I would love to see in the years ahead is a greater celebration of the ways in which audiences might encounter classical music for the first time. Sadly, all too often, the moment any arts organisation, record company or broadcaster attempts to offer a way in, there are howls of protest that simply do not stand up to scrutiny. For example: for years, any change at BBC Radio 3 has been met with accusations of 'dumbing down'. When we launched Radio 3 Unwind in 2024, it became an immediate success, and the station now attracts 400,000 listeners every week. All too predictably, however, many of the self-appointed arbiters of good taste among the commentariat declared it to be a disastrous development: for David Sexton in *The Spectator*, it is 'music for the morgue'; for Ivan Hewett in *The Telegraph*, it 'could spell doom' and is 'mindfulness mush'. And all because we have responded to audience needs and acknowledged the powerful connection between classical music and mood.

In fact, Radio 3 Unwind offers people a wide range of music that enables them to focus, study, relax or step away from the madness of the day-to-day. It is also additive: this service is available on top of, not instead of, the wealth of

content already offered on the main Radio 3 station. And I suspect that, 80 years from now, we will have seen countless other attempts to hook audiences into the wonderful world of classical music. Wouldn't it be refreshing if such approaches were generally welcomed in the decades ahead, rather than dismissed?

It's a similar situation with live music: those who criticise festivals or venues often do so because of a perceived notion of their classical music programming being watered down. If, however, you were to look back at the very first season in which the BBC was the custodian of the Proms, you would see music on the programme by one Kenneth Wright. His career included eight years as the BBC's Head of Television Music, and his song 'Love's Worship' was heard at the Proms in 1928. Alongside this, there was music by Maurice Besley, best known in the 1920s as the composer of popular ballads including 'Time, You Old Gypsy Man'. Not a million miles away, I would argue, from the Proms' recent tributes to such genres as northern soul and disco, or our orchestral concerts with Florence Welch or Sam Smith.

No doubt technological change and the expansion of AI will continue unabated over the next 80 years, and the world my children live in, in their old age, may well be unrecognisable from the one they were born into. But the same could be said of those born in the 1940s, when the notion that an opera could be viewed on your telephone would have been, to put it mildly, absurd. Eight decades from now, the devices via which audiences consume classical music are likely to be radically different from those we use today, as will individuals' expectations of how they should listen to or watch these works. This is already happening: at the BBC, we see the rise in on-demand listening continuing apace, and while live programming remains central to the experience of music for those of us who grew up listening to the radio, younger generations increasingly want content at a time of their

choosing. But this does not mean that the power of live music will diminish. On the contrary, I would argue that as we become, as a society, ever more connected and ‘always-on’, the opportunity to spend a few hours immersed in an opera or concert will appear increasingly attractive.

It goes without saying that funding challenges will continue over the years to come, and it’s unlikely to get easier to make the case that the arts require sizeable spend. At the time of writing, the combination of a cost-of-living crisis and a war in Iran is sending shockwaves through the global economy; in such a context, arguing for more money for orchestras and opera companies might seem naïve at best, and at worst, churlish. But the arts and culture aren’t charity cases or nice-to-haves; collectively, they contribute around £12 billion a year to the UK economy. And more than that: at a point when the world is growing ever more divisive, we need to evangelise for classical music and its role in bringing people together: through study, through performance, and through shared audience experience.

Back, finally, to 1946. It was an exciting time: World War Two was over at last, hope had returned to the UK, and in a few years, the country would celebrate culture and the arts with an optimistic, future-facing confidence at the 1951 Festival of Britain. Imagine being told in 1946 that, 80 years later, there would be a full-time opera company in Leeds; that Europe’s largest arts centre would have opened in London; that regular tours to Devon and Cornwall would be undertaken by the Bournemouth and Philharmonia Orchestras; and that the BBC Proms would have a footprint in cities such as Bristol, Sunderland and Middlesbrough, as well as continuing to present over 70 concerts a year at the Royal Albert Hall. And all the while, long-established centres of excellence such as the Royal Opera House and orchestras ranging from the LSO to the Hallé would remain world-leading.

My hope is that, in 2106, people will look back on what

has, ultimately, been 80 years of progress. There is an inherent risk that those in positions of power may not fully understand or appreciate the value of the arts – and that, as a result, the amount of public funding they can secure will be derisory. But ultimately I believe the power of classical music and opera is such that these two art forms, which somehow always manage to hold true to tradition whilst simultaneously shedding their skin, will continue to maintain their popularity over the decades to come. Here's to the new commissions, the inventive festivals, the venues rooted in their communities, and the embrace of both modernity and tradition. And here's to audiences of the future becoming hooked on the classical music so many of us have fallen in love with, however they first encounter it.

Change Becomes Contagious

How Art And Culture Give Birth To The World That's Yet To Come

*The arts don't just dream up possible futures, argues design futurist **Sarah Housley** – they invent, test, and popularise them; as such we need artists to expand our imaginations and shift what's thinkable.*

IDEAS ABOUT THE FUTURE TEND to come to us through news headlines, research reports, statistical projections, and tech-industry speculations. These ideas often serve us warnings, and sometimes threats. They're compelling, but they're not the whole story. Art and culture tell us about the future, too, but they take a very different approach. Art finds us in a different state of mind; it presents us with invitations, provocations, sometimes interventions. When dialogues around climate breakdown, inequality, social polarisation, or any of the other macrotrends that will shape our futures, are expanded to include art, they very quickly become more interesting. Suddenly, the future feels like a construct that we can all participate in.

In this country, the need for a positive means of connection to the future is particularly acute. In an IPSOS poll¹ completed at the end of 2025, only 32% of people believed that British people will start to feel more optimistic

about the future this year (compared with a global average of 52%). The 2026 edition of the Edelman Trust Barometer² found that just 14% of people in the UK expect the next generation to be better off. When even the idea of a future worth wanting starts to feel closed off, part of what artists can do is to open it up again. Equally crucially, art can provide a means of resistance – by protesting, satirising or deflating the futures we are being shown that we resolutely do not want, and must reject.

The period of time that we are currently living in is often characterised as ‘VUCA’ – an acronym with origins in military and business theory that stands for ‘volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous’. Global geopolitics and economics have been viewed as increasingly VUCA since the early 2000s, and the arrival of visible climate breakdown has intensified the feeling that if the present is uncertain and anxious, the future can only be more so. Art, like so many forms of creativity, is familiar with ambiguity and non-linearity: artists have a particular ability to feel the edges of things; to sense and interpret the emergent and the unknown, and to live at the cusp of the new. They widen the aperture of what we are able to see, expand the thinking of a culture, and introduce a strangeness that feels exciting and generative. In these VUCA times, we urgently need to widen the aperture beyond the present and beyond the existing, to imagine more. Living creatively – not only being an artist, but participating in art and being culturally engaged across one’s life – adds options. It increases people’s capability to think in pluralities and beyond binaries.

Art and culture can be deeply activating experiences, normalising discussions of different futures and creating or catalysing our desire for them. They can propel us to navigate what is ‘not yet but might be’ or ‘the thick presents and still possible futures’, to borrow from philosopher and theorist Donna Haraway. Reading correlates with increased empathy,³

helping us to understand perspectives beyond our own; creative thinking became a buzzword in business⁴ because it enables people to find the possibility in situations, even when they feel constricted. One bold, brilliant example of this process in action is *Power Station*⁵ – a film documenting artists Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn’s attempt to turn their residential street in Walthamstow, east London, into a collective power station by installing solar panels on each house, and a nearby school. Begun during the pandemic and continuing through the cost-of-living crisis, when energy prices were skyrocketing and people were suffering in cold and damp homes, *Power Station* harnessed the energy and mindsets of art to reframe people’s attitudes to change and make collective action into an audacious creative act. ‘We want to make a real case for art and imagination as infrastructure,’ Edelstyn said at a screening of the film in 2026. The artists used what Powell describes as ‘imaginative acts’ to attract support for the project, maintain its momentum, and continuously renew their neighbours’ interest in participating. They distributed *Power Station* posters for people’s front windows, printed ‘greenback’ bank notes for backers to purchase, slept on their roof to raise money, recorded community songs, and filled their street with sunflowers. And they achieved – in part – their goal: creating new, hyper-local energy sources that illuminate a different vision of the future.

The infrastructure that enables art-making can also become a lever for collective change and futuring. Staged in 2023, director Katie Mitchell’s production of *A Play for the Living in a Time of Extinction*⁶ radically rethought the requirements for a touring play. Travelling without materials or a cast, it is performed at each location by actors who are available locally, with sets and costumes sourced second-hand. The play advocates for adaptive reuse, and is a cultural demonstrator of localised and low-waste living, expressed through theatre, creativity and joy. Framed in this way,

environmental responsibility doesn't limit possibilities but creates many more. If a play can so radically rethink its mode of operation to reduce its environmental impact, why can't an office? A company? A city? When it's made to feel not only possible but desirable, change becomes contagious.

One of the most useful models available to track societal change is the Overton window. Developed in the 1990s by policy analyst Joseph Overton, it's a way of categorising the range of ideas that are acceptable to the public. While it's most often used as a political barometer of collective opinion, it can also be used as a means to consider the average view of the future, by distinguishing between ideas that are generally seen to be 'acceptable' or 'popular' future probabilities, and those that are 'radical' or 'unthinkable'.

TV shows and films have long shaped what we expect the future to bring, and influenced people to actively make that future. They can move ideas into the Overton window relatively quickly, and influence public opinion to the extent that policy swiftly follows. This happened recently, emphatically, with the British TV drama *Adolescence*, which sparked calls for a social media ban for under-16s, first in newspapers and on social media and then in parliament. Beyond the screen, art's role in the Overton Window – its ability to persuade people and affect change – is subtler and more diffuse. Not all art makes it obvious that we are thinking about the future when we engage with it. Some art simply asks us to witness change, sit with it, and hold space for the feelings it produces.

In 2018, the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson brought his ongoing project, *Ice Watch*,⁷ to London's Tate Modern. In collaboration with geologist Minik Rosing, he installed 24 large chunks of detached Greenlandic ice outside the gallery, viewable from the public embankment, so that people would see them melt. Melting icecaps were an early and enduring symbol of climate change; by putting them

directly in front of people, Eliasson made that abstract symbol immediate and visceral: passersby could touch, smell, and listen to the ice. The exact impact the installation had on public awareness of climate breakdown, or the desire to take action to mitigate it, is impossible to quantify. But that the vivid, memorable encounters it created deepened people's engagement with the threat seems beyond doubt.

The idea of bearing witness also drove British artist and set designer Es Devlin's installation at the global climate conference COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. *Conference of the Trees*⁸ transported 197 trees and plants to line one of the venues, each tree representing one of the nations present at the talks. The indoor forest changed the context of each conversation, emphasising the interconnectedness of humans with other parts of nature, and reminded attendees – as art so often does – that while facts, figures and rhetoric are important, emotion comes first and last in human experience.

In 2005, in an article for *Grist* titled 'What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art',⁹ US environmentalist Bill McKibben observed that the climate crisis was strikingly underacknowledged in contemporary creativity. 'Oddly, though we know about it, we don't *know* about it,' he wrote. 'It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?' It took a while. Culture Declares Emergency,¹⁰ a connective movement that has committed to 'putting action into creative practice, and culture into environmental activism', launched in 2019. And now, those books, poems, plays and operas are firmly here.

One of the best I've seen is *Precipice*, an electro-folk musical that was incubated and staged at London's New Diorama Theatre by Timelapse last year. It depicted two snapshots of one ongoing future: a near-term event that sparks societal collapse, and the far-future consequences of that collapse. Oscillating between accountability, despair and hope,

it asked its audience to be open and receptive to the possibilities it presented and the range of emotions they invoked, even when these were uncomfortable.

Of course, leaving the viewer to draw their own conclusions about the futures being depicted in art is not without risk. In 2016, London-based digital artist and designer Keiichi Matsuda released *Hyper-Reality*.¹¹ The short film follows a gig worker in Colombia, and shows a near-future in which digital overlays take over people's experiences of the world, injecting an overwhelming amount of digital sensory stimulation, largely made up of adverts and gamification. Intended to be provocative and to explore an 'exciting but dangerous' trajectory for immersive display technology, the film was aesthetically captivating and widely admired. Ten years later, it's still a key reference point for the tech industry – sometimes presented as a prospect to avoid, but also, sometimes, as a future to work towards.

Futures-oriented art is often more speculative than prescriptive, turning projections and pathways of action into scenarios that can be physically interacted with. In futures thinking, this type of approach is called experiential futures, and includes physical spaces, settings and objects that bring to life a possible vision of the future. People are invited to interact with this version of the future: to imagine the world that exists around it, and consider what it might feel like; what happiness it might contain, what problems it might bring with it.

These projects sit somewhere between art, performance and roleplay, and are powerful enablers¹² of 'collaborative imagination', which studies¹³ have found to be a strong driver of social connection. One of my favourite examples is *Future Climate Souvenirs*,¹⁴ an ongoing project by British artists and designers Parsons & Charlesworth, which depicts a possible future for New York City in the form of embroidered patches that act as tourist souvenirs. The patches evoke an NYC in

which ingenious new forms of eco-tourism have been developed, including carbon capture harbour tours, inner city wetlands, and visits to feed the dodos at the city's de-extinction lab. The patches invite us to apply our own imagination to this future, by unpacking the world that might exist around them and considering how that world might have come about. In futures thinking terms, what they're encouraging are two processes called worlding and backcasting, but you don't need to know that to enjoy the project and use your imagination. The patches suggest a narrative, and leave us to do the rest. Creating a preferred future doesn't have to mean closing off possibilities.

Collective modes of art can make people more comfortable with the idea of a different world or a different perspective, through play and participation. Over the past few years, LARPing – live action roleplaying – has become more popular around the world, including in the UK. With deep roots in Nordic culture, LARPing involves taking on a character and inhabiting their world or moment. It is interactive, collaborative, and always done as part of a group. Like improvisational theatre, it is a collective experience that is creative for everyone involved.

Dressing up and inhabiting a character is fun to do, but it's also a form of embodied empathy. Some LARPs take on challenging subjects, such as living through the AIDS crisis, having to move countries as a refugee, or being in a relationship with an AI. The line between empathy and appropriation can on occasion become blurred, and some LARPs have been accused of exploitative approaches. But at their best, they offer a deeply imaginative immersion into an experience that would otherwise feel inaccessibly other. LARPs have been described as a way to 'rupture reality' and prototype and practise worldviews other than your own. Those who take part are also taking the risk of opening themselves up to long-term change: the worldviews they take

on often spread into their real life afterwards, a phenomenon that LARP artists call ‘bleed’.

On their own, LARPs are temporary excursions into another experience. But roleplay methods are also being used more systematically in cultural work to engender broader and more intentional changes in perspective. Moral Imaginations, a not-for-profit organisation founded by Phoebe Tickell, has developed a group governance method called Interspecies Council.¹⁵ Participants in the Council each receive a brief on which non-human being they will represent, and commit to try to understand that being’s perspective and put forward their needs. Moral Imaginations has used the method to gather feedback for a land use consultation by DEFRA, the UK’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. One delegate, representing ‘River’, writes of their experience:¹⁶ ‘Given the invitation, given someone to listen, an imaginative skill has leapt forth,’ observing later that ‘my thinking is changing in real-time.’

Ideas about the future can be confronting and unsettling, sometimes bringing up difficult feelings and implications. But art is a context in which we expect to consider new and radical concepts. Because all of these examples were framed as art, or at least as art-like, they were allowed to be provocative and allowed to be strange, in a way that more conventional approaches to change would not. By framing them in this way, the ideas feel more accessible, and less uncomfortable.

Cultural critics have been discussing¹⁷ for some years the rise of cultural homogeneity.¹⁸ This rise, they believe, is driven by several systemic factors, including the defunding of creative education and practice, the increasing commercialisation of culture, and the endless rechurning of ideas that is facilitated by algorithmic social media and generative AI. Thanks in no small part to eight decades of sustained public investment, the UK’s cultural and creative sectors remain some of its strongest exports and proudest assets. But there’s work to do. One of my

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personal hopes for the future is that we can rebuild the material and societal conditions that allow creativity to grow, so that art and culture-making can be as financially possible and as educationally integrated as they are socially valuable. If we expect artists and culture-makers to inspire us towards hopeful futures, and if we want more imaginative and diverse futures to be envisioned, we have to make it possible for them to do so.

Art activates our collective imagination. It can invite people in, make space for possibility, and gently – or less gently – reframe perspectives. When it orients us towards a future, it can make that future feel more tangible, more exciting and more possible – and motivate us to co-create it. If you believe, as I do, that the more people think about the future, the better our collective futures will be, then art and culture is no less than indispensable in that process.

Notes

1. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/predictions-2026-three-quarters-britons-expect-large-scale-public-unrest-year-ahead>
2. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20190523-does-reading-fiction-make-us-better-people>
4. <https://www.canva.com/resources/creativity-for-business-growth-report/>
5. <https://power.film/>
6. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/katie-mitchell-headlong-a-play-for-the-living>
7. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/olafur-eliasson-and-minik-rosing-ice-watch>
8. <https://esdevlin.com/work/projects/conference-of-the-trees-cop26>
9. <https://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/>
10. <https://www.culturedeclares.org/>
11. <http://km.cx/projects/hyper-reality>
12. <https://www.templeton.org/news/the-power-of-collaborative-imagination>
13. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.2318292121>
14. <https://parsonscharlesworth.com/future-climate-souvenirs-of-new-york/>
15. <https://www.moralimagination.com/interspecies-council>
16. <https://moralimagination.substack.com/p/becoming-river-an-interspecies-council>
17. <https://libcom.org/article/thoughts-mark-fisher-and-slow-cancellation-future>
18. <https://news.artnet.com/multimedia/w-david-marx-blanks-space-2734880>

Excellence. For Everybody. Everywhere.

*Arts Council England's chief executive **Darren Henley** on why ongoing public investment in artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries benefits us all.*

PUBLIC FUNDING FOR ART and culture is critically important, because a sustained, strategic approach to cultural investment pays big dividends in all our lives. I understand that words such as ‘investment’ and ‘dividends’ might be dismissed as economic rather than creative terms. Where’s the art in all this? My answer is that these dividends flow only when the art excels. While there will always be a healthy debate about what quality means within the artistic community, the public tends to know straightaway when they are being fobbed off with anything less than the real deal. To my mind, if you want truly popular, memorable and resonant art, it has to be the best. As Nick Serota argues in his introduction to this book, we hold this truth as dear in 2026, as we celebrate 80 years of the Arts Council, as our founder John Maynard Keynes did back in 1946.

Before I joined the Arts Council, I spent fifteen years leading the UK’s biggest classical music radio station, Classic FM, bringing some of the greatest works of art to a mass-market audience – so I have never understood the distinction that some make between ‘great’ and ‘popular’. There are works

of art that are ahead of their time, but few artists have ever striven not to be seen, or to have their work leave people untouched. The greatest art is the most human. Given time, it will always find its audience.

That doesn't mean that all art will be equally popular in every constituency. Taste, custom and history – elements intrinsic to our national culture – must be taken into account, and these are every bit as influential as the aesthetic traditions of an art form. It is only by encouraging the diversity of individual artistic perspectives that we can ensure we are reflecting the lives, loves and interests of audiences – and that everyone is getting the best. From a funding perspective, what matters is that we support talent and champion ambition, imagination and risk. These values are integral to creativity. We must never dilute them.

One of the great joys of my job is that I get to travel the length and breadth of England, meeting creative professionals and the audiences that they serve. Doing this has helped me to understand better how our creative ecology works, and I believe we're on the way to realising a vision in which everybody everywhere can have equal access to excellent performances, exhibitions and artistic events close to where they live.

Across England I've visited exciting new venues, many of which have been helped into being through major capital investments made by Arts Council England, using taxpayers' and National Lottery funds: among them, Storyhouse – the library, theatre and cinema in Chester; Shakespeare North Playhouse – a theatre that has sparked regeneration in the heart of Prescott; and The Box – the gallery, archive and museum in Plymouth.

I've seen works of ambition and innovation, from exhibitions of new art at Nottingham Contemporary to the technology embraced by the creative community at Pervasive Media Studio at Watershed in Bristol; from the work presented

by young people at Burnley Youth Theatre to the terrific writing, acting and production values of *The Children's Inquiry*, created by Helen Monks and Matt Woodhead from the wonderful Barnsley-based Lung Theatre.

Everywhere you go in England, you'll find brilliant art breaking out in unexpected places, with traditional art forms being presented in daring and innovative ways by highly creative professional performers, producers and directors. Take opera as an example: in recent years, I've seen productions of all sizes and scales, up and down the country. At Leeds Grand Theatre, I saw Opera North's stunning productions of Puccini's *Tosca* and Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Fully staged, both occasions were utterly magnificent. New generations of audiences are discovering opera presented at this scale, with our major opera companies continuing to create and innovate across England through new commissions and fresh versions of old favourites. Newly resident in Manchester, English National Opera made full use of the creative possibilities of Aviva Studios' magnificent building with *Angel's Bone*: a full-on musical, technological and theatrical experience that packed the sort of emphatic artistic punch that stays with an audience for years. I absolutely loved an intimate performance, just as artistically excellent but much smaller in size, of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* at the Invisible Wind Factory in Liverpool, produced by Southampton-based OperaUpClose in partnership with musicians from Manchester Camerata. I caught an excellent performance of *Windrush, The Journey* playing to an extremely appreciative audience at Bristol Beacon. Showcasing a rich tapestry of music and storytelling, and celebrating Black classical composers of the past, present and future, the production was created by Pegasus Opera Company, whose mission specifically champions under-represented voices in opera. And who could have failed to have been completely blown away by Birmingham Opera Company performing Michael Tippett's dystopian *New Year*

with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Alpesh Chauhan in a big top pitched in a car park in Birmingham city centre? The audience was free to move about the tent during the performance, with the action happening all around us. Truly, this was Birmingham Opera Company living up to the creative ideals of its founder, the late Sir Graham Vick, and to its tagline: ‘Not what you expect from opera’.

The best of innovation and the best of tradition thrive alongside each other in a consistent celebration of all that is finest about our national culture, whether that’s Nnena Kalu’s stunning Turner Prize-winning exhibition as part of Bradford City of Culture 2025; the artistic excellence in neighbourhoods across England powered by Arts Council *Creative People & Places* projects; the remarkable BBC Proms concerts in consecutive years by the Aurora Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Collon, when the musicians performed Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* completely from memory; James Graham’s powerfully devastating play *Punch* directed by Adam Penford at Nottingham Playhouse; or the internationally successful *Black Sabbath – The Ballet* commissioned by Carlos Acosta at Birmingham Royal Ballet.

These are just a few of the many events and places that I have experienced over recent years – and I am able to take in only a fraction of what’s on offer every day. Put together, they make up a wonderfully interconnected cultural ecology that extends across our villages, towns and cities. And, separately, each of them also shows the value of public investment in culture and creativity. Nowhere is eight decades of long-term sustained and strategic investment in culture more obvious than in our capital city. The south bank of the River Thames features beacons of artistic excellence including the National Theatre, the Southbank Centre (home to the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Purcell Rooms and the Hayward Gallery), the BFI, Shakespeare’s Globe, Tate Modern,

the Old Vic and the Young Vic. These institutions define that area of London, both for Londoners and for visitors from around the world. They are engines of creativity and production, driving economic and reputational growth.

And the same is true on a smaller – though equally vital – scale in other towns and cities across England. Those of us who work closely with libraries, museums, arts organisations and individual artists see the benefits of their work in these places, day in and day out. At the Arts Council, it's our responsibility to make the case for the value of the arts – and of public investment – to the widest possible audience. And we need to get that argument across in ways that make sense. We can do this most powerfully by showing how public investment in excellent work by artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries makes a huge difference, not only to the major cities that are most often talked about, but to every part of the country – to the communal lives of villages, towns and cities everywhere.

Thinking about how we can encourage culture and creativity in less obvious places is a preoccupation of mine, and I am always excited when I visit towns that might not be regarded as conventional tourist hotspots and discover great cultural riches. The range of Barbara Hepworth's work in the eponymous gallery in Wakefield is breathtaking. It's thrilling to see a Henry Moore sculpture rubbing shoulders with paintings by L.S. Lowry and Francis Bacon in Huddersfield Art Gallery. And I was excited by the breadth of the artistic riches on show and the obvious pride that people who live there have in the museums and collections when I visited the likes of the Higgins Museum in Bedford, the Grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool, the Museum of Making in Derby, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, and the Harris Museum in Preston.

Big cities such as Manchester, Newcastle, Leicester, Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol and Birmingham are surrounded by

smaller towns and cities that, while not so well known, are imbued with civic pride: places including Barnsley, Blackburn, Bridgwater, Coventry, Darlington, Middlesbrough, St Helens, Wakefield, Wigan and Wolverhampton. The people who live, work and study in these places deserve to reap the benefits of creativity and culture in their areas. In the past, many of them have been overlooked, but I believe firmly that the time has come to redress that balance, and to do so in a sustained and strategic way, making investments that deliver long-term change. Many of these towns have a proud heritage of innovation and creativity that is crying out to be rekindled. During my travels around the country, it's been exhilarating to walk the streets and see how artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries share a genuine ambition to make culture a part of local life, and how they are working to ignite the spark of creativity that can help reimagine and regenerate their towns.

You can find the same inspirational message in the towns that dot our coastline, whether you're in Margate or Hastings, Blyth or Scarborough, Great Yarmouth or Grimsby, Ventnor or Watchet. And it's important to remember the role that artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries play in counties with big rural areas, such as Northumberland, Lincolnshire, Cumbria, Cornwall, Herefordshire and Dorset. The population of these parts of England may be dispersed, but the people who live there have just as much right as those who live in big cities to benefit from the opportunities that individual creativity and excellent culture bring.

As well as having the ability to be both local and global, art is often, quite rightly, political. Long before the birth of the Arts Council 80 years ago – and of the formal arts-funding structure that this book celebrates – artists used their work to espouse views contrary to those of the government of the day. The creative freedom of artists is of paramount importance. It's one of the reasons it's so important for the Arts Council to

operate at arm's length from the government. Different people have different views – that's the beauty of living in a liberal democracy. People certainly have different artistic tastes. Speaking personally, I am very passionate about the bovine and ovine paintings of the Victorian artist Thomas Sidney Cooper (1803–1902), even going so far as to write a book about his life and work. He was a prolific artist (the most exhibited Royal Academician of all time, due to his long life), so his pictures of cows and sheep hang on many gallery walls, and I always experience a frisson of excitement when I visit one of the many museums around the country that hold his works in their collections – but I do realise that they may not be everyone else's cup of tea. So, I welcome the fact that different people will have different artistic passions across different art forms. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that I revel in celebrating those different perspectives. It's one of the things that I have come to love the most about doing the job that I do.

Every day, I engage with people who are passionate about art. Often their passion will be about a particular art form; sometimes it will be a subgenre that excites them; on other occasions, a single artist or company or venue is the focus of their fervour. You could say that our job as custodians of public money at Arts Council England is to make investment decisions that reflect as many of the passions of as many people in as many places as possible. Often these passions are in direct contradiction with each other, with some believing that their art form is inherently more important than others'. But while a passionate defence of one's own art form is to be expected, and even applauded, I have no time for the argument that one art form is intrinsically more valuable than another, and certainly this is not a position anyone working for the Arts Council can or should take. Our budget is finite, and we must balance it in support of artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries across all art forms, at all scales, in all parts of the country. As you might imagine, this leads to healthy and

detailed debate. Keeping everyone happy all the time is an impossible task. But, in the end, it's why I'm personally so passionate about the extending of the Arts Council's investment into new organisations and communities.

I believe that one of our jobs at the Arts Council is to try to make sure that everybody is afforded the opportunity to develop their own personal creativity, no matter who they are or where they live. Everybody has a creative potential that they can realise if offered the right opportunities. I reckon that achieving this potential can help each of us to lead a happier and more fulfilled life. So, when I describe investing in everyone's passions here, I believe that this should include giving everyone creative opportunities at all stages of their life. To be clear, we exist to support creative professionals to make excellent work across all art forms, as well as to invest in nurturing future generations of professional artists and performers. Encouraging everybody's personal creativity is not an alternative to that. Nor is it a replacement for investment that enables audiences to experience the widest range of artistically excellent, professionally produced culture close to where they live. Rather, it is a complementary aim.

The UK's status as a creative nation is sometimes better recognised abroad than at home, though in recent years, there has been a greater understanding of the economic value of the creative industries to 'UK plc'. Our future success depends on a sustained supply of national talent. We need to identify, nurture and develop this talent from an early age. So, providing children and young people with an excellent cultural education is vitally important. Every child should be able to enjoy the arts for their own sake. School subjects such as art and design, dance, drama and music should not be seen as entertaining optional extras. They give young people knowledge and skills that will help them build careers that are creatively and economically valuable. Some will go on to study at our excellent network of conservatoires or specialist

arts universities, and will ultimately work in the cultural sector or creative industries. Others will pursue a broad range of subjects in further education or higher education institutions – but they will do so as more rounded and confident human beings, trained to think creatively, because arts subjects have been a strong part of their education. As I said in my very first speech as Arts Council England chief executive at Ferens Art Gallery in Hull back in 2015: ‘Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not’. The fairer distribution of those opportunities has been central to our mission ever since.

Outside the classroom, children and young people should have the opportunity to enrich their lives via the performing arts, museums, galleries and libraries. They should take part in creating new art and culture, and they should be encouraged to experience the very best that is on offer. These opportunities should be the same for all children, no matter where they begin in life. Every child, whoever they are and wherever they live, should have the chance to realise their talent. They should not be disadvantaged by the colour of their skin, their religion or beliefs, their family background, gender, sexuality, disabilities or social class.

And this isn’t just the case when we are talking about young people. To liberate the creativity of every part of society, we need to fight for a more inclusive and diverse art and culture sector. To achieve that, we’ve got to continue to act intentionally to ensure our workforce and audiences reflect the world we live in – and shed light on the world we want to see. Diversity is a major opportunity we must embrace if we are to thrive. Rather than treating diversity as a kind of supplementary add-on, or an activity that is supported to run parallel to the mainstream arts and culture world, it should be regarded as central to the creative process. It is not a duty, but an opportunity: to find fresh ideas and new art.

At the Arts Council, we have a longstanding and fundamental commitment to supporting excellence for

everybody, everywhere. Our cultural landscape – like our country – is made infinitely stronger, brighter and better by the contribution of brilliant artists and cultural leaders from all our communities. By sharing the full range of stories and experiences that collectively make up our country, our artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries are playing their part both in reflecting the breadth and richness of 21st-century England, and in creating a future in which we all have a stake, and in which we can all take part.

We need talent, of every sort. To get it, we must continue to break down the barriers that block creative young people from flourishing, and we must build bridges that allow their talent to proceed and succeed. Here in England, many cultural organisations are playing their part in consciously deciding to help make this happen. Sally Shaw, the director of Colchester's Firstsite gallery, has introduced a wide-ranging programme of 'Holiday Fun' for children when schools break up over the summer. It meaningfully connects the youngsters both with the visual arts as an art form, and with the gallery as a physical space in the centre of their town. In the same vein, I visited a primary school in Skegness with the Royal Shakespeare Company's chair, Baroness Shriti Vadera, to experience their superb education programme, which takes Shakespeare to a network of schools across the country.

These major programmes aren't just happening in the visual and performing arts. Under the leadership of Jonathan Douglas, the National Literacy Trust's Connecting Stories campaign aims to increase young people's access to books and literary experiences in communities where levels of reading for pleasure are traditionally low. It has already reached more than 200,000 youngsters in fourteen areas across England through a variety of online and in-person events. I saw Connecting Stories in action in Stoke-on-Trent. Hearing first-hand the love of reading that had been sparked among young children and their families was a joy. With greater

investment, high quality programmes such as these could reach further, faster.

At all ages, our interaction with creativity and culture delivers huge positives. There are a multitude of intrinsic benefits that come from being surrounded by excellent cultural events and experiences – as well as from being involved in the process of creating something. Paintings, sculptures, photographs, dance, drama, music, literature, films, poetry, carnivals, parades, crafts, digitally created art – all of these bring profound pleasure, on an individual and collective level. Great art can transport us to a different plane. It can take us from the mundane realities of life to a new world. It can fire our imagination and show us the possibilities of other lives, other places – even other galaxies. It can lead us to question ideas and challenge our assumptions.

Although this book is bursting with the many different benefits of public investment in culture, I believe that art that cannot be enjoyed for its own sake is scarcely likely to have much of an impact in other ways. So, we must always celebrate the intrinsic value of art as a human, emotional, thoughtful, transformative experience. That experience is more than enough reason for investing in the work of creative professionals and cultural organisations. But it's not the only reason. Artistic and cultural activities can produce a wide variety of outcomes, beyond their purely intrinsic value. This adds to the excitement and relevance of the art. If you like, art can be used as a tool to secure a beneficial outcome – it is 'instrumental'. For me, there doesn't have to be a choice between the instrumental and intrinsic benefits. I'd maintain that the best of art has the greatest value in every way. But it's important that we never think of investment in culture and creativity solely as a tool. We should not invest in artists and cultural organisations only for instrumentalist purposes. Invest in artistic excellence and creative ambition, though, and the rest will follow.

We make this investment on behalf of the public, who

must always be at the heart of everything we do. A few years back, I went to see the Rambert Dance production of *Peaky Blinders: The Redemption of Thomas Shelby* in Bradford's Alhambra Theatre. It brings to life in a new way the story and characters familiar to millions who adored the small-screen version. At the interval, I was chatting to those sitting each side of me. One couple were avid fans of the TV drama, but they hadn't seen a dance production in a theatre before. For those on my other side, the opposite was true: they loved dance theatre but had never seen the TV series. Like me, both couples were enthralled by the spectacle unfolding on stage before them. That interaction of audience and exciting work is, of course, what we all want to see. And we should never forget that at the heart of the Arts Council's work is a belief that we share with the individuals and organisations in whom we invest: we are all here in service of the public, of the audiences, participants and visitors who interact with our work.

Public funding of the arts, museums and libraries in this country encompasses an entire cultural ecosystem and its interdependencies. At the Arts Council, our role is necessarily about balance – and about rebalancing. It's about stewardship: for here and now, and for the future. We recognise the complexity of the environment in which we invest. We are not an 'Either/Or' organisation. Rather, I see us as an 'And... And' organisation.

So, we are here for the regular audience members who loyally support their local theatre month in month out; and we are here for that couple in Bradford who've not been to the ballet before. We are here for every art form – theatre, music, dance, literature, the visual arts, digital work. We are here for everything within and between those art forms – opera, musical theatre, jazz, circus, carnival and more. We are here for museums. We are here for libraries. We are here for arts and health, arts and tech, arts and the environment. We are

here for every geography – north, south, east and west. For big cities, post-industrial towns and small villages. And the most important ‘And...And’ of all: we are here for audiences. Because audiences demand work they can access, and they demand that work to be truly excellent.

At Arts Council England, it’s as important for us to fund the work of the Royal Ballet and Opera as it is for us to invest in a network of grassroots music venues in towns and cities across the country. Both are equally relevant and valuable to the audiences they serve, and the creative professionals that they employ. Neither is more important than the other.

The money that we invest belongs to the people who pay their taxes and play the National Lottery. Our investments create a virtuous circle, enabling creative people and cultural organisations to innovate, to take risks, to be bold, to go on new creative adventures, and to surprise and challenge audiences, participants and visitors. The more we delight and astound audiences, the more they are prepared to support the case for more public investment in culture.

For the past eight decades, our work at the Arts Council has been as much about who we might collectively become as a country tomorrow as it is about who we are today. As we now look ahead to our next 80 years, it is my hope that our artists, arts organisations, museums and libraries will continue to tell our national story in ways that are innovative, inclusive, collaborative and world renowned. As Arts Council England’s new Chair Dawn Airey said on the day of her appointment: ‘In a world where AI, technology and automation are increasingly dominant, human connection, experience, imagination and creativity are the things that bring us together. They are the quintessential elements of a creative life and of a life well lived.’ At the Arts Council, we’ll play our part by continuing to invest in brilliant artists, performers, curators and creators who make excellent work across all art forms, at all scales, for all audiences in all places. And together, we will

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create happier lives in villages, towns and cities right across England. Surely, there can be no better reason to invest public money than that?

the real story

Naomi Alderman

IN THE SKY OVER THE train station, the clouds were advertising the latest thrilling and addictive adventure. Any cloud that was big enough was showing images of the heroes battling each other. Mr. Mercury turned himself into a pillar of acid steam to attack the great white dragons of Captain Unbelievable. Captain Unbelievable commanded her dragons to throw up a force field. The blue shield repelling the acid attack; the bright yellow electric bolts showing that Evil Fred was on his way to stir things up, and cause another plot twist. A quick code flashed up: if you wanted to see your personal version of the end of this story, you could pay a few pounds and it would be broadcast directly to your smart shade.

On the platform, the train was about to arrive. Kite, 41 years old, wearing her serviceable green travelling coat and pulling along her battered bag, looked at the small child of indeterminate gender standing next to her, staring warily up at the sky. The child might have been seven or eight years old. Old enough to ride the train by themselves, in search of interest and adventure, monitored via various remote services for the length of the journey. But no one was here to give this child comfort about the sky.

‘Look,’ said Kite to the child, ‘you can see where the broadcast drone is. Do you see? It’s hovering at the corner of that cloud, projecting the image into it. Do you see: there, and

there, are the drones that haven't found a big enough cloud yet?'

'*I know*,' said the child. 'We do it in media awareness and technological literacy, it's the first subject. Only babies think stories in the clouds are real.'

Oh right. Things had changed since she'd been at school. Then, it had all been about stopping them from accessing any online media at all. But you can't stop children from accessing clouds, so obviously lessons must have moved on, to keep up.

'So have you ever heard a real story?' asked Kite.

'Stories aren't real,' said the child, 'that's what makes them stories. We did that in Truth and Fiction in Year One!'

'Well, where are you travelling today?'

'Only to Brighthaven,' said the child. 'There's a funfair, and my auntie's going to take me. Look, I've got my GuardWatch.' They held up their wrist.

'That's a coincidence,' said Kite, 'I'm going to be working in Brighthaven today. My friend and I are there for Fair Season. If you come along, you can see a real story.' She touched her ring lightly to the child's GuardWatch, sharing her details, her various security checks, and the event.

'What *is* a real story?' said the child.

'A real story is one we make ourselves, it's the size of us. The stories in the sky are big, exciting stories; they're fun but they're different for each of us. A real story is a story we share.'

The child looked sceptical. The train pulled in.

Nathan was waiting on the train, in their usual seats by the window. The journey was only an hour. He had already done his research, although, of course, research told them almost nothing. But he was a musician and visual artist, which gave him a bit more to go on.

'Look,' he said, 'I've been looking at the palette of colours from the sea, and the clothes people wear in Brighthaven. I think this is where they're at emotionally, in terms of texture.'

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And here's the pattern of the seagull flights over the town in the past six years, turned into a melody.'

This possibility had been imagined long ago by the novelist and prophet of technology, Douglas Adams. All you needed was enough computing power to follow millions of birds, to turn their lives and ways of being into musical chords. It didn't always work; sometimes it came out sounding like a long death rattle. But with a human being in control, picking the beautiful melodies and discarding the discordant ones, you could turn statistics into wonder. The melody he broadcast to the clip on the side of Kite's ear was delicate and somehow funny. It spoke of a town at ease with itself, enjoying itself, looking hopefully but clear-sightedly towards the future.

This was the thing. The machines could certainly perform amazing feats with large amounts of data. The patterns of seagull flights weren't really so different from the patterns in the way a community chooses the colours of its houses, or the way a story morphs and travels between groups of people. If you fed the machines enough human-created stories, they could make the big beings in the clouds and turn them into an individual story, perfected to hit your particular tastes, exactly the sexiest and most enticing thing for you to watch that day. But you did have to have the data to begin with. Old data didn't last. Human minds and culture moved on too fast. If you wanted the machines to be able to keep on making big, extravagant, customisable things, you needed people to make small, intimate, communal, human-sized things.

There had been a lot of arguing, and a lot of bad behaviour. There had been companies trying to eat other companies. There had been founders challenging other founders to physical fights. There had been some kind of space race. There had been terribly damaging stories broadcast into retinal implants supplied to children in developing countries. It was very important to be aware of all the harm that had been done. There had been a time when people told

themselves that any harm was worth it, and some of those people had gone to prison for a very long time.

But in the end, the harms had been stopped, and the benefits had been made available to the general public. Like the railway network, like the electrification of houses, like the provision of universal medical care, something that had once been done for profit and had therefore often been done in a terrifyingly slapdash and exploitative way, did have some practical purpose. Like the railway network, like the electricity companies, like health care, the great machines had eventually been subject to the laws of democracy. There was a fair price a person could be expected to pay, not an extortionate price. There was a level of service a person could expect to receive, not a harmful service. It was extremely important to protect the machines' ongoing ability to do those useful things. It was from this logic that The Settlement had been agreed.

In Brighthaven, Kite spent her morning and afternoon with the local fixer assigned to help visiting artists. She met wonderful people. The two Immanuel sisters who were raising the third sister's children after she had died. The men who had rebuilt the community centre at the edge of town after a fire, and had planted a sensory garden for the visually impaired around it. The Al-Walids, the couple who ran the café in the centre of town where everyone was always welcome to bring their pet, and which every child in town therefore wanted to visit. She talked to children at the local school about their teachers, hearing the joke about Mr Robinson, who was terrified of cactuses, the accepted wisdom that Mrs Liu was the best teacher in the school but also the most formidable, and had taught three generations of Brighthaven children yet somehow seemed always to have been 60 years old.

By the evening, she'd worked with local artists and makers to create a quick series of puppets, partly using 3D printing. The show would evolve over the next month, but this was somewhere to start.

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Storytelling must always have been like this. Performance must have been like this. When human beings were a group of wandering hunter-gatherers, when we knew a band of between 150 and 1,000 people extremely well, storytelling must have been something that we did as a community, and for the community. Kite was always amazed by how quickly she was able to bring a piece together in a new place. It felt like something older and deeper than her, speaking through her. The tradition of oral storytelling, the generations of bards who learned their words off by heart and embellished the old tales with their new thoughts. There had always been people who took those tales and wrote them down. There had always been people who knew that writing a story down, pinning it into place, was a way of killing it. The way that storytelling remains alive is for it to be always changing. It remains alive if the audience can shout out their suggestions; if the performer realises that part of their job is to respond to what the audience is feeling. No night of her performance over the next month would be the same as any other.

She was delighted to see the child from the train station in the front row, accompanied by a middle-aged woman in a light summer dress. Must be the aunt. The aunt laughed particularly uproariously at the puppet of Mrs Liu, shouted out that she remembered being taught by her when she was a child. Two people came on stage to tell their own stories about their time at the school. The puppets of all the animals in the Al-Walid café got a particularly good reaction. Nathan's melody was a repeated refrain, and he had already covered half the walls of the theatre with murals based on local pebbles and shells. When Kite brought the elements together into a story about Mrs Liu setting up a school for animals, when the animals fought and argued in just the way that had happened over the ownership of the community centre, when one of the animals was terrified of cactuses, Kite felt the voices and ideas of all the people she'd met speaking through her.

It wasn't her best work. The section about the community

centre was a little hackneyed. She would find more things to sharpen it tomorrow. At some point, she might make something out of it that she felt would be good enough to preserve and make available to people who didn't live in Brighthaven. Or maybe she wouldn't. She had learned long ago that the thing that emerged through her wasn't entirely under her own control.

At the end of the night, the work she had done would be made available to the ever-hungry machines. For some people, this turned that work into a horror show. They were disgusted by the idea that the machines had contact with anything that she did. But it was this process that had made The Settlement possible. A good percentage of the income of all the machines went back to artists, communities, individual creators. Because the machines could not work without them. Artists had always had patrons. Often those patrons had not understood the work that they were supporting. Understanding wasn't the point. The point was that it was still possible to make work.

In the clouds, Evil Fred was cackling his high-pitched squeal. The clouds, too, were a settlement. They could only be turned on for fifteen minutes, three times a day. Evil Fred invited Inspector Peculiar to fight him in his evil lair. And then they turned off.

The child came up to Kite at the end of her performance.

'I liked the animals,' said the child. 'I want to tell stories like that one day.'

'Real stories, or big stories?'

'Real stories.'

About the Contributors

Carlos Acosta CBE is an internationally acclaimed dancer, choreographer and Artistic Director, and former Principal Dancer of The Royal Ballet. Born in Havana, he trained at Cuba's National Ballet School before performing with leading companies worldwide, including American Ballet Theatre and Paris Opera Ballet. Since 2020 he has been Director of Birmingham Royal Ballet and is also Founder of Acosta Danza. He was awarded a CBE in 2014 and has received numerous honours for his contribution to dance and the arts.

Naomi Alderman is an award-winning novelist, broadcaster, TV producer and videogames creator. She is the author of the bestselling, multi-award-winning *The Power*, which was chosen as a book of the year by both Bill Gates and Barack Obama and became a TV series for Amazon Prime. Her other books include *The Future*, *The Liars' Gospel*, *The Lessons* and *Disobedience*. Her latest novel *The Strangers* will be published in September 2026

Simon Armitage is a celebrated British poet, playwright, and musician who was appointed Poet Laureate in 2019. He is currently Professor of Poetry at Leeds University and has written poetry, plays and non-fiction, receiving numerous awards including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

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Victoria Adukwei Bulley is a poet, writer and artist. An alumna of the Barbican Young Poets and recipient of an Eric Gregory award, Victoria has held residencies in the US, Brazil and the V&A Museum in London. Her debut pamphlet, *Girl B*, was published by the African Poetry Book Fund in 2017. She is the recipient of a Techne scholarship for doctoral research at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her debut collection, *Quiet*, was published by Faber in 2022. It was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and won the Rathbones Folio Prize for Poetry and the John Pollard Foundation International Poetry Prize.

Ann Dinsdale is Principal Curator of the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth and an expert on the world-class Brontë collection, appearing on numerous TV and radio programmes. She has published several books and articles on the Brontës, including *Let Me In: The Brontës in Bricks and Mortar*, co-authored with Sharon Wright.

James Graham is a playwright and screenwriter. His plays include *This House*, *Labour of Love* and *Ink*. He won the 'Best Play' Olivier award for *Dear England* (2024) and *Punch* (2026), and is BAFTA, Emmy and Tony nominated. His screen work includes *Quiz* (ITV), *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Channel4) and *Sherwood* (BBC). He received an OBE for Services to Drama and Young People.

Graduating from RADA in 1987, **David Harewood** is a distinguished British actor, writer, director and current President of RADA. Awarded an OBE in 2023 for his services to drama and charity, he is known for his roles in *Homeland* and *Supergirl*, alongside vocal advocacy for mental health and racial equality. David has recently finished a run as Othello on the West End, a role he first performed at the National Theatre in 1997, the first black actor to do so. David is the lead in a new Channel 4 drama, *Pierre*, based in a solicitor's office, which will air later this year.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Darren Henley CBE is chief executive of Arts Council England. His boardroom experience spans the arts, media, education, charity and government. Previously managing director of Classic FM, he authored two independent government reviews into music and cultural education. After studying politics, management and art history, he trained as a positive psychologist and as a coach, completing a doctorate exploring how outsiders drive change.

Nigel Higgins is Chair of Sadler's Wells, Chairman of Barclays plc, and previously served as Chairman of the Group Executive Committee and Managing Partner of Rothschild & Co. He is also a non-executive director of Tetra Laval Group, Oxford Quantum Circuits Limited, and a Board member of Garsington Opera. He has long supported education and the arts.

Lubaina Himid CBE RA is a British artist whose practice addresses themes of race, history, feminism, memory and identity. Her work often employs theatricality, pattern and colour to challenge dominant cultural narratives and amplify overlooked voices. She is representing Great Britain at the 61st Venice Biennale, was awarded the Susan Deal Booth/FLAG Art Foundation Prize in 2024 and the Maria Lassnig Prize in 2023, and won the Turner Prize in 2017. Her work has been exhibited extensively in the UK and internationally and has been acquired by major public and private art collections worldwide.

Sarah Housley is a design futurist and innovation researcher. Previously the Head of Consumer Tech at trend forecasting company WGSN, she now works independently as a consultant, writer, speaker and visiting lecturer. Her book, *Designing Hope: Visions to Shape Our Future* (The Indigo Press, 2025) outlines four emerging futures to inspire hope, action and critical thinking about how we'll live in the decades to come.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Sam Jackson is the Controller of BBC Radio 3 and the BBC Proms. Working closely with teams based in Salford, London, Cardiff and Glasgow, as well as with the Corporation's UK-wide Orchestras and Choirs, Sam leads the strategy for classical music across the BBC. He drives creative and managerial responsibility for the running of Radio 3 and the delivery of the annual BBC Proms (the world's biggest classical music festival), making sure the network and the Proms remain at the forefront of cultural life in the UK and across the world.

David Joseph CBE is Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts and Chair of The Grenfell Foundation. Joseph has been a leading figure in the UK's creative industries for more than three decades. Before joining the RSA, he spent 17 years as Chairman and CEO of Universal Music UK, helping to build one of the world's most successful music companies. Alongside his commercial career, he has championed climate action, social justice, and neurodiversity, including through the publication of *Creative Differences*.

Daljit Nagra is a professor at Brunel University London, Vice President of the Royal Society of Literature, Advisor to Poetry By Heart, and presenter of Radio 4 Extra's weekly *Poetry Extra*. He has six poetry collections, all with Faber & Faber, and has won the Forward Prize for Best Individual Poem and Best First Book, the South Bank Show Decibel Award and the Cholmondeley Award. He was the only writer commissioned to write a poem for the 'Lighting up the Nation' ceremony for the King's Coronation Concert in 2023.

Dave Moutrey OBE is Director of Culture and Creative Industries at Manchester City Council, leading the city's cultural and creative industries strategy. Previously Chief Executive of HOME, he led the merger of Cornerhouse and

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Jacqui O'Hanlon is Deputy Executive Director & Director of Creative Learning and Engagement at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where she leads the RSC's work with education settings, communities and partner theatres across the UK and internationally. She is an Evidence Associate for the Cultural Learning Alliance. She was appointed as a Commissioner for the Durham Commission in Creativity in Education and received an MBE for services to the arts.

Amanda Parker is an arts consultant and Associate Writer for *The Stage*. Her career spans strategy, policy and communications leadership across education, broadcast and culture, including Director of the London Short Film Festival and Editor of Arts Professional magazine. As CEO of Inc Arts UK, Parker led EDI campaigns across the UK's creative and cultural sector. She is Co-Chair, Mayor of London Cultural Leadership Board, and a Trustee of the RSC and Intermission Youth Theatre.

Jess Prendergrast is Chair of Contains Art CIO and a founding Director of Onion Collective CIC – two organisations that in consortium established, built and now run the East Quay arts centre in Watchet Somerset. She combines a background in economics, policy and research with a deep commitment to cultural access, community rootedness and regenerative transformation that seeks to confound what an art centre can be. She writes regularly on culture, community and the next economy.

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Chris Riddell studied at Epsom School of Art and Design and at Brighton Polytechnic under Raymond Briggs. A celebrated political cartoonist for *The Economist*, *The Independent* and *The Observer*, he is also an award-winning children's author and illustrator, twice winning the Greenaway Medal. His acclaimed works include *Ottoline*, *Goth Girl* and *the Ghost of a Mouse*, and the bestselling *Edge Chronicles* with Paul Stewart. Renowned for combining classical draughtsmanship with warmth, wit and themes of tolerance, he lives and works in Brighton.

Bobby Seagull is a maths teacher, broadcaster, author and speaker best known for his appearances on University Challenge and the BBC series *Monkman & Seagull's Genius Guide to Britain*. A former investment banker and Chartered Accountant, he now teaches in East London while completing a doctorate at Cambridge. Bobby is an ambassador for National Numeracy and a passionate advocate for public libraries, campaigning for long-term funding and championing libraries as spaces for learning and opportunity.

Nicholas Serota was appointed Chair of Arts Council England in 2017, following nearly 30 years as Director of Tate, where he oversaw the opening of Tate Modern and Tate St Ives. He also served as Senior Independent Director of the BBC from 2017 to 2025.

Jack Stilgoe is a professor of science and technology policy at University College London and part of UK Research and Innovation's Responsible AI programme. He researches, teaches and advises Government on the governance of emerging technologies, including geo-engineering, self-driving cars and artificial intelligence. He is the author of two books: *Experiment Earth* and *Who's Driving Innovation?*

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Annabel Turpin is Chief Executive of Storyhouse in Chester, one of the UK's largest arts centres, integrating theatres, cinema and library, and welcoming 900,000+ visitors annually. She is also Co-Director of the Future Arts Centres network, championing arts centres as drivers of social, economic and cultural change. Since 2023, she has chaired Arts Council England's North Area Council and serves on its National Council. Previously, she led ARC in Stockton-on-Tees for 15 years.

Jo Verrent is the director of Unlimited – which exists to change and challenge the world through commissioning disabled artists to create extraordinary work. Since 2013, Unlimited has supported over 556 artists with over £7.6 million, reaching audiences of over 9 million. Jo has an MBE and also a cup for making jam. She is on the National Council for ACE and the oversight group for Arts, Fundraising and Philanthropy.

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Supported using public funding by
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Design by David Eckersall

