

‘Artpoints’: a proposal for raising the profile of the arts

A response to the Arts Council's Draft Strategy 'Yes for Art', 3 June 1998

Many documents, such as this document, start with a quotation. Why is it there? Because an apt quotation, from a well-known personality, can express an insight vividly and succinctly. It can focus our attention. It can make a message stick in our memory. That is what a good quotation is for. It stays with us in ways that ordinary language cannot. And, as a result, we can take ownership of it, and use it to others, propagating an insight throughout a community in ways which far exceed what its original author could ever have foreseen.

The Draft Strategy goes on to expound its message of advocacy - and it does this extremely well. It is one of the best summaries of the points to be covered by any strategy for the arts that I have seen. But it is not written in ear-catching language. It is couched in the - perfectly appropriate but nonetheless unmemorable - language of the strategist, with its 'aspirations' and 'outcomes' and 'targets' and 'benefits'. The stylistic contrast with the William Morris quotation, which opens the document, is striking. 'In the times when art was abundant and healthy', Morris says, 'all people were more or less artists'. It is a daring, dramatic, personal comment. It does all but one of the things that the 'style of strategy' recommends. It shocks a bit; it is jargon-free; it is inclusive; it doesn't moan; and it suggests the normality of the arts in people's lives.

The one thing this sole quotation cannot do, though, is live up to the final point in the 'style of strategy' list: to 're-package the arts and cultural industries to appeal to those who operate outside the arts community'. A single quotation, no matter how vivid or insightful, cannot do that. The arts, by their nature, are too complex and profound for their value to be capable of summary in a single statement. This is not a domain where slogans of the advertising kind are going to be effective. A heading such as 'Yes for Art' conveys a strong initial impact, but it is essentially meaningless. What is it we want people to say 'yes' to? How do we get *that* message across? The task there has hardly begun.

But it is beginning - and all over the country, and beyond, I see people struggling to find ways of expressing their feelings about the arts and their relevance and value in society. However, what strikes me is that they are, in the process, rediscovering the same wheel. How much duplicated mental energy must have been spent by creative writers as they put together statements such as 'Yes for Art', around the arts world? Why do people spend so much time trying to say again what has already been said, with greater elegance and force than most of us will ever be able to amass, by a cadre of specialists over several hundred years? I am referring, of course, to the artists themselves, to their commentators and critics, to the art theorists and professional writers who have spent a lifetime of thought about what the arts are all about. Rather than trying to replace their efforts, in our puny ways, we should be standing on their shoulders. Everyone will see further, if we do.

But how do we get everyone to stand on their shoulders? And do so in such a way that we meet what in my view is the most rigorous demand of the whole Draft Strategy - 'to celebrate the arts as a *normal* part of people's lives' (my emphasis)? The proposal below suggests one possible way in which we might make some progress.

But first: *normal*, in this context, needs some clarification. It does not mean 'normal' in the sense of 'normal breathing' - something that happens all the time, a permanently present part of our lives. The arts, after all, provide an alternative to what is normal in that sense. Rather, 'normal' here has a sense of frequency - to mean a regular or habitual encounter with something which is, by definition, rather special. The task, accordingly, is to find ways of bringing the importance of the arts routinely into the forefront of people's minds. We need to devise methods of giving people the opportunity and the motivation to experience a regular 'drip, drip, drip' of moments of reflection on the arts. At the same time, we need to be realistic, and recognize that everyone is busy and bound up with their existing routine, and that we can only expect to achieve an entry into a tiny part of a person's behaviour. But if we were able to grab the attention of a person, for just a few seconds of his or her time, on a daily basis, to get the message of the arts across, would we not feel we were doing something worthwhile?

In my view, we shall be most successful in doing this if we make use of methods which are already part of people's routine behaviour - or, at least, part of their routine awareness. So, what are the methods people routinely use when they try to keep themselves in regular, daily touch with an aspect of life which is of importance to them? There are several. They include the diary (in book or computer form), the calendar, the concept of 'thought for the day' (used in varying forms in all media, but most noticeably on the *Today* programme), the filofax, the computer booting message system, the 'on this day' (and other) sections of daily newspapers, visiting cards, and so on. It ought to be possible to adapt one or more of these to provide a way of increasing people's opportunities to access our message.

And to increase their motivation? My answer to this is to give them something worth reading - in the form of a short quotation, of the kind referred to above, which presents an insight into what the world of the arts is about. I leave it to others skilled in marketing to decide which method, or combination of methods, is likely to reach most people. The present memorandum deals only with the concept and with the editorial input which is required. But somehow, using one of these methods, an artistic 'thought for the day' should be part of the ammunition which Arts Councils and other arts enthusiasts have, as part of their strategy of persuasion. The phrase 'thought for the day' is not quite right, given its religious resonances. For the moment, as the concept needs a working title, let me call it Artpoints.

Here are some examples of the kind of quotation which could be included. I have an extensive collection of these.

Sample quotations

We spend our days, each one of us, in looking for the secret of life. Well, the secret of life is in art.

Oscar Wilde, Irish writer
(In *Nothing - Except My Genius*, Penguin, 1997)

Art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterizes prayer, too, and the eye of the storm ... an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction.

Saul Bellow, US novelist
(In George Plimpton, *Writers at Work*, 1967, p. 190)

Anything can make us look; only art can make us see.

Archibald MacLeish, US poet
(*'Riverside'*, in *Poetry and Experience*, 1961)

Art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.

Walter Pater, British critic and essayist
(*Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 1873)

We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish artist
(In Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art*, 1972))

Artists are the antennae of the race.

Ezra Pound, US poet
(*'Henry James'*, 1954)

No better way is there to learn to love Nature than to understand Art.

Oscar Wilde, Irish writer
(In *Nothing - Except My Genius*, Penguin, 1997)

The poem ... is a little myth of man's capacity of making life meaningful, And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see - it is, rather, a light by which we may see - and what we see is life.

Robert Penn Warren, US poet
(*Saturday Review*, 22 March 1958)

Art very possibly *ought* to be the supreme achievement, the 'accomplished'; but there is the other satisfactory effect - that of a man hurling himself at an indomitable chaos and yanking and hauling as much of it as possible into some sort of order (or beauty) aware of it both as chaos and as potential.

Ezra Pound, US poet
(In H Kenner (ed), *The Pound Era*, 1973)

Art is dedicated echo.

George Santayana, Spanish philosopher and writer
(In J Gassner & S Thomas (eds), *The Nature of Art*, 1964)

Art - the only achievement of Man which has made the long trip from all fours seem well advised.

James Thurber, US writer and cartoonist
(*Forum and Century* magazine, 1939)

It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.

Oscar Wilde, Irish writer
(*'The Critic as Artist*, 1891)

It being a remarkable fact in theatrical history, but one long since established beyond dispute, that it is a hopeless endeavour to attract people to a theatre unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get into it.

Charles Dickens, British novelist
(*Nicholas Nickleby*, Ch. 30)

Literature is news that *stays* news.

Ezra Pound, US poet
(*'The ABC of Reading'*, 1934, Ch. 2)