

Unleashing the Potential of the Creative Sector: 23 October 2007

This seminar was striking for the strength of enthusiastic support for follow up action that it provoked in the audience. This would not have surprised David Hume, who observed that action did not generally flow from reason alone but required the passions to be engaged. The qualities of passionate commitment, intellectual depth, artistic feeling and personal engagement - as well as empirical evidence of the scale and significance of the creative sector to the economy - were strongly to the fore in the presentations by the two speakers for the evening, Professor Seona Reid, Principal of the Glasgow School of Art and Jonathan Mills, Director of the Edinburgh International Festival. There resulted a lively debate, skilfully chaired by Professor Joan Stringer, DHI Trustee, and the clock brought an end to the formal proceedings long before the debate had reached a natural conclusion.

The speakers acknowledged that the focus of the evening was to be primarily on the economic potential of the creative sector while both being at pains to stress that the significance of creativity for people and society went far beyond the economic.

Seona Reid cited a formidable array of statistics and reports in support of some key propositions:

- that creative industries and creative people are of much greater economic significance than is generally recognised;
- that this significance is growing and is bound to grow further;
- that Scotland has a flourishing creative sector already and has the qualities that are recognised internationally as essential to its continuing success

Among Seona's points that stayed in the mind were:

- the Richard Florida analysis that highly creative people, together with the places, notably cities, that they find attractive to live and work in, are a major driving force for modern economic growth;
- the requirement for centres of creativity to possess the three Ts – talent, technology and tolerance - characteristics in which Scotland is well positioned.
- the impressive amount of 'third party' endorsement that exists for the proposition that in Glasgow and Edinburgh, taken separately and together, Scotland possesses some of the most highly regarded locations for creativity in Europe.

In contrast to this generally upbeat view of the potential of Scotland's creative sector, Seona Reid had some challenging things to say about current policies towards the sector in Scotland and specifically about 1) ambition, 2) public support and 3) education.

- On 1) there is no holistic view of the creative sector to match that which the DCMS in England and its Welsh and Northern Irish equivalents are pursuing. Linked to this is a regrettable lack of meaningful data about the sector in Scotland. Responsibility for the sector is split between departments of the Scottish Government, with no-one having a clear lead at Ministerial or official level. Similarly, responsibility will be split between Cultural Scotland (the body that is to replace the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen) and Scottish Enterprise, with much uncertainty about what if anything will be the role for SE in relation to creative industries in future.

- On 2) public funding for creative activities adopts a business model which assumed that economic growth requires the creation and growth of large companies, whereas the creative sector is likely to continue to be a mass of small businesses which need to increase in number rather than size, like algae not trees. Also heavily deprecated was the pervasiveness of what was described as an audit culture. I took the point to be that public funders seek a degree of transparency and predictability regarding expected and actual outcomes, which stifles creative endeavour.

- On 3) education, a fresh approach is required, encouraging creativity at all stages. with a shift away from excessive emphasis on deductive reasoning to develop all kinds of intelligence. There is a challenge for business to learn how to use the talents of creative people. Seona closed by calling for the national conversation about Scotland's future to be about developing culture, creativity and diversity in Scottish society.

Jonathan Mills, pianist, composer and architect as well as EIF Director, complemented Seona Reid's talk by focusing more on the non-economic significance of creativity and culture. A number of his observations did however echo some of Seona's points, e.g.

- the creative sector is a world of extraordinary individuals who flourish in osmotic systems; interference in the creative process can be stifling and, as Florida warned, highly creative people are extremely mobile so policy needs to avoid that stifling effect.
- we should learn from Hume and other Enlightenment figures that creativity requires an open minded search for answers in more than one discipline; and, crucially, space to develop ideas far from the market place and from audits

While fully accepting that endeavours such as the Edinburgh Festivals have to justify themselves to national and local public funders, among other things by reference to their impact on the local economy, Jonathan considered it vital to strengthen support for creativity and culture by achieving an understanding of the deeper and longer run significance of creativity and culture in helping people understand the world we live in and how it is changing. Without claiming to have clear answers to this challenge – one that he suggested would need a David Hume to tackle - Jonathan spoke interestingly about the connections between technology, collective memory and culture, highlighting the vast changes that current generations have experienced from a simple acoustic world to living 'in thin air' in a world of virtual reality and displaced locations.

He likened this in some degree to the introduction of printing to Europe, which had altered the nature of collective memory and culture by disembodiment of the memories that had previously resided in individuals, with profound implications for culture.

To select from several points raised in a lively debate, it was suggested to the speakers that they needed to choose between free expression without public subsidy or subsidy that was bound to come with conditions. Seona Reid argued that the public funding conditions had become much too onerous, with demands for evidence of economic impacts in as few as three years for actions which were bound to be more long term in their impact. She sought a move to a more trusting relationship.

Other points made were that creative industries play an important part in the economy of rural areas like the Borders; – agreed and there are good examples in Italy, but cities as creative hubs give scale. Creative people are often reluctant to adopt a commercial approach but need help to learn these skills and to understand that otherwise the commercial value of their work may be to be picked up by large corporations; - agreed

Other questions dealt with skilfully by the speakers included;

- whether the remit of the Broadcasting Commission should be expanded; and
- whether the next Edinburgh Festival should be launched from Glasgow

The issue of how to fund creativity re-emerged in a discussion with the speakers over dinner with a number of policy makers, practitioners and others.

One contributor said that private sector funders would draw a clear distinction between propositions worthy of venture capital funding, which they would look at on strictly commercial criteria; and propositions they were asked to consider as philanthropists, where the chief criterion would be the funder's enthusiasm for the non commercial benefits of the project. This might not rule out the same quango dealing with both kinds of project in relation to public funding, though how this would work in practice was not clear.

Concluding thought - the plea from the speakers for a less constraining form of public support seems essentially to be a design challenge. The prospect of government agreeing to 'send money and ask no questions', the long held aspiration of all sorts of publicly funded agencies over the years, may be remote – and perhaps rightly so. But there is surely scope for creative thought about the design of a system of support that, while containing some safeguards for public funds, is tailored to meet the circumstances of the creative sector and to impinge as lightly as possible on creative freedom.

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