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ACE joins the social networking revolution

By Pauline van Mourik Broekman

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/>

The Arts Council has got a blog on... As part of the 'first ever public value enquiry' into the arts, ACE is creating an elaborate set of feedback mechanisms, one of which is a website discussion currently well underway at [ArtsCouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk). Nothing is yet visible of the focus groups, meetings and one-to-one interviews that are also promised in this £500,000 enquiry, but the website augurs interesting times ahead. To respond to an apparently widely felt dissatisfaction with ACE's existing 'tick box' style indices (deemed, one imagines, to be crude and demeaning of art's higher functions), this process has ostensibly been initiated to shape what Chief Exec Peter Hewitt describes as 'a more contemporary notion of accountability in the publicly funded arts sector, one that is meaningful to the Arts Council's own ambitions, to the individuals and organisations we fund and to wider society.'

However, it will (and has) inevitably lead to a discussion of Art proper, leading on from what it is, where you find it, who likes it, who assesses and pays for it to all the other difficult questions that the entire edifice of the Arts Council is built on. Coming as it does after several other projects delving into the same vaguely Frankfurt Schoolish territory (most notably the Peer Trust's Art for All: Their Policies and Our Culture book/event in 2000), it is difficult to see how ACE's more corporate and state influenced measures of value will manage to form the necessary triad with a new, both more sophisticated and 'popular' understanding of art; utility, autonomy and value-for-money *all* sorted...

Looking at the discussion board, one interesting genie making its way most swiftly out of the bottle is a hitherto mysteriously obscured movement for the indigenous arts of England. Though here promoted by suspiciously stereotypical sounding 'English' entities – such as Christine Constable, Alan Squirrel, and Lee Pickering – they represent a dark side of ACE's own flirtation with the multiculturalism totem that I don't think will go away... More reflective of the kind of justified incomprehension (of its methods) and fury (at its decisions) that ACE is trying to engage with are the comments of Sandeep, who brings to mind many other unwelcome 'stars' that have arisen in mainstream media blog environments (where they might be criticising the journalism, he's criticising the premise of the consultation exercise). The first thing you wonder when reading the announcement in conjunction with the expressions it's catalysed is how the two are ever going to meet up informationally: quite apart from the gargantuan amount of data-processing involved, how is ACE going to draw up a believable and 'neutral' conclusion?

In any case, as a Regularly Funded Organisation well aware of all the other directives crystallising around us (entrepreneurship, education and 'good leadership' being the most conspicuous examples), Mute will follow the course of – and possibly even take up! – this most universal of invitations.....

*An introduction to the enquiry, by Peter Hewitt (see below):

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/2006/11/our_chief_executive_introduces.php

*How the indigenous English genie got out of the bottle (discussion subject 'Arts funding by focus group?') http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/2006/10/we_think_the_arts_debate_is_a.php:

*The Peer Trust's Art for All book/event: <http://www.peeruk.org/html/publications/artforall1.html>

Arts debate

01 November 2006 Our chief executive introduces the arts debate

Posted by Peter Hewitt

I'm delighted to have this opportunity to welcome you to the arts debate - Arts Council England's first ever public value inquiry.

The arts debate marks a renewed commitment at the Arts Council to public engagement. Our core purpose is enshrined in our Royal Charter and reflects a dual responsibility – to enable and support quality and innovation in artistic practice and to encourage public participation in the cultural life of this country. In my 2005 paper *Changing Places* and in my recent Smith Institute lecture I acknowledged that while we've always cared deeply about the artistic community, we perhaps haven't always been as well connected to the wider public. More active participation in the arts by adults and young people everywhere will require us to capture the imagination of the public, and to better understand their hopes and concerns. It's time we found out more about how people perceive and engage with the arts – and how they might do so in the future.

It's also time we led a fresh debate about one of our most fundamental challenges: how we in the arts community can best hold ourselves to account for the money we receive from the public purse. Like other parts of the public sector, we have found this territory difficult to negotiate, and many commentators have expressed their dissatisfaction with output-based or instrumental performance measures. I believe that by giving members of the public a voice in the debate, we can shape a more contemporary notion of accountability in the publicly funded arts sector, one that is meaningful to the Arts Council's own ambitions, to the individuals and organisations we fund and to wider society. Collectively we can develop a more challenging vision of what could and should be achieved through public investment in the arts, and how we can foster a 21st century arts ecology that more fully reflects public preferences and aspirations.

Of course the Arts Council does not represent the entire artistic community in England. Most artists and arts organisations work in a mixed economy, maximising commercial opportunities and balancing the often competing priorities of multiple funders. But by taking a broad view of the arts, our debate can lend clarity to the best contribution that public investment can make to this rich and complex ecology.

The arts debate will drive a continuing process of reform and renewal inside the Arts Council, and in the long run has the potential to engender a profound shift in the way we operate. But the outcome will not be some crude distribution of what we've got and already do; rather it will be a vibrant set of possibilities for new forms of engagement, for new priorities and a route map for how the Arts Council and the organisations it funds may need to be different.

I invite you all to join us in this important initiative – and help shape the future of public investment in the arts in this country.

Peter Hewitt
Chief Executive
Arts Council England