

In Search of Cultural Democracy

Owen Kelly

Originally published in the October 1985 edition of Arts Express, Owen Kelly wrote in response to Roy Shaw's essay on 'Arts for All.' Shaw, a former General Secretary of the Arts Council, argued for the democratisation of culture.' Kelly argues that debate lies with an alternative idea, and this article became a rallying call for many community artists of the time. Enjoy!

From a distance, the idea of 'arts for all' sounds like a good idea. It might be the kind of notion that could bridge the gap between the interval at Sadler's Wells and half-time at the Kop.

Close up, however, the idea evaporates. I certainly do not believe in it, neither do many others within the community arts movement. When we hear the phrase 'arts for all' we want to know just what 'arts' are being referred to, and why. We want to know what it is about these 'arts' that is so important that everybody needs to have them.

A 'sport for all' campaign could be predicated upon commonly held assumptions about the effects on the human physique of prolonged sedentary and stressful urban living. Such a campaign would therefore presumably exclude those who lead relaxed and active rural lives. What, then, are the assumptions that would underpin an 'arts for all' lobby, and who, if anybody, would be exempt from them?

Roy Shaw (August/September issue) discusses the idea of 'arts for all' without ever addressing this question. Instead he seems to take it for granted that the answer is self-evident, and self-evidently worthy of support. The problem, as he sees it, is that the idea is impractical.

I do not intend here to rebut his arguments point by point, but instead I shall try to outline some of the thinking that has fuelled the recent upsurge in support for the idea, not of 'arts for all', but of 'cultural democracy', for I believe that it is with this idea that the real debate lies.

To ask what 'arts' are being referred to in the phrase 'arts for all' is not being flippant, for the question of how we decide what is and what isn't an art, and the criteria we use to decide this, are central to the issues Roy Shaw wishes to discuss. It is worth remembering that it is only during the course of the last 150 years that 'the arts' have attained their current definition and status. In medieval

university curricula, 'the seven arts' were grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, and an artist was someone skilled in one of those arts.

The only alternative definition of an artist was someone practised in one of those arts presided over by the seven muses: history, poetry, comedy, tragedy, music, dancing, astronomy. It was not until the late seventeenth century that a specialised use of the term 'artist' began to become commonplace; a use related to a group of skills hitherto excluded: drawing, painting, engraving and sculpture. This usage did not finally become dominant until the middle of the nineteenth century.

It was during this period that this specialised definition of the arts became known as the 'fine arts', and the growth of the 'fine arts' paralleled the growth of the 'scientist' in Victorian England. It was then that phrases such as 'artistic temperament' and 'artistic sensibility' came into use, and the notion of 'the arts' as a value in their own right, as an automatic means of enlightenment, became possible.

This belief was applied retrospectively across time and space, so that ancient artifacts from other cultures were revered as art: that is, as though they also were answers to questions posed by particular groups of mid-Victorian gentry. In the Lady Leverhulme museum in Port Sunlight, for example, ancient Chinese and Indian sculptures, vases and utensils, traded or plundered during the expansion of the British Empire, were displayed as art, in rooms adjacent to works by Burne-Jones, and a host of his now-forgotten contemporaries, to be judged by the same criteria. Although they had been made for very different reasons, whether religious or dynastic, they were now to be reassessed as the forebears of the human ingenuity and enterprise that had culminated, through a process of human evolution, in the British Empire.

The same reassessment happened with medieval and renaissance European art. The work of people like Michelangelo, who was a master craftsman, a superb painter and decorator to his contemporaries, was revalued, and he was promoted from the ranks of artisan to the lofty heights of misunderstood artist. When Roy Shaw talks about the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as 'art', he is skirting round the fact that it was neither intended nor received as such. It was an act of decoration and religious devotion; it was perhaps an act of decoration as religious devotion. Its reduction to the status of 'art' was a part of the Victorians' drive to legitimise their own actions and values, and to present them within the newly fashionable Darwinism, as the natural aspect of a neutral and inevitable social evolution.

This was undoubtedly a part of what has been termed the imperialist viewpoint. The viewing of Indian sculptures as 'arts' was a way of denying their validity as

religious symbols; of giving them an alternative meaning which did not conflict with the actions of those muscular Christian missionaries busy riding roughshod over native cultures and 'converting heathens'.

When Roy Shaw says that I dismiss 'the Great Tradition of European Art' as 'an ideological construction of the imperialist climax', he misses the point. It is not the art that I am dismissing, it is the 'Great Tradition' which claims the right to say what is and what isn't art. It is not what is being graded that I am condemning, rather it is the method of grading.

I have nothing against the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones-in fact, I definitely take pleasure in the paintings of Burne-Jones. What I, and many others, oppose is the cultural hierarchy that ranks these painters according to their alleged importance in a presumed universal history of art, then subsumes work produced in other cultures for entirely different (and often unknowable) reasons into this history, and finally asserts that this history is somehow binding, so that activities which do not fall within its purview are by definition lesser activities.

Roy Shaw suggests that 'it is time to ask what is bourgeois art?' - a question which he does not himself begin to address, perhaps because it is inherently nonsensical. What I, and many others, are asking is, as Roy Shaw himself notes: What is the 'bourgeois package', the dominant cultural agenda, within which the arts are placed? This is very different.

I do not, for a moment, believe that there is a bourgeois or a revolutionary way of holding a pencil or playing middle C on a cello. Nor do I believe that there is a bourgeois way and a revolutionary way of drawing a bunch of dahlias.

I do however believe that there is a bourgeois way of ranking the results of such activity, of saying that this way of drawing is better than that; and that this way, when it becomes the dominant way, takes the taste of one (bourgeois) group of people and presents them as the natural taste of civilised people everywhere.

I believe that what Empson first called the Great Tradition is just such an enterprise. It takes those creative works, and those modes of creative work, favoured by the groups and classes dominant in the cities of Western

Europe and the United States in the first part of the twentieth century, and assumed, become the justification for dismissing whatever is not favoured, whatever is different or strange or cannot readily be absorbed.

To believe in this Great Tradition does not necessarily mean one need dislike or denigrate whatever does not belong to it; only that one must recognise what is outside it as inherently different, as inherently inferior. To argue that a childhood of fish and chips and music-hall absolves one from a belief in the primacy of the

Great Tradition is to miss the point. There are many paths to an unquestioning adherence to 'a scale of values', which is neither justified nor conceived as of needing justification, and undoubtedly some of these paths start at chip shops. The point is: from where does this 'scale of values' derive its authority?

Roy Shaw argues that we should be prepared to recognise 'that a first-class performance of Twelfth Night is a more valuable experience than a first-class performance by Billy Connolly'. I would agree with this specific example, but only because I find Billy Connolly one of the least amusing people ever to tread the earth. The principle behind the example I would oppose strongly. What has the improvisational style of a contemporary Glaswegian stand-up comic to do with the carefully rehearsed performance of a script by an Elizabethan dramatist. Is Roy Shaw, in fact, comparing like with like, and if he is not, how can they be compared at all?

What Roy Shaw is doing is using the term 'art' as a method of categorisation, while at the same time using it as an accolade. He is implying that, because (in his opinion) Billy Connolly is an exceedingly good comedian, he is, in effect, an artist, and can therefore be realistically compared to 'real' art. In so doing, he is ignoring the fact that the strengths of Billy Connolly lie in very different areas to the strengths of a 'first-class performance' of Twelfth Night.

Connolly's strengths are an ability to confront the unexpected, to deal with hecklers, to turn surprises to his own advantage, to come out on top, no matter what happens. We pay to watch him juggle with ideas. This kind of verbal and intellectual juggling is very different from the skills of a Shakespearean actor, who must each night imbue a known text with freshness, and who must hide or disguise any unexpected occurrences in the interests of the overall narrative flow.

Neither is an inherently better skill, yet neither is directly comparable to the other; any more than an exquisite culinary experience is directly comparable to hearing a bravura jazz solo. Roy Shaw, however, is trapped into forever comparing chalk with cheesecake. If he is not finding Billy Connolly less 'valuable' than Shakespeare, he is spotting 'the qualitative difference' between a mural and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Roy Shaw's fallacy (and he is by no means alone; he is perhaps an articulate spokesman for an entire army of similar-minded administrators and practitioners) is to take as one of the premises of his argument what he ought to be seeking to prove. If you assume as a starting point that there is a category of human activity called 'the arts', then you will be forever trying to fit things into this category, and exclude other things from it. At the end of the day you will presume that all this activity has somehow demonstrated that the category exists and make sense.

This fallacy is the crux of the debate, for there are many, many different creative acts performed by human beings for many different reasons. That category known as 'the arts' is merely one particular sub-group of these acts: artificially created at a particular point in history to serve particular ends. It was created as a part of what might be termed the cultural politics of an emerging capitalism, and it was (and is) neither a reason for performing these creative acts, nor for applauding them when they are performed.

What is being proposed by many people today, including myself and many other community artists, is not the extension of this concept of 'the arts' to encompass more activities and more people, but its replacement. We believe that human creativity is vital and undervalued, and that, ironically, the trumpeting of some aspects of this creativity as 'the arts' has assisted in the undervaluing of human creativity in general.

We believe that this creativity occurs within social groups, within communities, although it may often be enacted and brought to fruition by individuals, and that it can be recognised by its complexity and richness (whether of physical activity or thought or both), by its allusiveness, and by its power to surprise and illuminate, in ways which are at times disturbing. We believe that this creativity is a part of the way in which human groups and communities communicate and, through communicating, construct those commonly held meanings which serve to link them, and enable them to move forward.

These creative acts both arise from and feed back into specific communities (and I am talking here not just of geographical communities but of all those networks of relationships through which we derive common meanings, and thus common purposes and identity), and draw their powers of allusion and richness from the histories and common interests of those communities of which they themselves form a part. Their ability to communicate their concerns to other, more distant groups will necessarily be secondary.

Thus we can see that the richness of Malcolm Bradbury's 'The History Man' will be most available to those with direct experience of university life, who will recognise in specific terms the situations in which the characters find themselves. The further removed from this experience the reader is, the more the story will become a generalised and cynical tale of corruption failing to get its comeuppance, until, to someone completely removed from English life in the mid-twentieth century, it might not even be apparent that it is supposed to be a comedy.

So it is with Shakespeare or Marlowe today. To understand why many of the jokes are jokes (let alone why they are good jokes, if in fact they are), it is first necessary to acquaint ourselves with those Elizabethan customs and practices at

which the jokes are aimed. If we do not do that we cannot hope to understand them.

Everybody is a member of one or several such communities, within which common meanings are derived and common purposes acted upon. Within every such group creative activities take place which serve to fuel and inspire the making of this culture. These activities might not necessarily be perceived by members of other communities as 'valuable', but within the communities in which they arise they may serve valuable functions.

These acts may include joke telling, formal and informal sports, oratures, the creation of dance music with little regard to external criteria about what constitutes 'good' music, and the imaginative observance of communal festivities. Each example of these will be good or bad within its own frame of reference (a joke, for example, will be funnier or less funny than another joke), but one activity will not be better or worse than another activity. A joke will not be funnier than a piece of music, and a dance will not be more rhythmic than a piece of pottery.

If the invention of 'the fine arts' in the middle of the nineteenth century was an attempt to take the pleasures of one community, those who formed the governing classes, and to present it as a universal criterion for civilisation, then it was a very successful attempt. So successful was it that even those who are, in political terms, 'radical' are often content to limit their demands to an increase in popular access to 'the arts', as though an increased dosage of someone else's pleasures could ever be a substitute for pleasures of your own and the pleasures of the groups to which you belong. 'Art for all' does not begin to address the problems that the Great Tradition poses, if we take the idea of multi-cultural democracy seriously.

The idea of cultural democracy represents an attempt by a wide group of people to address these issues. We argue that what is needed is a genuine cultural pluralism, which the idea of 'a scale of values' is replaced by the idea of many localised scales of values, arising from within communities and applied by those communities to activities they individually or collectively undertake.

We argue that people should have rights of access not just to cultural outputs, but to the means of cultural input. In a complex democracy, common meanings should be created democratically, or, at the very least, the means by which they are created should be open to democratic scrutiny and available for democratic decision.

In practice these demands are both cultural and political. They are concerned with the licensing, regulatory and financial arrangements which determine whose voices, whose opinions, whose creative acts will be made public, and

whose will remain hidden. To be in favour of cultural democracy then is not, as Roy Shaw seems to fear, to be opposed to opera, or ballet or any of the 'great arts', for they are creative acts as honourable as any others. It is merely to be implacably opposed to the present structure of grant-aid and sponsorship, which privileges them on an a priori basis against countless other forms of human creativity which are marginalised or disregarded.

Nor is the demand for cultural democracy necessarily linked to the desire for art which is agitprop or propagandist, for our concern is not with producing the 'right art', but rather with producing the right conditions within which communities can have their own creative voices recognised and given sufficient space to develop and flourish.

Cultural democracy is not just a dream. It is the basis for a programme of cultural and political action, which will seek to build a consensus for the inversion of our cultural institutions and (to paraphrase a well-known phrase) the decentralisation of the means of cultural production. This is a task which is politically necessary in a multi-cultural democracy, where the idea of a single scale of values is manifestly absurd.

It is also a task which is becoming more and more technically feasible - as it becomes possible, for example, to replace national and regional broadcasting with a plurality of local narrowcasting, and the quality of low-cost video and audio cassette recording comes to match the expectations of the audiences grown accustomed to the capital-intensive outputs of the record and film industries.

Cultural democracy is not just a dream, it is a choice that more and more people are demanding the right to exercise. In May this year the AGM of the Shelton Trust for community arts voted to inaugurate a campaign for cultural democracy. This campaign is already bearing fruit: a number of union branches are considering a levy on their members to provide for cultural activities, and a series of regional debates have already occurred, with many more planned.

We must stop asking how the position of 'the arts' can be changed by society, and start asking how society can be change; confident that those creative activities we have been taught to regard as 'the arts' will have a real role to play alongside countless other creative activities in any cultural democracy. To say this is to be opposed to a series of political, social and commercial monopolies, owned and managed by small and interlocking oligarchies; but it is not to be opposed to 'the arts' and the people who practise them. Rather it is an invitation. Let us let go, and move forward.

Owen Kelly was, at that time, a community artist working in Lambeth and author of 'Community, Art and the State' (Comedia 1984).