

Can Labour Show It Really Understands The Power Of The Arts To Transform Lives?

[Paula Briggs](#) asks is it brave to acknowledge what art can do for us, or foolish to ignore it?

When New Labour came into power in 1997 there was an energy of fandom; the arts in the UK were thriving, and Blair, Britpop and the Young British Artists celebrated together in Downing Street. As an artist and spectator, it felt reasonable enough - here was Blair doing just what we hoped; showing he valued the arts.

But actually, with hindsight, we can see more clearly the particular way Labour valued the arts. Yes the arts made us cool – but they also made us exportable, monetizable. Labour valued the arts from the perspective of capitalism. Investing in the arts made sense – they were good for the economy. Let's not forget that it was during Labours' government that the term "Cultural Economy" was quite literally coined. The newly established Department for Culture, Media and Sport worked with creative entrepreneurs to understand not just which "industries" might be considered creative, but also to measure the inter-relations and financial impact of these

industries on the economy. New Labour's establishment of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) - the organisation, by the way, which helped establish AccessArt - was one of the ways Labour put meat on the bone. There was philanthropy yes (like the 25 museum and galleries who were subsidised to offer free entry to visitors), but there was always quid pro quo. For New Labour, investment in the arts, and protection of the arts, made economic sense because they saw the arts, and the people that worked in the arts, as commodities. You were a producer, or consumer, or both, but either way you brought in revenue - giving a tangible value to the interactions within the creative economies.

And the [figures for the Creative Economy](#) are still shared widely today. The Creative Industries website shares that in 2022 official government figures show that the creative economy grew by 6.8% (growing more than twice as fast as the rest of the UK economy that year), and added a whopping £124.6bn to the value of the UK.

And that's to be applauded, and I've shared those figures as often as the next person when trying to convince others of the value of the arts to society. But, whenever I do, I have a few niggles at the back of my head. I'd like to talk about them, and to think about how our current Labour government might show it has the capacity to

really understand the potential value of the arts to society, now, in 2024, and to use that understanding to inform vision, policy and approach.

Niggle Number 1 – No Equality of Value

When you look at the breakdown of money generated through the Creative Economies, there are of course clear winners, and therefore clear losers. Things like video game production churn the £'s. Being a fine artist does not churn the £'s. The creative economy figures are posted on the walls of schools to tempt parents and pupils into taking GCSE art, and it's true there is money to be made in some creative industries, but it is also very true to say that it is incredibly hard (always was but it has got worse) to make even a modest living in many areas of the visual arts. I'm surrounded by illustrators, animators, painters, sculptors whose incomes needs supplementing by other non-creative work. It's a hard slog. Job satisfaction maybe sometimes be high, but it is a reality that many creative areas do not bring in the pounds, and underpinning that reality *is that it is not always possible to assign a financial value to a creative life, but that creative life is no less valuable.* To fail to recognise, and to fail to have a conversation about "creative non-economies", is perhaps at worse elitist, and at best a missed opportunity.

Niggle Number 2 – No Mirrored Action/Intent

The statistics about the Creative Economy remain enticing and persuasive - even Rishi Sunak's government couldn't ignore their rosy glow. And yet... there has been little money, or even real intent, where the mouth is. I won't talk about the cuts to the arts at every level, and I won't talk about the way the arts have been razed in schools through decisions to promote STEM Subjects, and the belief in Progress 8, and the lack of understanding around "value". If you are reading this, you probably know all that. And where we do have funding, for example through the Arts Council, are we certain that the mechanisms which enable money to be passed from government to artist / arts organisation are fit for purpose to enable equality of access? Suffice to say, whilst governments are happy to hold the golden prize of the creative industries, they have failed to invest in the arts infrastructure and in the education needed to fuel that pipeline. And to hold up the Creative Economy figures as success, is to gaslight some of the Creative Industries themselves.

Niggle Number 3 – What About Creative Non-Economies?

There are many instances in which the arts bring non-economic value to society, or more accurately, bring economic value to society through a more organic, longer term route. An instance of this might be the fact that engagement with art can

help wellbeing; improved wellbeing helps productivity and helps protect against time away from work due to illness. Personal creativity and expression might not earn bucks for the economy, but it does help nurture a sense of connection and empowerment – which in itself helps counterbalance feelings of fragmentation and dissatisfaction, which if left unchecked, as we have seen, cost the economy money in countless ways. We need to talk more about the creative non-economies, and to acknowledge the very valuable role they play in our lives.

So, What Do We Need Labour To Understand?

Labour needs to begin with the question:

What are the values of the arts to society – in their totality?

How do we map, not only the purely financial interactions between arts and society as Blair did, but also the social and behavioural values and benefits. And once we have understood that, how do we shape language and policy which better represents that totality of value.

Let's start by calling out some issues in our society today.

The country is in a very different place now, to the one Labour inherited in 1997. Many people feel a lack of control and empowerment. Challenged by the climate crisis, the cost of living, world

peace, the unknown of AI - the list goes on - we do not feel safe. Instead, surrounded by pressures on all sides, people feel anxious, stressed and disenfranchised. There is a sense of the country being fragmented and disconnected; we become defensive, and we lash out, looking to lay the blame for our feelings (as individuals and as a society) wherever we can, and most definitely on anything we perceive as a threat to our very being.

Of course very little of this is caused by the fact that the arts have been systematically devalued – no one would argue that. But there *is* a very real argument that says by not making positive space and time for the arts in our lives (and that includes investment in art education) then we have taken away a key tool from our toolkit which would help individuals and society manage, understand and more positively respond to the challenges above. *By not appreciating the real value of the arts, governments have failed to recognise the power of the arts to enable people to live better lives.*

As humans, we rely on our visual, aural and spatial senses to navigate the world. We quite literally sense our way in and through the world, using our hands, hearts and brains to enable us to process, test and respond. At any point, in any day, our understanding of how we exist in the world, and how we feel about that, is governed by

these processes, and vitally, it is through our ability to think critically, creatively, imaginatively, that we show ourselves as humans. Art education, at every level, should help learners understand the importance of these skills, and in so doing help learners feel inspired to explore and understand, enabled to process and create and empowered to connect and affect. *If we value the output (the art), we must remember to acknowledge the importance of the input* – we must not fail to recognise that the artistic journey (of exploring, understanding, making, sharing) has an even greater value.

That journey is one of the things which makes us human, so if we take it away - if society doesn't acknowledge or create time and space for it – then we are left less than whole, and we feel less empowered, less connected and less positive. We suffer in countless ways as individuals and as individuals suffer, so too does society over time. We are all full of sensitivities (we sense the world after all), but these sensitivities are vital and useful. It is only when they are squashed, ignored, or not given proper means for processing and expressing, that those sensitivities can become anxieties. As we become more anxious, our negative or inexpressible thoughts over time exhibit themselves as actions, and negative behaviours form. Society has to deal with these in the form of poor mental health, dissatisfaction, fragmentation. And government

quite literally has to pay for those.

By not investing time and space, and by not using language which allows us to recognise the true value of the arts, government has been complicit in allowing us to lose an element of ourselves. AND they have squandered an opportunity to empower us to cope, heal and move forward, in turn creating greater burdens on other areas of the economy.

Making Space To Consciously Define The Purpose Of Art For Our Time

Every period of time sees a redefinition of the role and purpose art serves to that culture or society. Most often we only recognise these shifts after the event, understanding them from a historical perspective, BUT there is a real opportunity for society to actively define what role they wish art to play, what greater good they wish it to serve, and to proactively shape that purpose through actions. This is the opportunity we have now. Through collective conversation and vision, we can ask ourselves:

- *How can art and artists serve us now?*
- *What do we need to feel better?*
- *And what can artists offer?*

Without in anyway undermining or dismissing the

financial value of the creative economies (and long may they grow with investment and understanding), I'd like to suggest that perhaps for the UK, in 2024, the real value of the arts lies in the fact that *art can help us heal**.

We need Labour to recognise that:

Where people are feeling fear, art can help people process and express.

Where people are feeling fragmented, art can help people connect.

Where people are feeling despair, art can create optimism.

Where people are feeling disempowered and unheard, art can empower.

What Labour did in 1997 – parading and waving at us to a backdrop of brash, upbeat, extrovert and exportable creativity, isn't going to wash. We need something gentler, something more holistic, more caring, more inclusive and more diverse. We need the language around the understanding to change and soften. We need an approach which recognises that the value of the arts comes in a variety of different guises (and we will learn that ironically many of these guises will save us money in the long term). And we need to embrace the understanding that it is in the *process* of making art (whatever our level or means of expression) we perhaps find most value.

Recommendations from AccessArt

As [visual arts education charity](#) acting as voice for our 23,500 members and 44,000 subscribers, and as Subject Association for Art and member of the [CfSA](#), we would like Labour to:

1. Undertake a reform of the curriculum for all schools, working with Subject Experts such as AccessArt (Subject Association for Art), to create a more holistic curriculum which shows understanding of the vital role the arts play within a pupil's education.
(www.accessart.org.uk/primary-art-curriculum-more-info/ and www.accessart.org.uk/enquiry-based-learning-for-teenagers-menu/)
2. Understand, protect and advocate for the unique space which the arts provide for a pupil within the school day, and for the positive benefits of being in this type of space.
(www.accessart.org.uk/why-we-need-to-allow-art-to-be-the-unique-subject-it-is/)
3. Abolish any measure which creates a hierarchy of subjects, such as Progress 8 and subject buckets.
4. Change the language around education, making space in the lexicon to recognise education is holistic, and human-centred, not mechanistic or one size fits all. Recognise that the education system we need, in a world

of growing AI, is not the same as the system we have had, and that a focus on growth of us as humans, not competitors of AI, requires a brave and holistic approach. (www.accessart.org.uk/taking-control-of-the-narrative/)

5. Invest in subject-specific teacher training (whether Initial Teacher Training or Continuing Professional Development and Learning) equally across all subjects. Understand we need subject experts in ALL subjects (not just maths) (<https://cms.wellcome.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/final-cpd-challenge-evaluation-report.pdf>)
6. Recognise not only the importance of the Creative Economies, but also expand the language, and therefore the intent, to the “Creative Economies and Creative Communities” which recognises the totality of the value of the arts to individuals and to society. In so doing, we build a more diverse, democratic and inclusive understanding of the arts, rather than one based only upon a more capitalist understanding.
7. Connect the “Creative Economies and Creative Communities”, to other areas of life, including making space for them in conversations in other departments around health, wellbeing, productivity, citizenship, reformation, regeneration, industry, sustainability and others. Recognise the

complex but subtle interactions and benefits this will bring.

8. Recognise that artists of all disciplines, backgrounds and intentions bring a wealth of skills, behaviours and approaches which can be shared and benefit others, including curiosity, divergent thinking, exploration, testing, reflecting, communicating, creating and connecting. Recognise the potential in working with artists and arts organisations at all levels, appreciating their value, and sharing responsibility, reconnecting artists and arts organisations to the communities they serve or speak for.
9. Recognise the importance of opportunities for returning to creative exploration of the arts at all stages of life is an importance contributor to wellbeing, which in itself impacts positively on that persons health.
10. To ensure that there is a solid infrastructure to allow for incubation and development of arts organisations of all sizes, including individuals, and to ensure that this is representative of the diverse cultures of the UK.

Labour, remember, growth comes in many forms, and there are many interpretations of the word value. Let's embrace them all for the good of all.

Paula Briggs,

**The first principle in the preamble to the World Health Organisation's constitution, created in 1946 states:*

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

WHO goes on to say:

"With this in mind, WHO has always long used the arts in its work on health promotion and communication. Anthropology has shown that in early human history, art, religion and healing evolved in the same social space. In 2019, WHO began testing arts interventions to advance specific health goals, including universal health coverage (UHC), mental health and suicide prevention, maternal health, blindness prevention and quality of care, in addition to historic efforts in HIV/AIDS prevention... Over the past two decades, innovations incorporating the arts and health have been used to enhance physical and emotional support for resilience and wellbeing in communities, complementing and supporting therapeutic, rehabilitative and preventive efforts, increasing awareness of health and contributing to emergency preparedness. WHO's Regional Office for Europe is leading work into research on the effect of art in health through

its Behavioural and Cultural Insights program.”

and

“Artistic expression grew in lockstep with human cultural development and has long played an integral part in how we teach, learn, communicate and heal. Since our earliest ancestors began telling stories to make sense of the world, we have evolved to learn from narrative, be it through visual media, song or performance. The arts are uniquely suited to help us understand and communicate concepts and emotions by drawing on all our senses and capacity for empathy... Art can help us to emotionally navigate the journey of battling an illness or injury, to process difficult emotions in times of emergency and challenging events. The creation and enjoyment of the arts helps promote holistic wellness and can be a motivating factor in recovery... Benefits are seen across several markers, including health promotion, the management of health conditions and illness, and disease prevention.”

<https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>

<https://www.who.int/initiatives/arts-and-health>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2015/feb/23/jennie-lee-policy-arts-white-paper-funding>

<https://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/guide/what-creative-economy/>

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c0b3de5274a7202e19327/Classifying_and_Measuring_the_Creative_Industries_Consultation_Paper_April_2013-final.pdf

<https://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk/facts-figures/creative-industries-add-ps124bn-of-value-to-uk>

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/05/uk-general-elections-2024-what-art-world-figures-want-from-the-new-labour-government>

https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf

<https://www.accessart.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Art-Now-Report-V10-singles.pdf>

This is a sample of a resource created by UK Charity AccessArt. We have over 1500 resources to help develop and inspire your creative thinking, practice and teaching.

AccessArt welcomes artists, educators, teachers and parents both in the UK and overseas.

We believe everyone has the right to be creative and by working together and sharing ideas we can enable everyone to reach their creative potential.