



POST SALON ESSAY

From the forthcoming book:

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Precarities and Dissensualities: Arts, Policy and Space on the Eve of an Election
Sukhdev Sandhu

Cultural City: How Arts Policies Influence Space

Held on 24 June 2009 at St. Anne's Soho, London

Speakers included:

Sonia Metha, Creative Industries Consultant

Andy Pratt, Director of the LSE Urban Research Centre

John Pandit, Musician & Rich Mix Centre Founding Board Member

Helen Burrows, Policy Adviser, Ed Vaizey MP, Shadow Culture Minister

Gavin Alexander and Tony Nwachukwu / Founders of CDR and burntprogress

About This Is Not A Gateway Salons:

This Is Not A Gateway Salons is a series of informal workshops where speakers from a range of fields and backgrounds are invited to investigate a focused question related to cities. Discussion and cross-sector learning is integral to the salons and presentations are limited to 10 minutes each, with greater concentration on audience participation. The key ideas and questions raised during the Salon are distilled and circulated through a post-salon essay.

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Precarities and Dissensualities

Arts, Policy and Space on the Eve of an Election

SUKHDEV SANDHU

Brightly-coloured, funkily-designed, estate-agent literature bigging-up chunklets of economically needy London boroughs for the edgy cool and dynamic live-work spaces they offer. Supersized photographs of YBA artists fringed by gobbets of freedom-invoking Beat poetry draped across the exteriors of lavish retail developments on the sites of old neighbourhood markets. Public spaces across the capital, battered but resilient mesh-works of hairdressers, corner stores and independent traders, buffed up and rezoned into toney cultural quarters.

In recent years, it's been hard to miss the often-predatory ways in which policymakers and big business have sought to use the lexicons and prestige of art in order to rebrand and engineer contemporary London. What's more, local authorities, always on the lookout for opportunities to attract tourist revenue, increasingly support cultural events that purport to address the needs of minority or historically embattled groups (with sexuality, Gay Pride parades; with ethnicity, Chinese New Year festivals and Diwali; with anti-racism, the RISE festival).

How odd. Up until recently, artists were seen as metropolitan flotsam and jetsam. They represented a ragged and amorphous demographic, a puzzlingly disaggregated sector whose members sported neither blue nor white collars, a negligible bunch of idlers and dreamers who had little to contribute to serious debates about social or economic life within the capital. They were, at best, footnotes to the real story of urban development.

Things have changed. As the city's manufacturing and maritime past fades into history, invoked mainly by bespoke developers hoping to peddle a muzzy, nostalgia-

tinged form of industrial aesthetics to hike up the value of old garment workshops and riverside warehouses, there is a growing desire to use art and artists as examples of knowledge-economy entrepreneurialism.

Policymakers view them as highly motivated and ambitious networkers who make relatively few demands on public funds; tangible assets generating value for neglected or abandoned parts of the capital; flexible itinerants whose vibe-seeking migration to a new postcode has the potential to presage speculation of a loftier, financial kind.

This is a global phenomenon of course. It's been described and celebrated by the likes of Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class – And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (2002) and Elizabeth Currid in *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, and Music Drive New York* (2007). Florida has even established ranking systems allowing cities to be rated according to a 'Gay index' or a 'Bohemian index', metrics he believes will allow policymakers to foster the correct environments for attracting and retaining that class of web designers, curators, DJs and fashion students that apparently holds the key to urban prosperity.

It's a perspective that was rearticulated by The Work Foundation's 2007 report 'Staying Ahead: The Economic Performance of the UK's Creative Industries' whose preface was written by the then-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell. And it's a perspective, full of elisions and blind spots, that was deconstructed by Andy Pratt from the London School of Economics in his opening contribution to Cultural City: How Arts Policies Influence Space, a salon organised by This is Not A Gateway.

Far from seeing the growth of the cultural sector, or indeed its dominant working practices, as a desirable formula for the rest of the capital's economy, Pratt suggested that the election of the Labour Party in 1997 ushered in an era when the political classes within Britain began to valorise artists precisely because their work patterns were in sync with the forms of precariousness and insecurity that neo-liberal economists had inflicted on other industries since the early 1980s.

Seen in this light, the romantic vision of the artist as free, independent and not subject to the work vs leisure division faced by grafters and toilers in the 'straight' world makes him or her a model worker. For, typically, artists work at home or in studios which aren't covered by health and safety regulations; they have irregular but also long hours that erode the difference between day and night; they don't belong to unions; are accustomed to a system of 'free labour' where, because of the number of people trying to break into the art world and the challenges involved in monetising

such an abstract, speculative sphere, a lot of services are unpaid. In short, the ‘space of art’ is a concept that, far from being shorthand for urban enclaves dotted with cafés, vintage-clothes stores and new galleries, refers to the topography of modern labour, one governed by contingency, illegality, casualisation and compulsory flexibility.

According to Pratt, any government or state body that wishes to engage with contemporary arts policy in serious, constructive fashion needs to think about its production as much as its consumption. It’s no good talking up the role of art as an engine for personal expansion, cultural citizenship or social cohesion if the means by which it is incubated and created rely so heavily on systems of exploitation (and self-exploitation).

Currently, access to the arts is treated as a matter of finding discourses, curatorial strategies and pricing mechanisms that attract rather than intimidate socially disadvantaged groups. But, as the cost of living and working in the city has shot up in recent years, entry-level jobs in the arts sector, most of which pay a pittance at best, are serious options only for those who can afford to donate their labour freely. Even internships, long seen as a quick-fix way of introducing under-represented people into work environments, are increasingly only of use to those who have gone to university and already have cultural capital and social networks on which they can draw. Arts policies designed to address questions of diversity and social inclusion need to tackle class at least as much as race and gender.

The presence at the salon of Helen Burrows, a policy researcher for the Conservative Party, made this topic especially timely. As she herself acknowledged, the arts world tends to skew Left. As she didn’t say, there are good reasons why it has done so with particular passion since the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher (who chose ‘How Much Is That Doggie In the Window?’ as one of her Desert Island Discs) famously claimed, “There is no such thing as society, only individuals.”

Norman Tebbit, the Chairman of her Party (who said he believed there was no difference between a Titian painting and a Page-3 pin-up), urged unemployed people (though not would-be immigrants) to get on their bikes rather than bemoan the dismantling of industry in their home cities. For the last three decades, Tories, like their Republican counterparts across the Atlantic, have championed Samuel Smiles-style individualism. Instinctively hostile to experimentalism and non-instrumentalism (as evidenced by their efforts to introduce greater quantification into higher education and art schools – a move continued by New Labour), they also dismantled the Greater London Council whose commitment to subaltern and minority voices they vilified as Loony Left-ism.

Burrows spent much of her twenties working as a freelance photographer and later for the Ministry of Sound. She stressed she was not a member of the Conservative Party, and claimed that, when it came to the arts, there was very little ideological difference between Labour and the Tories. Asked to talk about texts that had influenced her thinking on the relationship between arts policies and space, she mentioned Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* (1979), an idiosyncratic synthesis of anthropology, sociology and literary criticism that explores the nature of creativity in capitalist society.

Her summary of the book – that it deals with the challenges creative people face in order to survive; that it argues art is “beyond the market” – didn’t quite capture the extent to which Hyde regards the market economy as the enemy of art. Nor did it emphasise sufficiently Hyde’s belief in the spiritual, almost erotic power of gift exchange (as opposed to that of market transactions); the former, he believed, established a link with a community, while the latter was extricated within the values and social relations of commodity capitalism.

Burrows was a thoughtful speaker, and it was good to hear her assert that governments should be prepared to invest in forward-thinking institutions while, at the same time, appreciating that eight out of ten of their projects would likely fail. Still, it’s not being unduly cynical to speculate about the implications of a future Conservative culture department drawing on *The Gift* for its philosophic underpinning. Undue emphasis on the supra-market qualities of art runs the risk of treating it as a neo-Romantic, transcendental sphere; or, as Andy Pratt had suggested, neglecting the extent to which, for good or for bad, the arts are a deeply embedded part of the political economy, and need just as much sympathetic understanding and long-term investment as other industries.

Perhaps the most disappointing part of Burrows’ presentation, especially in light of comments she made about her belief in the importance of grassroots and ground-up experience, was her claim that the single most important factor in making the arts so successful in modern-day Britain was the introduction of the National Lottery by John Major’s Conservative government. Leaving aside the difficulty of gauging that success, such top-down initiatives can hardly be said to explain the transformations (for good or for bad) in the East End of London, a place where Burrows lives and home to Rich Mix, the culture centre whose complex institutional history served as a case study for the contributions of many of the salon panellists.

More significant by far were the concerted actions taken by a generation of young Bangladeshis, alongside a clutch of left-wing groups, to tackle the British National Party thugs who used to make life miserable for local inhabitants until the

1990s. It was their bravery, day after day, in kicking out racists that made the likes of Brick Lane, Bethnal Green and Hoxton feel safe for outsiders and would-be artists to move to. It was their resolve, now clearly forgotten by the amnesia-plagued hipsters who benefited from it, that created the preconditions for the 'gritty', 'edgy' playgrounds across which they circulate.

The shifting demographics of London, in part caused by new waves of immigration, and property-boom inflation, and their knock-on effects on local populations, was an issue that cropped up in the contributions to the salon of John Pandit of Asian Dub Foundation. He entered music through anti-racist politics and community activism in the early 1980s, putting much of his energy, even after the formation and success of his band, into educational and workshop initiatives designed to help disadvantaged youths many of whom came from Bangladeshi backgrounds.

He suggested that by the time funding bodies finally made up their minds and decided to fund a centre in the East End that could speak to the educational and cultural needs of 'the local community', the nature of and dynamics within that community had morphed. Poverty still exists, levels of inequality are still very high, but other social groups – artists, lawyers from the ever-encroaching City, Polish migrants, middle-class refugees from Islington – are also part of the new picture. What's more, as Pandit pointed out, the Bangladeshi youths whom he used to train have turned in greater numbers to drugs, gangs and the politics of a particularly rigid strain of Islam.

In this changing context, can an organisation, especially one the size of Rich Mix, accommodate and adapt to the ever-mutating communities to whom they were designed to cater? How useful even is the idea of 'community' – freighted as it is with assumptions about a broadly shared critique of local issues, as well as a vision of and commitment to an ameliorated future? Might 'neighbourhood', a term that is at least as spatial as 'community', and possibly less pregnant with unhelpful ethical connotations, be a better category for policymakers to work with and around? How can arts organisations that often develop crookedly and unevenly over the course of many years, dealing in the process with an ever-changing roll-call of bureaucrats and cultural gatekeepers, cleave to their original goals *and* respond to the transformed landscapes they encounter when they finally get up and running? Clearly, any theory of urban space has to be a theory of, or at least be informed by an understanding of, time.

If the relationship between art and community requires more supple and clear-eyed conceptualisation than is currently the norm (too many organisations perceive

'social inclusion' as an add-on, a matter of tacking a couple of ethnic members onto their trustee boards, screening a few ethnic films, commissioning graffiti or mural projects; too many also talk, in the language of Christian missionaries, of bringing their work 'to the community'), it's equally important to be alert to the reductive ways in which the word 'culture' gets bandied about. Far too often it's spoken of as an artefact, a product, something to be offered to the masses. Too rarely is there an acknowledgement of culture as encompassing a way of life, what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling".

The result is that arts policymakers, in speaking up for the need for new spaces within cities, imply that the people whose cultural poverty or limited cultural access they are trying to redress didn't already have spaces that they'd established for themselves. These spaces might be in parks, at churches, at fast-food restaurants. They might be perambulatory spaces carved out over long periods both inside and outside particular neighbourhoods. By contrast, specially customised quarters or buildings, meticulously conceived though they may be, represent a monumentality that is just as off-putting as a Victorian statue (I'm reminded of the architectural consultant to the Rich Mix who boasted that the building represented "a piece of the West End coming to the East End"). There is an ethics of scale and of texture, and of speed – both real and perceived – to which politicians and consultants need to be better attuned. This was touched upon by Sonia Mehta, a creative industries consultant with a background of working in social justice and anti-racist groups, who likened arts centres in deprived areas to gated communities, embodiments of a gentrification they were unable fully to perceive let alone work against.

A more finessed understanding of the way in which social groups fashion themselves would involve getting to grips with the role technology plays in their lives. The digital sphere, and the free software and applications available there (or available to be hacked and stolen from there), offers interfaces, platforms and networking tools rich with a potential unimaginable a decade ago. Users can talk to each other, access otherwise unaffordable information, participate in a huge range of 'communities' that speak equally to their 'real' and speculative identities equally. They can learn to create music, self-publish, see themselves represented on YouTube. They can seek to intensify local subjectivities, but they can also sever themselves from their surroundings. And all without leaving their bedrooms.

The internet is not a panacea, and not everyone has 24/7 access to it, but just as its unstoppable rise has had a huge impact for professionals in the music, journalism and broadcasting industries, it will also pose difficult questions for policy-

makers attempting to conceptualise and develop best-practice models about the relationship between space and culture. Indeed, one of the most intriguing discussions at the salon involved Tony Nwachukwu and Gavin Alexander, musicians responsible for CDR, an on-line platform for producers, artists and club-music fans to discuss and offer feedback to record producers who had submitted tracks that were still works in progress.

This commitment to collaboration chimed with their belief in the need to foster platforms that promoted creative processes rather than mere consumption. It also reflected their desire to go beyond Left/Right binaries (New Labour, in their eyes, having implemented funding cuts that an incoming Conservative Party will continue), and to develop business models that, by moving beyond the public of 'the public sector', have the potential to give rise to especially innovative projects.

The economist Paul Romer famously declared: "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste." A sense of crisis is indeed prevalent throughout our society. It's viral. It's meteorological. Economic: some financial analysts fret that the collateral damage from the current recession might last for decades. And it's political: the country is on the brink of electing a Conservative Party that has next-to-no track record on caring for art or contemplating space in anything other than property/'an Englishman's home is his castle' terms.

The current Mayor of London came to power on the basis of targeting voters living in the suburbs, men and women with little knowledge of or perhaps even interest in the kinds of social problems, demographic admixtures and motile energies that are second nature to inner-city Londoners. That sense of multiplicity, though it can oftentimes be fractious and challenging, is what has always made the capital a magnet.

This city is a series of overlapping and competing stories. It's ragged and hybrid and sometimes internecine. It's a dissensus. Any attempt to sell a narrative that smoothes and planes its splintered surfaces in the name of continuity and a pasteurised community will be a betrayal.

The crisis of contemporary London is also an opportunity as much as it is a challenge: to look closely at and imagine anew the cultural landscapes we cherish and, in the face of coming attritions, to work to hold on to them.

Biography

Sukhdev Sandhu is Director of Asian/Pacific/American Studies at New York University and author of *Night Haunts* (Verso, 2007) and *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined A City* (HarperCollins, 2003).