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# Beyond The Obvious

from producing things to nurturing social capital

Looking Back On Culture Action Europe's  
2014 Annual Conference

*by Luke O'Shaughnessy and the CAE Team*





The location. Not London, actually, but two cities in the North East of England: Gateshead and Newcastle, separated by a narrow strip of the Tyne river and united in a conviction about the power of culture to regenerate the urban environment.

The venues. No, not a faceless conference centre but a leading university and two exceptional arts spaces: Baltic, a contemporary art gallery, and Sage Gateshead, a Sir Norman Foster designed music centre for performance and learning. Sitting just across the Tyne from Newcastle University, these two spaces – or ‘architectural gestures’ as their proud proprietor, Mick Henry, leader of Gateshead Council described them – symbolise a local authority’s vision to enrich lives through culture.

In the choice of locations and venues for its 2014 annual conference, Culture Action Europe (CAE) chose a poignant backdrop to look beyond the obvious. Just the setting then to challenge over 180 participants (cultural leaders from around the world) to look beyond borders, beyond conventional assumptions about the frontiers between disciplines, and consider how culture contributes to social and economic regeneration at a local, national and European level. Or more simply, how culture develops social capital – the benefits of social exchange for the productivity of individuals and groups.

# DAY ONE

## NEW COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Opening the conference at the University of Newcastle, Chris Csikszentmihalyi, ERA Chair at M-ITI, University of Madeira and Former Director, MIT Center for Civic Media & Computing Culture Group, got the conference thinking about the role of art in the digital age or in an age of ‘cheap communication’. For Csikszentmihalyi, while, in the past, technology allowed only for single or (at best) several-user innovations, the digital revolution enables artists to engage in new collaborative processes. His examples were telling. Among them Between the Bars, an artist-led project which enables prisoners in the USA to find new forms of expression, thanks to online volunteers who transcribe their (hand-written) words. Through this collaborative effort, the project allows those incarcerated to exchange with the rest of the world, with often touching and politically engaging consequences. In such projects, the artist inspires empathy and promotes civic engagement as many others have done in the past. But, in an age where information and communication cost little, the artist has the chance to imagine new forms and new collaborations within and across communities. The artist has now the possibility to create new platforms for aggregation of ideas and actions (both virtual and physical) where a collective sense can be experimented and brought forward to solve complicated challenges. As a facilitator of collective action, the artist of today - while required perhaps to be a little more self-effacing than in the past - has the potential to imagine new means of ‘producing things’ and to political empowerment. This is culture for culture’s sake not for commerce.



## CHANGING INSTITUTIONS

Reimagining artist practice based on non-commercial ideals also requires, said Csikszentmihalyi, a reimagining of our cultural institutions. The role not only of the artist but the publisher, editor, librarian, university professor or other cultural 'gatekeepers' is changing too. So how should we address these changes? In the digital age, what new economic models will prevail? What should be the place of copyright? The keynote speech was not the place to find all the answers but, as Csikszentmihalyi suggested, we would do well to look to the past for inspiration - if not to monks transcribing manuscripts, but at least to troubadours, who, in different times, earned their crust and found ways to their audiences. Would troubadours use streaming today?

## DAY TWO

At the start of day two – the conference having now transferred to Baltic - Mercedes Giovinazzo, President of Culture Action Europe, underlined CAE's role in addressing the challenges raised by Csikszentmihalyi. CAE has revised its work plan to support the cultural sector in times of change, and is now focusing on building the capacity of cultural operators to adapt to changing social and economic conditions through a programme of active dialogue, research, conferences, public debates and training labs.

## EU INSTITUTIONS

This work plan, Giovinazzo reminded us, has been the subject of a recent successful application for funding from the European Commission's Creative Europe programme. Who better than the next speaker, Jens Nymand-Christensen, Deputy Director-General of the EC's Directorate General for Education and Culture, to give a perspective from a European institution? Nymand-Christensen spoke powerfully about the role of culture as the cement that binds the peoples of Europe together. He presented the economic measures that EC has set out to strengthen these bonds and the cultural sectors ability to operation across borders, including a new bank guarantee scheme. His colleague, Walter Zampieri, Head of the EC's Culture Policy and Intercultural Dialogue, addressed another important and related economic question: how best should Europe make provision for social security in an age of transnational mobility. On a topic such as this, where states retain sovereign control, any dream of harmonising social security at a national level is clearly unrealistic. Zampieri, however, presented the EC's active programme to better inform mobile cultural workers about their entitlements. Suzanne Capieau, a Brussels-based lawyer specialising in these questions, added her call for a programme of greater social protection for the culture sector's many freelance workers at a European level and a study into the possibility of increasing the levy on businesses to fund such a programme.



If rapid change is understandably complicated at the level of large European institutions, how then are national bodies

adapting to the changes in how art is produced and how people and peoples interact. The next speaker, Graham Sheffield CBE, Director Arts at the British Council (BC), put it simply: “It no longer works to fire your culture at someone like a gun”. In an age when audiences are consuming culture in a different way and many artists are hungry for more interaction with them, Sheffield made the case for bi-lateralism at BC. As he put it, British Council will no longer support ‘cultural one-night stands’ and he is leading his organisation through a change in mind set: relationships not events; convening not control; networks not solo. With caution, a brave Director Arts might (and, between us, even did) say that obtaining ‘benefit back to the UK’ is no longer the primary objective of the British Council.

After inspiring opening words, it was time for the cultural professionals gathered at the conference to share and debate these issues. Mercedes Giovinazzo reminded the conference that CAE has itself adopted a more participatory means of governance, creating a number of coordination groups, working in closer dialogue with its membership.

## THREE KEY QUESTIONS

With dynamism, marker pens and oversized cubic note pads, CAE’s team set the delegates the challenge to address three critical questions in three ‘laboratories’:

How can the cultural sector in Europe: i) measure the impact of cultural activity? ii) enable the cultural transformation of cities? iii) devise new economic models for culture? A number of hours later - punctuated by lunch and some fresh Tyneside air on the Baltic Terrace - the groups reconvened and shared conclusions.

## HOW SHOULD THE CULTURAL SECTOR MEASURE ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY?

The group concerned with measuring impact said: What do we want to measure?

And concluded that the answer could include a continuum of impacts: from ‘knowledge and relationships’, through ‘values and social capacity’ to ‘participation and quality’. The group shared good practice such as how to implement the ‘Most Significant Change’ method of evaluation. All were convinced of the new ways needed (such as social media) to extend the conversation between arts organisations and their audiences; a sort of digital extension to people’s discussion post-show bar or the museum café. Volume and nature of such discussion, the group agreed, had value as an indicator.

## HOW CAN CULTURE TRANSFORM CITIES?

The group concerned with transformative culture for transformative cities stressed the need for new narratives to help understand society, something impossible without a proper consideration of the cultural sector. Considering the economic impact is not enough. They shared a conviction that cities are the places where transformative change will happen, starting from rethinking the urban planning of cities itself.

## WHAT ARE THE NEW ECONOMIC MODELS FOR CULTURE?

The group concerned with new economies of culture asked how best can the cultural sector implement new ‘sharing



economy' models. A considerable part of the conversation focused on the concept of 'building trust'. This group spent time reflecting on the difficulties of the sharing process and the successful implementation of such models to the cultural sector will depend on cultural operators' ability to understand culture's political, social and economic impact.

The messages were becoming clearer. The arts sector has to be more self-aware because culture is more than the sum of instrumentalist arguments for culture. The sector needs to find new models and new narratives to put the citizen at the centre of this debate. And has to engage (in new ways) with citizens to be able to create a better dialogue for building a better future.

## NUMBERS

'Is it only about numbers?' someone said. The ensuing debate was lively at the end of the second day. Some had nightmare visions of numbers being misused to set one artform against another; judged on some spurious theory about one artform's capacity to better develop future 'model citizens' than another. Others were more optimistic and encouraged delegates that politicians were not necessary bereft of empathy upon taking office and that emotive arguments had their place too. The delegates ended the second day in broad agreement with CAE's Secretary General, Luca Bergamo, that numerical 'data' underpinning the arguments for culture are, above all, a necessary means to an end: to build consensus about the value of culture, without being led by them but using them in the most interesting way.



# DAY THREE

The third and final day of the conference opened at Sage Gateshead, with a welcome by its General Director, Anthony Sargent, who spoke convincingly about how social and artistic values have parity at Sage. And the building itself spoke volumes more: workshop rooms, family spaces, and two fine auditoria have equal presence under Foster's embracing organic roof.

## USING NETWORKS TO MAKE THE CASE FOR CULTURE

One of the day's Speaking Guests echoed this all-embracing, un-hierarchical architecture well. Alan Davey, Chief Executive of Arts Council England, plays a key part in shaping the cultural agenda in England. After a collective failure in British society to develop a discourse at national level about the value of culture, Davey is committed to developing arguments with which politicians feel comfortable. Davey regularly meets politicians and arms himself with four-pronged arguments (that he refers to as his 'holistic' case for the arts) about the value of the Arts in: Culture (from identity to collective memory via fresh insights); Society (from health to well-being via social engagement); Education (from primary school to lifelong learning); and in the Economy (from cultural exports via national employment to regional regeneration).



## THE POWER OF NETWORKS

But for those not in a position to breakfast with politicians, what should the rest of us do? Luca Bergamo set out the key challenge of the day: what is the role of networks in not only supporting but shaping the arguments for arts and culture in today's world?

A conversation with three networks and movements' organisers offered some inspiration.

Alistair Spalding, Chief Executive and Artistic Director of the Salder's Wells dance venue in London, offered a thoughtful viewpoint. Spalding is a founding member of What Next?, a group of cultural leaders forming a rather unusual type of movement. At an informal gathering for an hour every Wednesday morning in a theatre in London, this movement is a conversation between cultural workers. As a group they recognise their failure to win over the public about the importance of culture and are working to make amends. But this is not cultural lobbying in a customary form; no public statements, no banners waved. What Next? has a tactical approach working from the 'inside' to empowering individual arts leaders to convey the same message within their own organisation and within the communities they serve.

For his part, Sergio Salgado, Cultural Activist in Spain for the X-party, explained the scientific operation of networks. In his experience, the meaning of a network is always re-negotiated among the members itself, even if only a small percentage of them are actually more engaged than the rest.

Emina Visnic, Director of POGON Zagreb (an open platform for programs of culture organizations and youth), explored the relationship between public space, public good and culture and focused on the 'strategic' view necessary for a movement to create impact and gain relevance in the system.

Aspiring to more deep-rooted change, a shift of the power base toward collective action is essential. And the common point is asking yourself not what networks can do for you but what you can do for your networks.

As during the previous day, the CAE team then orchestrated an energising working session across the delegates about how best to empower networks to shape the agenda for culture and develop a new narrative about its value. The aim of this Lab was to understand with participants how the cultural sector could get organised and can start acting as a crucial player in the development of culture in the political agenda. For this session, CAE participated as a catalyst for this movement – as for its new path of development. A few shared issues were raised and will inspire the work of the CAE network in the next months: the need for a more 'grassroots presence' of culture in society; the necessity to be more connected as active players to share experiences and practices; the challenge of moving 'beyond networks' to create a much stronger narrative about what culture represents for societies.





## MOVING BEYOND

The Conference was closed in an unusual way: no answers, red-thread or conclusions; but more questions to be explored in the next months. Sociologist Renata Salecl did not draw any conclusion, but provoked thoughts by launching new questions to participants. What art is really about, today? How art practices, the new discoveries in the field of human body and the individual anxiety of engaging and choosing as citizens can teach us?

At the close of the conference, delegates spilled away from Newcastle and Gateshead with new energy and insights about why to engage in the democratic process in the name of culture as professionals and actively engaged citizens. As planes and trains left Tyneside, the hope is that no one was left waiting for someone else to set the agenda.



# THANKS TO

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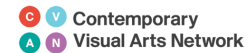
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## INSPIRING PARTNERS



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