

FCnK

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Commissioned and published by ixia, the public art think tank

21st March 2012

PART ONE:

Fur Coat and No Knickers?

Ring out the bells, it's 2012! The Olympic year, in which the transformation of the once toxic wasteland of Victorian industrial East London, like one of our most fetid hospital wards, is deep-cleansed and scrubbed up, for the 'ultimate national well-being campaign'.¹ Jubilant planners predicted the costs of the games to be around £2.37 billion in 2005, and with current costs in at over £12 billion, with some analysts predicting a final cost at around £24 billion,² we can only hope that the Olympic legacy will be a generational cultural shift towards a rosy-cheeked 21st Century athleticism and resurgent civic engagement. With the Cultural Olympiad already having lavished an estimated £97 million over the last four years, the way that the arts in the public realm are perceived has never been more critical. We know just how keen some of the popular press is to point out what a waste of public money this work can sometimes be.



'Fat Man' atomic bomb replica

Whilst London and its provinces gear up to share their great cultural and sporting prowess, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) tells us that the number of people who are unemployed in the UK has risen to 2.67 million, the highest since 1996.³ We're all feeling the repercussions of the blind greed of the bankers and the world's in disarray for sure: the much ignored arterial bleed from Fukushima is quietly spewing its invisible and malignant bile into land, sea and air. War, starvation, terrorism, inequality and blind-consumerism are day-to-day realities, and

then there are the natural catastrophes just waiting to happen; if it's not a comet collision, tsunami or slow Mayan countdown

to Armageddon, it's the pandemic that will drop on us like a 'Fat Man'⁴ from a clear blue sky.

I guess every century has its fair share of trauma, both natural and as a result of our meddling hand. It's perhaps in the shadow of our ongoing 'deficit crisis' that thinking about our Arts/Health agenda



'Fat Man' atomic bomb explosion

might best be framed, for if the work has got any cultural value, isn't it in a crisis where we'll show our metal? John Pilger tells us that our current financial state is '...not remotely a crisis. When Britain was officially bankrupt at the end of the Second World War, the government built its greatest public institutions, such as the National Health Service and the arts edifices of London's South Bank.' This observation is adroit and relevant to our shared agenda, but Pilger also points to the vanity of artists and asks where their voices are whilst the government slash and burn to fulfill their policy objectives?⁵

Art in the Public Realm, in the minds of people outside the world of culture and the arts who are facing uncertain futures, is an irrelevance, meaningless decoration and a waste of resources: *all fur coat and no knickers*.^a You only have to look at the sculpture by Juan Ripollés, at the new Castellon Regional Airport in Spain, to see how both the media and politicians alike enjoy nothing more than a badly conceived project to hide behind. A €300,000, 24m-high, 20-ton copper statue has been dedicated to the infamous and allegedly corrupt politician, Carlos Fabra. His gurning, patinated face will welcome people to a brand new airport that few people use, in a country teetering on the brink of recession and with the highest unemployment rates in 17 years.

Surely this is public art at its most banal and most irrelevant?⁶ Whilst Pilger calls for artists to rage against the hypocrisy of politicians and morally bankrupt societies, it seems art in the public realm so often reverts to the default 'wow' factor; a quick-fix opiate to keep the people happy. A 37-ton, 50 foot high spider;⁷ a 20 foot tall elephant;⁸ or a Giant Little Girl:⁹ like Talos, the bronze giant from Jason and The Argonauts,¹⁰ these are sensational, terrifying and appealing. But, like any drug, you just crave more and its got to have a bigger hit each time. Just think *fireworks*: how can you improve on the previous display? Surely the ultimate progression involves the split atom and is altogether more participative.

We're frequently told that the arts offer us something as a counter-blast to this 'fast-food, quick-fix smiley culture', but through their addictive gloss and glamour, aren't they often just a reflection of, and not a reaction to, the here and now? And the ONS,¹¹ whilst charged with measuring our progressive unemployment, are also commissioned to measure the nation's well-being and come up with the next measurement of happiness. Isn't that what we're all searching for - a prescription for a diversion from this mess? Isn't this what this Arts/Health movement's all about - doling out cultural quick-fixes for a fractured society?

If that's the case, aren't we manipulating our practice to fit the criteria for the next funding application: watering down the work so it fits the paymasters' needs and corporate social responsibility profile? This Arts/Health field is in danger of becoming some bland cultural sub-species, offering the marginalised a transient feel-good factor; some base level cultural instrumentalism for the impoverished, whilst the regular cultural consumers suck up the high-fat, spoon-fed nectar of the acceptable avant-garde.

So, what are our values - and are they just dictated by the next government spending review, or else a shift in Arts Council priorities? Judging by the coalition government's desperate bid to hijack the well-being agenda and reduce the populous to happy, passive, measurable units, there needs to be serious discussion about both what we understand as our shared (and opposing) values, and what others deem to be our quantifiable worth, both economic and social. I never thought I'd be citing Alastair Campbell in an article on

^a The informal British slang expression to 'be all fur coat and no knickers' can be defined as: having an impressive or sophisticated appearance – one which is superficially positive and belies the fact that there is nothing to substantiate it.

arts and health, but his recent writing on happiness and depression acknowledges the hard work, pain and anxiety that add up to the fully-rounded human being that can honestly look back on a life well-lived and consider that they may have experienced transient happiness as part of something far more complex; that fraught experience of being human.¹²

So here's the nub: the heart of this essay. In a world of sedated citizens, it just takes a hairline crack to expose the potential of life beyond the confines of the superficial facade of order. Witness the simmering anger at institutionalised corruption, bursting like lanced boils across the surface of this 'goodly frame the earth.'¹³

PART TWO

Institutional Neglect

There's a scene in the dystopian 1960s sci-fi classic, *Soylent Green*,¹⁴ where an aging Edward G Robinson, exhausted by his meagre existence in an impoverished and bankrupt world, embarks upon his own assisted suicide. In the film, this is euphemistically referred to as 'Going Home', and gives those who choose this option the opportunity of retiring to a state-run unit, wherein lies a comfortable room that is designed to your own specifications: colour, sounds, images, and then, after the administration of what's presumably a lethal injection, you fade peacefully to 'sleep'.

In 2011, I had the pleasure of giving the opening address at the third International Art of Good Health and Well-being Conference¹⁵ in Australia. In my paper, I chose to edge into the ethical minefield of how we end our days; another euphemism, perhaps, for how we might not only think about the quality of life of older people or people with terminal illness but specifically: how we might achieve a good death. I used the scene in *Soylent Green* to unlock some thinking around this. In an Arts/Health context, it's always a little difficult to discuss our dying because, like the medical fraternity, we seem to believe that our work is all about resolving life's difficulties; all medicines, plasters and surgery. It was a relief to find that the conference wasn't only populated by well-meaning artists and allies from medicine, but critically, people from the field of palliative care.

I'd like to develop ideas around how our Arts/Health agenda might somehow be connected to both the civic unrest I've alluded to, and the apparent absence of outrage at the neglect meted out to our elder citizens within health and social care, recently exposed in the UK by the Care Quality Commission¹⁶ and The Patients Association.¹⁷

Over the last decade, we have seen health settings transformed into veritable palaces of culture; glass and steel temples to 'evidence based design', but whilst all the private/public partnerships have enabled the humanisation of what were once seen as oppressive and frightening environments, has the impact of the arts gone much beyond the beautification of the NHS? A view of the five-storey Michael Craig-Martin mural KIDS, at the Oxford Radcliffe,¹⁸ might temporarily distract you from your ills, but how long could its impact be sustained for those on lengthy treatment? And does the presence of a mural affect cultural change within the NHS? I'd suggest not, for it's during this same period of renaissance in NHS modernisation that we've seen the re-designation of corridors to waiting rooms and hospital trollies to beds. Whilst it has seen huge technical advances in medical science, it has seen a surge in hospital-acquired infections, cases of malnutrition and in the case of older people, institutional neglect.

Whilst much of this essay could focus on the constant restructuring of the NHS and the target culture so associated with the previous decade, it is the notion of this vast health and well-being context within the public realm, and its wider significance to the arts, which is relevant to this discussion.

Pause for thought: in the world of health care, certain areas of practice are more 'sexy' than others. Imagine the cut and thrust of emergency surgery: if that's your bag, sexy - paediatric care - as high profile and important as it gets; neurosurgery, the brain: damn sexy; and then there are CAT Scans; PET Scans; MRI's; Nuclear Science; Transplants – it's all so cutting-edge and exciting. But what does this mean for older people with all the associated infirmity of age - the heart disease, the stroke and the cancer?

The loneliness, the loss and the dementia? Is this the antithesis of sexy for artists and clinicians alike? These are the people with no aspiration to Olympian (or Elysian) field events, written off and largely ignored, but where quality of life is of paramount importance.

It's useful to think of the arts in relation to people marginalised by the ever-shrinking realm of old age, or those facing the final stages of terminal illness. If we focus on those people most disenfranchised through illness, we may better understand our worth and our values.

The society portrayed in *Soylent Green* isn't too far-fetched and artists have consistently imagined scenarios that, at the time, may have seemed outlandish but, with hindsight, display prescience. Jonah Lehrer, in his book *Proust was a Neuroscientist*,¹⁹ usefully expands on this theme, suggesting that creative minds might shed new light on complex scientific problems and moreover, that artistic enquiry often preempts scientific understanding.

Describing how 'more and more of life's inevitable processes and difficulties—birth, sexuality, aging, unhappiness, tiredness, and loneliness—are being medicalised', Dr Richard Smith, one-time editor of the *British Medical Journal*, argues that '...medicine alone cannot address these problems and that common values and attitudes towards the management of death, whilst well known about in scientific circles, have yet to be acted upon because of lack of imagination.'²⁰ Whilst the modern version of the Hippocratic Oath urges clinicians to avoid the 'twin traps of over-treatment and therapeutic nihilism', it also stresses that 'there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug'²¹ and urges a focus on the human being, not the illness. Smith suggests that the arts might just be the vehicle to address these points.

As the government pushes the NHS – this once-great institution, born in an age of post-war depression but with near utopian aspiration – towards piecemeal privatisation, it is imperative that creativity, culture and the arts inform a radical vision of the new NHS that puts the patient at the heart of decision-making and places emphasis on care and compassion over competition. How so?

I have argued that the arts should be more than superficial gloss to plaster over the sometimes fractured NHS and that art, by its very nature, has the potential force to kick-start cultural change. But this is about people and places; institutionalised mind-sets, hierarchies and medical procedures are not, as Charles Ledbetter notes, made to accommodate social relationships. A case of delivering services *to* and *for* people, not *with* them.²²

PART THREE

First Blast - Second Blast

I have chosen not to illustrate what I consider the exemplar Arts/Health projects that are involved in this work, because they are out there. Go and discover them!* What I want to do, for a moment, is to draw together some of the themes I've raised in relation to artists *giving voice*.

Whatever the art form, artists have the ability to scrutinise society, to make sense of the times and to criticise the status quo. From the individual making sense of the world to the collaborations of the oppressed, art gives voice. Just imagine the bravery of artist Shamsia Hassani who broadcasts public dissent through graffiti on the streets of Kabul,²³ and the eloquence of the Banksy tagging of the segregation wall that divides the West Bank.²⁴ Retiring Artistic Director of the Tricycle Theatre, Nicolas Kent, is going out with passion with his final work, *The Bomb*, a mix of plays, films, exhibitions and discussions about the Nuclear Bomb²⁵ and its proliferation from the 1940s to today. Is this related to our health and well-being? Of course - and it expands the issues way beyond benign sloganeering. Michael Billington describes Kent's work as: '...an astonishing achievement that puts the nuclear issue back at the centre of public debate. The Tricycle has once again started a debate that our politicians would prefer to suppress.'²⁶

Shamsia Hassani, Street Art, Kabul



Production shots from Tricycle Theatre's *The Bomb*

When up to 80,000 people gathered at St Peter's Field in Manchester in 1819 to demand the reform of parliament, the government sent in the cavalry resulting in 15 deaths and 650 injuries.²⁷ The Peterloo Massacre provoked the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to write what is widely seen as the first statement of the principle of non-violent resistance in *The Masque of Anarchy*:

'Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war...

...Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you-
Ye are many — they are few.'²⁸

On 15th February 2003 between 6 and 10 million people took part in anti-war protests in 60 different countries, as the US began the coercion of its allies to attack Iraq (other estimates suggest the figures were between 8 to 30 million).²⁹ Patrick Tyler, writing in the *New York Times*, claimed that this showed that there were only 'two superpowers on the planet - the United States, and worldwide public opinion.'³⁰ So where were the artists' voices here? What were some of the responses?

*Baghdad, 5 March 2007*³¹ is the rusty wreckage of a car that was destroyed in a 2007 truck bomb attack among the book stalls of Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, an attack that killed 38 people. Turner Prize winning artist, Jeremy Deller, toured it across America on the back of a truck in the company of a US soldier and an Iraqi citizen for a piece entitled *It Is What It Is*. It is now on permanent display amongst the high-gloss weapons of war in the Imperial War Museum.



Baghdad, 5 March 2007, Jeremy Deller

Mark Wallinger's 2007 installation *State Britain*³² at Tate Britain recreated the 120 foot long banner display of peace campaigner

Brian Haw, whose protest camp against the economic sanctions and war against Iraq was dismantled by the police under the Serious Organized Crime and Police Act, that forbids unauthorised demonstration within over a mile radius of Parliament Square. Oscar Wilde would no doubt have approved of both Haw and Wallinger's actions, having declared: "Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion."³³

Queen and Country was created by another Turner Prize winner, Steve McQueen, in response to a visit he made to Iraq in 2003 following his appointment by the Imperial War Museum's Art Commissions Committee as an official UK war artist. McQueen collaborated with 160 families whose loved ones lost their lives in Iraq. He created a cabinet containing a series of facsimile postage stamp sheets, each one dedicated to a deceased soldier. He

proposed that the Royal Mail issue portraits of those who have lost their lives during the conflict as stamps. 'An official set of Royal Mail stamps struck me as an intimate but distinguished way of highlighting the sacrifice of individuals in defence of our national ideals. The stamps would focus on individual experience without euphemism. It would form an intimate reflection of national loss that would involve the families of the dead and permeate the everyday – every household and every office.'³⁴ The facsimile postage sheets bear multiple portrait heads, each one dedicated to an individual, with details of name, regiment, age and date of death printed in the margin. The artist considers the work incomplete until the Royal Mail officially issues the stamps.

Deller, Wallinger and McQueen's work explicitly takes forward the position of the artist holding a lens to contemporary society, implicitly conjoining broad notions of humanity, politics, and - I'd suggest - well-being.

As well as 2012 being the Olympic year for Britain, it is also the Queen's diamond jubilee year, which gives its citizens twice the opportunity for mid-recession celebrations, specifically as an extra public holiday has been given to celebrate the monarch's 60 year reign. It's a tragedy that Cultural Olympiad commissioned artist, Martin Creed, will have to wait until the 27th of July to hear what the response to his *Work No. 1197*³⁵ will be. Creed is encouraging everyone to ring a bell at 8:00 in the morning on the first day of the games for 3 minutes. If people participate, it'll be another 'spectacular'. Yet like so many sensate expectations, it will be over in three minutes! Easier to digest for the youtube generation perhaps, than the slightly longer and potentially blistering 4'33" by John Cage.³⁶

So how on earth does the plight of our invisible, neglected elders, or those facing the final stages of terminal illness, fit into this narrative?

Our ageing population is on the rise, and figures from The National Council for Voluntary Organisations³⁷ predict that, by 2034, people over 65 will account for 23% of the population, within which an estimated 3.5 million will be the 'oldest of the old', that is, aged over 85.

Whilst the educated, well-connected ageing middle-classes will undoubtedly strive to engage with civic society and participate in a rich cultural life, the less well-off and socially disconnected will find the inequalities they've experienced throughout their lives deepening. Add to this the physical and emotional consequences of living longer and the inevitability of facing our own uncertain death, and the needs of our aging population are (if left to fester in the ways that have been permitted to date) bleak and terrifying.

There are currently 750,000 people living with dementia in the UK, a figure predicted to rise to over a million by 2021.³⁸ If we succumb to dementia, do we aspire to spend our days slumped in front of the inane chatter of daytime TV, our moments punctuated by pureed food and compulsory nostalgia, glassy eyed and sedated? And, if we succumb to a terminal disease earlier in our lives, do we want to blindly accept all medical interventions?

In an article for *The New Yorker*, the surgeon Dr Atul Gawande³⁹ painfully illustrates how modern medicine often focuses on aggressive interventions to stave off death whilst losing sight of both the patient and the ways we can improve quality of life in people's final days. In his unflinching narrative, he describes Intensive Care Units as 'warehouses of the dying' and paints a picture of a health system that, in its attempt to prolong life, takes medicine and surgery to its furthest limits, sacrificing quality of life by pursuing every available intervention, however traumatic, for the possibility of extra time.



Marjorie Raynor by Lois Blackbur:
Arthur and Martha
<http://www.arthur-and-martha.co.uk/>

These futures should outrage us just as much as bankers' bonuses, the inequalities that surround us and the abuse we mete on our environment. It's more likely that this future reflects the disconnected, superficial values that have enabled this 'air-conditioned nightmare'⁴⁰ to take hold. As Richard Smith consistently points out, the arts are a vehicle not only to question what is unacceptable, but to suggest what *is* possible. Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, the general practitioner Dr Iona Heath⁴¹ expands on the harsh and much avoided reality that our mortality rate will always be 100%, commenting that: 'Authentic health care for the old and frail has much more to do with helping to preserve their dignity, treating them with affection, and supporting their continued involvement in social activities, rather than the pursuit of ever-more elusive cures.'

The Arts/Health agenda is maturing, both through participatory models and through an evolving evidence base, but, for a relatively small number of exemplars, little notice is paid to end of life engagement. This is more than simply designing bespoke coffins or funeral services that reflect the individual. The arts can enable

the most difficult of conversations around how we die, facilitating dialogue around advanced directives, building on the role of medical humanities in undergraduate training, and positing a secular *ars moriendi*⁴² for the 21st Century, an area I am currently researching.

The ongoing debate around assisted dying, highlighted by Lord Falconer and the Commission on Assisted Dying,⁴³ has only scratched the surface of issues that will affect us all, and, whilst compassionate medical practitioners like Dr Philip Nitschke⁴⁴ are pilloried by the media for their call for action and frustration at impotent-rhetoric, surely artists and designers have the capacity for imagining technology and scenarios that enable both informed choice around how we maintain our quality of life and how we choose to die.

Dementia care homes shouldn't just cultivate the singing of sentimental wartime ballads. Instead of containment through anti-psychotic medication, the arts offer exciting ways of channeling frustration, anger, disappointment and fear through imagination.

Similarly, by avoiding discussions around choices concerning our own deaths, we are missing opportunities to engage in the most important and provocative of conversations. I'd suggest that in succumbing to the culture of quick-fix sensationalism, we're missing the possibilities of how the arts might evolve in the public realm. French philosopher Pascal Bruckner describes the potency of the arts as revealing '...new aspects of life to us' and artists as '...Sirens around us, solar, radiant beings who invite us to try on other destinies. They are the ones who experiment with new arts of living, wrench happiness away from its canonical definitions, and set it upon new avenues.'⁴⁵

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"...something's happening, whether you like it or not."⁴⁶ Martin Creed

Westfield Stratford City, located next to the Olympic Park in east London, is the largest urban shopping centre in Europe. Costing £1.45 billion, the centre has over 300 shops, 70 restaurants, a 14-screen cinema, three hotels, a bowling alley and the UK's largest casino. Critically, it will provide the main access to the Olympic park for the 2012 Games and is held up by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, as '...one of the most important legacies of the 2012 Olympics.'⁴⁷

Once the bluster and high-jinks of the Olympics has subsided and we enter the legacy phase, will it be the spirit of imagination and possibility that's retained, or will the full icy blast of deep austerity strip the skin from our bones and leave us sedated by our harsh addiction to neon consumerism?

As the DCMS⁴⁸ calls yet again for near impossible measurements of cultural value, and the movement that we call Arts/Health appears to be expanding, there is the ever-present danger that all we aspire to achieve will be reduced to commodification. Like the recent MasterCard-sponsored BRITS and Festival of Britain anniversary, it seems the ways in which we illustrate our worth will always be measured in the language of the 'market'. Will any political party ever really understand the social impact of the arts or, more than that, invest in a vehicle of potential individual and collective dissent?

If we see the Arts/Health agenda as being somehow separate from the mainstream world of culture, we are in danger of retrenchment into divisive silos of self-interest.

It's up to those of us who are outraged at the onslaught on the NHS, and those of us who want to give voice to people who for whatever reason have no voice, to express their aspirations, frustrations and needs. Artists, designers, scientists and Sirens - this is our call! Imagine new possibilities for collaboration and action. This conversation offers us the opportunity to grab the nettle. This is about the individual, about democracy and generational, cultural change. Our health is political, the arts are political too.

"Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that."⁴⁹ John Donne

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Nunc Lento Sonitu Dicunt, Morieris

*If forced to share exemplars from the field, we might look to the ethos behind *Maggie's Centres*, or the understated impact of the sensate designed objects in dementia care settings of *Darren Browett*. We might look at collaborations like that of *All City* in New York, bringing pediatrics' and graffiti together; the work of organisations like *MoMA* and its impact on dementia, *Creature Tales* who bring intimacy back into end of life care, or the consistently exciting Artangel. What I'd hope is that these projects wouldn't dictate the *style*, but be a springboard for new ways of thinking.

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ISBN Number: 978-1-900756-67-9