

# ART, ITS PUBLICS AND AN AGENDA OF IMPACT: THE UK CASE

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This text considers UK 'third way' cultural policy and its agenda of impact that seeks to directly connect with processes of social and economic change via the commissioning of art and culture. I claim that publicly funded art commissioned as part of 'impact policy' is increasingly instrumentalized and that this process has become complicit with and functional for an agenda of privatization and marketization. Here I use theories of the public sphere as a critical framework with which to interrogate this agenda for art in third way cultural policy. I propose that third way cultural policy produces debased public spheres. In order to understand how this occurs and in what ways the state utilizes art practice, I present three forms of rhetoric common to third way cultural policy and public art commissioning. This articulation allows us to comprehend how cultural policy is a steering medium that promotes ideas of economics and ways of living that are increasingly informed by neoliberal values and that further undermine public interest, social justice, and democratic debate. Instead of a third way agenda for art, we must consider the potential of the arts and their institutions as spaces where politics, difference, and futures can be expressed and debated.

In the UK the impact agenda for the publically funded arts has advanced despite a lack of evidence to back claims for its instrumentalization.<sup>1</sup> Three forms of rhetoric are commonly used in third way policy and interrogate this agenda for art's function using public sphere theory as a critical framework.<sup>2</sup> Habermas' theories of publics and of the public sphere are concerned with communicatory interaction, debate and opinion formation between social actors forming a deliberating citizenry that is central to operations of democracy.<sup>3</sup> The rhetorics are, art as a form of cultural democracy; art as an economic driver; and art as a provider of (solutions for) social amelioration. What these rhetorics reveal is that cultural policy can operate as a steering medium that promotes ideas of economics and ways of living that are increasingly informed by neoliberal values. This process further undermines public interest, social justice, and democratic debate (fig. 1). Third way cultural policy also undermines critical art production and produces 'safe' third way art.

## IMPACT IN THIRD WAY GOVERNANCE

To understand the rise of culture for third way politics — and hence my critique of its accompanying rhetorical functions — it is first worth retracing recent policy developments.<sup>4</sup> Social theorist and Labour advisor Anthony Giddens, who together with Tony Blair was the architect of 'New' Labour, proposed third way political governance. The new social democratic politics that they claimed were a response to the dilemmas facing Western post-industrial society, and more pragmatically a politics that would bring Labour to power.<sup>5</sup> Third way politics was influenced by neoliberalism but adapted to the UK context of welfare state reforms. For New Labour, the third way was

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Impact has now also been embedded as a device for measuring value in UK's funding Research Councils (RCUK) in the Research Exercise Framework (REF). Although this is not key to arguments on art and its instrumentalization, it points to the ways in which economic and ideological priorities have gripped all areas of knowledge production within what I describe as the 'instrumental turn'.

2  
Andrew Hewitt, *Art and Counter-Publics in Third Way Cultural Policy*. London: PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2012.

3  
Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere — An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, [1962], Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989, p.176.

4  
New Labour was in government from 1997 until 2010.

5  
Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 10.



fig. 1 Freee, *The Function of Public Art for Regeneration is to Sex Up the Control of the Under-class*, 2005. This work belongs to a series of images of the project *For Real Estate: Art in a Changing City*, as a reaction to third way cultural policies. Curated by B+B, London in Six Easy Steps, organised by Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

an ideological leap to the right, undermining the 'left's core social and political values, i.e. the traditional Labour Party goal of social justice via intervention by the state. In third way political theory, social justice is replaced by ideas of social inclusion.<sup>6</sup> The concept of third way citizenship then becomes framed in terms of the 'individual' in society and how effectively one participates in the economic system. As a result, measurement of the impact was required for state policy.

In post-Fordist Britain, culture and the 'cultural industries' were imagined as providing a means to economically regenerate the nation via the signs and symbols of 'cultural capitalism'.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, New Labour set in motion a new phase of instrumental policy for art and culture, described by Murdock as a "shift in public policy", to marketization, privatization, and liberalization.<sup>8</sup> As Griffiths pointed out: "[i]n the UK the cultural sphere has been gaining a more central role in public policy over the last 10–15 years".<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Blair stated in populist terms that culture was to be available to 'the many not the few', with the first Culture Secretary Chris Smith establishing the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to promote the interests and market potential of the 'creative industries' — a wide field of artistic, cultural, and technological practices employing an instrumentalized conception of art.<sup>10</sup>

The agenda for arts policy then was to 'converge' with third way economic and social policy initiatives in order to impact upon serious levels of deprivation within post-industrial cities. Known

<sup>6</sup> Social inclusion policy as an affirmative action to counter social exclusion, i.e., the economic marginalization of citizens in economically developed countries such as those considered to be without full citizenship due to unemployment, mental health or race. For more information <http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk>.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access — How to Shift from Ownership to Access is Transforming Capitalism*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Murdock, 'Back to Work, Cultural Labour in Altered Times', in A. Beck (ed.), *Cultural Work: Understanding the Cultural Industries*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Griffiths, 'City/ Culture Discourses: Evidence from the Competition to Select the European Capital of Culture 2008', in *European Planning Studies* 14:4 (2004), pp. 415–430.

<sup>10</sup> Labour Party, *Create the Future*, London: The Labour Party, 1997.

as 'culture-led regeneration', cultural planning then positioned culture and creativity as a means to achieve social inclusion and to promote ideas of citizenship and social reconstruction. It was, however, also tied to economic and social development objectives. In this context, art was subsidized to new and higher levels, but at a cost: it was further instrumentalized as an agent of political, social, and cultural complicity.<sup>11</sup>

Having set out the context for the convergence of cultural policy and wider governance, below I will introduce the three key rhetorics that have emerged in cultural policy that envisage forms of functionality for art production and become a measure of its impact.

### 1. Art as a form of cultural democracy

In the rhetoric of art as a cultural democracy, the art gallery is imagined as a public space where debates on contemporary social matters as a form of participation in 'cultural citizenship' are thought to contribute to empowering citizens and the revitalization of civil society. Many new art galleries built under New Labour were perceived as the new agoras, where citizens could enjoy interaction, experience sociability, and thereby produce forms of social cohesion through cultural participation.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the commissioning of artworks by increasingly diverse public, private, and third sector organizations saw artists deployed to work on social agenda projects to address social problems and to come into contact with new audiences.

### 2. Art as a driver for economic development

The articulation of art as an economic driver encourages the use of art within urban regeneration, in visual 'place-making' and in art biennials, thereby contributing to the re-branding of post-industrial cities for inward investment and as tourist destinations. Artists participated in urban planning as art experts on design committees and recipients of commissions from arts development companies to produce spectacular visual works for urban centres.<sup>13</sup> Artists were also valued and marketed as a visibly conspicuous 'cool' social group that regenerated the places they lived and worked in.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Art as a provider of social amelioration

Finally, the expression of art as a form of social amelioration sets out to provide increased access for 'economically challenged' citizens, to participate in art and culture and thus, according to the rhetoric, to be inspired and therefore aspire to better and more cultured lives.<sup>15</sup> Artists are recruited into informal education and outreach workshop programmes,<sup>16</sup> a process that according to Charles Landry can change the 'mindset' and 'behavior' of residents, "to improve their effectiveness in creating capital and growth in order to reduce what is seen as a dependency on state provision".<sup>17</sup> This is a concise articulation of art production and its functions within and for policy but it shows at once the range of ways art is perceived as functioning for the state.

## ART AS A PUBLIC GOOD

What is manifest in third way cultural policy is the idea of liberal art and culture having universal benefits and important functions within

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See social and cultural theorists whose work examines cultural policy such as Malcolm Miles, Jim McGuigan, Deborah Stephenson, James Heartfield, and Jonathon Vickery.

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A new wave of museums and art centres were commissioned as part of urban regeneration programmes, examples include The New Art Gallery Walsall and The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts in Gateshead.

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Public art agencies act as specialist art intermediaries working between the artist and the planning and building teams, and working within the strict bureaucratic systems of regeneration. These groups have worked to professionalize the field, advocating arts in planning with public and corporate partners, and in developing codes of practice. Groups include Futurecity ([www.futurecity.co.uk](http://www.futurecity.co.uk)), Artpoint ([www.artpointtrust.org.uk](http://www.artpointtrust.org.uk)), General Public Agency ([www.generalpublicagency.org.uk](http://www.generalpublicagency.org.uk)), and Freeform which is one of a number of new genre arts consultancies specializing in urban regeneration.

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Deborah Stevenson, 'Civic Gold Rush', in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 10:1 (2004), p. 125.

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For example in the programmes developed by organizations such as The Public in West Bromwich, or METAL in Southend-on-Sea.

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Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, London: Demos, 2000, p. 9.

a modern society as a 'public good'. In cultural policy, 'impact' is then a new term for a continuing debate. Arguments on art's instrumentalization and ideas of art as a public good have been rumbling on in the UK since the formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain back in 1946, when the state formally took over as patron of the arts.<sup>18</sup> Back then, the Labour Party had the thorny problem of directly engaging what was deemed to be high art, minority, or dominant culture, with processes of social change for the majority; addressed, largely, by providing the lower classes with increased 'access' to middle-class culture, its taste, and aspirations.

This is an ideological understanding of art as a public good. For example, John Holden described the potential of art to "release the talents and increase the capital of the whole of society".<sup>19</sup> 'Public good' is connected to governance and political decision-making, with the state producing what it sees as public values or public interest in policy for collective, ethical notions of the 'good', usually to counterbalance public and private interests between the state, citizens, and business. Therefore, what constitutes a public good (or its potential impact) is an ideological question; public good might be beneficial to one social group but detrimental to another.

With publically funded arts and culture chiefly characterized as a benign force for the common good, art production becomes a means to reach and influence people, coupled to a distinctively neoliberal conception of public good, namely privatization and marketization. What this policy ignores is art's own politics and its contested function in society, i.e. the social and cultural divisions that form art and sustain it.

## AUDIENCES VERSUS PUBLICS

There is no doubt that art is attractive to policymakers who have been quick to seize on art for a third way agenda. Art is useful because it produces audiences, it communicates and disseminates ideas, and it has the reputation of being special, clever, and valuable. In evaluation processes for agencies such as the Arts Council England, the small chatty cultural audiences that art produces are referred to as actively engaged participatory publics of the political kind. Art's audience is also portrayed as an imaginary 'general public' or a cohesive singular version of *the* public. However, we can identify theories that deal with the concept of 'the public' starting from Habermas' public sphere and the critiques of his theories that followed (for example by Nancy Fraser). Habermas' theories of publics and of the public sphere are concerned with communicatory interaction, debate, and opinion formation between social actors forming a deliberating citizenry that is central to operations of democracy.<sup>20</sup> As Habermas describes, "the public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions".<sup>21</sup> Thus, public sphere discourse problematizes the mechanisms for collective decision-making. It allows us to understand publics engaged in producing opinion and debate and their relationship to and effect on the institutional apparatus of the democratic state.

Habermas' early conception or blueprint of the bourgeois public sphere was a historical account of the formation of these processes in eighteenth-century Europe and has been criticized for its limitations. Critics suggest that his public sphere, far from being a space

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When it was first established, the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it was then known, was run on an 'arms length' principle (as in the BBC) with some level of autonomy whereby the state provides funding but does not organize the running of the body. Trusted persons, deemed of high standing, who were accountable only through annual reporting to government, ran the body.

<sup>19</sup>

John Holden, *Democratic Culture; Opening up the Arts to Everyone*, London: Demos, 2008, pp. 29.

<sup>20</sup>

Habermas, op. cit. (note 3), p. 176.

<sup>21</sup>

Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)*, Cambridge: Polite Press, 1996, p. 360.

of equals, engaged in a debate on matters of common interest, and was instead the foundation for an emergent class who were set to repress weaker plebian public spheres. Later theories, such as those of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner, provide ideas of counter-publics, comprised of excluded marginal groups, seeking social justice, making demands based on cultural or political alterity, be it class, gender, race or sexuality. Counter-publics transform the public sphere from a place of talk to one of unrest, violence, and social change. This multiplication of public spheres suggests that there are official and powerful public spheres and a host of rival counter-publics in existence. In this context, 'the public' can be regarded as a misnomer for a citizenry that is diverse, contradictory, fractured, and that includes dominant publics, but also subaltern and counter-publics. We can, therefore, conclude that there is not a singular art public, only groups of common interest that are small, divided, and contested.

In the Habermasian conception, the public sphere is public not because of its spaces but because of its activities. The emphasis is on publishing and making one's ideas public through argument and debate. He calls for a multiplicity of public spheres that include the marginal, subordinate and oppositional, what Habermas called the 'periphery', who challenge the interests of ruling elites and liberal reticence. Its potential is in the transformation of individual citizens into public publics.

In the rhetoric of 'art as a form of cultural democracy' with the building of new art galleries as new agoras, the art gallery largely operates to produce visual works for aesthetic contemplative thought — not debate and political argumentation. 'Audience development' for art tends toward the affirmative processes of educating and culturalizing visitors and is a space for convivial exchange. While these activities are not without value, cultural institutions do risk becoming safe, uncritical, and conservative when hitched to a third way function of producing social cohesion. The gallery is a space for cultural public spheres — not political public spheres — and is in the main an unpromising place for citizens to have their say or to be active producers themselves.

The increase of art commissioning by non-art organizations may offer exciting interdisciplinary activity, however, work is set on the host's terms (often third way prerogatives) which, whilst providing stimulating paid work for artists, leads to artworks that function as publicity and illustrative production for the commissioner. Agora for social inclusion can only provide debased public spheres with art production that looks to construct civic identities.

In the rhetoric of 'art as an economic driver', the process of art commissioning is a part of the styling of the city with works selected for visual effect as formal and decorative, in line with the branding of urban spaces. In this process of marketization, artists' work becomes tied to developer-led real estate speculation and capital accumulation that, in situations where planning regulations are weak or debased, produces economic asymmetries in which low incomes residents make way for gated communities in a process of gentrification.<sup>22</sup> Planning processes are notoriously opaque for residents and communities to engage in and so having representation by art experts on design committees can further obfuscate negotiation for sustainable and equitable solutions with art's values, codes, and cultural capital becoming a means to legitimize controversial developments. In addition, cultural workers are also active in shaping the city for the benefit of their own elite cultural class, which is not a universal benefit and can function to maintain both cultural and social divisions.

Finally, in terms of 'art providing solutions for social amelioration', middle-class culture *cannot* be a means to bring about social justice. 'Access' to culture is widened to a culture predetermined in the

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Andrew Hewitt and Melanie Jordan, 'Winner, Outside Artspace, Showflat', *I Fail To Agree*, Sheffield: Cornerhouse Publications, 2004, p. 21.

image of the governing cultural body. Arts' publics are thereby rendered passive receivers of culture rather than being empowered to shape cultures. The use of agencies such as publicly funded arts institutions repeat this management process and, in the case of the arts, act as a means to promote community relations. Cultural workers are then deployed in lower class neighborhoods to help locals become 'full' economic citizens by gaining employment and raising aspirations. Cultural education programmes are used to supplement social inclusion policy as a means to manage people and their behaviour. This model of using culture for social intervention is patriarchal and reformist in character and does not tackle systemic social inequalities.

## IMPACT POLICY AND DEBASED PUBLIC SPHERE

The impact agenda engenders a social function for art in constructing civic identities. The field of publicly funded art then functions to legitimize initiatives and policy aims, but does not ask what should or should not be done in the future, thereby funneling people by managing public opinion as a form of steering media. Habermas also provides the concept of 'steering media', that is the inherent directing and coordinating mechanisms of state administration and the economy that are in the hands of experts and administrators and operate away from public scrutiny and possible democratic control.<sup>23</sup> Such policy functions to produce opinion-formation for the state, and in doing so supports bureaucratic, managerial, and social control mechanisms that cannot be deemed as a public good. The rhetoric of third way cultural policy is, therefore, a debasement of the public sphere (of democratic communication between the state and citizens), and in this process art functions to produce an impression of positive social change while state policy is actually driving further privatization of the state sector, diminishing the transparency of governance, and producing further social division.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact agenda of 'third way' cultural policy that utilizes publically funded art and culture to directly engage with processes of social change is flawed. As I have described, the three rhetoric of arts policy as a public good function instead as steering media for the state. It is my contention that uncritical and affirmative cultural production has the effect of producing debased publics spheres that undermine democracy.

Despite the rhetoric from arts advocates, top-down state-run art institutions are unpromising arenas for open, public debate providing a weak platform for political public spheres. In addition, art under 'third way' governance has economic functions, for example in urban planning in which art and artists plays a role in place making. However, in the dynamics of property-led urban development with weak social housing policy and processes of gentrification, the benefits reach elite social groups, the traditional users of high culture, therefore, preserving both cultural and social division. Thirdly, the idea of 'access' to art as a force for change in society offers a very limited scope to alter socio-economic divisions. Instead, the social inclusion policy as a form of social amelioration is reformist, to provide social cohesion via cultural education programmes as a means to manage people and their behaviour.

Art can produce debate, discussion, and sometimes controversy, but the communicative potential of a 'third way art' is limited and

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, op. cit. (note 21), p. 344.

undoes the transformative and critical potential of art. Third way cultural public spheres that use techniques of participation and display function independently from politics and actually work towards the diminishment of transparent governance, which in turn exacerbates social division.

It becomes crucial to defend and re-articulate key concepts in progressive politics, such as public interest, social justice, and democratic debate, and to demand the effective translation of these ideas, through the activity of state institutions, for example, from those that produce visual culture. Say no to third way impact policy and say no to third way art.

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