

# Who Needs Artists?

A paper delivered at the What Artists Need Symposium, hosted by Cywaith Cymru at the National Museum of Wales.

It doesn't need pointing out that artists are individuals, more so than in most professions perhaps, since their work depends on this individuality. Artists are encouraged to "think differently". It should come as no surprise then to find that they often think differently to each other on almost every topic. Organizing artists into groups or unions has always been difficult, and the results are short lived or maintained only through the dedication of a minority of its members. Artists resist the herding instinct.

One thing that all artists will agree on however is that they need time and space to make art, and they would like to be "sponsored" in one way or other to do that. This "sponsorship" has been seen to be a requirement in an enlightened, civilized, culture, which rewards the artist for fulfilling an important, some might argue, crucial function within Society. The support then ultimately should come from the State. Art, according to this theory, cannot be at the mercy of market forces. Commercialisation leads to vulgarisation or a dilution, "dumbing down" in other words, removing Art from that realm where it attains (or is perceived to have) an almost "Spiritual/Mystical" function within a primarily secular society.

Why should society feel honour bound to support artists who make no effort to make "sellable" work? If the answer to the question; Who Needs Artists? turns out to be 'society' in general, then how does Art benefit that society ...what does Art do?

*The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, says Carl Gustav Jung, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate for the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.<sup>1</sup>*

Rather than merely reflecting the age in which it is made (as much of today's art seems obsessed with), this suggests that art should offer more. In an age of instant gratification, it offers pause, reflection. Art is not "entertainment", though it is assumed to be, I never liked its coupling with "Sport" as in Ministry Sport and the Arts. At its best and given due attention, it provides psychological sustenance and solace. To know that fellow human beings can make things that are outside the realm of base human needs, that are made to "grace" all our lives, is in itself a revelatory and life affirming experience. This is where we get to the spiritual aspect for lack of a better word, since art operates on a psychological level akin to Faith and Religious feelings. Dylan Thomas in this "Note" written as preface to his Collected Poems in November 1952 hints at this:

*I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!". These poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.<sup>2</sup>*

In this analogy, the poet (Artist) might be seen as the shepherd of men, who protects his flock by the use of his "craft or sullen art". The same sentiment is found in this quote from the Cuban artist Raquelin Mendieta;

*Art and Spirituality are one and the same; works of Art are prayers on the altar of life.*

There is evidence if you read most artists biographies or “notes on work” to suggest that this idea is deeply held and shared, I can think of others in a similar vein. The Scottish painter Alan Davie says; *In painting as in alchemy, one is involved in a magical transmutation of matter into an indefinable spiritual essence, and like the alchemists, I have in the end reached some enlightenment in the realisation that my work entails a kind of symbolic self involvement in the very process of life itself. And when the magic happens, the base materials have become pure gold.*<sup>3</sup>

If your particular frame of mind finds this idea too fanciful, and to remove art completely from its priestly or shamanistic role in Society, it may, alternatively, be seen to be a political instrument of dynamic potential. Art can be harnessed to political ends; it can spearhead regeneration, reinvention, re imaging, a cases in point being Bilbao or Newcastle/Gateshead. Art offers subtle unifying elements to a multi cultural view of contemporary society. That Art can be beneficially harnessed to the aims of politicians cannot be denied, but (and perhaps this has been played down in recent conformist times) Art can also work as a revolutionary apparatus, something that also scares politicians. Raymond Williams proposed a model that divided human culture into dominant, residual and emergent domains. The dominant maintains its hegemony by the use of a “Selective Tradition”, he explains it thus;

*in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective. This implies no presumption about its value. It is this central system that formulates the selective tradition; that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as “the tradition”, “the significant past”.*<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to this “selective tradition” there is a “residual culture” which is reactionary and an emergent culture” which is revolutionary.

In these cases, an avant-garde in art is an “emergent” and culturally revolutionary force of revitalization; it offers an alternative “tradition” in the case of moribund and lethargic monumental systems. It is commonly believed that an avant-garde no longer exists, however, if we look at art that challenges accepted notions, questions the state or the market or prejudice, racism and imperialism, there lies the avant-garde. Only people who equate New York’s SoHo, or Hoxton, with artistic production in general, can blithely assert that the avant-garde is dead. This has also been seen as the act of “compensating the cannon”, that is challenging and offering alternative variants to the accepted and “selective tradition”.

Historically, the fact that art has the power to question that “selective tradition” makes its funding by the perpetrators of that “tradition”, or those with a vested interest in its perpetuation, problematic. Art’s beneficial effects, characterized as “a society in conversation with itself” indicates however that a truly confident and mature culture should embrace the transgressive elements of art as much as the confirmatory, both are life affirming.

A third option, and these options are not mutually exclusive, is the idea of art as a provider of “completeness”, a role closer to that of the “spiritual/mystical”, but one that is more or less empirical; as far as it is at all possible to quantify aesthetic and formal aspects empirically.

Writer Jeanette Winterson in notes for a theatrical show of “The Power Book” says; *“It is very difficult for us to look at things. Life passes in a blur. We don’t know how to see the object itself at it really is, because our own subjective reality is always intruding, and we are not in command of ourselves enough, to know how subject and object are always coming together and forming new wholes. Our experience is fragmented and partial.*

*Art brings together our disparate realities and gives us a coherent experience. The emotional satisfaction of art is the satisfaction of wholeness.”*<sup>5</sup>

*“The challenge” as the New York critic, Robert C Morgan says “is how to rediscover the act of seeing in this desperate age of speed and information, how to slow down and regain consciousness, and how to enter the world once again with an open mind and a new vision of what the future may hold with the prospect that it may benefit our lives”.*<sup>6</sup>

To return to the point of view of the artist at its most simple level, in the words of Mexican artist Fransisco Toledo; *“ I do what I do without any hope of a lasting or significant effect. I do these things because I feel it’s my duty and because I have the means to do them at this moment in time”*<sup>7</sup>

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## **Footnotes**

1 Carl Gustav Jung. “On the Relation of Analytical psychology to Poetry”.

2 Dylan Thomas. Preface to the “Collected Poems”

3 Alan Davie. *Towards a philosophy of creativity*. University of Brighton 1997.

4 Raymond Williams. “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, *Problems in Materialism and Culture, Selected Essays*. Verso. London, 1980. PP 38-39.

5 Jeanette Winterson. Programme Notes to *The Power Book*. National Theatre. London.

6 Robert C. Morgan. *The End of the Art World*. Allworth Press, New York. 1998.

7 Fransisco Toledo. Interview with George Mead Moore in BOMB, Winter 2000, quoted by Catherine Lampert in a catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000.