'All in this together': The depoliticisation of community art in Britain, 1970-2011

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What's in name?[1]

The term 'community art' came into use in Britain at the beginning of the 1970s, at a time when the cultural experimentation of the 1960s was confronted both by harsh economic conditions and by more concerted resistance from a cultural establishment beginning to recognise the nature of the challenge to its authority it was facing (Hewison 1995:152). Community art was used to describe a complex, unstable and contested practice developed by young artists and theatre makers seeking to reinvigorate an art world they saw as bourgeois at best and repressive at worst (Braden 1978; McGrath 1981).

The phrase 'community art' fell out of favour at the beginning of the 1990s, to be replaced by the seemingly-innocuous alternative, 'participatory arts', though the original term is still used by some people and may even be in the process of rehabilitation.[2] It is also used outside the UK, notably in the Netherlands and Australia, where it has acquired locally-specific meanings with diverse connection to the original theories and methods.

Does this change of terminology have any importance? Surely it is the practice that counts, as the founders of the Association of Community Artists argued in 1971. Anyway, as Juliet famously says, 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'.[3] But Juliet is a 13 year old child and her question is naïve, if idealistic, as the play makes clear. Words matter. They shape, reflect and shape again how we think: language expresses us.

The renaming of community arts is not without meaning. It is both symptom and indicator of a profound change in the politics of Britain after the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, a change that saw individual enterprise promoted at the expense of shared enterprise and a recasting of the citizen as a consumer engaged in transactions rather than relationships. Britain was not alone in experiencing this ideological change, nor was the government its only cause. The collapse of Soviet communism, the liberalisation of the global economy and advances in computer and communication technology were all determining influences.

The arts were not exempt from this transformation of British society, economics, culture and thought. As the virtual space in which a community expresses, negotiates and redefines its meanings art, like language, both shape and reflects society. The path from

'community art' to 'participatory art', whilst seen as merely pragmatic by those who made it, marked and allowed a transition from the politicised and collectivist action of the seventies towards the depoliticised, individual-focused arts programmes supported by public funds in Britain today.

Of course, this is a simplification. There was non-political community art work in the 1970s and 1980s and there is challenging socially-engaged arts work now. But the trend of the past 40 years has been from radicalism to remedialism. While there have been improvements in aspects of practice within a global trend towards cultural democracy, community artists in Britain – if anyone still describes themselves as such – have mostly been carried along with the ideological tide of the times. Ignorance of their own history and reluctance to theorise their work, already lamented by Owen Kelly in 1984, has left them largely unable to resist the domination of market economics in the arts or in society as a whole.[4]

Today, when the results of that unchallenged domination are evident in economic collapse and a raft of social, political and environmental crises, it is time for artists working with people to ask some questions about history, about theory, about practice. It is time to review the journey from community art to participatory arts and ask what was lost on the way. It is time for artists working with communities, under whatever term, to ask how well their ideas and practice engage with today's troubled world and what contribution they can offer in making a better one.

Community art and collective action

Although connected with older traditions of cultural emancipation, such as the Workers' Educational Association, community art's immediate roots lie in the artistic, social and political experimentation of the late 1960s.[5] It had grown quickly and by 1974, the Association of Community Artists submitted a list of 149 groups to the working party set up by the Arts Council to examine the issue (Kelly 1984:13). There could not but be diversity of opinion and practice among such a large body of practitioners. Even so, many of those who created the community art movement – and it is significant that it described itself as a movement – had a clear left-wing political agenda (Kelly 1984:36). Theatre groups such as Red Ladder and 7:84 – *The Economist* had written in 1966 that 7% of the UK population owned 84% of its wealth – set out to articulate socialist political analyses and 'raise awareness', in the language of the time. For Welfare State, who set up camp in 1968 on a former rubbish tip in Burnley, living in community was itself a political position. Not far away, Albert Hunt's Bradford Art College Theatre Group was devising plays like *John Ford's Cuban Missile Crisis* and *The Fears and Miseries of Nixon's Reich.*[6] Other activists, for instance in the visual arts, may have had less committed politics but they still operated within, and were sympathetic to, a broadly left of centre progressivist culture. After all, the British right had had just four difficult years in government between 1964 and 1979.

Community art in the 1970s also grew up alongside the much bigger, more mature and more theoretically sophisticated community development movement. In 1953, the United Nations had defined community development as:

> A movement to promote better living for the whole community with active participation and if
> possible on the initiative of the community. (Craig 2011:3)

Although initially linked with decolonisation (and promoted as an alternative to communism), the thinking and practice of community development spread quickly to urban renewal programmes in the USA, in the context of the civil rights movement, and to Britain.[7] It is not necessary to go far into community development theory or practice here, except to note some key ideas in the UN definition. First, it is concerned with improving the living conditions of the whole community, not of individuals. Secondly, it sees active participation as the essential means to achieve that improvement. Finally, it prioritises the community's own initiative – in other words, its own judgement of what would constitute an improvement in its living conditions and how that might be achieved. (It should also be noted that this is to be done only 'if possible', a qualifier that can be considered realistic, open to corruption or both, according to interpretation.)

By the 1970s, this practice was embedded in many poorer areas of Britain, with community development workers active in the creation and support of tenants' associations, women's groups and similar grass roots organisations. The community art movement, in cities like London, Glasgow and Manchester, and in the new towns being built to relieve urban overcrowding, found natural allies here as well as a body of ideas and experience on which to draw. It did so because many of its leaders were committed to an art that was public and collective, as John McGrath, founder of 7:84, wrote in 1981:

> Theatre is not about the reaction of one sensibility to events external to itself, as poetry tends to
> be; or the private consumption of fantasy or a mediated slice of social reality, as most novels
> tend to be. It is a public event, and it is about matters of public concern. […] The theatre is by its
> nature a political forum, or a politicising medium, rather than a place to experience a rarefied
> artistic sensibility in an aesthetic void. (McGrath 1981:83)[8]

At about the same time, the community arts advisory panel of the Greater London Arts Association described community art as an approach that:

> Involves people on a collective basis, encourages the use of a collective statement but does not
> neglect individual development or the need for individual expression. (Kelly 1984:2)

The work they described included a very wide range of artistic action that was mostly ignored by established arts institutions and by the funding system: outdoor festivals, creative play, inflatables, murals, community printing, radical writing and new media work. It also had room for traditional music and dance, popular forms such as rock music which, with the emergent punk movement and its DIY ethos, was also developing a political consciousness, and the artistic expressions of people who had come to Britain from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent.

Now that the radical performances and festivals like Craigmillar and Easterhouse have gone, it is the murals painted in the poorer districts of London and other cities that are the most visible traces of this artistic vision. The work of Brian Barnes, Ray Walker and other artists are evocative survivors of community art at this time.[9] The *Floyd Road Mural* in Charlton, SE London is an emblematic example, painted in 1976 by Carol Kenna and Steve Lobb of Greenwich Mural Workshop, with the local resident's association.[10] The

mural, still in good condition after 35 years, shows local people, black and white, resisting the bulldozers of commercial developers. Other images on London's walls show people united against fascism in the 1930s (*The Battle of Cable Street*) or resisting the nuclear missiles that haunted many people's imaginations at the time (*Wind of Peace*, *Riders of the Apocalypse*). The contrast with Banksy's popular and witty, but cynical and essentially individual street paintings is striking: it is also notable that his work has been commercialised by the publishing and art markets.[11]

'An historical occayshan'

The development of community art in 1970s Britain occurred at least partly as the art world's response to the wider social changes of the time, just as its transformation in the 1990s was linked to the social and cultural changes going on then. The connection with the radical end of popular music, particularly punk, pub rock and reggae, has already been noted, and the political struggles evident within the arts were versions of much greater trials. London's murals often depicted solidarity and resistance but in idealised forms; unhappily, more vicious conflicts were on the horizon by the end of the decade.

In April 1981, a little less than two years after the election of Margaret Thatcher, the inner London district of Brixton experienced a violent confrontation between local people and the police. Street battles between mostly black youths and mostly white police officers raged for about 48 hours, resulting in hundreds of injuries and the burning of 28 buildings, with a further 117 damaged and looted. Petrol bombs were thrown for the first time in mainland Britain.[12] The riot was triggered by an incident in which a young black man had been stabbed, but it was fanned by a major police operation in the area over the previous days, codenamed 'Swamp 81', in which the police's power to stop and search people merely on suspicion (or 'sus' in the street talk of the day) was a source of great resentment, partly because it was used so disproportionately against young black men.[13]

The wider background included rapidly rising unemployment as Britain sank into recession and decades of mistrust between London's black population and its police force.[14] For the poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose record, *Makin' History*, appeared in 1983, this was 'Di Great Insohreckshan', when it was:

> doun inna di ghetto af Brixtan
> dat di babylan dem cauz such a frickshan
> dat it bring about a great insohreckshan
> an it spread all owevah di naeshan
> it woz truly an historical occayshan' (Kwesi Johnson 2006:60) [15]

The Prime Minister did not see it as an historical occasion: for Margaret Thatcher, the events were simply 'criminal'.[16] Nonetheless, she was forced to institute a public inquiry under Lord Scarman, which reported in November 1981 that 'complex political, social and economic factors' created a 'disposition towards violent protest'.[17] Before then, however, urban unrest had spread to other parts of the UK. In July riots took place in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and elsewhere. Disturbances in the Toxteth district of

Liverpool were particularly ferocious, lasting nine days and leading to hundreds of injuries and arrests as well as massive destruction of property.

That month, the No. 1 single in the UK pop charts was 'Ghost Town' by The Specials, which had evidently captured the mood of many young people:

> This town, is coming like a ghost town
> Why must the youth fight against themselves?
> Government leaving the youth on the shelf
> This place, is coming like a ghost town
> No job to be found in this country
> Can't go on no more
> The people getting angry[18]

The Specials were the first major British band with black and white members, drawn from the working class communities of Coventry. Their anti-racist unity was non-negotiable, embedded in the very name of their (independent) record label: 2 Tone. The Specials, along with other ska and reggae bands of the time, had emerged from a politicised punk and post-punk music culture that expressed social(ist) solidarity in Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League (Hewison 1995:200ff).[19] This movement continued through the early 1980s, reaching a high point of public consciousness with Live Aid in 1985 and ending with the Red Wedge music collective that supported the Labour Party's failed 1987 election campaign. After Margaret Thatcher's third successive election victory, musicians seemed to lose their appetite for politics. In 1988, Billy Bragg sang, in 'Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards':

> Mixing pop and politics he asks me what the use is
> I offer him embarrassment and my usual excuses[20]

Today, an online search for 'red wedge' offers mostly shoes: a neat symbol of the shift from politics to consumerism.

It has been argued that 'Thatcher paid little heed to Scarman after 1981' (Neal 2003:57) but some things did change. Most symbolically, the 'Sus' law, that gave the police powers to stop and search people in the street, was repealed in August 1981.[21] Reforms were also made to police procedures and recruitment. Such measures did not, of course, solve the problems of policing diverse and multicultural communities, as subsequent events have shown: for example, in 1999, the Macpherson Inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and its investigation described the Metropolitan Police as 'institutionally racist'.[22]

The Thatcher government also responded to the 1981 riots by investing in urban regeneration, including some cultural initiatives such as the Garden Festivals advocated by the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, and the creation of an outpost of the Tate Gallery in the decaying Liverpool docks (Hewison 1995:280ff). For Britain at least, these were the first steps towards an enthusiasm for culture-led regeneration, inspired by Glasgow's year as European Capital of Culture in 1989 and enabled by the huge flow of funds for capital investment in cultural infrastructure that followed the creation of the National Lottery in 1994. The ground was being laid for the artistic boom

of the late 1990s, even if it was not quite the 'new Renaissance' one minister would declare on the eve of the financial crisis.[23]

Culture-led urban regeneration projects could not be expected to end civil unrest in Britain; nor did it. With the Miners' Strike in 1984 and new urban riots in 1985, resistance to government policy and state power continued for some years.[24] Indeed, the 1990 Poll Tax Riots are acknowledged to have contributed to ending Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership.[25] There have been disturbances in the 20 years since then, often, as in Brixton, associated with the policing in inner cities. There is a conscious history of popular rebellion inseparable from British democracy.[26] Schoolchildren are taught – or were in the 1960s – about Magna Carta, Simon de Montfort and the first parliament, the Peasants' Revolt, the Pilgrimage of Grace, the Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, the Peterloo Massacre, the Levellers, the Luddites, the Suffragettes and the Jarrow Marchers. In 1988 the Thatcher government's local taxation reform was given the benign title 'Community Charge': its opponents renamed it the Poll Tax, making an explicit connection across 600 years with the unjust taxation that sparked the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.[27]

Ideas of community

In 1981, the idea of community, so central to the collectivist ideas of community artists, still had popular resonance. As late as 1983, Raymond Williams could write:

> Unlike all other terms of social organisation (*state, nation, society*, etc.) [community] never seems to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (Williams 1983:76)

Admittedly, Williams was a man of an earlier age, born in 1921 and formed in pre-war working-class Wales and post-war welfare state intellectual circles. By the time of his death in 1988, politically at least, the idea of community was becoming rapidly discredited by an ascendant neoliberal ideology. The word was treated with suspicion by academics and radicals alike; it seemed increasingly tainted, particularly as Government co-opted its positive associations to rebrand policies such as the 'community charge', 'community policing' and 'care in the community'. George Orwell had warned of 'Newspeak' in *1984*: it had reached Britain in good time.

By the late 1980s, community art was associated, not always unfairly, with simplistic certainties articulated in work of little artistic ambition. It seemed like Billy Bragg's singing: heartfelt, but not Schubert. And mixing pop and politics – what *was* the use? Community art looked tired and old fashioned in the early days of computers, the Internet and the 'creative industries'. Its slogans seemed disconnected from its actual practice. It could be criticised for infighting, self-indulgence and obscurantism; it frequently was for its quality and aesthetics (Witts 1998:481). Community art had even come to seem naïve to some of its practitioners after a decade of Thatcherism, privatised public services and deregulated finance, as it had always been to its opponents in the arts and politics.

By renaming their practice 'participatory arts', artists working in social contexts seemed to free themselves from all this unhappy lumber in a single bound. The new term was neutral and descriptive, a simple statement of what the work did. Where community

art saw itself as a form in its own right, the addition of a final 's' enabled the participatory arts to become a method applied to all other forms.[28] So art forms and styles previously criticised as 'bourgeois' could be recast as ideologically neutral, while their advocates adapted the once radical methods of community artists to the cause of advancing civilisation. The techniques of cultural democracy were conscripted to the cause of the democratisation of culture. Because it coincided with deep changes in social policy driven by the neoliberal ideology that came to dominate politics and public life during the 1980s, the change both reflected and enabled a shift in practice.

The difference can also be seen in some aspects of the riots that shattered many urban districts of England in August 2011; (interestingly, neither Wales nor Scotland, where Thatcherism had much less appeal than in England, experienced this unrest). The similarities with the events of 1981 are obvious. The differences are also illuminating and mirror some of the changes in British society evident in its community art and wider culture.

'You should get some of your own'

The London riots of August 2011, in the midst of economic depression and a year into the first Conservative-led government since 1997, were the most violent and widespread since those of 1981. On 9 August, Claire Burlington, a resident of Woolwich (South East London), reported what she saw on her blog:

> The main shopping street, Powis Street, was like a war zone. A war where glass, rubbish, fire extinguishers, rubble and mannequin body parts were the major weapons. I couldn't see all the shops as parts of the street were totally blocked off, but this incomplete list will give an idea as to what it was like: Argos – looted; M and S – windows smashed and looted; all the mobile phone shops looted and smashed; all the pawnbrokers in the side streets – CashConverters etc and smaller independent jewellers-cum-pawnbrokers – smashed windows, forced security grilles and looted; New Look – windows smashed and looted (I thought it was *really* bizarre that all their window mannequins had gone), Burton – windows smashed and looted; Bon Marche – smashed and looted, video game shop - smashed and looted; a now-unidentifiable shop (possibly a mobile phone shop) – burnt to a shell with walls collapsing into the street and firefighters still putting out the flames; Natwest bank – smashed windows and looted.[29]

Three large buildings, including a new Wilkinson's supermarket, had been torched and a number of other fires had been started.

There were many similarities between 1981 and 2011. In both cases, riots occurred as a fairly new and not very popular right wing government responded to economic recession by implementing large scale public spending cuts.[30] Again, a police assault on a black man (the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan on 4 August 2011) was the initial spark, seeming to confirm perceptions of police racism and injustice among those involved.[31] There was, according to research by the London School of Economics and *The Guardian* newspaper, a significant sense of political anger felt by many of those involved in 2011:

> 'I still to this day don't class it as a riot,' said one young man in Tottenham. 'I think it was a protest.' He was far from alone. A consistent theme emerging from the experiences of the rioters

across England was that they harboured a range of grievances and it was their anger and frustration that was being expressed out on the streets in early August.[32]

However, in the dominant media narratives about the riots, this aspect was overshadowed by a discourse that, in theory and rhetoric, is very similar to that of 1981.[33] David Cameron, like Margaret Thatcher, saw only 'pure criminality', going on to argue that:

'This was about behaviour… people showing indifference to right and wrong… people with a twisted moral code… people with a complete absence of self-restraint.[34]

The riots did produce large scale criminality, but that is not so unusual in Britain today. The MPs who abused their generous expenses scheme might equally be described as criminals with 'a twisted moral code'; several went to prison in 2011. The bankers who stole from their clients, fixed interest rates and fuelled the economic crisis also showed 'a complete absence of self-restraint', though few have yet been imprisoned.

But focusing only on individual criminality, rather than the systems that allow people to behave criminally – or even encourage them to think that doing so is 'normal' – is an inadequate response to a social, economic and political crisis that is systemic. It also does little to prevent a recurrence of criminal behaviour – and one thing we can say about both riots and fraud is that they recur. So, without lessening individual responsibility for individual acts, we should look at the conditions that made their behaviour not just possible, but acceptable, to people with no previous criminal record. One way into thinking about those conditions is to ask how 2011 was different from 1981.

The obvious novelty, widely analysed by the media, is the belief that the 2011 riots were predominantly about personal greed, as young people smashed their way into high street stores to steal mobile phones, computers, trainers, clothes and other consumer goods. One young person interviewed for the LSE/*Guardian* study of the riots said:

'The rioting, I was angry. The looting, I was excited. Because, just money. I don't know, just money-motivated. Everything that we done just money-motivated.'[35]

Because this image was real, it was easily burnished by media corporations with their own commercial and political interests. Photographs of people looting or even posing with stolen goods were widely published and fuelled public support for unusually tough sentencing by the courts.[36] The initial protest over the death of Mark Duggan was quickly overshadowed and the disorder's political dimensions obscured.[37] Instead, the media – itself expanded beyond imagination since 1981, when there were just three TV channels and newspapers were literally and not just metaphorically monochrome – focused on personal stories of victims and perpetrators. A revival of the established moral panic about youth gangs (which can be traced back to the battles between Mods and Rockers in the 1960s, if not earlier) was the media's only suggestion that there was any collective or organised aspect to the riots.[38] Otherwise, it was the increasingly familiar story of selfish individualism, personal greed and moral vacuity, versions of which have already been used to explain the banking crisis, the parliamentary expenses scandal and now phone-hacking, media intrusion and bribery.[39]

That story is neatly represented by the song that was at the top of the UK pop charts in August 2011. It was 'Swagger Jagger', the first record by Cher Lloyd, who finished fourth in the 2010 series of the popular TV programme, *The X Factor*. Its chorus runs:

Swagger jagger, swagger jagger
You should get some of your own
Count that money, get your game on
Get your game on, get ya, get ya, game on[40]

This is a long way from the socio-political statement of 'Ghost Town', though the imperative to 'get some of your own and count that money' is just what the looters were doing, perhaps feeling that they were only following the example of the politicians, bankers and celebrities of Britain's sorry elite. It seemed that many people's principal objection to consumer capitalism was that they didn't get enough of it. One casualty of the Woolwich rioting was rich in symbolism. A mural by Carol Kenna and Steve Lobb was destroyed when Wilkinson's store burnt. It had, in Steve's words, 'made the case for the communities of the town to live happily together'.[41]

There was no sustained critique of power in 2011, as there had been 30 years before, only rage, frustration and a profound sense of injustice. And so there has been no public inquiry into the causes and consequences of the riots: just severe custodial sentences. In the past, political parties and trades unions, community development and education activists – including artists – could give collective form to such feelings. In an era of depoliticised individualism, who was there to organise, analyse or explain? The absence of an articulate political dimension leaves the individual unquestioned as the central actor in a market economy. The collective 'wi' that Linton Kwesi Johnson places at the heart of the 'histarical' confrontation with 'babylan' is absent today.[42] In a race for private satisfaction, it's everyone for himself or herself – and the devil take the hindmost.

From radical to remedial: Participatory arts and Thatcherism

The key difference of participatory arts, in keeping with trends in British economic and social policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s, was its attention to individuals rather than communities and its depoliticised response to their situation (Matarasso 2007). Projects focused less on community as expressed in place and more on groups of people seen – often by public agencies who provided the funding – as having common problems such as poor health. Those problems themselves were often treated apolitically, for instance as part of a discourse about well-being rather than the reality and causes of health inequality. People enjoyed and benefited from taking part these arts projects but change, such as it was, was mainly personal. Art forms and activities that offered opportunities for celebration, such as parades, carnivals and outdoor events, took precedence over those that demanded more intellectual, aesthetic or political engagement from participants, audiences or the artists themselves.

Community art's critical relationship to art and society was flawed in many ways but it has been increasingly hard, since the mid-1990s, to see a critical dimension in participatory arts at all. It is also worth noting that the term 'participatory arts' has not gained

currency outside the arts world itself. It is used largely by professionals, often loosely and sometimes almost as a euphemism: some admit freely that the people they work with do not understand it, preferring instead the more familiar concept of community art, with or without a final 's'.[43] Nearly 30 years ago, Owen Kelly castigated the community arts movement for its failure to capitalise on its early promise or its beliefs, arguing that:

> 'In refusing to analyse our work, and place that analysis into a political context, the community arts movement has placed itself in a position of absurd, and unnecessary, weakness.' (Kelly 1984:3)

It would be wrong to describe participatory arts as being in a position of weakness, given how its methods and at least some of its ideas have become mainstream practice across the arts in the past 40 years. There is much better and easier access to the arts in Britain today than there was in 1970 and the character of the arts offered has also changed greatly. (How far that will survive the massive reductions in arts spending of national and local government now being implemented in the cause of austerity remains to be seen.) The community arts movement and its successors have played an important part in achieving that change, helped enormously by greater prosperity, better education, the growth of culture in leisure and other factors.

However, that achievement has come, as Kelly argued it had already in 1984, at the cost of compromise with state power and ideology. In the case of community art, it is the focus on individuals and on non-political analyses that has been the most important change, reflecting two of Mrs Thatcher's best known political dictums, both dating from the high point of her political authority, after she had won a third election. In an interview for *Woman's Own* in September 1987, Thatcher summarised her belief in the individual:

> We have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to under-stand "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" [...] and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.[44]

Paraphrased as 'there's no such thing as society' this American-sounding statement of individual responsibility became a touchstone of Thatcherism.[45]: Six months later, in the House of Commons, Margaret Thatcher neatly encapsulated not just a central idea of her economic policy, but, in a different way, her ideas about society too, when she said:

> 'There is no way in which one can buck the market'.[46]

In presenting markets as neutral, even natural phenomena like the sea, the ideologues behind the Washington Consensus aimed to make the decisions of governments and cor-porations appear as inevitable as the tide.[47] If British miners and steelworkers could not produce as cheaply as those of Poland or Korea, that was simply how things were. The resulting unemployment was just bad luck or, for the harder ideologues, the result of un-competitive practices forced on decent managers by greedy trades unionists. And since there was no society or community – except when the word might smooth the way for taxation or policing – there was no need or scope for collective action in response. The

problem was individualised, so that each unemployed person had to accept personal responsibility for their situation. State financial support was gradually reduced to today's subsistence levels and government help was limited to retraining people to take jobs in the new service businesses emerging after de-industrialisation.

But, as the historian Tony Judt argues:

'The victory of conservatism and the profound transformation brought about [was] far from inevitable: it took an intellectual revolution. (Judt 2010:96)

It also took a cultural revolution, which many were happy enough to contribute to, through ignorance or inattention, self interest or sympathy. The cultural sector as a whole did very well in this brave new world of liberalism, enterprise and consumption. Rapidly expanding computer technology spawned new art production methods and distribution platforms and initially made a great deal of money, though those same technologies are now destroying the economic models they once fed on.[48] The term 'creative industries' was coined to describe the financially productive part of the cultural sector, though without much awareness of its symbiotic relationship with the now dominant neo-liberal economic model. 'Creatives' came to see themselves as the elite of the knowledge economy, flattered by media-savvy advocates such as Richard Florida (Florida 2002). In the UK, cash from a National Lottery founded in 1994 began to enrich publicly-funded cultural institutions as never before. New theatres, concert halls and galleries sprang up like mushrooms after a good rain, sometimes even in poor areas in need of urban regeneration; programmes thrived, including those participatory arts activities designed to increase 'engagement' in the expanding cultural offer.

The cost of this prosperity received less and less attention in a booming arts world which, like the New Labour governments that backed it, felt things could always be done for the economy's losers. One analyst of the Labour government concluded early:

New Labour's discourse is littered with a sense of resignation and an indication that remedial, paternal interventionism is the most that social democrats can hope for in the current climate. (Wickham-Jones 2003:36).

Participatory arts were gradually drawn in to addressing – or even servicing – the complex symptoms of a more and more unequal society (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). Now funded more by public welfare agencies than through dedicated arts resources, artists working with people had less and less time to think beyond the immediate problems of their 'clients' or, in the new current climate, of how to finance their work. Community art, always more interested in causes, was not required.

'All in this together'

The most obvious similarity between 1981 and 2011 is that there was an economic crisis then and there is one now, though today's troubles seem to be much deeper. Curiously, the present Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, has appealed to the neglected idea of community, telling the British people in his first major speech after taking office in 2010 that 'We're all in this together'.[49] But if we are all in this together, the important

question is what 'this' is – a competition or a community? Is it about individual pursuit of personal enrichment or shared enterprise for the common good?

Community, in theory and in practice, has real problems but, since it is a result of human action, it would be naïve to expect otherwise. Injustice and inequality, the abuse of power and the oppression of minorities, conformism and repression – these and all other human failings exist in communities large and small, of every type and culture. They must be resisted in community as much as anywhere, but they do not in themselves invalidate community as a goal or an idea, any more than they invalidate the human beings who enact them. Indeed, though modern sociologists like George Yúdice doubt the 'warm persuasiveness' that Williams saw in the idea(Bennett 2005:51-4), being part of a community remains a widely held aspiration: we are, after all, social animals. Studies of the motivations of volunteers consistently show the importance that people place on being part of a community and contributing to meeting its needs (Argyle 1996; Low 2007). In the arts, the idea of supporting community is a key factor in motivating the thousands of volunteer promoters who bring touring shows to British villages (Matarasso 2004). If Robert Putnam identifies both a decline of community in America and nostalgia for an idealised past, these things matter because recognition of community's value is the foundation of his analysis of social capital (Putnam 2000).

There is no going back to community art as it existed in the 1970s, nor should we wish to do so: as John Fox, co-founder of Welfare State, has written, 'Nostalgia dulls reality' (Fox 2002:4). The world is vastly different and many aspects of arts practice have matured and improved. But there are ideas from that time that merit revisiting, particularly the recognition of collective interests alongside individual ones and the readiness to question systems, whether in society or in art. We do not know what kind of world is emerging from the huge economic, political, social and cultural upheavals we are now living through but we can meet it in different ways. There are those who, wedded to the hegemony of the past 30 years, believe that it will be restored. Perhaps they will be vindicated, in the short term, but all systems fail and the most wasteful fail quickest.

If community art has a future, under whatever name, it will be because it has renewed itself, shedding ideas and practices shaped by a failed ideology and searching out new ways in which artistic engagement can help people meet the world as it is and perhaps make that meeting better for all those involved. That will require hard work, with little money. It will require constructive cooperation and openness to other ideas, experiences and values. It will require admitting our weaknesses and our failures, especially those we like best. It will require engaging with history and theory, debate and experiment, an di language that is inclusive and democratic. It will require listening to those who have gone before and have experience – and to those who haven't, because they have new ideas about a world unlike the one that has been. It will, in short, require a lot of us.

But it might produce a community art practice that is rooted in humanist and democratic ideals; that questions assumptions, including its own; that is ethically engaged and politically aware; that sees money as a means, not an end; that gives people skills for life, not just for work; that is cooperative with others and competitive with itself; that is optimistic and joyful.

It might, in short, foster a culture to truly worth celebrating and an art to empower us.

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[1] Some of these ideas were first presented at the mini International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam (Netherlands) on 2 December 2011, and I am grateful to Eugene van Erven for the invitation to speak and then write on these topics. I am also indebted to Carol Crowe, Pauline Matarasso, Jo Wheeler and especially Helen Simons for commenting on earlier drafts of this essay. Finally, I am privileged to acknowledge my debt to Steve Lobb, Carol Kenna, Lulu Ditzel and Robb Finn with whom I worked in 1981-82 at Greenwich Mural Workshop: this essay is dedicated to them.

[2] Some other terms have also appeared, notably 'combined arts', 'community-based art' and 'socially-engaged practice', partly as a result of renewed interest in working outside galleries in the contemporary art world. It is questionable how far these practices, which have been described by Grant Kester and use different theories and methods, should be considered as community art or even participatory arts (Kester 2004).

[3] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2

[4] This is not a universal experience: for example, community art in Belgium and the Netherlands exhibits a lively, if sometimes rarefied, political and theoretical discourse (De Bruyne & Gielen 2011). But the very Englishness of the story of community art described in this essay tends to confirm its close connection to England's wider experience of politics, economics and social change.

5   The Workers' Educational Association, founded in 1903, describes its vision in terms that few community artists would disagree with: '*A better world - equal, democratic and just; through adult education the WEA challenges and inspires individuals, communities and society*'; see http://www.wea.org.uk/about/vision

6   In 2008, Albert Hunt was interviewed for the celebration of Bradford College's 175th anniversary: '*There is now a distorted perception of the 1960s. I passionately think the work we did, with people inside and outside College, was hugely important. It was not eccentricity but about engaging with people and valuing their experiences. Having people cooped up in classrooms all day, tested and harangued by authority, as they are today, is true eccentricity*'. http://www.175heroes.org.uk/albert_hunt.html

7   The UK and Commonwealth branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, an important early supporter of community arts, was also very engaged in community development work (Braden 1978:135).

8   It is not coincidental that this book contains a foreword by Raymond Williams, who the same year also introduced Albert Hunt's *The Language of Television: Uses and Abuses* (London 1981).

9   The London Mural Preservation Society website shows many of these works: http://londonmuralpreservationsociety.com/

10 http://londonmuralpreservationsociety.com/murals/floyd-road/

11 '*A collection of works by graffiti artist Banksy have sold for more than £400,000 at an auction in London*'; BBC News, 30 March 2012: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-17559526

12 http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton_riots.htm. The Metropolitan Police appointed its first black officer, Norwell Roberts, in 1967; the participation of white youths in the events is recorded by Darcus Howe: 'Darcus Howe remembers the "insohreckshan"', *New Statesman* 3 April 2006, http://www.newstatesman.com/200604030015

13 The name of this operation is notable, since the word 'swamp' had often been used by the opponents of immigration to describe its effect on British society; the word can be seen as a 'dog whistle' term, seemingly bland but an immediately recognizable signal to a specific group.

14 Op. cit. *New Statesman*, 3 April 2006.

15 Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Di Great Insohreckshan', from *Making History*, Island Records, 1983; the poem is also at The Poetry Archive http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=14960

16 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_Brixton_riot

17 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm

18 Jerry Dammers, 'Ghost Town', 2 Tone Records 1981, http://www.thespecials.com/music/view/36

19 Many other commercially successful singers expressed strong anti-government views in the late seventies and early eighties, including the Clash, the Jam, UB40, Billy Bragg, Tom Robinson and Elvis Costello.

20 Billy Bragg, 'Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards', from *Workers Playtime*, Go! Discs,1988. The album appeared with the label 'Capitalism is killing music', a satiric comment on the stickers then appearing on the records of the big music companies stating that 'Home taping is killing music'. product

21 The police have since regained these powers and many others in the name of public order and security, under both Conservative and Labour governments.

22 See http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/1999/feb/24/lawrence.ukcrime12; the Macpherson Report at http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm

23 James Purnell MP Secretary of State for Culture, 5 January 2008: '*When Brian [McMaster] talks about the potential for a new Renaissance, I don't think that's an overstatement. It's exactly true.*' http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jan/05/artnews.artsfunding

24 Some community arts organisations were involved on the fringes of these struggles: for instance, Corby Community Arts printshop produced posters and leaflets for the unsuccessful campaign to prevent closure

of the town's steel works in the early 1980s. Big Country's 1984 record, *Steeltown*, celebrates Corby's industrial history, one of the last such expressions in popular music.

[25] The Poll Tax was the name given by its opponents to the Community Charge, which in 1988 replaced the longstanding Rates system for funding local government. The Community Charge was no longer based on the value of a house, but on the number of people living in it, a move which it was argued shifted the burden of taxation from the wealthy to the poor. The Community Charge was short lived. It was replaced in 1992 by the current Council Tax, a value-based property tax like the old Rates, under the government of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative successor, John Major.

[26] Cf. David Horspool's history of *The English Rebel* (London 2009): http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/16/english-rebel-horspool-hattersley

[27] Douglas Dunn published *The Poll Tax, The Fiscal Fake* in 1990, an increasingly unusual example of political engagement by a British poet.

[28] Others see this question differently. Owen Kelly, for example, argued against the idea that community art was a form, saying instead that it was *how* work happened that characterized its innovation (1984:18). But, of course, form is created by how something is done. The Arts Council – admittedly not a trustworthy guide in this area – implicitly treated community art as a form by creating a Community Arts Panel alongside its existing art form panels; it never established a Participatory Art Panel. The use of the final 's' in both terms is also a matter of interpretation: in fact there was and is little consistency, a fact that tends to confirm the view of limited theoretical clarity among practitioners in either field.

[29] It is worth quoting this first hand account at length both for its vivid description of the effects of the riots on residents and because it is unmediated by the interests of politicians or media companies: http://claireburlington.co.uk/2011/08/09/report-from-the-invisible-quadrant/

[30] There had already been violent demonstrations against the Coalition's increase of student tuition fees from £3,000 to £9,000 per year and the scrapping (in England, but not in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) of the Education Maintenance Allowance, which supported students from low-income families. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-15646709

[31] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/nov/18/mark-duggan-ipcc-investigation-riots. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and *The Guardian* newspaper have conducted important research into the riots, including interviewing 270 people directly involved in the events. Of these people, 73% had been stopped and searched by police in the previous 12 months. *Reading the Riots, Investigating England's summer of disorder*, The Guardian/LSE, p.19; available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/14/reading-the-riots-investigating-england-s-summer-of-disorder-full-report

[32] *Reading the Riots,* p.24.

[33] The LSE/*Guardian* research highlights the widely different interpretations of the causes held by interviewees who were involved and the public at large, an aspect which must be troubling to anyone concerned about social cohesion: *Reading the Riots*, p.11.

[34] http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/

[35] *The Guardian*, Monday 5 December 2011; http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/05/summer-riots-consumerist-feast-looters

[36] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2023667/London-riots-Looter-posts-photo-booty-Facebook.html

[37] The LSE/*Guardian* research reports that some looters justified their actions with an anti-capitalist analysis, making reference to the morality of large corporations, but what weight should be placed on this is unclear: http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/05/morality-of-rioters-summer-riots

[38] According to the LSE/*Guardian* research, 75% of the general public believe that gangs were an important cause of the riots, while only 32% of the interviewees actually involved thought so; *Reading the Riots*, p.11.

[39]   The last have all emerged in the Leveson Inquiry into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press' set up in July 2011 by David Cameron; http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/

[40]   Curiously, this song was a collective effort, requiring nine contributors, mostly American hip-hop producers, a commercial manufacturing process strikingly different from the independent DIY ethos and authorship of 2 Tone and the punk movement; http://www.cherlloyd.com/gb/songs/entry/swagger_jagger/

[41]   Personal communication.

[42]   Johnson's 'wi' is truly a political collective, since he says in the poem that he was not there himself: 'it woz event af di year / an I wish I ad been dere' (Kwesi Johnson 2006:60).

[43]   A Google search for 'community art' produces about 181 million results; the same search for 'participatory art' gives just 7.6 million hits.

[44]   http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689

[45]   By 2005, when he was elected Conservative party leader, David Cameron seemed to distance himself from the divisive image of his predecessor by saying that 'There is such a thing as society, it's just not the same thing as the state': http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=315. This idea has since become the intellectual justification for the 'Big Society', a key social policy of the present government.

[46]   Margaret Thatcher speaking at Prime Minister's Questions on 10 March 1988, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107195. Her use of 'one' unconsciously expresses her belief in individualism; one person clearly cannot influence a market, but a group of people can as the bankers who fixed the Libor lending rate clearly demonstrated.

[47]   British schoolchildren once learned, alongside those myths of popular resistance, the limits of governmental power in the story of King Canute on the seashore, his feet lapped by the waves and submitting to God.

[48]   The Specials had to sell many more records to get a No. 1 hit in 1981 than Cher Lloyd in 2011.

[49]   David Cameron Speech, 7 June 2010, http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/06/David_Cameron_We_must_tackle_Britains_massive_deficit_and_growing_debt.aspx