

UNSEENSANDWELL

The Jubilee Arts Archive 1974-94

**Young People have the right to their own cultural expression,
a right to define what The Arts are.**

By Sylvia King and Wes Webb

Originally published in Report, the newspaper of West Midlands Arts, 1987.

The arts are, like all important human discovery, potentially dangerous, and without meaning if they aren't located in social and political dimensions. From our experience of involvement with arts activities with young people we'd like to expand on some of the issues that artists and youth workers need to address.

Some definitions first: who's young? The changing nature of our society over the last decade, and particularly the rise of unemployment and low-waged jobs, has caused us to re-define the concept of 'young person'. In the prosperous sixties and seventies, young usually meant 'teenager', and people in their twenties were usually financially independent adults. Now youth workers report that they are working with people in their thirties - the social and maturation processes into adulthood that society used to provide through jobs have gone. The disadvantaged group of 'young people' gets older every year. You are right to be wary of the term 'youth arts'; we need to be wary too of the term 'youth', in case we think there are 'people' and there are 'youth'.

Generally, young people are denied access to the arts. The major barrier for most is undoubtedly cash. Even with UB4O discounts (which you lose if you're on the Youth Training Scheme, Community Programme, Enterprise Allowance, etc), the cost of most performances or workshops will be something like your total daily allowance. If there are travelling costs as well, the difficult becomes impossible. If we believe that young people have a right to a part in the artistic life of our culture, we can't rely on commercial considerations to provide the opportunities.

But there are other important barriers too: physical access can be insurmountable if you live in the country, if you're disabled, if you don't have facilities for child care; equally important are the cultural barriers of class, race and gender - the world of the arts, like much else in our society, is still dominated by middle aged, middle class white men. It's not surprising that the vast majority young people see the world of mainstream arts having little relevance to their lives.

So what are those of us with some power to provide to do? The first thing is to grapple with the notions of 'power' and 'provision'. It can't be 'us' providing something for 'them' which is patronising and elitist. And we need to get rid of concepts about 'youth culture' which many of us took on board in the sixties; 'youth culture' was largely an invention of big business to sell to a new monied group of young people. If we have any power, then we've got to give it away. The term community arts is now problematic; can we talk about 'cultural democracy', the right of people to control their own cultural expression.

'Giving young people a voice', you say, is the right kind of phrase. Well, yes, provided your 'giving' accepts that you are graciously allowing someone else to have a bit of the power that you feel is yours, or that you have the right to control what that voice is going to say.

Cultural democracy is not about simply providing the money and physical access so that the arts are 'available' for all; it is centrally about democratic decision-making about the arts. It is not about youth workers providing opportunities, but empowering young people to provide their own opportunities. The first major implication is that there has to be democratic decision making about funding. It is largely the case that it is us, the 'adults', who decide on funding, write the applications; at best we act as intermediaries, don't let young people battle with all bureaucracies, and set out the hoops through which we make other people jump to get the money.

Rarely, either, do we allow young people to be part of, let alone control, the planning of the arts. While there are many drama workers, painters, video-makers who are skilled at giving over their medium to young people, they often arrive at a youth club or group of young people apparently out of the blue. We have to find ways for young participants in arts activities to have control, not only of the camera, but whether the camera arrives or not. Young people have the right to their own cultural expression, a right to define what 'the arts' are. This implies that the decision making has to be decentralised from bodies like the Arts Council, the Regional Arts Associations, and local authority youth officers. We can avoid parochialism if we give young people access to the networks of people and organisations that we use.

The arts are dangerous because one of their functions is to challenge the dominant culture. Ironically, many young people want to challenge the whole notion of 'youth culture' which is largely something that others have defined and put on young people. We do not have the right to tell young people what their culture is; an essential part of the democratic process in the arts is allowing people to re-define in their own terms their experience and culture – 'one person's knowledge is another person's slavery'. What we are saying about

democratic control doesn't only apply to young people making their own arts in the 'workshop' context of a youth club or a community arts setting. Again, this view of young people and the arts, as a slightly more sophisticated version of junior school children making their Easter cards in the classroom, can be patronising. The professional performance arts - music, dance, drama, fine arts, film - are perhaps even more outside the control and interest of young people. Not only are they barred from participation in performances by money; they are debarred from any say in the programming of such events - this is the world of adult experts.

The key concepts have to be 'access' and 'control' - and of course they're linked. It's not just access to our provision, but access to the means of control. That is not to imply that we simply have to hand 'the kids' the money and let them get on with it. Administrative and bureaucratic burdens can prevent the arts happening. We have the responsibility to recognise the power we have, and create partnerships with young people which enable them to take the knowledge and understanding that we have.

Young people have to be firmly included in the debate about 'young people and the arts'. We are not unaware of another irony there - the writers of this article can hardly claim to be 'young', and we guess neither will be most of our readers. But we are not arguing that the creation of cultural democracy is an easy process. However, there are some examples of ways of loosening our control.

One is to support and encourage groups of young people to set things up on their own, independent of the formal adult structures we work in. Groups such as Dead Honest Soul Searchers and the Lion Street Cultural Centre from Telford, Leamington Youth Arts Group and Brum Unlimited are examples where sympathetic advice and support from professionals have enabled arts work of the highest quality to take off, totally under the control of young people.

Art is a means not an end - and probably not a beginning. Which is to say that we have found it is often a mistake to begin with the art; you've got to begin with people. The most fruitful beginning is usually an existing group of young people, who may well become interested in working in the arts when it's seen as a way of saying something, as a tool for them to communicate with others - and when they are allowed control of that tool.

Most artists, and community arts organisations like Jubilee, don't have the regular contact with young people that many youth workers have. The youth workers are frequently the key to opening up opportunities for young people. Artists can't descend for a few hours or even a few months into young people's settings and produce anything worthwhile without a context in which to work.

Just as it's often wise not to start with art, it may in some circumstances be equally wise not to start with young people but to explore first the concepts and possibilities of the art with youth workers.

The base line has to be giving young people a choice. At a minimum, a series of 'taster' sessions in different art forms and different ways of working and perhaps visits to see other groups of young people, can provide some meaningful framework for choice. But it is only a minimal beginning; such taster sessions should also introduce notions of control and democracy, and open up the agendas about who is providing the sessions, and where the decision-making powers and the money are.

You could go through this article and cross out the word 'young'; it wouldn't alter the arguments we're putting forward. The concerns we suggest are at the centre of young people and the arts are the same concerns as 'community arts' and 'cultural democracy'. Which is where we came in; young people are people with needs and desires pretty much like the rest of the human race.

Sylvia King was then a worker with Jubilee Arts and Wes Webb was then the West Midlands Arts Education and Youth Officer.