

Letters

What follows is an open letter to Mike Russell MSP, Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution, concerning Creative Scotland (the proposed merger of the public bodies, the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen) that will shortly be sent to him. The letter was formed through open group discussion and concentrated exchanges between artists and members of Variant's affinity group. If you concur with the letter and wish to sign it, either in a personal or 'official' capacity, then please email Variant at: variantmag@btinternet.com

For ongoing analysis of the Creative Scotland debacle, please visit: creativescotland.blogspot.com

Open Letter to Mike Russell MSP, Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution

Dear Mike Russell,

Re. Promotional Culture versus Democratic Culture: The Case of Creative Scotland

After a long series of confusing twists and turns over cultural policy in Scotland it is clear that there is considerable controversy surrounding the proposed cultural body Creative Scotland. We believe Creative Scotland is already impoverishing culture by promoting and envisaging it in overwhelmingly industrial terms. This misguided approach ultimately fixates on anything or anyone that can be bought, sold or put into debt¹, and stands against the spirit and letter of the *UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* which came into force in March 2007.²

So far, the formation of Creative Scotland has been a largely opportunistic political and bureaucratic exercise in a country which suffers from significant democratic deficits despite our devolved parliament. It is therefore vital that this organisation, if it is to truly represent the interests of culture, builds moral and democratic authority. We take your recent ministerial appointment as evidence of the seriousness of this problem at the heart of Creative Scotland.

It is disappointing that your first public meeting, at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh (18th February 2009) about the new cultural agenda was with a selected gathering. Many people who wanted to attend, such as the President of University Colleges Union in Scotland, were excluded. It should go without saying that there are intertwined problems of protecting criticality and freedom in education as in culture. However, the 'Team Scotland' ethos already expressed for Creative Scotland³ demonstrates far narrower promotional and business-led objectives that neglect these and other treaty obligations in cultural policy.

Other countries which have also ratified the UNESCO

declaration, such as Sweden, recognise prosperity as an important consideration in cultural aims⁴. Yet, in contrast to successive pronouncements in our country, Sweden's policy explicitly states the need to counteract "the negative effects of commercialism". Evidently Scotland and Sweden's leaders in the cultural policy area are not singing from the same song sheet. However, given that both nations are signed up to the same universal rights and obligations, we, as citizens, are entitled to ask why there has been absolutely no sense in Scotland's political discourse of all the ways that culture and commerce are not compatible?

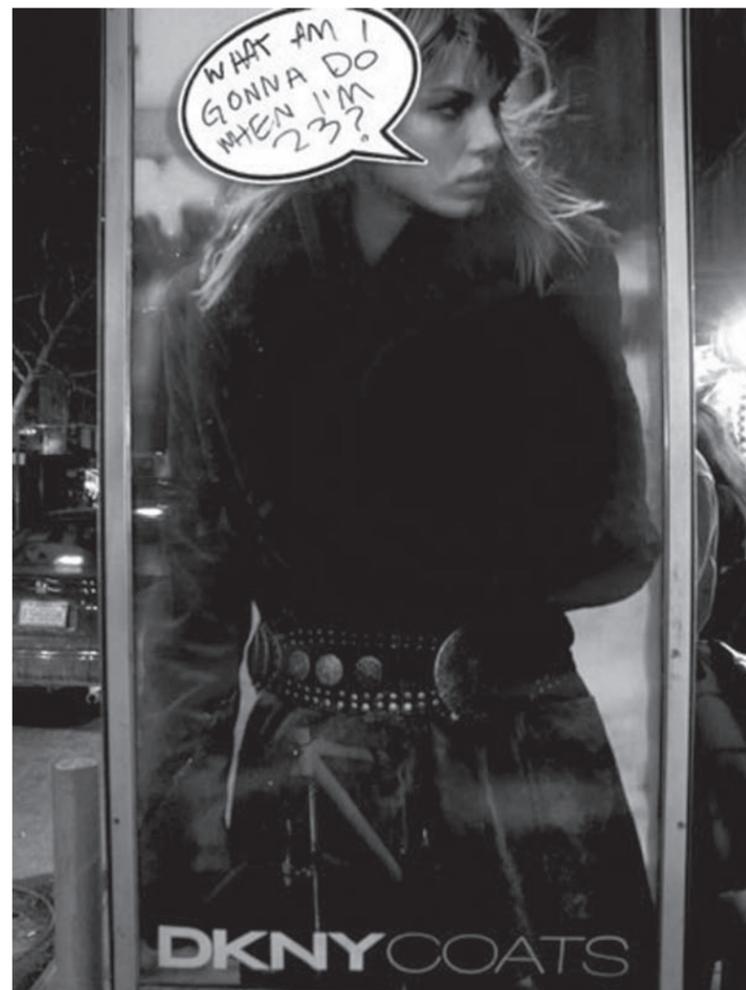
Is it that Scotland is conforming to an old slur against its people and is now ruled by the same short-sighted money-minded people, the best of whom have presided over financial disaster, or is it that we have not been represented in accountable and truly democratic terms? In either case we see the dominant ethos of Creative Scotland as deeply flawed. It is highly inappropriate that Creative Scotland is being forged by bankers and businessmen who are evidently insensitive to, or ignorant of, the broad implications of cultural policy. Their patronage or support for certain cultural activities is no qualification and does not enable them to address culture as whole. We therefore urge the resignation of Ewan Brown, Peter Cabrelli and Chris Masters from the board of Creative Scotland on the grounds of their inability to fully discuss this key issue of democratic society with politicians, civil servants and wider communities.

In accordance with our international obligations under the UNESCO convention from March 2007, it is also essential the following points are recognised in, and made central to, Creative Scotland's 'core script':

- Culture must be protected from commerce, particularly from the economic processes of globalisation.
- The very idea of 'Team Scotland' is a symptom of these competitive processes and should be removed. It is not a means to defend diversity of expression, nor does it promote international co-operation. These two obligations should be clearly addressed.
- The poverty, and consequent lack of autonomy, of artists and cultural workers must be acknowledged as a key issue that should be addressed by any cultural organisation seeking to articulate the public interest and the common good.

Notes

1. "The Government wants Scotland to be recognised as one of the world's most creative nations - one that attracts, develops and retains talent, where the arts and the creative industries are supported and celebrated and *their economic contribution fully captured*." [our emphasis] Published - 5 February 2009, Support For Creative Industries: Roles And Responsibilities - Core Script
The previous minister Linda Fabiani stated: "If formed, Creative Scotland will add to the range of funding sources available to artists and creative practitioners. As well as grants, it will develop a wider portfolio of funding methods including loans and investments." This was reinforced further in a *Sunday Herald* article, where



it was reported, "A spokeswoman from the Creative Scotland transition team stated: 'Creative Scotland will be looking at a range of alternative investment models, with the aim of finding and increasing sources of funding.' Tax incentives, venture capital, loans and corporate investment are all potential models previously mentioned by the transition team."

2. Culture is itself broadly defined in the convention as a complex phenomenon; "...consequently cultural goods and services convey identity, values and meaning and cannot be treated as mere commodities or consumer goods like any others..." p4 'UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions'.
3. 5 February 2009, Support For Creative Industries: Roles And Responsibilities - Core Script
4. "The objectives of national cultural policy include safeguarding freedom of expression and creating genuine opportunities for everyone to make use of that freedom; taking action to enable everyone to participate in cultural life, to experience culture and to engage in creative activities of their own; promoting cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thus counteracting the negative effects of commercialism; enabling culture to act as a dynamic, challenging and independent force in society; preserving and making use of our cultural heritage; promoting the thirst for learning, and promoting international cultural exchange and meetings between different cultures in the country." 'Sweden's objectives of national cultural policy' www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/3009/a/72002