

letters

MUTE

Mute's 100% cut by ACE

We are very sad to announce that, on Wednesday, *Mute Publishing* found itself in the category of 'losers' as these emerged from Arts Council England's (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation decisions. The magazine had presented to ACE a programme that combined a web and print magazine, books and events, community self-publishing, education, and digital strategy support and advocacy work, but faltered in the second stage of the assessment process, where its financially precarious position and 'weak' governance structure – as well as the perception other organisations were better placed to deliver to ACE's strategic goals – proved fatal, resulting in a 100% cut to core funding.

We regard the process of being placed in competition with other arts organisations as poisonous and distracting: while we will privately question the sizeable uplifts granted to large, established organisations (which, in the greater scheme of things, need further funding about as urgently as Paris Hilton needs another handbag), in the end we recognise it as a familiar part of the divide-and-rule principle that has long marked the operations of support agencies like ACE, where a chronic reliance on the parent body for the basic apparatus of organisational reproduction nurtures fear among the 'dependents' – slowly but surely stripping them of all sense they can do anything for themselves, let alone together... The spectacle of slavish gratitude for the spoils of public funds, in which even organisations cut or killed felt compelled to reiterate the basic tenets of ACE's funding paradigm (excellence, innovation, global leadership and creativity), were truly depressing in this regard – not one voice standing out for offering a different vision or lexicon of practice.

For us, the relevant story is elsewhere, as it has always been, and is effectively being obscured by a smoke-screen of rhetoric: it is said that 'adventurous and risk-taking programming is being rewarded', and a 'resilient' arts portfolio composed. Although we concertedly participated in the process, adapting our organisation's operational model to that demanded by ACE's 'Achieving Great Art for Everyone' agenda (within which we happily chose to deliver to the Excellence and Innovation Aims), the relevant story lies in the devastation being wrought upon the social in general. Here, in the name of prudent economic management, Government's disinvestment in art and education (two fields with which *Mute* interfaces most intimately) appears as a symptom of a larger programme of creative destruction, launched in the name of an aggressively kickstarted, entrepreneurial Britain that we all know is doomed to fail, but not without wrecking the lives of millions.

To be a 'winner' in the arts variant of this competition (and that means those who, as *The Guardian* dubbed it, 'won big'; not the hundreds kept on on a shoestring), several kinds of compliance are required. Firstly, a near religious belief in the power of art to 'deliver' personal transformation. Second, a normative and by now entirely standardised model of art-organisational development, where success is measured via the ability to diversify funding sources (via trading activities, rights management, sponsorship, philanthropy and a variety of non-public sources), have 'reach and impact' (loose catch-alls combining audiences, media reception, influence), and offer 'engagement' – all of which, it is reiterated, can only be achieved by bodies in possession of larger executive boards, which have represented on them 'experts' from the realms of Finance, Legal, Development and Artistic Vision, and who watch Income and Expenditure lines like hawks, assuring they mitigate risk, execute their mission and stay on a number of targets, as these encompass financial, audience and

strategic partnership projections. As *Mute* – and many others, such as the Scottish based *Variant* magazine (another 'loser' of late) – has attempted to discuss in a series of articles stretching back decades, the backdoor this structure has offered to an entirely corporatised version of art, wherein genuine diversity and antagonism is replaced by superficially different versions of doing the same thing (and many platforms for critical discussion gradually desist from analysing culture as a whole to discussing the ins, outs, rights and wrongs of particular art forms), is one of the great untold stories of mainstream contemporary culture.

As a critical platform seeking to understand culture in the round – i.e. in the many and various ways it exemplifies, illuminates and engages with larger processes (be they, to put it cheesily, part of the 'macro' dimension of global economics, or the 'micro' level of subjectivity) – we have attempted to shore up our core editorial work with a range of others that could help subsidise this. *OpenMute*, our consultancy and tools agency, through which we also facilitate the publishing activity of many other independent producers, has been the most visible result. But the free-content economy of the web, which felt like a natural home for our discussions, eventually became *Mute's* nemesis, as sales and subscriptions decreased at the same speed our web readership grew, and a growing international community of readers slowly and unwittingly dealt our 'business model' a death-blow.

We must now figure out what to do about this, as all of us who've worked on the magazine for so long have no intention of stopping our work because of a funding decision. Many different working models can and are already being imagined. Others in the many small to medium sized digitally-led organisations which have been cut will be trying to figure out their futures similarly, as will, it seems, many comparable small organisations whose governing remits aren't deemed essential in the current round. We are particularly perplexed by the blow dealt to diversity-led organisations, who engage with questions we imagine will increase rather than decrease in urgency in 'Austerity Britain'.

We will attempt to continue the discussion in a number of places. One, on our website, *Metamute.org*, which publishes weekly and where we will open space for responses to ACE's funding decisions, on *Mute Publishing* as well as other organisations, as well as the Googlegroup, *acedigitaluncut* and media arts discussion list *CRUMB*, where many are hoping to marshal a more specific discussion about the apparent disinvestment in the still badly understood area of digital practice. ACE's decisions reflect a presumption digital has been 'dealt with' by conceiving of it as integrated in routine organisational development processes, rather than demanding to be explored as a highly self-reflexive area of work with a long and rich history linking into video, performance, independent publishing, installation art, software development, literature and more. Given the consolidation, surveillance and privatisation happening in the digital realm as we speak, now seems exactly the wrong time to be making such a move. The fact that ACE (and partner organisations like the BBC) are seeking to align themselves with digital innovation and broadcasting at exactly the same time just demonstrates further ignorance and shortsightedness.

Yours sincerely, Pauline van Mourik Broekman,
Director and co-founder of *Mute*

metamute.org

Artlink

Taking another tack

I've worked with *Artlink* in the area of learning disability and the arts for the past 25 years, and been personally involved for way longer than that. In that time I've watched education turn somersaults, healthcare pass the buck and social services run round in circles, stood by as new ways of working and new terminologies became fashionable and just as suddenly fell outdated and smirked as new and similar approaches couched in different vocabulary took its place. Throughout that time I have had the honour to be around the most amazing activists, people who have fought for the rights of people with learning disabilities, people who have really made things happen.

I've seen it all before but perhaps not quite like this; services hacked to pieces, greater stress placed on families as their support systems are eroded, families with homes under threat as a result of changes to housing benefit, benefits axed with little understanding or care of impact. We appear to be going backwards to a time when you were 'bloody lucky' to get anything at all.

Rather than continue to be negative or merely plead exceptionalism, I want to take a slightly different tack. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to occupy myself with unimportant matters

and neglect priorities during crisis. I want to heighten expectations; raise the bar. In times like these it is so necessary we up the ante.

Artlink have recently published a magazine called *Utopia*. An upbeat look at what should be. In it we look at a series of ideas for objects and ways of working which would benefit people with profound learning disabilities. We promote alternative ways of understanding what is being said to us, taking time to look at the detail, to understand the individual, deciphering what is being said through the twitch of an arm, flicker of an eyelid, tilt of a head.

It is vital that we continue to find ways to understand the distinctive needs of people who are often excluded from society, as in doing so we respect their right to be included. It is only by focusing on the detail of the individual's needs, and working to remove the barriers they face, that people with profound and multiple learning disabilities will be given the respect they deserve.

Utopia proposes that we put our heads together, concentrate, cross disciplines, use our imagination, think creatively, to find ways to ensure that people with high support needs remain valued. Ultimately, respecting differences and valuing people for who they are.

For more information or if you would like to join in the discussion then please write to: alison@artlinkedinburgh.co.uk

Utopia is available at selected sites throughout Scotland.

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