

Speech
19 June 2008

DEMOS

Building
everyday
democracy

Social Change and Contemporary Art

This speech was delivered on 19 June 2008 at Camberwell School of Art. It marked the launch of Peckham TV at Camberwell's Peckham Space.

[Check against Delivery]

Good evening.

I'm from the thinktank, Demos

At the beginning of this year, Emily [*Druiff, Director of Peckham Space*] asked us to look at the work that is beginning today, and will be going on at Peckham Space over the next few months.

Specifically, she wanted us to look at the different projects from the perspective of policy-making, and also to look at how they contributed to the idea of democratic engagement.

To kick that off, tonight's discussion will cover the topic of artistic production and social change

Before handing over to Saul and Harold [*the artists of Peckham TV*], who will tell us about the real meat of tonight's event – the work that's going on, I'd like to start by talking about a few topics that will set a context for that discussion and help us think about the role of art in relation to society and politics more widely.

And I'd like to do this not by making a case or a specific argument, but by raising some questions that Peckham Space might help us answer.

Some art does make explicit statements that relate to politics, but it's not always so easy to think about art in political contexts.

Often, there is the well-founded fear that artistic independence and production can be stifled by political involvement.

And, from the other perspective, politicians can be sceptical of art as something that is 'soft' ... and too easily dismissed as elitist.

Well, some of the changes and developments I'll talk about make me think that that has to change.

The first relates to public engagement in politics as a whole and its apparent decline; the second relates to changes we are seeing in public participation in culture and the arts; and finally, borrowing from a very good book I recently reviewed, there is the role of the arts in 'provoking democracy' .

I'll return to each of these as I go along.

To give you a bit of context, it would help if I explained a little bit more about Demos, who we are, what we do and so on.

We are an educational charity, founded in 1993. There is a team of about 25 of us, and we have a wider network of associates.

In fact, one of the things we are doing at the moment is exploring the different means there are of discussing ideas relating to policy-making more widely, and in ways that challenge a political word that can often be very Westminster-focused.

One of these is the visual arts.

We've just started out doing this, so I'll be very interested to hear your thoughts.

For example, one of our interns had an idea for launching a pamphlet we had written about young people and public space... he has just completed his MA at the RCA.

He turned the pavements of Southwark into a playground on the day of the launch.

Generally, we work in a range of different areas to investigate how policy can be shaped in the future: some of us work on science issues, others electoral issues ... and others on things like public services.

I specialise in culture and the arts and my colleagues, Pete [*Bradwell*] and Joost [*Beunderman*] with whom I'm working on the Camberwell Project, specialise in Public Information and Public Space respectively.

The important thing to say is that we're independent: so we don't work at the government's behest and we're not affiliated to any particular party.

It also means that we have the flexibility to pursue ideas as and when we have them, and when we meet people and organisations doing interesting things.

Peckham Space is one of those.

And it chimed very much with the work that we have been doing over the past few years.

Across a range of areas, we've looked at the mechanisms by which the public voice is represented in policy-making, and the different means that there are of connecting government to people's opinion and daily lives.

These have included local assemblies, through to the importance of creative learning in providing young people with the skills and opportunity to relate their values to the wider world.

I noticed on the programme that we're billed as 'the thinktank for everyday democracy': Everyday Democracy grew out of a trend that, over the past decade, has worried policy-makers, political scientists and many others.

That's the fear that people seem to be less engaged in politics at the moment.

Across the developed world, voter turnouts are in decline; in the last General Election here, two out of every five people ... 40% ... however you want to cut it ... didn't vote to decide who would govern the country for the next five years.

By way of comparison, turnout in 1950 was about 83%.

At local government level, the level at which much government is felt, turnouts are even more worrying: they hover at around 40%.

Many have taken all this to mean an apathetic public.

However, is that the case? Do people really not care about politics?

Well, actually, there's plenty to suggest that they do.

Single issue politics are on the rise: nationwide, millions protested against the Iraq War, and campaign groups, from either fox-hunting enthusiasts or critics, to Fathers for Justice have become a regular part of the political environment.

Of course, there have always been similarly active groups, from the Luddites of the 19th Century to the Suffragettes.

However, the combination of 24 hour media and the ease with which we can use technology to group together around issues and communicate our ideas to far greater numbers than ever before, means that rise of single issue politics is likely to continue and have growing impact.

Furthermore, although it is intrinsically bound up with the internet, it doesn't even have to be online.

Thousands have bought wrist-bands to symbolise their allegiance to particular causes and, everyday, lots of people choose to spend that little bit extra of their money to buy fair-trade coffee, or other ethically-based consumer goods.

This all amounts to quite a lot.

What is becoming clear is that democracy is now better understood as the mass sum of millions of individual choices made each day than in the wranglings of our representatives in parliament.

It is not that we don't need representation ... far from it ... there will always be issues that will need managing, and things that are beyond the public control.

It's more that we now have plentiful choices that actually provide a much richer mosaic of our opinion ... than the boxes on the ballot-paper.

This is what we call 'Everyday Democracy'.

What is needed is to reconnect political representation to ways in which people are actually finding to express and articulate their opinion and draw recognition of them into our political structures.

One of these is culture.

Culture is one of the most difficult words to define but, as a suggestion, I mean culture as the everyday calculus of histories, behaviours, consumption and production that has made us - and makes us - who we are, identifying each one of us as being either different or similar to others.

I think that wider definition is important because it makes what we know about cultural provision and activity much more significant, and it helps make the often problematic connection between the ideas of art and politics.

Where 61.5% people voted in the 2005 election, DCMS figures show that 67% of people engage in arts-related activities each year, and 53% participate in the arts.

If we take artistic engagement and participation as an expression of value ... and in the light of some of the shifts in political behaviour I just mentioned ... the need to start thinking about how it relates to social change becomes very clear.

As more and more people make the choice to engage in cultural and artistic practice, we need to start thinking about what opportunities there are in seeing this as a form of democratic participation.

This is coupled with another trend: patterns of artistic consumption and activity are changing.

In artistic institutions like museums and galleries up and down the country, people now expect to have their say.

Go to the Tate, and you can pick up leaflets that map paths around the galleries not just according to curatorial interpretation, but also according to moods and feelings.

There is the 'First Date' tour and ... for those coming from a less upbeat perspective ... the 'I've just split up' tour as well.

Perhaps most interestingly of all, there is also a completely blank leaflet that enables visitors to create their own tour according to their mood, and leave it for others to follow.

Such a change in approach means lots of different things.

On the one hand, many curators, gallery educationalists and others have reinterpreted the role of the arts professional to move beyond the presentation of expertise and to include the stories that people engaging with culture bring... certainly in relation to a more connoisseurial past.

And this ties with changes in the relationship between the expert, the amateur and the public in many other walks of life, from journalism to science.

On the other hand, more participative engagement with the arts redoubles their importance in relation to the democratic meaning I mentioned a moment ago.

Engagement with artworks can provide a space for conversation between values.

So, as Peckham Space progresses, I'll be really interested to see not just how people react to the work, but also how they react to what other people have thought and said as well.

The other side of the equation is the role of artists in challenging convention.

Earlier this year, an American Academic called Caroline Levine published a book called *Provoking Democracy*.

In it, she argues that the arts allow challenges to the conditioned uniformity that is the fatal flaw of a democracy.

In other words, they challenge the status quo and they stimulate the debate on which a democracy depends.

Levine discusses a series of specific cases and cites a number of leading voices, among them, the Czech writer and politician Vaclav Havel, who said that:

'...an artist must challenge, must controvert the establishment order. To limit that creative spirit in the name of public sensibility is to deny society one of its most significant resources'

This harks back to the political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville, who predicted that mass culture - unchallenged and uniform in its appeal - can in fact erode the diversity and debate on which a healthy democracy depends.

The Arts provide scope for an avant-garde to ask how things might be different and how people might perceive things differently.

On top of this, participative artistic projects – like Peckham Space – are important not just in stimulating debate, but also in enabling and tracking it as well.

So, the next few months in Peckham should be very interesting indeed.

Before handing over to Saul and Harold, there is one final point I want to make.

For a wide number of reasons, from increased migration to global communication, widespread travel and mass media, we encounter many more cultures than ever before - that's culture in the wider sense I mentioned earlier.

At the same time, people are now able to use social networking websites to platform videos and other creative output more widely.

This ramps up the amount of cultural production to which we are exposed, and it has redefined the boundaries of what is and isn't available, communicable and accessible.

Well, with such a vast array of cultural stimulus, there are big questions to be asked about the means of accommodating and responding to changes.

How we read different cultural forms will become even more central to how we manage and navigate the world than it is today.

If we are to empower this kind of creative expression, and unlock the democratic potential of the arts and artistic engagement, we will need to build skills in cultural literacy.

On the one hand, this relates to the capacity to read meaning into culture in all its forms, from the shoes we wear to the art produced and consumed by a society

And, on the other, there is the building the more widespread realisation that creative and cultural production is a means of articulating opinion and expressing ideas.

These are big questions that will be important as we address the democratic challenges I mentioned at the beginning ... and they are also questions that projects like Peckham Space can help us answer.

Thank you.

Samuel Jones

June, 2008