

Leading arts institutions in an age of uncertainty

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*Keynote Address for the ELIA Leadership Symposium
Zurich, 3 December 2009*

Thank you for the invitation to join you at this symposium: it is a great privilege to be part of an international gathering like this. Thank you, too, for the opportunity to address you on an occasion where your theme raises such important - such challenging - questions. I am conscious, of course, that the perspective I bring is inevitably coloured by the fact that I live in the UK, rather than in mainland Europe, as many of you do. But the theme of this symposium touches us all, so I hope my remarks offer enough links to your particular situation to make this address a suitable curtain-raiser to the discussions in the days that follow, wherever you come from.

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Global financial collapse, political destabilization, the disappearance of major businesses – events like these have made the past year or so a particularly unsettling time for many individuals and organizations. It seems that things that we have long taken for granted can now disappear almost overnight. Last January, in a pre-inauguration speech, Barack Obama deplored what he called the ‘devastating loss of trust and confidence in our economy, our financial markets, and our government.’¹ As he implied, the covenant of trust – that bond between the people and those who lead them – had been fundamentally damaged. We are indeed living in uncertain times.²

And how is this affecting the arts institutions you lead? I am sure that most of you already have stories that you could tell. Arts institutions are not easy to lead at the best of times. In England repercussions are already being felt right across the sector. The loss, or threatened loss, of funding from both public and private sources is a matter of extreme concern for many institutional leaders and governing bodies. In some places departments are closing, specialist courses being withdrawn, members of staff losing their jobs.

But despite this – or perhaps because of it - the crisis has stimulated discussion about whether a recession can actually be good for the arts. Can the ‘worst of times’ also be ‘the best of times’, as the novelist Charles Dickens once suggested?³ [OHP 1]

It does, of course, depend on your perspective. London art dealers in the previously lucrative contemporary art world have been lamenting the fact that the ‘bottom has dropped out of the market’.⁴ However other commentators – among them, some well-established artists - have been observing that boom times are not necessarily good for art and art-making, and that less affluent, less predictable times may well produce more interesting work.

Already there are signs that artists’ traditional resourcefulness is coming to the fore: in the UK a group of young artists – turning their backs on the trendy art ‘hot spots’ in the capital - have established themselves in a run-down part of south London.⁵ [OHP 2]. In towns throughout the country artists and curators are moving into empty shops – ‘turning vacant spaces into creative places’, as it has been described.⁶ Art of all kinds is reaching local communities in new ways; dying town centres are being given fresh life.

Not everyone sees these trends as unambiguously positive. But what I believe it *does* show is the resilience of the arts, and their capacity to reach and support individuals and communities, in times good and bad. Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate, had something to say about this recently: [OHP 3]]

In times of uncertainty, culture is more important than ever in helping us to understand and identify our place in the world. Artists, writers, film-makers and poets are the people whose insights guide and nourish us, more than the words of economists or politicians.⁷

For those leading arts institutions, words like these should be a source of encouragement. So should the fact that despite all the doom-mongering our students, our staff, our clients remain loyal and committed. The apparent fragility of the business and commercial world, and the disaffection and distrust that continual accounts of tawdry dealing have engendered, have arguably played in our favour. If anything, they seem to have strengthened the commitment and resolve of those in the arts – strengthened their conviction that, in an uncertain world, the arts have a vital contribution to make.

In the professional world of the arts the atmosphere at the moment seems anything but downbeat. For brave, imaginative, risk-taking events – if the London experience is anything to go by – audiences continue to roll up. London West End theatres have been reporting record attendances.⁸ Of course there is no guarantee that this trend will continue – naturally the situation varies from theatre to theatre, from production to production – but recent messages from New York’s Broadway present a similar picture. It is true that ‘hard times squelched quite a few shows, especially musicals’, as one New York-based commentator

colourfully put it, but theatres there are finding that 'strong plays' are drawing good audiences. This headline [OHP 4]) captured it neatly, I think:

The neon lights of Broadway still shine but in a rather different way.⁹

Certainly the view seems to be gaining ground that some change may not necessarily be bad for the arts. The British artist, Grayson Perry [OHP 5]) – an artist you may know for his ceramics or for his cross-dressing - had this to say:

To have a period of austerity and remind artists why they do it could be a good thing. Maybe artists will be reminded that integrity is about doing what you want rather than what makes money.¹⁰

There are signs, too, that audience expectations may be subtly altering. The pianist, Joanna MacGregor [OHP 6]) talked about this recently:

In hard times, people want to go to see things. You'd imagine that people feeling the pinch would not want to go out but the converse is true. People need to find some meaning in the chaos. Another mistake made in hard times is that you give people empty spectacles, but actually people want more than that.¹¹

I recalled Joanna's comments a few weeks ago – in a week when London seemed to have a new exhibition opening almost every day. It was noticeable that two of the works that attracted most attention were tough, challenging installations - [OHP 7]) Miroslaw Balka's *How it is*, at Tate Modern – a giant steel structure, a chilling 'box of darkness' - and [OHP 8]) *Chord* by Conrad Shawcross – a kaleidoscopic installation in a disused tram tunnel.

For me, one critic captured the mood particularly well. [OHP 9] . . . little, polite, pretty things will not suffice', he observed. 'People who go to exhibitions are no longer a group who are happy merely to look and passively absorb what they see'.¹² Art is now something that those attending expect to 'feel, see – and **be**.' In uncertain times, the arts can help us to 'look at work not just for its gloss and its shine, but for the questions it asks about who we are and the times we live in'.¹³ Here I am echoing a remark by the Artistic Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Ekow Eshun. As he was implying, in times like this, the arts can encourage us to re-examine our basic values.

This questioning of values is, of course, a trend evident within society more generally. I am sure that many of you are aware of the increasing prominence being given to the role of ethics – within the professions, within corporations.

The fear of being 'the next Enron' has spurred many organizations to think more deeply about their core values – to see whether their internal cultures, their priorities, the behaviours they encourage, are supporting their values, or inadvertently undermining them. I am sure there is a message here for leaders of arts institutions too. This is not something that affects only the commercial world: ethical values matter at least as much for us. They matter increasingly to our students, our staff, our clients. We are all faced with ethical dilemmas. We need strong sets of shared values to help to distinguish the important from the unimportant; good from bad, right from wrong.

In times of increasing financial pressure it can be difficult to ensure that our actions are consonant with our values. Faced with the requirement to succeed in ways that 'tick boxes', institutions may feel pressurized into adopting practices that call into question the depth of their ethical convictions - the real strength of their value systems. Activities like recruitment (both student and faculty recruitment) - like marketing, publicity, employment contracts, budget allocations – activities with resource implications – these can present particular pressure

points. There is a temptation slightly to misrepresent one's position, to cut corners, to try to 'do down' the competition. Is there a risk that because of political or financial pressures we are tending to underplay values in which we privately believe ? And it is not simply a question of actions: words matter, too. Shifts in language can change the way we think, the things we notice, the actions we take, and as a result can subtly distort the values we aim to espouse.¹⁴

Essentially what I am saying is that I believe that as leading higher education arts institutions we need to make our values explicit, not simply rely on their being implicit. And we need to ensure that our students and staff develop tools that will enable them to address the moral and ethical dilemmas that are part and parcel of being an artist today – and an effective advocate for the arts. The environments in which we all operate are increasingly complex and disparate: they have fewer traditional boundaries, artistic or social.¹⁵ Honing students' professional skills, but doing so in an intellectual – an ethical - vacuum seems to me an abnegation of responsibility.

I am convinced that it is particularly in uncertain times – times when the future seems especially unpredictable - that we need arts leaders who have robust value systems, leaders who are clear and persuasive in articulating the value – the relevance - of the arts for individuals and for society as a whole. To do this effectively, we *must* be active in shaping the public 'narrative'. If we are not careful, the prevailing orthodoxies – the standard rhetoric – can seduce us into accepting descriptions of the arts and of priorities for arts education to which we fundamentally do not subscribe.

I want to refer briefly to one report that I believe is strong in the vision it presents in this regard, the UNESCO Report on Education for the Twenty-first Century. In making its case for a rounded – and grounded – education irrespective of

specialism, this report adopts the model of ‘four pillars of education’ [OHP 10]). The fourth pillar - ‘Learning to be’ – the development of whole person – it regards as an essential progression from the other three. While acknowledging that there are tensions – it focuses on these seven in particular¹⁶ [OHP 11]) - the Report stresses its belief that education should enable everyone to develop a clear set of values [OHP 12])

All people should receive . . . an education that equips them to develop their own independent, critical way of thinking and judgement so that they can make up their own minds on the best courses of action in the different circumstances in their lives.¹⁷

It is true, of course, that questions of value and values – in the moral and ethical sense - have engaged the attention of philosophers for thousands of years – certainly at least since the time of the Greeks. It is also true that a great deal of ink has been spilt in arguing the respective merits of various ways of thinking about value. For artists, the emphasis which governments and funders have increasingly placed on extrinsic value – on instrumental value - has produced some rather sterile discussions, and created more than a little misunderstanding and mistrust.

However some of the more recent work in this area – the area of ‘cultural value’ – has been attempting to reframe the debate about value by looking at other ways of conceptualising the intrinsic versus extrinsic dichotomy.¹⁸ This reframing assumes that intrinsic and extrinsic values need not be in conflict – rather, that if appropriately handled they can serve as complementary ways of thinking about the same thing – the value of art. This work therefore assumes that there is not one unitary value – rather, that values are multiple in character; that values can, for example, be expressed in aesthetic, historical and spiritual terms; that values

are context-dependent; that they have a social dimension (seen from the perspective of the individual, as well as from the perspective of the community) and that they can in some cases also be monetized – that is, viewed in terms of hard cash benefit. Some of this recent work on value has also added to the intrinsic/extrinsic pairing a third category, that of institutional value – a category which connects with some of my earlier comments about ethical institutional behaviour.

I am referring to this because I think it can help us to make sense of that provocative phrase about value – ‘value is vulnerable’ – the epigram that provides the title for this symposium. As you may well know, it is actually a line from a poem. The author, Lucebert – a Dutchman – was a pioneering artist and poet who, till his death in 1994 aged 70, was a keen observer of the changing attitudes to the arts and culture during the twentieth century.

In the original Dutch this phrase about value is well-known - particularly to residents of Rotterdam [OHP 13]) where it is blazoned in neon lights across the top of an office building.¹⁹ For about three decades it has challenged residents of the city – just as it is challenging us now - to ponder its cryptic message. *Is all value vulnerable? What sort of value? And why?*

To understand what Lucebert was getting at, it helps, I think, to look at the phrase in the context of the poem as a whole. Even then it is not easy, because Lucebert wrote in a distinctly elliptical, enigmatic style – and the poem, which is entitled ‘The very old person sings’, is brief - a mere dozen lines..²⁰ It seems likely that the ‘very old person’ that Lucebert had in mind was a Greek philosopher, Parmenides – a philosopher on whose work both Plato and Socrates were to build. So he begins by reflecting Parmenides’ view of the world as one indivisible being, before then offering the observation that what is really

valuable is vulnerable – or, perhaps more accurately, ‘defenceless’ (‘wehrlos’ in German). Value cannot be ‘dealt’, he says: it cannot be held, it cannot be possessed. Value, he says, comes from ‘touching, and being touched’ – getting close to - being moved by the art object itself. This, he concludes, is what helps to make life rich – to make it feel that one is truly living.²¹

So what is the message for us right now? What exactly is it that Lucebert regards as vulnerable?

I must admit that my views on this have changed as I have lived with the poem in the past few weeks. Given the philosophical position from which he begins, what I now think that Lucebert was talking about is the *intrinsic* value – the value that comes from the thing in itself – the value that comes from the experience of touching and being touched by a work of art. It is what that London critic probably had in mind when he said that art is something that people want – need – to ‘feel, to see, to be’. By itself, in itself, such value is indeed ‘defenceless’.

But it is, I believe, defendABLE. And this brings us back full circle to the leadership role – the role that we, our colleagues, and our students need to play in the advocacy and defence of culture and cultural values. You will notice that I am now using the term ‘values’ – using it in the plural, not the singular: although I do not have time to raise this now, there is an important debate to be had here. We need, I believe, to play a formative role in helping to establish the terms, the principles, the ways in which - in a rapidly changing, ever shrinking world - these values can be acknowledged, articulated, celebrated - in some cases, preserved, in other cases, created anew. To do this compellingly, confidently, persuasively, we need a shared language, a set of shared understandings, a shared set of principles. And we need models that recognize the times in which we are living – models that are resilient enough to embrace the changing social contexts – the

social plurality - in which we find ourselves. In terms of issues of culture, this provides a particular challenge: views on cultural priorities vary widely across Europe, as recent reports have shown,²² let alone more globally. But the debate about culture and cultural value is too important to be left primarily to funders and politicians – or to sociologists and market researchers. It is a debate in which **we** need to be strong and influential. In uncertain times, about this we must be certain.

To date our arguments have tended to be based on rhetoric that does not fully acknowledge the challenges or the changing perspectives of the times in which we live. It is high time that we engaged more decisively with these issues, and with their implications for our work and for the arts more generally. This, I believe, is an increasingly urgent task. The defence of that value to which Lucebert was referring must surely be one of the key responsibilities for those who lead some of the world's most distinguished arts institutions. It is one to which ELIA is well-positioned to contribute. And the current uncertain times should, if anything, provide a spur to take the debates further: with so much conventional wisdom under scrutiny, there could hardly be a better time to question elements of the *status quo*. So, in leaving you with this challenge, may I express the hope that this symposium, with its direct focus on issues of value, will provide a decisive step in this direction, and wish you a fruitful, stimulating and enjoyable few days together here in Zurich.

¹ Speech delivered at the Center for the Arts, George Mason University, Virginia, 8 January 2009. See http://www.theassetmanager.com/docs/Text_Barack_Obamas_economic_speech.pdf and <http://spirit.gmu.edu/fall08/obama/>

² The reference to an 'age of uncertainty' in the title of this address echoes the title of the classic text by the distinguished Canadian-American economist, J K Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty* (1977).

³ This is an allusion to the opening paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Charles Dickens ('It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had

everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.’)

⁴ See Charlotte Higgins, ‘When the bottom fell out of the art market’, *Guardian*, 15 October 2009. According to Art Market Research, in the last few years, prices for contemporary art in London had risen by over 300%.

⁵ A disused car park in Peckham is now the location for some particularly interesting work. See Alice Pfeiffer, ‘Emerging Artists Find New ‘Blank Canvas’ in London’, *New York Times*, October 15, 2009.

⁶ See <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/investment-in-arts/action-recession/art-empty-spaces/>

⁷ Quoted in Imogen Carter, ‘Now look here: let’s set the agenda for 2009’, *The Observer*, 25 January 2009 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jan/25/artspolicy-akramkhan/print>).

⁸ Audiences in the year to 18 July were up 2.5% on 2007/08, with box office takings up 3.5%. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts_and_culture/8188146.stm

⁹ See http://www.economist.com/books/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=14743370 (‘. . . producers began to shift strategy, moving away from extravaganzas towards leaner musicals and straight plays for grown-ups. . . . One way or another, the policy seems to have paid off: October saw 29 productions in full swing, filled to 87% of capacity.’)

¹⁰ Quoted in Carter, ‘Now look here: let’s set the agenda for 2009’.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Benjamin Secher, ‘Feel it, see it, be it – how art climbed out of its box’, *Times*, 17 October 2009, R3.

¹³ Quoted in Carter, ‘Now look here: let’s set the agenda for 2009’.

¹⁴ Cf. Mark Moore’s observation (in *Creating Public Value*, 1995) that ‘As people begin to use a different language to describe what they do, they tend to change what they see and do.’

¹⁵ For further comment on ethics in higher education, see The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), *Ethics Matters. Managing Ethical Issues in Higher Education* (2005). Report available for download from <http://www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0509Ethics.pdf>

¹⁶ For detailed discussion of these tensions, see Preface to *Education: the Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century (1996), <http://www.unesco.org/delors/utopia.htm>

¹⁷ *Education: the Treasure Within*, p.94. See also <http://www.unesco.org/delors/ltobe.htm>

¹⁸ See for example ‘Reframing the Debate about the Value of the Arts’, report of project for The Wallace Foundation (2005) by K.F. McCarthy *et al* (see <http://tinyurl.com/yfwm43v>); Robert Hewison, ‘Not a Sideshow: Leadership and Cultural Value’ (2006), Demos (pamphlet available for download from <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Sideshow%20-%20web.pdf>); AHRC/DCMS/ESRC, ‘Not Only . . . But Also: Capturing the Value of Culture, Media and Sport’ (2009), (seminar report available for download from <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/events/esrcseminar/intrinsic.aspx>); H. Bakhshi, A. Freeman and G. Hitchen, ‘Measuring Intrinsic Value’ (2009), (paper available for download from <http://www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/page.php?id=34>).

¹⁹ It has also been adopted elsewhere, for example by Café Trefpunkt in Ghent.

²⁰ Text of Lucebert poem (from *Verzamelde gedichten*, 1974)

De zeer oude zingt

er is niet meer bij weinig
noch is er minder
nog is onzeker wat er was
wat wordt wordt willoos
eerst als het is is het ernst
het herinnert zich heilloos
en blijft ijlings

alles van waarde is weerloos
wordt van aanraakbaarheid rijk
en aan alles gelijk
als het hart van de tijd
als het hart van de tijd

The very old person sings

there is no more in little
nor is there less
still is uncertain of what was
what will be will be without will
only if it is, is it serious
it remembers in vain
it remains hastily

everything of value is defenceless
in touching and feeling will be rich
and equal to all things
like the heart of time
like the heart of time

²¹ I am indebted to Eleonor Tchernoff (Project Administrator, European Association of Conservatoires) for advice on the translation of the Lucebert poem. For its interpretation, I take responsibility. My comments are informed by an article by Peter Hofman, 'De filosofie cvan een weerloos citaat', *Trouw*, 31 January 2006, and by an unascrbed article on 'Interpretations of Parmenides', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmenides#Interpretations_of_Parmenides

²² See, for example, Report for the European Commission, *European Cultural Values*, Special Eurobarometer 278 (September 2007). http://ec.europa.eu/culture/pdf/doc958_en.pdf