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## Home Truths

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We love labels: *Nike, Versace, Prada, Tommy Hilfinger*, parent, teacher, teenage mother, young offender, substance abuser, disabled, ethnic minority, homeless, unemployed, and a more recent arrival, socially excluded. Most of us prefer to choose our own labels and the groups with which we identify, but we can be quick to apply labels to others. Labelling other people helps to depersonalise them, enabling us to forget that we are talking about individuals, and to distance ourselves from anyone whose characteristics, or circumstances, make us feel uneasy.

In 1997, the newly elected Labour government was applauded for being the first administration in years to acknowledge the existence of chronic poverty in the UK. The term 'poverty' first entered the vocabulary of British public life in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Charles Booth and Joseph Rowntree began to document the lives of 'the poor'.<sup>1</sup> In those days, and for decades thereafter, poverty was measured in absolute terms; it was the inability to buy basic food, clothing and shelter. The flexible 'poverty line', linked to a country's average standard of living, is a relatively new concept, as is the recognition by academics and policy makers that poverty is a condition with multiple causes, in which one set of circumstances leads to another.

Multiple deprivation is one of the defining characteristics of social exclusion and what differentiates it from discrimination on the grounds of a single factor, such as disability, gender, ethnic origin or age. In the language of the new government, social exclusion was a 'joined up problem' demanding a 'joined up response'. Within months of the election, a Social Exclusion Unit had been created. Located within the Cabinet Office, its job was to report directly to the Prime Minister on ways in which government departments and agencies could work together to reduce the incidence of social exclusion. Its initial areas of inquiry included rough sleeping, truancy and school exclusion, teenage pregnancy, opportunities for unemployed 16 to 18 year-olds and neighbourhood renewal.

Because of the confusion it has caused, 'social exclusion' will be remembered as one of the most problematic terms of contemporary public policy. Some people object to the implication that there is a majority in society that is deliberately excluding a minority. Others dislike its tone of permanence and hopelessness and instinctively adopt the more positive vocabulary of inclusion. Others argue that there is no point fiddling with the symptoms of social exclusion unless we also address its cause.

François Matarasso has been working with the Secretary of State for Culture's 'Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team' (QUEST) and with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and its non-departmental public bodies (which include the Arts Council of England, Resource, and the national museums and galleries) to try to establish a common understanding of social exclusion, social inclusion and the journey in between. Building on the experience of other European countries, especially France, Matarasso argues for an understanding of social exclusion that goes beyond the experience of poverty, poor housing and ill health.

'To the everyday experience of poverty,' he writes, 'are added social isolation and a de facto, if not de jure, disenfranchisement from participation in the political and economic life of the country'.<sup>2</sup> Social exclusion, in this analysis, is seen as a powerful, if unintentional, side-effect of the way majorities organise to meet their interests - a social process within a whole society rather than a way of categorising individuals and groups within that society.

If we accept this analysis, then every gallery, arts centre, school, and organisation that offers a public service needs to consider how it might be contributing to that social process.

### **Bringing Britain Together**

In 1998, the Cabinet Office published *Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*. This report argued that the linked problems cited by the Social Exclusion Unit - 'unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' - were most likely to occur in the country's poorest neighbourhoods. It was in these neighbourhoods, therefore, that action needed to be taken first.

*Bringing Britain Together* recommended the formation of eighteen Policy

Action Teams (PATs) to look at different areas of public policy and to recommend ways in which social exclusion might be tackled head-on. Crucially for the arts sector, the report recognised that the arts and sport might have a role to play. Although blindingly obvious to anyone already working in the arts and sport in poorer communities, this was apparently a revelation to some politicians and civil servants.

So it came to be that PAT 10 was convened by DCMS to identify good practice in the arts and sport in poor neighbourhoods and to suggest to the government how it might maximise the impact of its spending and policy in those areas. PAT 10 involved representatives from the Treasury, the Department for Education, and the Social Exclusion Unit, all working alongside national, regional and local funders, providers and practitioners in the arts and sport. The discussions were, for the most part, challenging and creative and when the PAT 10 Report was published with a long list of recommendations to, among others, the arts funding system, it whipped up a storm.<sup>3</sup>

Artists and arts organisations with long experience of working in community settings (with youth clubs, school and after school groups, day centres, hospitals, residential homes, probation projects, etc) were excited to find that the value of their work was at last being recognised. At the same time, they suspected that any new resources to 'combat social exclusion' or 'to promote social inclusion' (both objectives were on the table) would go to arts organisations with higher profiles and better connections with the arts funding system, but without the necessary experience to work in the country's poorest communities. More fundamental was the concern that artists and arts organisations would be expected to achieve miracles, reversing deep-rooted social and economic problems with the swish of a paintbrush.

These fears have not been realised. While the DCMS, Resource, and the Arts Council of England produced their initial responses to the PAT 10 report within weeks of its publication, they have taken their time to work out how they might contribute, in the longer term, to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society.

### **A learning process**

The present government puts great stress on evidence, and the arts funding system and arts organisations know that if they are going to persuade governments to invest more resources in the arts, they need to provide proof that the arts have made a difference. A search, commissioned by PAT 10, for 'robust research' into the role of the arts and sport in neighbourhood renewal, unearthed dozens of reports of activity, but few that could be described as robust. Too many evaluations over-emphasise the positive aspects of a project and disregard the negative. The reasons why are obvious: those who have worked hard on a project do not want to dwell on what went wrong and a positive evaluation is more useful than a negative one when it comes to raising money for the next project. However, in the long run, unbalanced evaluations are of no use to anyone.

One of the positive outcomes of the PAT 10 process, and the widespread discussion that followed, has been a renewed commitment to learning about the impact of the arts (however defined) on people who are already experiencing social exclusion or who are at risk of exclusion. First was the publication by the DCMS of *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*.<sup>4</sup> Then came *Museums and Social Inclusion*, researched by Eilean Hooper Greenhill and her colleagues at Leicester University, and published by the Group for Large Local Authority Museums.<sup>5</sup> This came shortly after that the Scottish Arts Council had commissioned Glasgow University to produce a tool kit for evaluating arts projects in what it calls 'social inclusion' areas.

The research now being instigated or supported by, among others, the Arts Council of England, the Regional Arts Boards, Resource, and QUEST, is contributing both to our understanding of how the arts can help to slow down the process of social exclusion and to our knowledge of how to evaluate this kind of work. Provided the arts funding system can persuade its clients that it prefers evaluations that reveal the weaknesses, as well as the strengths, of their activity then in the long-term, this work should produce the sort of evidence that this, and subsequent governments, will be looking for.

The Arts Council of England is currently working with East Midlands Arts and South West Arts in 'Education Action Zones' in Corby and Bristol, looking at the contribution that the arts make to raising standards in schools. The National Foundation for Educational Research has been commissioned to study the relative impact of four different types of arts activity in schools: the one-off intervention; series of unrelated short-term activities involving different art forms; long-term projects; and indirect interventions linked to teachers' professional development in the arts. Artists and teachers involved in this scheme are also conducting their own research to test these different ways of working.

The Arts Council of England and the Regional Arts Boards are also collaborating on a two-year programme of research looking at different ways of working with socially excluded groups. Eighteen projects are being evaluated both by the participants in selected projects and by an independent evaluator, with the intention of producing guidance on how to measure the impact of arts activity on socially excluded groups. The much publicised 'Creative Partnerships Programme', which will bring together large numbers of schools and arts organisations in designated areas of England for a period of two years, will include a full-scale evaluation. These are all promising signs.

The arts funding system across the UK gives the impression of taking seriously its share of the responsibility for challenging the social processes that lead to exclusion. But this has to be about more than education and access programmes. In Ireland, Hugh Frazer, Director of the Combat Poverty Agency, went straight to the heart of the matter when he referred, in a talk about the arts and social exclusion, to

*'...the arrogance, elitism and exclusiveness of a dominant culture that cannot comprehend the importance, centrality and value of creativity and self expression in the lives of everyone, not just the dominant majority in society. If we are to build a more inclusive society,' he suggested, 'we must explore and express and encourage and validate the cultural identity of all groups in our society, especially those on the margins. Indeed we must welcome difference and diversity. A socially inclusive society is one in which all traditions are visible, recognised and included.'*<sup>6</sup>

For Frazer, Matarasso, and an increasing number of people, arts organisations need to spend more time examining the services they are offering and questioning their relevance to the British public.

Galleries in the UK are said to be among the best in the world for the volume, range and quality of their education programmes. But few have invested as much time and energy addressing the more fundamental issues of employment practices, staff training, opening hours, and other factors that create the public face of galleries and that ultimately influence public attitudes to the arts.

Nearly four years after it began, the work of the Policy Action Teams is beginning to bear fruit. This is evident in the way that different parts of the public sector are now planning and working together. The health service, the criminal justice system, the education and care sectors are all more engaged with the arts sector than ever before. There have always been links, but now those connections are being made at a much higher level. While the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion and the consequent involvement of different interests could result in more bucks being passed more frequently, the ideal is that there is a sense of shared responsibility which is more likely to result in long-term change. 'Art cannot change the world,' said Herbert Marcuse, 'but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of men and women who could change the world'.<sup>7</sup>

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Foreword to, an as yet unpublished report, on research undertaken by QUEST. Working title: 'Social Inclusion in Action'

<sup>3</sup> Policy Action Team 10, (1999), *A report to the Social Exclusion Unit: Arts and Sport*, London: DCMS

<sup>4</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, (2000), *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, London: DCMS

<sup>5</sup> Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, (2000), *Museums and Social Inclusion: The GLLAM Report*, Leicester: Group for Large Local Authority Museums

<sup>6</sup> Frazer, H. (1996), *The relevance of the arts and culture to combating poverty: An Irish perspective*. Paper given to the Irish Presidency /European Commission Conference, 'Poverty: Access to and participation in the arts and culture'

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