

A Story of Future's Venture

THE END

Finally, to fund artists themselves and trust them to make the art; that for me was a truly radical gesture, an act of deep generosity from both the giver and the receiver. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, some funders like Esmée Fairbairn, recognized the need of artists to simply survive and gave funds to their existing clients. Future's Venture Foundation (FVF) started by funding those of our Alumni who were in need and then asked the Alumni to identify other artists in need, thereby extending the network of personal contacts. No forms were required. No reports. And no expectations. Amazingly, of their own free will, those who were funded this way, sent accounts of how this funding had enabled them to continue their practices and live. The unsolicited wealth of projects were phenomenal and it reached many more artists who are 'wired differently', think differently and identify differently. In other words artists who are otherwise excluded from any usual form of funding application.

This initiative alone, revealed the inequalities embedded in the application processes of most funding systems. Reports and policies for 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' represent absurd avoidance of these issues, as the Treasury (ACE) or elite trustees renege on their responsibilities, afraid of being accountable for their actions. People make art and need to be supported by other people, not forms and algorithms. And this takes us back to the beginning of FVF.

FVF fundamentally challenged the anonymous management structures of abstract, quantitative efficacy and the denial of responsibility, now prevalent in most major arts funding institutions. Getting it wrong is learning, not to be blamed, but the litigation culture of our society distances engagement and accountability from those they claim to serve. As art and creativity are seen as unmanageable, challenges to the political status quo, the present Government has axed most arts activities from the National Curriculum, UK Research Councils and courses from Higher Education. This follows the reactionary trends of institutional neo-colonialism, asserting control and retaining power for the elite, maintained through the prevailing bureaucratic management systems of our age.

HISTORY

In an interview for the Ashden Directory, in 2006, I learned from John Fox that he ended Welfare State International (WSI) mainly because Arts Council England's (ACE) bureaucracy diverted attention from making art. He, also mentioned that after 38 years of radical artmaking, WSI had had its day and it was time to move on. WSI's building, assets and ACE Revenue funding were passed over to Lanternhouse International that initially engaged in large-scale civic spectacles and then focused on local community arts in Ulverston, Cumbria.

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

As ACE cut the Revenue Funding of Lanternhouse International in 2012, by 2014 Denis Mc Geary (Chair) and I were the last trustees. We had spent two years developing erroneous diverse business plans at the behest of ACE and were forced to make all the staff redundant as there were not funds for programming. The last Artistic Director, Andrea Hawkins, had been financially prudent and there were reserves, but these were hemorrhaging at £39,000 a year, just to maintain the Lanternhouse building and

warehouse. With no viable support from anywhere, Denis and I agreed to sell all the company assets and either start a new company or create a trust fund. Either way, making art was paramount.

The sale of the building, 'Lanternhouse' met with minor protests from ACE and the Mayor of Ulverston, and some old WSI associates expressed their displeasure, but still no support was forthcoming. Denis and I offered the proceeds to a group of local artists who had worked on Lanternhouse projects and the staff to start a new company but neither wanted the responsibility. The trust fund became the final option. Denis and I engaged Alison Surtees to help create the new charity and invite trustees, and Richard Povall to ethically invest the money. At the first trustees meeting, the Manifesto that I had previously drafted was amended and adopted for the new company's guiding principles.

THE RADICAL INDEPENDENT ARTS FUND (RIAF)

Originally conceived as the Independent Radical Arts (IRA) fund, the words were rearranged to avoid confusion. However, it is worth considering the ideas and intentions behind the words.

INDEPENDENT

In February 2015, the film Director Mike Leigh, received a BAFTA Fellowship Award. The central point of his acceptance speech was the importance of independence, "... free from all censorship or interference by governments, backers, producers, script editors, or committees of any kind."

Quite simply, he could not have made the film, had he been tied to a studio or beholden to industry sponsorship. RIAF, therefore, represented opportunities for artists to make work that was not constrained or controlled by the dominant management culture or political persuasion. This was further enabled by FVF's desire to support work that would otherwise not normally be funded by established arts funders. Although being independent is a vulnerable place to be in many ways, it allowed us to own our vulnerability, rather than succumb to the double-bind of establishment accountability. Being independent permitted us to be radical.

RADICAL

In the Arts there are many ideas associated with what 'radical' might mean. For this purpose, it does not refer to the Art World 'avant garde'. It does refer to art that challenges the societal status quo - the 'otherwise' unacceptable. It includes art that reconnects fundamental culture (not 'Culture') to creatively address diverse ways of perceiving and cognitively engaging with the world. Politically, it is regarded by the dominant culture as dangerous and therefore to be oppressed. However, given the nexus of climate, species and cultural crises we all face, such art seems to one of the few means of ecologically (social-environmental) savvy resilience available to us.

ART

There was no specific artform bias within FVF, per se, other than most of those associated with FVF practiced or were involved with more than one. This meant that we could focus on content, issues and approaches to contemporary society and cultures that may be expressed from a wide spectrum of practices.

The notion of funding, itself, was an issue of both independence and radical in nature - a creative process, in its own right. After all, how could an organisation that funds the arts not adopt creative means to deploy its work? We, therefore, aimed to work independently from the establishment, to promote radical arts practices, through alternative methods of

funding. The art emerging as practical, dynamic, creative processes towards social transformation, not fetishised high-end commodities, quantifiable outputs, verifiable outcomes nor evidenced impacts.

Did the art meet high standards of excellence? Although these terms were largely rejected as being incomprehensible to the realities of art making, most of the FVF associates had gained traditional training and much practical experience. Highly valued, the younger members brought their own life experiences, worldviews and aesthetics to the organization and its collective understanding of good art. Given the acclaim and further support from other arts bodies for many of the artists, following FVF recognition, it may be assumed that our standards were widely accepted. Our art, therefore, was in our creative ability to influence others. However, such advances are often met with equal resistance from the establishment – such is the History of Art.

CO-LEARNING

What did I learn? I tried to listen more. I tried not to invoke the negotiating societal survival tactics of an educated, white, heterosexual male. And I tried to learn with my fellow FVF trustees, mentor/advisors and artists how to work in uncharted territory - there were few, if any, models to learn from. But we had a passion to be compassionate to those with whom we engaged. Alison achieved empathy in the pastoral care she initiated and went on to develop through her Mental Health First Aid sessions.

Yes, there were times of frustration and disagreement with each other and the processes we developed, but for the most part these were openly expressed and resolved. Above all, we did not succumb to the normalising, default options of existing systems.

Were we in anyway prejudiced? Yes, we deliberately favored artists and arts practices that we considered to be underrepresented, socially marginalised, politically and culturally challenging.

RHIZOMATIC NETWORK

In his book, *Lila: an inquiry into morals*, Robert Pirsig wrote: 'The most moral act of all is the creation of space for life to move onwards.' Hopefully FVF created such a space. A space for a few artists to be believed in; a space for people at funding institutions to question their power relations; maybe a space that is the condition for revolution to regenerate culture; and a space for us to creatively survive the transformative challenges of this world becoming, with diverse futures.

Art is dangerous, because it permits people to be creative, think and act differently, and challenge the status quo. This is why the Art World, art education and art funding appropriate, undermine and suppress arts practices and people wanting to live their lives as artists.

Despite, initiatives to be 'equal, diverse and inclusive' ACE and other major funders fail to see two important issues (there are more). The first is that this well-meaning command comes from above, as a diktat to those below to act in a particular way in future. It does not recognise the endemic colonial structures and the existence of ubiquitous racist practices. Most current management and HR systems perpetuate deeply colonial doctrines of deterministic efficacy and elitism. Diversity, then becomes the means to retain power over 'others', by including them in behaving as the dominant culture wishes.

The second issue is colonialism that goes beyond the obvious exploitation, extraction and appropriation of materials, resources and people. It has, since the Age of Enlightenment, changed the way we think. Through political, economic, social, environmental and above all, educational systems, colonialism has insisted on the reductionist, atomistic scientific method as the right way to gain knowledge and truth. Each of these points undermine the right for people to determine their own cultural values. Industrialized, urban society (Metropolis) demands dependency on the state to provide food, water, services, housing, health, education and jobs - all of which are capitalised or being privatised. In other words, the state giveth and the state taketh away for the benefit of those in power. In essence we are educated to believe that there is no alternative to the norm of a free market economy as the basis for democracy, freedom and making art.

If nothing else, FVF challenged the status quo power balance between funders and artists, 'Culture' as culture and made the ethics of funding an issue of concern. Much of this way of thinking is well documented, already, by people like Isabel Fremeaux, Jay Jordan, Paulo Frier, Augusto Boal, Edouard Glissant, Edward Said, Albert Memmi, Darren McGarvey and Vanessa Andreotti, but it is worth stating this again and again and again, as art. FVF's legacy may be the collective memories, conversations and actions of all those who were associated with this seven-year exploration to think differently and to trust each other. It proved that it is possible to support artists' futures in their ventures, beyond this neoliberal, neocolonial society, by creating a 'Brave Space'.