

9 Culture for all

Love it or hate it, culture in our time is technology based. While it expresses the achievements of human history, at the same time, it is not socially or class neutral. As writer and self-confessed computer nerd Bob Hughes writes:

The machine on which I write this was massively subsidised by the sweat, tears, taxes and poisoned aquifers of the people of Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and China... Its chips have consumed 700 times their own weight in water, hydrocarbons, toxic gases and solvents... It has perhaps 30 capacitors containing tantalum: very likely part of the spoils of Congo's civil war, which has killed around 4 million people.

The Internet is an outstanding example of the contradictory nature of today's culture. Ranged against the corporate interests of media giants and companies like Microsoft, Amazon, Google and Sony are those who create content, value and social significance – the artists, technicians and users. They are the countless musicians, writers, professional and amateur photographers, editors, technicians, including hackers, web-builders, researchers, readers, fans, campaigners for rights and freedoms and students, as well as those looking for long lost relatives or even a recipe for dinner. Not to speak of fraudsters, criminals, pornographers and credit card cloners. The corporates want tollbooths on the information highways and seek to make

every form of creative labour into something they can exploit, while on the other side, the desire is to preserve the Internet commons as an area free from state or corporate control. Thus the Internet is a symbol of the great possibilities that exist for human creativity while at the same time showing how this comes up against corporate interests.

The Cyber-Rights and Cyber-Liberties organisation explains in a *Short history of content regulation and content blocking technology* that:

Until the 1990s there were no restrictions on Internet content... Despite the largely serious and academic nature of most material, a sub-culture also flourished of odd sexually-oriented, politically-oriented, and other materials often considered “wacko” (insane). The presence of such materials was tolerated by all users and even considered a sign of the health of the medium. In particular, few people were bothered by the presence of pornography in a community made up of over 90% of male users.

When the Internet became more widespread and governments began to take notice, the *first stage* in Internet content control began, consisting of heavy-handed and repressive forays in censorship. The US Communications Decency Act 1996 was a part of this trend, as are more recent but similar proposals by the Australian government...

The *second stage* in content control thus began with the introduction of rating and filtering products that claim to permit users to block unwanted material from their personal systems. The most sophisticated and widely recognised of these systems is the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS), introduced by the World Wide Web Consortium. European governments were especially interested in this hoped-for solution. They backed away quickly from incidents in the first stage of direct suppression and put forward PICS and rating systems as a proposed standard, both through national governments and the European Union as a self-regulatory solution to Internet content.

The Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) was adopted by the media giants, AOL-Time Warner, Disney/ABC, Bertelsmann

(BMG), Microsoft, BT and Bell Canada. Content filters are now being adopted by Internet service providers (ISPs) without users' knowledge. They may block out all but rated sites, which eliminates areas of cyberspace on the grounds that they are "unrated". The sponsors of the content standards are also suppliers of browsers, which reinforces the big corporations' control over access to the Internet. Other forms of control include "cookies", which place a unique small file on your computer which allow your browsing habits to be followed and even directed without your knowledge.

One of the most successful global companies in recent years is the Google search engine, which has outstripped its earlier rivals such as Yahoo. "Googling" is an activity engaged in by millions of Internet users daily, to find everything and everybody, from travel packages to cooking recipes, long lost relatives and childhood friends, academic and scientific research results. But as we innocently surf the waves of the web, thrilled by the ease of communication, we do not realise how our every click is being monitored.

One of the reasons for Google's financial success is that by tracking users' surfing patterns on the net, it can offer prime spots for advertising merchandise.

Google's immortal cookie: Google was the first search engine to use a "cookie" that expires in 2038. This was at a time when federal websites were prohibited from using persistent cookies altogether...

Google records everything they can: For all searches they record the cookie ID, your Internet IP address, the time and date, your search terms, and your browser configuration. Increasingly, Google is customising results based on your IP number. This is referred to in the industry as "IP delivery based on geolocation."

Google's toolbar is spyware: Google's free toolbar for Explorer phones home with every page you surf, and yes, it reads your cookie too.

www.google-watch.org/bigbro.html

Creativity goes corporate

The distinction between cultural activity and commerce is increasingly obscured. To enhance their image and to sell their products, the corporations increasingly embrace “creativity”. It is all part of the “media and entertainment business”, a seamless unity of global capitalist enterprise. All aspects of culture are now included, from advertising design to product design and the talent and skills of the workers/creators/performers whose labour is essential to the whole thing.

A survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers forecast that the value of the global media and entertainment industry would increase from \$1.1 trillion in 2001 to \$1.4 trillion by 2006, growing at an average rate of 5.5%. So the stakes are extremely high.

As one advocate for cultural diversity, Joost Smiers, has written: “It is not just the power to decide at the end of the process when the transaction is signed and the deal completed who will continue to be a client, a viewer or a listener; but power that extends to all the moments before this. It is the power to select a few artists and reject the rest; and to give those who are selected massive distribution and promotion. More and more, the decisive question thus becomes: who has access to the communication channels of the planet...”

Internet commons champion Laurence Lessig, has pointed to some of the opposing forces vying for control. Writing in *The Financial Times* (20 February 2004), he said: “The extraordinary growth in services and content on the Internet has come precisely from the neutrality of its ‘end-to-end’ design.” In other words, the success of the Net comes from the way in which all users can be in touch with each other at any time and place, without any restriction. Lessig points to the explosion of mass creativity on the Internet and how the corporations are pressuring governments to ensure protectionism amounting to an important change. In his book, *Free Culture*, he says:

For the first time in our tradition, the ordinary ways in which individuals create and share culture fall within the reach of the regulation of the law, which has expanded to draw within its

control a vast amount of culture and creativity that it never reached before. The technology that preserved the balance of our history – between uses of our culture that were free and uses of our culture that were only upon permission – has been undone. The consequence is that we are less and less a free culture, more and more a permission culture. This change gets justified as necessary to protect commercial creativity. And indeed, protectionism is precisely its motivation. But the protectionism that justifies the changes... is not the limited and balanced sort that has defined the law in the past. This is not a protectionism to protect artists. It is instead a protectionism to protect certain forms of business. Corporations threatened by the potential of the Internet to change the way both commercial and non-commercial culture are made and shared have united to induce lawmakers to use the law to protect them.

Thus, as in so many other ways, capitalist globalisation has reached a point where it needs to suppress the very forces that it has generated.

Compulsory freedom

Everything can become a commodity, at least during some parts of its life. While consumer culture appears universal because it is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone *can* be a consumer, it is also felt to be universal because everyone *must* be a consumer: this particular freedom is compulsory.

Consumer Culture and Modernity

The music industry provides the clearest and fastest example of corporate appropriation of creativity. As music industry critic Andrew Benfield, of the Big Chill festival says, it needs

to control the whole process of cultural production, from creating content through to how that content is marketed and distributed. The growth of globalisation and the consolidation of this “culture machine” into the hands of just five firms has led to an increasingly conservative choice of culture, highly marketed, tightly

controlled and fervently policed through the mainstream media channels of TV, film and commercial radio.

Britpop music historian John Harris believes that the creative, chaotic autonomy of earlier times has been “gobbled up”. The result is

music founded in a spirit of spontaneity and self-expression ending up at the core of an ever-more standardised planet (those Pepsi ads starring Pink, Beyoncé and Britney speak volumes). Moreover, as the music industry shrinks, pop’s increasing dearth of diversity is starting to impact on the UK. Each year, the odds against British acts making inroads in the US seem slimmer than ever; in music, too, there is but one superpower... how long, I wonder before Halliburton and Exxon start sponsoring festivals?

In today’s world of instant digital sound reproduction, the battle between the corporations, music lovers and pirates goes on, providing a major example of how the corporate ownership of distribution and marketing channels is constantly at war with the creators of music as well as the fans and music lovers. The US Central Intelligence Agency now sends its spies to track down digital piracy around the world.

Music lovers are now swapping digital music on a massive scale, with more than two billion songs being traded on the FastTrack (a Napster clone) system every month during 2002-3. And this was *after* the passing of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) in 1998 to stamp out copyright abuse! (see www.anti-dmca.org)

The shut-down of music sharing programme Napster in 2000, rather than crushing this flourishing counterculture, has spawned dozens of imitators that are proving harder to stop. From the centralised music library database pioneered by Napster, the file-sharing community began a guerrilla activity, working through a de-centralised network. Napster’s wild growth (40 million users in just six months) ended up with it being taken over by the Bertelsmann conglomerate, one of the very companies seeking its closure.

The latest conflict in the poacher-turned-gamekeeper wars has broken out between Real, which makes RealPlayer, the online sound and image software, and Apple, whose users have access to iTunes Music Store via their iPods. Apple has now accused RealNetwork of adopting the tactics and ethics of a hacker to break into their stash of music. The digital rights management field is full of minefields for consumers and content producers alike. In the three-cornered triangle of creator-fan-corporate ownership, the chief barrier between the musician and the fan is clearly the need for corporate profit-making.

The music industry is dominated by the big corporations who are still selling CDs and ways of listening to music at high prices, while musicians are subject to all the pressures of the industry. The mass media perpetuates the domination of an élite group of performers, while the rest of the talent struggles on the sidelines. We live in an age when teenie boppers' pester power is the last great hope for the music corporations' production-line pop which accounts for the promotion of less-than-challenging types of music.

The visual arts

Through the merger of cultural enterprises into a few big companies, what before was a separate area for visual art – painting, sculpture and photography – have been drawn into the corporate melting pot. This affects all the practising visual artists in the world – and there are a million of them in the US and Europe alone. The global art market has seen an unprecedented speculation, not only in Wall Street but throughout the world's art capitals. As one historian of the image, Richard Bolton, wrote in his critical history of photography: “This traffic in art mirrors the fervent trading of the stock exchange: investment indexes for art continue to climb; gallery owners trade artists and make deals in the style of corporate raiders.” Historic photographic archiving and reproduction is dominated by two giants, Corbis and Getty. In art auctioning, Christies and Sotheby's still rule the roost, despite price-fixing scandals which led to a jail sentence and large fine for Sotheby's head Alfred Taubman in 2002. Between them they control about 90% of the world's live auction

market in goods such as art and jewellery.

In this context, arts curators and gallery owners tend to become brokers who advise clients on what may be a good speculative investment. The decision-makers in this process tend to be middle class art administrators and curators who cater for the better educated and most privileged in self-perpetuating circles. In the view of many artists, the art world remains an exclusive place through an escalation of selectiveness maintained by a quasi-monopoly of operators including curators, dealers and their media friends. There is a fairly narrow group of wealthy superstar artists – a process which is intensified by the burgeoning of a lucrative contemporary art market especially in the last decade, where prices for art work can go from \$5,000 to \$50,000 in just a few years. We are told to consider them outstanding mainly because they have been successful, rather than for any intrinsic value their art may or may not have, much as in the other areas of the entertainment business. By definition, superstardom means that other, equally talented people, are deprived of access to audiences. The identity of mainstream art tends to be shaped by the existing élites rather than those who make art or the communities from which art springs.

As critic Nicholas Usherwood has noted (*Galleries*, July 2004) there is supposed to be “a system” whereby “the curators curate, the critics assess and, through due process, the artists we choose to represent our artistic culture emerge”. But this is manifestly not the case, even more so today than it was before the grandiose Tate gallery empire, masterminded by Nicholas Serota, sprang into existence. There are many examples of outstanding artists, dead and alive, who completely disappear from view.

Spiralling prices in the world art markets mean that museums and galleries simply cannot afford to buy art to keep national collections up to date. The top British art museums – National Gallery, Tate, British Museum, National Portrait Gallery and Victoria & Albert – appear well endowed, but had their purchase allocation cut from £8m in 1982 to £1m in 2003. This is at a time when a major painting such as Raphael’s *Madonna of the Pinks* can cost around £21m. In May 2004 Picasso’s *Boy with a Pipe* was sold for the highest price in auction history when it

fetched over £58m at Sotheby's. According to Jane Morris, editor of *Museums Journal* (*The Guardian*, 14 November 2003), museums and galleries have less money in real terms for day to day requirements, such as simple roof repairs and wardens, than they did 20 years ago.

Neither business and private sponsorship nor the much-vaunted National Lottery funding have made up the gap that constantly hits hundreds of cultural projects throughout the country, including theatre companies, cinemas and museums of all descriptions.

Funding cuts threat

In spite of the rise in council tax some areas of local authority provision are really suffering. Squeezed between the huge budgets for education and the social services, local museums and art galleries have had a raw deal, with hardly any investment beyond the occasional lottery handout...

When Labour came to power, Leicester had seven museums. One closed immediately when promised lottery cash was withdrawn. One closed in 2001, three are now proposed for mothballing – i.e. closed except for summer weekends and some school visits. One is about to close for a year for long-overdue refurbishment, and the remaining two are to close on Fridays.

... there will come a day in September when this city with such a proud museum tradition will not have a single museum open for visitors. A similar story is unfolding all around the country, for example the loss of two of our best costume museums in Nottingham and Manchester, and the proposed closure of the Daventry museum...

Robert Hartley, Leicester Museums Service
letter to *The Independent*, 2 April 2004

Meanwhile, we are educating today's and tomorrow's artists in self-marketing and a business approach is a major component of art school courses. Other areas of training such as life studies, drawing, sculpture and painting may not exist at all or be minimised. Degree shows for students who have just completed

a first degree are increasingly dealer and market oriented, or towards the artist setting up her or his own business enterprise.

Our proposals

Cultural activity of all kinds is what makes and defines the human. It should not be a luxury to be enjoyed only by a privileged minority. The creative impulse is a fundamental and continual way of affirming and deepening our relationship to the world around us, both natural and social. Various kinds of artistic activity allow us to explore our own potential and faculties as living human beings in a social world. The Impressionist painter Monet, for example, once said of himself that his talent consisted of being “only an eye”. “But what an eye!” was the response.

This anecdote points to the way in which artists extend and refine the ability to take in and transform the world. Making, appreciating, and participating in various art forms, as well as developing the physical abilities of the human body in sport and dance, allows humans to realise their inner potential as individuals. At the same time, these activities advance the interactions which make up society as a whole. Therefore, every form of human culture needs to be encouraged and everyone should have the opportunity to engage in it freely. The aim is to provide a framework within which all talents can flourish, rather than set out prescriptions telling artists what they should do or dictate what art is.

The leader of the Surrealist art movement, André Breton and Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera set out their aspirations in a manifesto written on the eve of World War II. In opposition to Fascism and Stalinism they called for the liberation of art from all political shackles:

To develop intellectual creation, an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly co-operation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far reaching than ever before in history.

Or, as Oscar Wilde put it even earlier: “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.” The opportunity to spend your life doing things you love doing until now has usually been the privilege of a small minority, as Wilde pointed out . “These are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation.” Wilde, the very antithesis of male chauvinism, was writing at a time when men dominated the arts and sciences. But his essential thought is important, because he believed that being able to “realise yourself” should not remain the privilege of the few. In his view a truly cultured and truly socialist society had to allow everyone the possibility of discovering and realising her or his own potential.

In today’s world, the ability to extend the range of human faculties, for example as an athlete or other performer, is seen almost wholly as a content to be reproduced and marketed by the media corporations. Commercial sponsors desperately *need* the co-operation and attraction that they get from music celebrities and sports stars. Without such endorsement the big companies would not be able to sell their goods. *Marie Claire*, Marks and Spencer, Vodaphone, Castrol and Gillette needed David Beckham to promote their products – that is why they signed around £60 million in sponsorship deals with him between 1997 and 2004.

The labour of cultural workers is vital to the profit-making activities of the present status quo. Without their endorsement and their creative abilities as well as their physical labour, capitalist production and marketing would be in grave difficulties. Instead of artists and athletes being viewed as claimants who are dependent on precarious forms of commercial or state sponsorship, they must be guaranteed financial, material and moral resources.

Culture for all

We already have arts venues such as theatres, museums, playing fields and sports centres, libraries and community cultural

centres, colleges and educational establishments. Today, many are threatened with commercialism, closure or cuts.

Following a revolutionary change in society, all such places, public and independent, will have the resources to continue and prosper. Reorganisation will take place in consultation and by agreement with users and those who work there – students, teachers, lecturers, artists, performers, curators, administrators, technicians and local people.

Spaces will be made available for cultural activities through renovation of disused industrial, commercial properties and new purpose-built facilities. All support for independent art and cultural activity will be without state censorship or control. Where appropriate, local enterprises can co-operate and exchange goods and services with cultural centres for the purpose of mutual improvement.

Diverse cultures of all kinds will be encouraged and encouraged to celebrate and preserve the many cultural heritages and legacies. Minority ethnic communities will receive special resources to help maintain the rich variety of national, ethnic and local traditions and art forms which already make up contemporary British culture. Oral histories of communities of all kinds will be recorded and archived.

Within present society there are many organisations and ventures which demonstrate how successful self-managed and independently-owned co-operative cultural enterprises can be (even though at present they still make use of corporate sponsorship). They include the London Symphony Orchestra and the Philharmonic Orchestra. Both these orchestras are owned and run by the musicians themselves. The LSO is owned by its 100 players each of whom has one share. It recently raised more than £10 million to convert an old church in London's Islington area into an advanced music education centre to train young players. LSO musicians are concerned about the continuity of music training, because state schools have run it down.

Pioneered by painters like Bridget Riley, who set up Space Studios three decades ago, self-run and financed artists' studio and exhibition complexes show what artists can do when they

take matters into their own hands. Present-day examples include the Art in Perpetuity and the Bow Arts trusts in east London. Other examples of high profile artists who are trying to break away from corporate control and establish independent, self-financing organisations run by themselves include singer-songwriter George Michael, who took on Sony in a famous legal case. In 2004 he announced that he would make future recordings available free to fans on the Internet. In 2003 singer Peter Gabriel launched a union called MUDDA (www.mudda.org), to enable musicians to sell music directly to their fans without going through corporate distribution channels. Independent film maker Michael Moore successfully challenged the monopoly of the media corporations, at first with the help of local librarians in the US, to launch his book, *Stupid White Men*, followed by his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

The Edinburgh international festival, for example, includes a huge fringe, a book festival, plus a jazz and blues festival. They are deluged by independent artists of all kinds. Looking through the programmes of such events shows how many outstanding and dedicated people there are who are forced to remain on the fringes and outstanding productions which never get into local cinemas or on the major television channels. The market's boast of choice amounts to the option to watch the same Hollywood films wherever you go. Thousands of actors, film makers, artists and other performers scabble desperately for a brief chance to get into the limelight, but only a few ever achieve more than ephemeral success let alone economic or financial security.

Similarly, independent art gallery owners and state-sponsored public institutions show only a tiny fraction of the artistic production which they are offered. Every London gallery owner and critic will attest to the way in which they are besieged by talented artists looking for an opportunity to display their work to the public.

Free from pressure

Cultural activity must be made available for the whole community. It should be unrestricted in its aims and how it operates and must be seen as essential as other services and

enterprises. Artistic production must be free and independent of commercial and political pressures.

Ownership, funding and control

- ▶ the resources of the global media companies will be owned and managed democratically by elected councils of cultural workers, technicians and users
- ▶ national, regional and local cultural councils with elected representatives will determine financial resources in consultation with elected Assemblies.
- ▶ the Internet will be self-managed by the people who create the content and those who use it with no commercial or state interference
- ▶ control over Internet content and other forms of distribution such as the cinema will be democratically discussed and agreed
- ▶ recording of sounds, images and words and publishing will be controlled by the creators and users. Copyright issues to be democratically agreed by creators and users
- ▶ cultural workers will be financially supported by local Assemblies and publicly-funded cultural committees
- ▶ sporting facilities will be owned and controlled by players, sports fans and the local community.

Development

- ▶ minority languages, dialects, literature, arts and traditions will be supported and encouraged to prevent them being lost from society
- ▶ existing cultural facilities, including local and national centres, trusts, self-organised bodies such as studios, orchestras, cinemas, film clubs, arts festivals, theatres, and exhibition areas will be developed and expanded
- ▶ training will be provided in different areas of the arts and crafts
- ▶ people who have rare and unusual skills will be encouraged to train new generations
- ▶ sustainable architecture, design, fashion to transform public places and the lives of everyone will be encouraged

- ▶ art and culture will be brought out into the street, and the street made into art, including graffiti art (as opposed to vandalism). Public, open air, and street art including theatre, sculpture, dance, music and murals will be encouraged
- ▶ organisations like the National Trust will be supported in democratic consultation with users and their sites opened to the public free or with low admission prices
- ▶ funds will be made available for the preservation and restoration of historic monuments, listed buildings and other sites in consultation with public and professional bodies
- ▶ each community will have artists' studios. Music recording and film studios will be provided for musicians, film makers and community projects
- ▶ cultural committees will ensure maintenance of resources such as playing fields, gyms, libraries, materials and exhibition areas.

Access

- ▶ the aim will be to organise a non-corporate sponsored Olympics
- ▶ cultural centres will be opened in areas where they have been closed down or where few are available, with the help of funding from local Assemblies
- ▶ a variety of programmes and events for deprived city and rural communities will provide educational and performance facilities where none exist
- ▶ all forms of culture, entertainment and sports events will be accessible to the public including theatre, opera, art exhibitions, training for free or at very low cost to everyone
- ▶ all heritage sites, the collections of former royal palaces, stately homes, national and local sites and monuments, gardens, parks and places of natural beauty in the countryside will be opened up
- ▶ restrictions on walking in the countryside will be ended.

Cultural education

- ▶ music, visual arts and drama, plus physical education and sport will be central rather than peripheral or optional parts

- of school curriculum from nursery level upwards
- ▶ schools, colleges and other institutions will have artists and sports people in residence
- ▶ sports facilities and training will be available for people of all ages, especially children.