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VIEWPOINTS

Covid commentaries: London's cultural landscape

DEBORAH BULL and LUKE DICKENS

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Baroness Deborah Bull CBE, Crossbench Peer, Chair of the Arts & Culture strategy group of the London Transition Board and Vice-President and Vice-Principal (London) at King's College London; in conversation with Dr Luke Dickens, Exhibition Reviews Editor for the London Journal.

Interview recorded online March 2, 2021.

LD: In place of our usual theatre and exhibition reviews, we're looking to get an overview from key cultural commentators about the impacts, mainly of COVID but also perhaps other recent events, on London's cultural landscape with an emphasis on museums, galleries and theatres. It would be useful, just to start though, for our readers to be able to position you as a cultural commentator.

DB: The perspective I bring to this is from my work on the London Transition Board,¹ which is a board co-chaired by Robert Jenrick MP and the Mayor of London, which is aiming to oversee London's transition out of the COVID pandemic. It was active in the first six to eight months of the pandemic, and it is just about to stand up again after it went into a sort of abeyance during the second lockdown. As part of my role on that board, I set up an Arts and Culture Strategy Group, which really was aiming to bring intelligence from the sector – broadly conceived – and escalate 'asks' to both the Mayor and Government. I think what was useful about that was I brought together people with a legitimacy to represent around 14 sectors within what might constitute London's cultural landscape. That can never be definitive, but a lot of the focus through the pandemic, driven by the Cultural Recovery Fund,² has been institutions and buildings and organizations. And actually, we know that within London's wider cultural ecology, they are only a part of the picture. So, I was very keen that sectors like outdoor arts, for instance, or children and young people, would be seen within the mix. So, that's the kind of perspective I'm bringing to this conversation.

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LD: That's raising some interesting questions already. One is – because questions of representation are really key, particularly given events of the past year and not just COVID, but equally, you know, COVID's impacts on forms of precarity – could you elaborate a bit on what that kind of representation might look and like how you went about it on the strategy group?

DB: Yes, it's a really important question. I was setting this up around the time that the Cultural Recovery Taskforce was set up. What often bothers me about those sort of set ups, is that we all have a tendency, and this absolutely goes to the heart of the question of representation, to lean on the people we know, particularly when there's a time pressure. So one gets repeated groups made up of quite a relatively small sample of people. These people are extremely well placed and brilliantly good at their jobs, and one has no reason to think they aren't well connected. But it is not the same as having a seat at the table.

What I tried to do was look for legitimate sector bodies that were established in order to speak for those sectors. For instance, Society of London Theatre³ was an obvious one for the theatre sector, the Museums Association⁴ was an obvious one. In other sectors, it became less obvious because they were perhaps emerging sectors or smaller sectors, or didn't have a single representative 'body'. We had Inc Arts,⁵ which does such brilliant work on inclusivity, and also representation from the Clore Leadership Programme,⁶ to be there to speak about the emerging pipeline of talent. We very much tried to make it people that the sector had either appointed or selected to speak for them. In some cases, we had to be slightly creative in order to do that. The Contemporary Visual Arts Network⁷ represents galleries. Some were national bodies, like Museums Association, and we also had the Arts Council's National Disability Champion on board,⁸ but we also had the Museum of London,⁹ which made sense given the London focus. With freelancers, we hit upon the problem that there are emerging bodies that are speaking for freelancers, and they are very important, but there isn't currently a single body. And I wonder whether that needs to be addressed because, as we know, they're disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

LD: You readily convey something of the delicate and very rich creative ecology of London, which feels distinct both globally as well as nationally. Of course, making judgments about COVID impacts depends on understanding that ecology geographically, I wonder if you can give us a sense of what that looks like?

DB: Yes, and there's a further wrinkle, which is the relationship between the West End and the Boroughs. We have Boroughs in London that are as big as other cities in the UK. And we have people who live in London, but live 25 miles away from the West End. But we know that the West End is a real driver for ticket income; I think 50 million tickets are sold annually by West End theatres, which is more than any other city in the world. And we know that a third of those go to overseas visitors, and that those visitors have a spill-over impact on the economy of some £7.3 billion, so they support jobs and so on. And the West End central activity zone contributes £53 billion of GVA to London's economy, that's three percent of the UK's GVA.

So you've got the relationship between the West End and the rest of London, and you've got the relationship between London and the rest of the UK. Those are all interesting subtleties and sensitivities within the relationship. One of the things that has been a topic of conversation throughout this is the concept of the '15-Minute City', which suggests we might become clustered around our high streets differently in the future.¹⁰ That becomes interesting for the state of West End

culture, because does the West End then become the once-a-year trip to the pantomime, the ballet or the big play, or whatever it is? And if that is the case, what does that mean for how we're subsidizing and supporting culture locally? So that's just an additional kind of complexity.

The figures about the size of the sector are telling; one in every six jobs in the capital was a creative one pre-pandemic. We know about the large extent of that workforce that's freelance. And then of course, you've got the SMEs and the supply chains too. It's been really good to hear the ecology word bandied around a lot more actually. I mean, it was clearly a stock DCMS answer, because we kept getting it at the Despatch Box, that they understood that the culture sector is an ecology. But the funding packages to support the sector through COVID didn't seem to understand the nature of that ecology. Because we've seen the issues around lack of freelance support, and we've seen that a lot of SMEs and very specialist supply chains have gone down.

So, understanding how those bits of the sector all work together, including talent pipelines, is vital. I'm not sure those things are completely understood. It's perhaps not surprising, because I'm not sure how well we understand ourselves as a sector, in truth. I mean, the other story is that we've got the interface between the commercial sector and the rest of the art sector, and there are complexities there in terms of talent pipelines, in terms of ideas generation, and workforces tend to move between the two. So, it's a very complex picture.

LD: My immediate feeling, with you saying that, is how we're only now starting to really understand something that's been so central, so prevalent, so important when it has come under threat.

DB: I feel that way a bit about the BBC, actually. If you drive out of Vegas, and you see those multi coloured and multi layered rocks that have been compressed over the ages, you see the strata and you see history in there, and it's the result of circumstances and occurrences that were completely haphazard, but it's created something completely beautiful. If you look at the history of the BBC, it has been made by those pressures over time, and what it is now you would never write if you were starting from a blank sheet, but we have it. And it's kind of beautiful, if imperfect, and I think that London's cultural sector is a bit like that. To an extent it had been working well, but of course, the sector is riven with inequalities, some of which are systemic and some of which you can attribute to wider society and how we educate people and so on. But some of it you do have to look at the sector itself and ask if this is being perpetuated by practices and conventions. So, in that sense, it was not perfect and it still is not perfect.

LD: The analogy of sedimentary rock is a very striking image, because we're still lacking languages to describe something so complicated, as an ecology and so on. And it's telling that the significant impacts of the past year have rendered London's cultural sector more visible, which in part prompts us to seek new languages and ways of understanding it. Given that you've raised tensions between the West End and the Boroughs in terms of a post COVID geography of the 15-Minute City, could you say more about how you're seeing the Boroughs fitting in this picture?

DB: The Mayor has just announced new funding to support the West End central activities zone,¹¹ because it is so important, but he was very conscious in doing so not to imply that the Boroughs were not important. With the Boroughs, we know that local authority investment is really important. And we know they're a significant commissioner of cultural services, but we also know that the funding for arts and culture has declined by 17% since 2010, and London's had the biggest

cuts, down 19% between 2010 and 2015. And this is because culture is not a statutory responsibility. In the face of funding cuts from the centre, they've had to make the cut somewhere, they're between a rock and a hard place. Also, libraries were not supported by the Government's £1.57 billion rescue package, which are an important part of the cultural landscape.

So, there are some boroughs which have significant cultural spaces within their own right, some of which are locally focused. I think of something like the Albany in Deptford,¹² which is an important part of the of the local landscape, but also is recognized more broadly. I'm a big fan of exploring partnerships, and I think there is more potential for some of the bigger central and national organizations to work more effectively with local partners, because local organizations tend to understand things in a different way and can be responsive. I think the potential for synergistic exchanges between borough-based organizations and centrally-based organizations could be really interesting. The Mayor might be quite useful in brokering that. But of course, the Mayor isn't really responsible for any of the funding. And we know that funding drives priorities a lot of the time. I think of some of the big charities, like the Paul Hamlyn Foundation or the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which have been very powerful in helping the bigger organizations transform how they think about issues like education and community engagement, talent, pipelines, equality, and so on.¹³ Maybe that might be something that they could think about taking further in London, in order to kickstart expert exploration of how new partnerships like that might play out. Of course, and this comes to potential opportunities of this context, for local partnerships around education, reskilling, health and particularly around mental health given what we know about the role of arts and culture within that; many organizations have been playing that part through the pandemic, and so there is perhaps greater potential for those locally based community organizations to have an even more embedded role supporting opportunities in the broadest sense, from cradle to grave as it were.

LD: Do you see similar potential around the renewed concern with the future of London's high streets?

DB: Yes, that's another really good point. It is shocking to see the number of occupiers of big spaces that have gone down. And there are going to be real gaps in the high street. And actually, it provides a great opportunity to forefront some of this work and take it to where people are.

LD: I wonder if you could give a flavour of what the impacts were of the pandemic on London's cultural sector. You make the shocking point that one-in-six jobs was in London's creative sector pre-pandemic, which clearly won't be the case in coming years without an all sorts of recalibration. Could you elaborate with some examples about what was lost or what has been impacted in the past year?

DB: Absolutely. Oxford economics did some projections on the financial impact last summer, suggesting there will be a UK wide GVA shortfall of up to £29 billion in the creative sector, and that London's creative industries were set to lose up to £16.5 billion by the end of 2020 and over 150,000 jobs.¹⁴ So the impact on the sector has been extreme, because it is a 'mass gathering' sector with a business model that largely depends on people coming together; you know, if people are not incoming, you don't have any income. The business model was pretty much broken immediately. No theatre is 100% reliant on ticket income, no organization is, but many, many of them are largely reliant on that. And of course, the limited opening up in between lockdown,

which was 50% of capacity, was an absolute non-starter because it just was not worth it, from a financial perspective, for many organisations. And the response of Government, which was the £1.57 billion, was incredibly welcome but it was very clearly in order to support organizations in London that they call the 'crown jewels' to thrive once the pandemic was over. It didn't impact on the many people who have either lost jobs or are likely to lose jobs when furlough finishes. And we know that there was a disproportionate impact on people from minority or marginalized communities, typically, because they were not in such senior positions, or they were in fixed-term contracts, doing flexible and front-of-house roles.

What was interesting to me were those organizations that chose to do what Francois Matarasso referred to as 'putting their business plans on the shelf',¹⁵ and pivoted to focus on what their communities really needed. So, I had a sort of a riff that I would share if I spoke at any group sessions at the beginning of the pandemic, which was around a sort of a hierarchy. My view was, we don't need to worry about the art, because actually, history tells us art will survive, people will make art, and people will want to come and watch art in the future. It's the people we need to worry about. The buildings we probably need to worry about least of all. It set me to thinking about the concept of institutionalization, and what happens when organizations pride themselves not for what they do, but for what they are. And when that sense is so closely associated with a building or an institution – and I know some of these buildings are wonderful, and I don't deny that – but you know, actually, the buildings are not the art, the art is what happens in them, and it involves real lives.

LD: It sounds encouraging that you can see a pivoting towards communities with a renewed sense of mission and purpose, reflecting on values more carefully, and trying to connect into local conditions and needs. Could you point to specific London examples of that?

DB: Yes, the Museum of Homelessness¹⁶ is a really interesting example of an organization that effectively became the homeless 'Task Force' during the pandemic; it lobbied to get the homeless off the streets and with some significant effect. The way in which parts of the building-based cultural sector, if you like, spoke up for freelancers and the supply chain was also a really good example of the understanding of the ecology within the sector. It's not specifically a London thing, but another element which has been very important is the 'Seven Inclusive Principles for Disabled People in Arts and Culture',¹⁷ which raised awareness of issues for artists with disabilities, who were shielding for much of the time, and there have been various advances made in the profile, visibility and inclusion of artists with disabilities. It was a really powerful piece of work from the 'We shall not be removed' campaign and others. It does feel as if through the pandemic, the COVID legislation that's come through has forgotten about people with disabilities, and certainly people with learning disabilities. Within arts and culture that's been a concern for the sector; that the advances that had been made, or were on the cusp of being made, were now sliding backwards.

LD: Since we're nearing the end of our conversation today, it would be good to get a sense of what you hope will come out of this present moment; what are you concerned about, or at least, what's now at stake?

DB: I guess what any of us hope would come out of this, is that we learn from it and retain those elements of the response or the reactions to the pandemic which are helpful and useful. There is

an opportunity around using digital tools in new ways. I am very conscious that there are still people who are either digitally excluded or in digital poverty, but with the greater use of digital tools, it is important to identify if we have pushed forward any innovations that would allow more people to be involved and engaged in culture. I would also hope that we would hang on to the closer relationships with our communities. I have a particular perspective on this, related to ballet history in this country. If you think back to the Second World War, when Sadler's Wells Ballet couldn't really perform in London because of the Blitz, it went on the road, and it performed in all sorts of factories and camps and toured up and down the country; just a piano and a bunch of dancers. And, actually, it formed an audience for ballet that was not really there before and that became a groundswell of support that carried the company for several decades. I think that it is essential that the close relationships that have been formed with local communities now influence the way that organizations see themselves in the future. If I can put my King's College London hat on for half a second, we're doing some work around scaling up arts based health interventions, the SHAPER project which is funded by Wellcome,¹⁸ and I would really hope that we can further explore and leverage the potential of arts-led support in mental health and wellbeing as communities recover, because we know there is an absolute pandemic of mental health ahead.

The other thing which we haven't talked about, of course, is Brexit. And the impact of Brexit on the sector and on business models, particularly for those companies that rely on European-based talent in working here, but also those who rely on touring, has been immense. I stand firm in believing, as I said, that people will always want to express themselves. We know that people will always want to engage with creative activities collectively. So, I think we will bounce back in that sense, but it is undeniable that the sector will be a different shape. We will have lost talent, because people will not have been able to survive without income for a year. If one were to be positive, the creative workforce is by definition creative and it is used to working in partnership, it is used to working in straitened times, it is used to working with limited resources. So, there are lots of positives on which to draw. But in saying that, I don't mean in any way to diminish the reality of where we are, which is incredibly challenging for the sector and incredibly challenging for the people who work in the sector.

LD: Thank you, Deborah, that's a thoughtful place to end.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/london-transition-board>
- 2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/culture-recovery-board>
- 3 <https://solt.co.uk>
- 4 <https://www.museumsassociation.org>
- 5 <https://incarts.uk/>
- 6 <https://www.cloreladership.org>
- 7 <http://www.cvan.art>
- 8 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/users/andrew-miller>
- 9 <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk>
- 10 <https://www.ft.com/content/c1a53744-90d5-4560-9e3f-17ce06aba69a>
- 11 <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/6m-campaign-to-get-people-back-into-london>
- 12 <https://www.thealbany.org.uk>
- 13 <https://www.phf.org.uk/programmes/localmotion/>; <https://esmefairbairn.org.uk/our-aims/creative-confident-communities/culture-restoring-communities>

- 14 <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/recent-releases/The-Projected-Economic-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-UK-Creative-Industries>
- 15 <https://parliamentofdreams.com>
- 16 <https://museumofhomelessness.org>
- 17 <https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com/2020/09/15/seven-principles-to-an-inclusive-recovery-for-the-arts-creative-sector>
- 18 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/shaper>