

Sustainability in the Arts? – A Provocation

David Stevenson

**Programme Leader, MA Arts Festival & Cultural Management
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh**

The term sustainability is one of the cultural policy buzzwords of our recent history. Having been lifted from the discourse of environmentalism, it is now not uncommon for someone working in the cultural sector to be challenged on how they plan to make their practice sustainable. Indeed the idea of sustainability is one that a lot of young artists appear to have internalised to the extent that this is one of their primary aspirations.

But what are we really talking about here? First of all let me make clear that I do not think culture, art and human creativity have suddenly become unsustainable. Symbolically expressive practice of some kind has been a part of the history of humanity from the outset. Indeed it has managed to sustain itself through some dark periods in history, just as it is sustaining itself now in environments where one would think that the conditions leave little space for anything other than fulfilling the basic needs of survival. There was artistic practice before state funding, and there was culture before there was currency.

Secondly, let me say that I also believe there is no automatic need for any specific organisations, performances, artworks, and individual artists to be permanently sustained for fear of the cultural armageddon that would follow their demise. Of course we have a moral obligation to leave a legacy of our cultural history for the future, but we also have a moral obligation not to allow the calcification of the past to hinder the capacities of those that will build that future. There is much talk just now of culture being an ecology, but in an ecology things die, it is part of a cycle, and demise is not something that we should be so afraid of when it comes to the arts.

And so what I primarily find people mean when they talk to me about how best to support sustainability in the arts is a question about how to have a sustainable career in the arts. But are there any sustainable careers in the arts? The idea of a career has never felt like it fits the activities of the majority of those who make some degree of a living out of their creative practice. To call something a career suggests some sort of long-term commitment with distinguishable paths for growth and progression. There is a sense of established frameworks, and of a foreseeable trajectory. Yet in the arts there are few opportunities like this and if anything they are getting fewer.

Most people who make some degree of their living in the arts are entrepreneurs – they are primarily risking their own resources in order to generate some sort of return. Asking how to do this sustainably is asking how to minimise the risk in a

practice in which it is intrinsic. It is asking about how to guarantee enough income to pay the bills, buy food, and save for the future while still managing to invest time and energy in artistic practice which is inherently risky and unpredictable. Considering how to achieve this is something that I feel too many young artists give too little thought to, and which Universities still do too little to help with.

So what do I see as the challenges facing young artists from managing to develop a sustainable artistic practice? Well firstly....

1. Seeing a portfolio career as a failure rather than the goal

I am surprised at the extent to which the romantic ideal of the autonomous artist who is able to devote all of their time, attention and energies to the production of their art is still so prevalent. Because with such an image comes the idea that what has been called a portfolio career or supplementing an income generated through artistic practice with an income generated through other means is in some way a failure.

There is a lack of honesty and transparency about how artists generate their income, and I would call for a more open environment in which people talk about the strategies they have taken to balance their need to generate income with their need to make art. There is a small project in Australia where artists do just this. It is called 'I'll Show You Mine' and the website hosts some brief case studies of artists explaining how they manage to 'get by'. For some, it is through a hybrid practice in which they blend voice over work with theatre work and the occasional corporate promo video. For some, their partner, their family, or both support them. For some, it's a case of dividing up their time, perhaps working six months at their art, and six months in other employment. There are such a variety of approaches taken that there needs to be a greater normalisation of the fact that making your living solely from your art is the exception, not the rule.

However there are demands that need to be made of the state in relation to this too. The majority of welfare and tax systems are designed for an economy of organisations, long-term employment and predictable careers. It is not set up to support those, like artists, who are going to have a lifetime of contracts, not a contract for a lifetime. We also need a minimum wage that means someone can earn enough to live on through working 20 hours a week, not 50. Your artistic practice may never be able to generate much, if any income for you, but having to generate a reasonable income should not be so onerous as to stop you being an artist.

2. Rejecting the market

Irrespective of what type of art you produce or where you do it, seeking to make an income from your artistic practice is a choice to enter a market. It is a market because you are offering to provide someone with something that they cannot or do not want to provide for themselves. It is an exchange, and as Adam Smith wrote in

The Wealth of Nations, once we enter such an exchange we become merchants, and we cannot then deny the market in which we must therefore live.

And yet I meet a lot of young artists who appear ideologically committed to the denial of the market in which they seek to exist. They appear to see the market as a wholly pejorative concept representative of all that is wrong with modern society, that the market and advanced speculative capitalism are one and the same.

For those of you who wish to make an income from your practice, I would argue that this is the wrong conclusion to reach. I would argue that understanding your markets, of which there will be many, is fundamental to including your art as part of the way that you make your living. I think that your job is to find your audience, and means finding those who value your work and as such are willing to enter into an exchange in order to access it.

Part of the difficulty in the past has been about getting access to the markets that might be interested in your work. Too often they were only accessible through gatekeepers who extracted a heavy price in return for brokering the relationship. Likewise, your capacity to communicate with a market was limited to large-scale broadcasts to relatively undifferentiated audience segments. The internet has changed all of this, it has given you the capacity to speak directly to your markets after having segmented them in such a way that you need now only communicate with those that have an interest in what you do and would be willing to support it financially. If you believe your work to have value then seek out those people that you believe will value it and ask them to pay for it.

3. The race to the bottom

This leads me on to my third point. I think there is a race to the bottom in which pricing is seen as the primary lever by which to generate an audience. There is also a reticence to talk about the costs involved in the production of a piece of work and a resultant tendency to undervalue or indeed entirely devalue what it is that you offer to people. There is a worrying trend towards giving away creative product for free which only works as a business model if, in giving that product away for free, you generate enough interest and audience that your audience then becomes an asset that you are able to sell to advertisers.

There is a principle called Baumol's cost disease that talks about the fact that in a mechanised world in which we are used to mass production making everything far cheaper, events such as theatre performances and orchestra recitals are destined to increasingly appear more expensive relative to other costs in our lives. These type of events by their very nature cannot be mass-produced, and nor can the number of artist or musicians or the time that they spend on it be reduced. And so the costs are squeezed through downward pressure on wages leading to the perverse situation that in some cases the person producing the performance is working for free.

I find it odd that I am regularly faced with the situation of having paid more for my pre-theatre dinner than I have done for my theatre ticket. I wonder why so many of the start up festivals that I see come out of the universities feel that they have to give away so much content for free. There is nothing wrong with this in and of itself, sharing is a wonderful thing and it is through such generosity that we end up with the type of communities that we wish to live in. But giving content away for free is also making a decision about your ability to make an income from it – the more that you share, the less willing I will be to pay for it in the future.

I believe that artists have been encouraged to worry too much about the people that don't come, rather than recognising the value of the audience that do. If so called arts attenders such as me claim to value the arts so much, why are we so reticent about paying the full cost price for that which we value? Why is it mostly the affluent middle classes that make the most of discounted tickets offers intended to broaden audiences? Why is there an automatic assumption that pensioners should have a discount when the majority of the pensioners that are coming to see the performance are far more affluent than any of the people who are performing in it?

Yes some people do not have the money to pay for tickets to see what they want to see – but that is a social and economic problem of poverty that needs addressed through the effective redistribution of wealth. It is not something for artists to fix through forcing themselves into poverty too. I return to my previous point about a market. Know who your market is and charge them appropriately. For all that there has been demands for the government to value the arts, I think the same might be said about those that spend more on their bar bill than their ticket bill.

4. Seeing funding as the solution

Which brings me on to my final point. That state subsidies, certainly not in the manner that state spending on the arts is conceived in Scotland and the UK, are not the answer to the question of sustainability. In the UK, it saddens me to see so many emerging artists fixate on securing the chimera that is some form of regular funding from government, as though receiving funding from the government was an excusal from entering a market relationship. As anyone receiving money from the state will attest, in accepting any form of grant you are very much entering into an exchange and it may not necessarily be one that you are all that comfortable with.

For what is most likely to be a very small amount of money, you will be asked to meet a whole host of objectives that may well be of little interest to you. So you need to think about what the best use of your time is. Do you want to spend that time applying for funds, monitoring and evaluating your project and writing reports, or do you want to spend it identifying an audience that might pay for your work and communicating with them in a way that makes them do just that?

That is not to say that state subsidise could not have a part to play, but not in the form that they currently take, because currently the majority of money goes on making a limited number of organisations 'sustainable'. Of the almost 150 million

pounds that Scotland spends on culture, 65% was to support the provision of 14 national organisations. Of the remaining 35%, distributed through Creative Scotland, the majority funds a network of theatre companies, galleries, and venues in Edinburgh and Glasgow. While Creative Scotland's 2014 overhaul of its funding resulted in an expanded group of organisations receiving 3 year funding, 83% of them had been those organisations that had always received some form of regular funding.

As it stands, state subsidies focus too much on sustaining that which is already there, as opposed to offering help to that which is trying to emerge. I would advocate for a funding system that is about supporting a widespread infrastructure of low to no cost production and performance spaces that remove the significant cost barriers to developing new work. There should be networks of affordable studios in which artistic production can take place so that the overhead costs do not consume any and all margin that you are able to extract from selling your work to the loyal and interested audience segment that you have worked hard to establish.

So my advice to you is that if you want to make an income from your work then you need to accept that you are selling it to someone. You then need to think about who might want to buy it, and who you would be willing to sell it to. Be realistic about how big this audience is and how much you can get them to pay. Make a budget on this basis and then figure out how you want to make the rest of the income that you need to survive. Demand more from the government, both in terms of how they directly support the infrastructure in which creative practice takes place and in fostering the social and economic conditions that make being an artist something that more, rather than less, feel able to do as a part of how they live.