

# MORE IN COMMON: MEETING ONE ANOTHER THROUGH ART AND CULTURE

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Francois Matarasso

Talk for Imagine at Millennium Galleries in Sheffield, UK, on 6 September 2016

In 1984, I was a community arts worker in Newark-on-Trent. That summer, I'd planned with a youth worker a series of photography workshops in rural communities across the district, and I'd commissioned a gifted photographer, Ross Boyd, to work with us. The idea was to work with playschemes providing activities for youngsters whose summer holiday might be a few days in Skegness, at best. We'd set up a mobile darkroom in each place and the kids would get three days to use our cheap Russian SLR cameras and discover the magic of making their own prints. We planned an exhibition of the best photos to give a child's eye view of summer in rural Nottinghamshire.

That was the plan. In reality, we found ourselves in the middle of an industrial conflict that was tearing communities apart and whose effects are still deeply felt today, here in South Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and everywhere there was once a coal industry. In March 1984, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) called a strike against the Conservative government's pit closure programme, but without holding a national ballot. Several regions, including Nottinghamshire, voted not to strike. Large numbers of striking miners travelled to picket the Nottinghamshire collieries. Equally large numbers of police were drafted in from southern England to ensure the pits stayed open. The confrontations were terrible.

The children found themselves in eye of this hurricane. The playschemes went ahead and so did our photography workshops, overlooked by policemen who seemed to have been told to be friendly. I can only imagine what it must have been like to be 8 or 10 or 14 and find your quiet town overrun by flying pickets, policemen and news reporters.

But if I can imagine it at all, it's because the children we worked with made such strong photographs about their experience. Our little child-friendly art workshops could make little difference in that storm. I myself was too young and inexperienced to do anything but carry on with what we'd planned. But Ross and I did achieve one thing, even if it was accidentally. We made a quiet space where children could think about what was going on – or think about something else if they preferred. They could use their imaginations and creativity to

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reflect their world and their feelings about it. Their photographs may be technically basic – we were often working in a tent on the recreation ground – but each one speaks powerfully of their maker’s feelings.

Why return to events from that distant past and a world erased by the Internet, post-industrial society and globalisation? Two reasons, I think. First, because that is the last time I remember feeling that our society was as divided as it is today. Then, as now, bitterness, anger and hatred were dominant in our public space. Then, as now, that frightens me.

The other reason is that during those weeks I first glimpsed art’s power to create a safe space for people to meet, think and express themselves in a dangerous time. I’ll come back to that but first I want to say something about the anger and hostility I sense in public space now because it’s that which makes the safe spaces of culture so vital.

When I speak of ‘public space’, I mean the forums where we talk to one another, formally in parliaments, assemblies and political meetings, and informally in the press, radio, television and increasingly the Internet. It extends also to pubs and cafés, streets and workplaces and other places where we meet as a society, but I’m concerned now with the consciously political part of that social world and its reflection in the media and online. It is a very particular kind of space, which people enter principally when they want to persuade others of their opinions. It is absolutely intrinsic to a democratic society. Without its freedom of expression, democracy – which, as Winston Churchill famously observed, is difficult enough<sup>1</sup> – becomes impossible. So the rules, written and unwritten, which regulate that space really matter. Public space and its governance concerns us all because it is at the heart of our ability to protect our human rights.

Unhappily for us all, it is becoming an increasingly hostile space as frightened, hurt and angry people use it to defend their vision of the world by attacking those who question it or simply sees things differently. You need courage to enter it because you are likely to meet strong reactions – if you’re lucky. Even in the recent Republican and Democratic Party National Conventions, speakers were booed by the audience, booed by people who were members of their own party. We’ve seen the same here as political parties tear themselves apart in pursuit of ideological purity.

There was similar and similarly evident anger in 1984, but you could get some distance. The growth of the media, 24 hour news and social media make that hard now. As a community arts worker trained in a printshop where we spoke seriously about giving people access to the means of cultural production, I am thrilled by the new technology that has made those naive dreams possible. In 1984, very few of the coalfield youngsters we worked with had ever held a camera, still less printed their own photographs. The children of those children have better cameras on their mobile phones. They can edit, share and publish their photographs and talk about their ideas with vast audiences. It is fantastic.

Nevertheless, it takes time to learn how to use new technologies. I don’t mean the craft skills, which are easily acquired. It’s the conceptual possibilities of new technology that are

hard to master because they stretch our minds. They change the world in ways it can take decades to understand. It took photography decades to discover that it was more than a very accurate type of painting. And it took painting as long to find a language that untied it from representation. We will learn what these new world-shrinking technologies mean and how to use them to most productive effect. Indeed, that is already happening.

But while that happens, many, have mistaken access to a platform for being heard. Some have been seduced by the illusion of intimacy fostered by this virtual public space into expressing without restraint their anger and pain, fear and hatred. In consequence, public discourse is becoming increasingly intolerant of any kind of difference.

I wish our political leaders were doing more to change that. Why should they, you might ask, since they are supposed to represent us? We shouldn't expect them to be better than the rest of us. Indeed, many leaders seem to think it is their role simply to amplify the views of those they glibly describe as 'ordinary decent people', implicitly condemning all who don't share their opinions to extraordinary indecency.<sup>2</sup> I take another view. We speak of 'leading by example': I want leaders who represent the best of British values and instincts.

The murder of Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen, was such a shock partly because it showed us just that kind of leader: principled, courageous and hopeful. But not with the facile hope of slogans: a hope built on knowing and valuing the people she represented. Her maiden speech has become justly celebrated for its vision of a common humanity that does reflect the best of this society's values. She described her constituency as:

'a gathering of typically independent, no-nonsense and proud Yorkshire towns and villages. Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration, be it of Irish Catholics across the constituency or of Muslims from Gujarat in India or from Pakistan, principally from Kashmir. While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.'<sup>3</sup>

It is profoundly sad that most of us only heard these words, or indeed only of heard the woman who spoke them, after her murder. It says much about the seriousness of our problems now that her example, soberly applauded at the time of her death, has been so quickly passed over. How soon we got back to shouting at one another on political stages, radio phone-ins and the Internet.

The hostility occupying our public space is self-perpetuating. Its aggression puts off those who accept that things are complex and who are therefore willing to listen to other points of view, even to think their own might be wrong. And the less these people participate, the more ground is left to those who want only to divide the world into versions of us and them. And that, never forget, is also the strategy of terrorism: to provoke a reaction that pushes people into opposing armies. This vicious circle of exclusion keeps most people out of politics and off the airwaves. It's one reason why voter turnout has fallen by up to 20% between 1950 and today.<sup>4</sup> It may be why we use social media to share cat videos rather than talking about the things that affect our lives: it's a safe way to share.<sup>5</sup> In the end, public space and

elections are left to the confident, the convinced and the angry, leaving large sections of society all but invisible.

I said before that this frightens me, and I wasn't exaggerating. A public space that excludes so many voices cannot sustain a democracy. The quality of our public culture – indeed of our daily lives – is defined by how safe and secure minorities feel. Majority rule is one thing. A tyranny of the majority, as John Stuart Mill warned, is quite another.<sup>6</sup> When I hear a Member of Parliament on national radio telling electors who have lost a vote he has won to '*suck it up*', it's not just his vulgarity that shocks me. It's his disdain for fellow citizens with other views and his ignorance of the principles of democracy itself.

These are big challenges for our politicians, the media and – not least – for each of us. But I work in the arts and so I ask myself how the arts can respond to them too. Some might say these are political questions, nothing to do with art but, as I discovered in 1984, politics can run all over you if you're not looking out. In any case, people who work in art and culture are citizens too – and the whole point of democracy is that we all share responsibility for our society.

But there is a third, equally fundamental reason why culture has a vital role to play in rescuing public space from a dangerous decline: because it is a part of that space. We don't only debate our values in parliament, the media or online, we do it in everyday life, through our cultural choices and artistic activities. In fact, that cultural space is much more important to most people than a political space which many find so alienating.

Art and culture allows us to express who we are, in all sorts of conscious and unconscious ways. How we dress, what we eat, how we live – all these things reflect our values and are expressed culturally. What we read, watch or listen to, whether we like to dance or sew or take photos – our artistic interests, tastes and activities are central to how we make sense of our lives. They allow us to share our feelings and ideas and connect with people who see things like us. They also allow us to get an insight into what life is like for people whose experience is so unlike our own. We do it all the time, often without thinking about it, thanks to public service broadcasting that is still of remarkably high quality, despite increasing political and commercial pressures. Nadiya Hussein's discovery of Bangladesh as a British Muslim was a fine example of the BBC's Reithian mission to educate, inform and entertain. Does it matter whether we label the film art or culture, if it is engaging, eye-opening and memorable? Public service broadcasting is an invaluable part of British culture and British democracy because it is the most obvious way in which we talk to one another and learn about our similarities and differences.

Broadcasting may be the most obvious part of our public culture, but it is the tip of an iceberg that also includes thousands of public cultural spaces across the country: libraries, museums, galleries, theatres, art centres, cinemas and many others. But cultural space is not limited to these designated places. It is created, formally and informally, for long and

short periods in village halls, community centres, churches, schools, shopping centres, parks, streets and playgrounds – in fact in just about any kind of place where people gather in everyday life.

These spaces – including their virtual and online versions – offer a vital alternative where most people can feel safe, can be themselves and can meet other people – literally and through enjoying the art works, stories, images and performances that happen here. These spaces make no demands. They can be entered without commitment. They are open to all and often free. They try not to judge people. In their corridors, galleries and auditoriums people of all kinds and cultures rub shoulders and discover something about people they might not otherwise meet.

Cultural spaces have their weaknesses and blind spots. Many people still don't feel welcome or know that these spaces belong to them. It is hard, if you're familiar with libraries or museums, to realise how alienating they can seem, to other people. It is the responsibility of cultural institutions to keep working to change that – and that might mean broadening their offer. After all, why would you go to the theatre or a gallery if you never see yourself reflected there? Cultural institutions must tell the stories and reflect the identities of our richly diverse society, and one way of doing that is to involve members of that society in curating and programming.

Our libraries, museums and art centres have a way to go in this but they still give a truer portrait of our society, its diversity and its common ground than many other parts of public space today. Like Jo Cox's vision of diversity, it is rooted in people's lives and experiences, because that is the raw material of culture. Consequently, culture cannot pretend that there is only a light and happy side to human experience. The darkness, pain and anguish of the human heart finds its expression in art and culture, but in ways that open up dialogue rather than closing it down. As Sue Braden wrote, a few years before the Miner's Strike, in a book called *Art and People*:

Our cultural heritage as cultural beings is that we have the means of communicating with each other, of expressing our ideals and our fears, of articulating our hopes and dreams.<sup>7</sup>

If culture is fundamental to how people – separately and together – reflect on their experience, art is especially valuable in testing the boundaries of a society's established limits. It is a space for deliberately going beyond what we think we know, for imagining other, sometimes disturbing, ways of being or living together.

The recent Spencer Tunnick work, *Sea of Hull*, is one instance of that. Until the artist began inviting people to come and stand naked in public together for his photographs, who could have imagined that such a thing would be possible, that we reserved British people would be willing to strip off in a cold climate and shed our embarrassment with our clothes? And, whatever else they say, whatever you think of them as works of art, the resulting images show that we do indeed have far more in common than that which divides us.

Jo Cox's statement was not wishful thinking. It was not just the pious optimism of a good person. It was a statement of experience that could be made by anyone whose work or life brings them into regular contact with people from different backgrounds and cultures.

It spoke to me because that has been my experience too. My working life, before and since that project during the Miner's Strike, has been spent in art and cultural projects that bring together people with widely different cultures, situations and opinions. Among many examples, I think of a project that happened around the closure of a psychiatric hospital and that enabled people with mental health problems, staff members and people in the community to share their different perspectives in writing and photography. Or a Bulgarian project that helped teenagers and the elderly overcome their mutual fears by reviving that village's unique traditional dance culture. Or a music group in the north of England that includes workers in the arms industry playing with committed pacifists because of a shared love of jazz. Or a theatre project involving people from different communities who survived the Yugoslav wars and struggle with the consequences on their lives and mental wellbeing.

All that is possible because art allows people to express themselves safely. Its resources of metaphor, symbol, imagery, ritual, emotion, movement, allegory and sound, among others, allow for complex interpretations. Art works can mean different things, even contradictory things, at the same time. They allow us to express our feelings and hide them too, to speak without fear of retaliation. Art can hear fear, anger and hurt, hold them and face them – all without becoming any of them. Art is a place for processing pain, not spreading it.

Art is tolerant of ambiguity, hesitation and uncertainty. It is the opposite of the angry claims and vague promises that nourish politics and the media. It accepts that things are complicated and that there might be more than one answer – or perhaps no answer at all. And it is equally accommodating of difference, allowing us to explore other ways of seeing, feeling, hearing and being without requiring us to make judgements about them. Through art we can walk in another person's shoes and we might find that they're not as strange or uncomfortable as we expected. Through art and culture we can go beyond our differences without abandoning them to find what we have in common without feeling threatened by what makes each of us unique.

I saw this again a few weeks ago in a theatre performance in Barcelona. It had been developed over nine months by artists from Teatre Tantarantana, in Raval, an inner city district with a very diverse population that includes many migrants from outside Spain. During the hour-long performance, 50 local people told a story of the sea, hope and danger, escape, intimacy and discovery. It was not just the beauty and magic of the show that impressed me: it was how it was created out of the performers' very different cultures, ideas and experiences. It would not have been the same without each person's contribution. There were pupils from inner city schools, recently settled migrants, retired people, amateur singers, performing arts students, local residents, and professional artists. As the writer of the piece, Albert Tola, told me:

‘Politically, for me it’s important to show another landscape of the city. Since the ’92 Olympics there has been a redesign of the city and I became very nervous with that. And so I want to feel at home again in my home and I do feel more home again since I’m doing this project.’

Learning about, from and to be with one another was an essential part of the creative process. Their performance also shared their complex experiences with an arts audience used to festivals and professional theatre.. And it moved them, getting some hugely positive responses as was evident in the lively conversations between performers and spectators after the show.

It’s true, as Jo Cox said, that ‘we have far more in common than that which divides us’, but we need space to meet and find that out. Today, when there is so much hostility in our public space, those of us who work in culture – whether professionally or in some other way – must work harder than ever to ensure that our cultural space is welcoming, tolerant, curious and constructive. We must ensure not only that it really does value every single one of us, for who we are and for what we can give, but that every single one of us knows and believes that too.

President Obama gave an exceptional speech to the Democratic party’s National Congress in July, during which he reminded his audience that

‘democracy doesn’t work if we constantly demonize each other. [...] For progress to happen, we have to listen to each other and see ourselves in each other, and fight for our principles, but also fight to find common ground, no matter how elusive that may sometimes seem. [...]democracy isn’t a spectator sport.’<sup>8</sup>

Democracy isn’t a spectator sport – indeed, and nor is culture. We need to participate in culture as an essential alternative space for us to open and negotiate our deep differences if we are to make having more in common not just a pious wish but an everyday reality.

## 1. REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> ‘No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.’ Winston Church speaking in the House of Commons Debate on the Parliament Bill, 11 November 1947 *Hansard* Vol. 444 cc203-321, available at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill> (accessed 31.08.16)
- <sup>2</sup> ‘This is a victory for ordinary people, for good people, for decent people’ - Nigel Farage MEP, speaking on 24 June 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-recession-economy-what-happens-nigel-farage-speech-a7099301.html>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-06-03/debates/15060324000002/DevolutionAndGrowthAcrossBritain#contribution-15060332000038>

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- <sup>4</sup> Turnout in the 1950 General election was 84.9%: in 2005 it was 61.1% and in 2015 it was 66.1%; <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/08/how-cats-took-over-the-internet-and-became-art.html>
- <sup>6</sup> 'In political speculations "the tyranny of the majority" is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard.' John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Braden, S. 1978, Artists and People, London p. 172
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/27/president-obamas-speech-at-the-democratic-convention/>