

Address to ELIA Gent October 2006

by Robyn Archer AO

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1. Brecht/Eisler – Ballad on Approving of the World

(sung / sprechstimme)

I'm not unjust, but not courageous either
 They pointed out their world to me today
 I saw the bloodstains on the pointing finger
 And quickly said 'I like my world that way

I stood before their world, beneath their truncheons
 And spent the whole day judging all I saw
 Saw butchers who seemed suited to their functions
 And when they asked 'd'you like it?' I said 'sure'

And from that instant my professed opinion was
 Better be a coward than in your grave
 To keep from falling under their dominion
 I kept approving what one can't approve

I saw the crops and landlords profiteering
 With hollow cheeks the people doffed their caps
 I tried their wheat and told all within hearing
 'Top quality , a little dear perhaps'

Then the industrialists, such crippling losses,
 They can't find work for more than one in three
 I told the other two, you better ask your bosses
 I'm ignorant about economy

I saw their soldiers preferring guns to butter
 And planning whom to murder and to rob
 I called out as I stepped down in the gutter
 'Credit where credit's due, they know their job'

Saw civil servants green with mildew keeping
 Their great big mobile dungheap shifter on the move
 So poorly paid for bullying and creeping
 I really hope their salaries improve

I saw the teachers, those poor flagellators
 Imposing their own image on the young
 That's what they get their stipends from the state for
 Or else they'd have to starve, so you should hold your tongue

And children seen in early adolescence
 Whose brains are eight and bodies eighty-three
 I say 'that's life', to the unspoken question
 'Why's life like that?' I answer 'Don't ask me'

And the professors whose impressive phrases
 Excuse the deeds of those whom they support
 Crime wrapped in talk of economic crises
 Let no-one say they're any worse than I had thought

That tradesman there assuring all and sundry
 It's not my fish but I who really smell
 Won't eat bad fish himself so let's all get to know him
 And hope that he may find us fit to sell

Doctors who throw back every hard patient
 Like anglers throwing back a too small fish
 I can't avoid and lay my sickly body
 Upon their couch to carve up as they wish

I saw the murderers and the victims also
 And with a bleeding heart and failing nerve
 Saw how the murderers singled out their victims
 And shouted 'I approve' without reserve

I see them coming see the butchers marching
 Would like to bawl out stop but since meanwhile
 I know their agents are standing right behind me
 I hear my own voice bawling out them 'Heil !'

Since poverty and baseness leave me cold
 My pen is silent times are on the move
 Yet all that's dirtiest in your dirty world
 Includes I know, the fact that I approve

(Bertolt Brecht, trs John Willett : *Brecht Poems 1913-1956* Methuen
 ed. Willett and Mannheim)

2. **Bob Dylan –Masters of War** (excerpts, sung)

Come you masters of war, you that build the big guns
 You that build the death planes, you that build the big bombs
 You that hide behind walls you that hide behind desks
 I want you to know that I can see through your masks

Like the Judas of old, you lie and deceive
 A world war can be won, you want us to believe...
 You that hide in your mansions , while young people's blood
 Flows out of their bodies and is buried in the mud

Let me ask you one question, is your money that good ?
 Can it buy you forgiveness, do you think that it could
 I think you will find, when your death takes its toll
 That all the money you made will never buy back your soul

3. Bob Dylan **For the times they are a changin'** (excerpts sung)

Come writers and critics who prophecy with your pens
 And keep your eyes wide, the chance won't come again
 And don't speak too soon for the wheel's still in spin
 And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'
 For the loser now will be later to win
 ... For the times they are changin'

3. Archer/Grabowsky – **These are the Days** (excerpt sung)

These are the days of the refugee women
 These are the days of the exiled men
 Take all your savings, set out on deep water
 These are the days spent like pigs in a pen

These are the days the foe fights with no standard
 These are the days when we know what life's worth
 Centuries on and a holy war's still thriving
 These are the days when there's no peace on earth

But these are the days of the young and the hopeful
 These are the days with the green in their eyes
 Out on the street protest's right back in fashion

These are the days when a world's realised

When these songs were written they were created by artists who had no choice but to create them. Their skills in craft and imagination were simply the most effective tools at hand to render up to the public ear the things those artists believed needed to be said aloud. The last song *These are the Days* was written in the immediate wake of the September 11th assault on New York.

I was due to make my New York debut there three weeks hence and it was unclear whether the tour would go ahead. It did, and we premiered the song at the BAM café in Brooklyn. Later, when we conceived a concert in which we would combine songs by Brecht/Eisler, songs by Dylan and our own songs in the same vein, it was in the wake of the Australian government joining the United States in a war on Iraq and for the first time ever committing Australia to go to war against a country which had not declared war on *it*. We called the concert **iprotest!** and I used not only all my curatorial skill to pull together interesting and comparable content, but we asked for a seven piece band with excellence and virtuosity of musical arrangement and performance.

We did this because in any venture Paul Grabowsky (pianist, composer , arranger and musical director) and I , always put musical excellence to the fore, but in this instance we also needed to ensure that it was not just a message carelessly accompanied and easy to reject on aesthetic grounds, but a message carried by exquisite musicianship. Compelling and thrilling to the ear, the message could not simply be ignored as mere polemic.

But it also has to be remembered that in his youth Brecht wrote songs like this in which he simply pinched popular tunes of his day and rewrote them:

4. **Remembering Marie A** (excerpt sung)

It was a day in that blue month September
 Silent beneath the plum tree's slender shade
 I held her there my love so pale and silent
 As if it were a dream that must not fade

Above us in the shining summer heavens
 There was a cloud my eyes dwelt long upon
 It was quite white and very high above us
 When I looked up, I found that it had gone
 (Brecht, trs Willett)

and his final songs included , along with Hanns Eisler also in his mature years and sounding more and more like Schubert (listen to Fischer Dieskau's or Matthias Goerne's recording of Eisler songs):

5. **To a Flower Garden** (Brecht/Eisler, trs Willett)

Beside the lake close to the silver poplar
 Hedged round by walls and bushes lies a garden
 So wisely planned to be laid out with monthly flowers
 That from March till October it's in bloom
 Here in the morning, not that often, I sit and listen
 wishing I could also always have, whatever the weather
 Sunny, cloudy
 Something or other just as pleasant on show

And in various concert tours – to London, Berlin, New York, Bogota, Zurich and all over Australia – Paul and I from time to time sang and played

6. **Piaf/Monnot - Le Vie en Rose** (excerpt sung)

Quand il me prends dans ses bras,
 Il me dit a tout bas
 Je vois La Vie en Rose...

7. **Freidrich Hollaender - Falling in Love Again** (excerpt sung)

Ich bin von kopf bis fuss auf liebe engestellt
 Denn das ist meine welt
 Und sondst gar nichts
 Das ist was soll ich machen meine natur
 Ich kann halt lieben nur
 Und sondst gar nichts...
 Manner umschwiren mich wie motten um das licht
 Undwenn sie verbrennen, dafur kann ich nicht
 Ich bin von kopf bis fuss auf liebe eingestellt
 Denn das ist meine welt ,
 und sondst gar nichts

or 8. **Via Con Dios** and left not a dry eye in the house..,

L'alborada despertar felice d'espera
 Sien tu corazon yo voy, a donde quiera
 via con dios mi vida, via con dios mi amor

My point is that even when artists consider themselves politically engaged, those artists are rarely ever overtly political all the time. I use the words 'engaged' and 'overt' for a reason: we cannot avoid the fact that we are *all* political *all* the time.

Even if we say or do nothing overt we are displaying our favour of the status quo: it cannot be assumed that only those who use their art to push for change are the 'political' artists. And even for them it was Brecht who also pointed out that people do not stop making love during wartime: his elegies *To Those Born Later*, the very late songs written with Eisler, carry the lines :

‘even hatred of debasement can distort your features
 even anger at injustices can make your voice hoarse
 Oh we who used to hope we created a basis for friendliness
 Never could be friendly ourselves’
 (Brecht trs Willett – *Bad Time for Poetry*, Methuen ed Willett)

Love songs as well as *kampflieder*, pastorate as well as political; this is what makes us human. But if political activists must take time out for love and beauty, what do we make of those who only dedicate themselves to the pursuit of beauty ? Are those who shut out ugliness, *realpolitik* and all those distractions of life which get in the way of pure beauty and excellence, just as likely to be thought less than human that those who devote their art solely , or partly to the common purpose? Most importantly, what do arts education institutions make of this ?

I have a great deal of sympathy, sometimes envy, for those who have been able to dedicate themselves solely to the pursuit of their own art. Being a jack of all trades, the daughter of a standup comedian (who also sang the popular songs of his era) I didn't know anything about formal training. While I was encouraged by my father to perform, I never had the benefit of advice from family or friends about dedicating myself to one path or subjecting my raw talent to tuition and improvement. I simply pursued everything I seemed to do well in as far as I could, *without* the benefit of an arts education. I simply responded to the things which interested me. I am telling this story precisely because I am *not* the product of any arts institution – I am a singer by blood and apprenticeship, a maker of festivals by pure luck.

Once I had become known as a singer there were many who urged me to remain *only* a singer. Even when I started to write songs, cabarets, theatre shows, speeches, verse and direct arts festivals, I know there were still those who wished I had remained *only* a singer, and amongst them those who wished I had sung only *one* kind of song – *only* the songs of the Weimar period, or *only* my own political songs, or *only* Piaf, or *only* wild country and western yodeling (you don't believe me ?) [*random demonstration of C&W yodeling*] My response was simple and natural: I am not interested in curbing who or what I am for the sake of conquering a market. I wanted to be all the things and everything I could be; and that of course included the acknowledgement of politics – of state, of gender and of culture. By the time I was twenty three, nothing was out of bounds ; all that which constituted life was material from which songs could be made.

My political upbringing was just as scant as my arts education: I came from a traditionally Labour voting family which was not financially well off. Apart from his entertaining, my father changed jobs a dozen times. I felt I lacked nothing, and yet it seemed we were always just a step away from penury. This probably left me with a sense of injustice, or at very least inequality, as I gradually understood that my parents felt cheated. They had worked all their lives and had no home to call their own and no savings. I have to suppose that this makes fertile ground for some degree of political awareness.

And there were two fabulous strokes of fate.

The first came as my adolescent hormones raged, and all I wanted was fame and fortune no matter what, as a way out of dry Australian suburbia, the songs at the top of the pops were those coming out of the American folk and protest movement – the hits of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter Paul and Mary, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger and Seeger reviving the songs of Woody Guthrie. When I competed in the 60s' version of Pop Idol, four of the ten national finalists were folk singers, and at sixteen I was one of them. So I was getting fame fast, but what I was also getting were the words of those using their songs to fight for 'freedom' and equal rights. At such an impressionable age I'm sure those songs were seeping into my porous developing-self much faster than the double mathematics, physics and chemistry I matriculated with.

The second stroke of fate happened when I was twenty-seven and had still not consciously encountered the products of serious art, let alone their ideas and practice. At that time I was teaching senior school English full time, and singing four to six nights a week in a sort of mock Elizabethan tavern: I was the wench who took the customers' money, made sure they were all seated and then whipped out a guitar and sang dirty ditties to the assembled throng. A university acquaintance was by now the administrative head of New Opera South Australia and he remembered me from revues past: they were looking for someone to sing the role of Annie 1 in the Australian premiere of Brecht/Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins*. They wanted someone without formal training, as Lenya had been when Weill wrote the work with her in mind. I plunged into learning the music by ear, by hard work, and by gradually feeling my way around the score. I sang with an orchestra for the first time. I had a huge success. More importantly I learned that in Brecht there lay a model for being as articulate as I wished to be (the academic side of me) but at the same time deploying all my skills as someone who had come from showbiz. This oeuvre from the 1920s-50s Berlin, exile, California, Berlin was supremely intelligent and politically incisive, with shades of satire and subtlety I had never before encountered. What's more, it had been created by Brecht in collaboration not with folk singers and three chord musicians, but with serious composers. I had suddenly found the way to stop being two quite separate people, as it happens with two names, doing two full time jobs at the same time. I not only discovered art, but at the same time a rationale for my life.

So this is the personal journey of one individual: this series of accidents of fate are not things you can somehow falsely replicate or teach. What of the artists or budding artists who have not known a sense of want, who have not developed a sense of the inequalities and hardships at large in the world or in their own societies? How do you teach 'awareness' and how do you create a balance between that, and the dedication needed to hone the craft? I was lucky. It's easier to come from the other side, and rarer I think. More significantly for you and this conference, perhaps the question is 'it necessary for an artist or student of art to be politically engaged?' Some would argue that it cannot be the responsibility of the individual artist, but it *could* be the responsibility of institutions of all kinds (from concert halls to festivals to training institutions) to ensure that they maintain a bridge between art and life. I would argue that if young artists are not overtly engaged, then they might perhaps at very least be made aware of the status quo they support by doing and saying nothing. I would have thought a dispassionate daily dose of simple global or even local and national facts and figures each day might serve to curb a lack of awareness even if it didn't cure it...

Today, as you fine tune that phrase of Bach, or hone that cross-hatching technique, just spare a thought for the following:

- a) this many thousands of people will have nothing to eat today
 - b) this many hundreds or thousands of people will die today in wars for which you may have given tacit approval
 - c) this many people in your own city will sleep rough tonight
- Do you care about this? If you do, what might we most effectively do to help? And help fails, is it better to have been at least aware?

This recalls for me the Brecht poem :

Thoughts on the Duration of Exile

I
 Don't knock any nails into the wall
 Throw your coat on the chair.
 What use is planning for next week?
 Tomorrow you go back home

Leave the little tree without water.
 What's the point of planting trees now?
 Before it's grown half as high as your doorstep
 You'll have finished with here.

Put your cap across your face when you see people approaching.
 What's the point of thumbing through foreign grammars?
 The news that calls you home
 Is surely in a familiar language.

Just like the flaking old whitewash
 (Do nothing to stop it!)
 So too the barrier of force will crumble
 That has been set up on the frontier
 Keeping the rule of justice out.

II

Here's the wall, you see the nail you hammered into it ?
 When, d'you think, will you be going home ?
 Do you want to know what you really believe ?
 Day by day
 You're at work, seated in your study, writing.
 Do you want to know what you really think of your work ?
 Look at the little chestnut tree
 You carried a full can of water to.

(Bertolt Brecht, trs Christopher Middleton)

And yes, we *would* be demanding of a student that they take all this on board at the same time as demanding they dedicate themselves to achieving all they can from their instrument, be it voice, limbs, pen, brush or musical device. Because the fact is there are still throughout the world enough arts organisations which uphold the status quo and *demand* from their artists that the inequalities of the world be largely ignored: they will argue “We have a large pot of state and private sponsorship and we will do everything in our power to hang onto it. We need dedicated ‘apolitical ‘ artists to be part of our system.” The star system is still very much alive, and because there are many stars required to fill that global firmament, *not* training for standards of excellence and ambition would preclude many young artists from achieving their potential, and their ultimate livelihood.

There are, clearly, rewards aplenty for those who manage to avoid any whiff of political engagement. And this is not just a matter of a lack of individual or even institutional conscience. Professor George Steiner even as far back as 1996, talked about the distance of art from the ‘big issues’ of life, as something we had *all* learned from the twentieth century. He was talking about the Edinburgh Festival when he said:

In the late 1960s, with Britten's *War Requiem*, with Menuhin's dedication of his performance of the Beethoven Violin Concerto to “ the indomitable and defiant spirit of man”, sentiments flowed high. The Souvenir Programme could proclaim the consecration of the Festival to “peace, compassion, and common humanity.”
 Do we still look at the arts in quite that way ? As the inhuman tenor of this century comes to condition our feelings, the terrible impotence of Literature and the arts stands somewhat naked... we now know of

the neutrality of the arts and of their performance in the company of barbarism, of the enigmatic capacity of human beings to appreciate music, art, poetry, profoundly in the evening, indeed to perform such music or write verse, and then to proceed to bestiality the next morning... Perhaps one must take a step further: great musical performances, art exhibitions, drama-festivals, architecture have not only co-existed with political madness, they have adorned and celebrated it... (George Steiner, *A Festival Overture* p12/13)

And if there is nothing inherently honourable in the arts, then there is no inherent obligation for art to connect honourably with the needs of society.

The only caution one might ever be able to give to those artists who choose not to see the wider context, is that they might feel a great deal worse for their ignorance if a conscience surfaces in them sometime in the future, long after they can do anything about it. The potential for personal demoralisation is immense.

On Friday I will travel to Antwerp to see Guy Cassiers' new production of Mefisto, the scenario in which an actor continues to play on during the Third Reich and the New Order which follows, arguing that it is important for artists to continue to dedicate themselves to their art despite any current climate .

Of course the implications of his complicity have their consequences. Even before I see it, this production is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all it is being mounted in a city where artists have been prepared to take on a battle against the extreme right. Secondly, Guy Cassiers in taking over Toneelhuis has offered us all a new model for a theatre company: he has established a team which includes his theatrical skill along with interesting young artists from other genres, such as installation and dance, making a program in which the disciplines are working together. The generic walls are coming down in Antwerp. At the same time we have seen this year a huge retrospective by Jan Fabre in his hometown, the Singel still remains one of the most interesting presentation and commissioning houses in Europe, and Guy Cassiers himself, having devoted himself to the honing of his theatrical aesthetic whilst in Rotterdam, has clearly allowed politics to re-surface in his plan for Antwerp.

The edgy political climate there has been producing a marvellous response from the performing and visual arts. This is unusual in the current anti-intellectual climate that permeates much of the English-speaking world which is obsessed with the desperate measuring of popularity in all things – here overt engagement one side or another will mean a dent somewhere in your popularity stakes, and possibly a dent in your grant or contract.

Many cultural commentators (including those who work within the cultural sphere) seem still to sit between two extremes – one is the aforementioned tendency to think that the artist's best path (especially for ambitious virtuosi) is to ignore overt political engagement: this stands, incidentally, in direct contrast to the paths taken by many of the virtuosi that such artists would wish to emulate – a

Casals for instance or a Shostakovich. The second extreme is the one that has reacted to the first: the forced necessity of community engagement. Frank Furedi writes:

‘.culture is [now] valued in so far as it advances the populist agenda of inclusion, participation and access. Increasingly, every aspect of culture is regarded from the standpoint of this agenda. The question is not whether a particular institution or cultural artefact is good, bad, beautiful or ugly, inspiring or uninspiring, but whether it is relevant, accessible or inclusive’

(Furedi, *Where have all the intellectuals gone – confronting 21st century philistinism* , Continuum, London 2004, p92 hardback)

The question then becomes ‘Where is the stand for both excellence and engagement ?’ This was , and *is*, precisely the attraction I have always felt towards the Brecht/Eisler repertoire – a great wordsmith (the poems more than the plays) and a very fine composer. This repertoire perennially throws up to a performer the challenge of getting all that right and at the same time often having to create a satirical distance from the material.

George Steiner actually went a lot further in looking at the possible reasons for the widening gap. He wrote in his *Festival Overture* for Edinburgh :

Personally I cannot shake off the intuition that minds and sensibilities shaped by aesthetics, by their identification with fictions, by their enchantment with the past (an enchantment which defines a humanistic pedagogy and culture) may be inhibited from any active, concrete involvement in the anguish and demands of the present. (Steiner, *A Festival Overture* p13)

Was this true ten years ago – is it still true now? And if so, is there any attempt in our institutions to train artists either for overt political engagement or in the arts of subversion ? Is there any institution that would pride itself on showing its students how they might entertain the possibility of career suicide by engaging with current affairs. Stefan Auer, speaking at a 2005 conference in Cork about the movement of New Slovenian Arts (NHK) said :

C Robyn Archer

To put it simply, it seems to me that it is becoming ever more difficult to to be subversive (There is this classic observation that while in the West anything goes and nothing matters; in the communist East nothing was possible but everything mattered a great deal. The problem that avant-garde artists face today is that nobody really cares. This is Marcuse’s point about ‘repressive tolerance’. You cannot be very subversive whatever you do if there is no-one out there who would be outraged about your non-conformist behaviour...

(Art and Politics : the imagination of Opposition in Europe, R4 publishing, Dublin and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Slovenia, 2004,p18)

Furedi agrees:

The end of the century offered a radically different political landscape. Politics today has little in common with the passions and conflicts that shaped people's commitments and hatreds over the past century.

There is no longer room for either the ardent defender of the free-market faith, or the robust advocate of revolutionary transformation.

It would be wrong to conclude that politics has become more moderate.

Politics has gone into early retirement.

The big issues of our time – impending environmental catastrophe, threats to our health, killer bugs, weapons of mass destruction – are presented as perils that stand above politics. It is widely believed that the world is out of control and that there is little that human beings can do to master these developments or influence their destiny.

(Furedi p 82/83)

This was published in 2004 and I'm not sure how much has changed despite some outward signifiers of young people seeming to engage at a very populist level with 'big issues'. Is this just a commercial co-option of the notion of 'protest', something that goes along with the retro fad for sixties design and sounds which peculiarly accompanies the iPod generation? Certainly when I asked youngsters in Liverpool who they would most like to talk to, it was Bono on world poverty. Yet Furedi refers to the fact that 'more young people vote for their favourite personality on Big Brother than they do in elections'. Similarly one of the sponsors of the Venice Biennale last year produced a give-away magazine which seemed to pitch to a new and politicised young audience, yet its expensive production values and placement at the Illy coffee stands throughout the Giardini reflected something more like 'big issue' engagement as fashion rather than real life.

Serious evidence of a change in the tide comes more clearly from the writing of Hortensia Volckers in a 2005 edition of the magazine produced by Germany's Federal Cultural Foundation, of which she is the Artistic Director.

Importantly the voice of hope in this case comes from a government institution trying to support art which has the ambition to be good art as well as art which is engaged:

As an agent provocateur, it aims to create 'future workshops' with a free choice of tools, encourage open-ended learning processes, and be a zone for intellectual and artistic risks, in short: a public forum which addresses issues concerning Germany as a whole

(Kulturstiftung des Bundes, August 31st 2005, p 7)

This positive attitude comes from someone not ignorant of the kinds of challenges that both Steiner and Furedi throw up, though Furedi is more despairing about the lack of alternative avenues of engagement, and Steiner more hopeful of science than arts:

Today it is noon-time not in the arts but in the sciences. An estimated Ninety percent of all scientists in history are now alive. Whereas the study of the humanities...looks backwards, science is, by very definition in forward motion... a stubborn intimation whispers to us that the coming in our culture of another Michaelangelo or Shakespeare or Mozart is doubtful. In the theoretical and applied sciences, even a middling talent is on an upward escalator...

...Theorems will be solved, crucial experiments performed, discoveries made next week and/or the week thereafter. At this very moment, such 'ultimates' as the creation of self-replicating molecular life, the mapping of the beginnings of our cosmos and the neuro-physiological understanding of consciousness are plausible. The dizzying concept of a 'theory of everything' is no longer science fiction.

C Robyn Archer

The impact on our practical existence and on the horizons of our imaginings is obvious. What is often overlooked is the shift in fundamental energies and joy. One would, in renaissance Florence, have aspired to some personal contact with the painters and sculptors. In this late twentieth century, many, possibly a majority of the most gifted, work in the sciences. They harness the most concentrated, innovative impulses towards the future. The prestige, the rewards associated with their project are, to the humanist, enviable...

Doing first class science or technology is, visibly, enormous fun...

It engages criteria of elegance, beauty, of harmony in mathematics as old as Pythagoras or Plato but now hidden from all who cannot master the languages, dare one say, the poetry of algebra. That may be indeed be 'no country for old men' as Yeats would put it, but it is brimful of laughter and sun-rise..

(Steiner, *A Festival Overture*, 1996, P 13/14)

Now there *is* a challenge, ten years old and maybe failing to anticipate the lights of an era beyond the post-modern : today it is clear that there *is* a desire for personal contact with artists – but conductors more than composers, film stars more than playwrights, and the heavyweights of the arts – architects of the stature of Gehry, Pei and Liebskind: though perhaps the latter confirms Steiner's point since architecture bridges both science and art as well as business, urban planning as well tourism, and all with a certain muscularity of purpose and realisation. But nevertheless Steiner's words remain a challenge for arts institutions if ever I heard one.

Interestingly, the Jan Fabre work which I presented in my 2004 Melbourne Festival was *I Am Blood*, commissioned for the Cour d'Honneur in the Palais des Papes in Avignon . It was inspired in part by the thought of how much blood had been shed in that sacred place, but was also very much to do with Fabre's own interest in recent discoveries about the qualities of human blood. Robert Lepage's *The Elegant Universe* which will premiere next year is wholly based on the physics of String Theory. So there *are* artists who recognise the power of modern science and are going to it for their inspiration. This impulse also lies behind a great deal of art and new media technology.

But Volckers now lumps science with the arts in terms of their current impotence:

With the twentieth century behind us, we know that art and the resource of meaning can be instrumentalised for political purposes.

However, we also know that, as the fashions rapidly change, they lose their critical power when misused as raw material for design, advertising, and round the clock entertainment...Aestheticism has lost its innocence, as has science - though its role models continue to be publicly honoured... In a world which has become godless and completely controlled by capital, even the most obscene protest, the shrillest artistic provocation finds itself between a rock and a hard place.

(Kulturstiftung des Bundes, August 31st 2005 p6)

This is echoed by Furedi:

It is widely believed that the world is out of control and that there is little that human beings can do to master these developments or influence their destiny. Deprived of choice and options, humanity is forced to acquiesce in a world-view that Margaret Thatcher aptly described as TINA – There Is No Alternative...

If indeed there is no alternative, politics can have little meaning.

(Furedi p 83)

But Volckers does see alternatives and her hopes for her own institution are passionate and full of belief:

... it is a small flexible institution of enlightenment – in the sense of exploring unknown terrain and with hope that artworks and cultural endeavours will be able to create communicative enclaves from which the commercialised public sphere and paralysed administrations can be breached. From which effective artistic interventions occur which could shake the credo of contemporary politics that states 'There Are no alternatives'. I still believe that the incorruptibility, the freedom, the ability to criticise and perceive each individual and group can reinstate the society's self-reflective discussion. The discussion about how we wish to live in the future.

(Kulturstiftung des Bundes, August 31st 2005 p7)

C Robyn Archer

So where, precisely now, can this lead us ? I am not part of an institution and yet of course I am often in the business of teaching or at very least in the presence of learning. I did teach for two and a half years – senior high school English (my formal degree was an Honours in English language and literature –and I studied Latin and Old and Middle English) . This was in the aftermath of a motorbike accident and , *because* of my university education, a growing dissatisfaction with the popular entertainment I had grown into: it gave me no scope for the newly learned skills of perceptiveness and subtlety. I loved teaching, but I left a school because having found Brecht I believed I could be a more effective teacher outside the system than inside it. I hope that's been true.

As an informal mentor, what would my position now be ? Would I take Furedi to heart, or Auer, and agree that the political scene is so demoralised that nothing can be done. Do I encourage the children of my cousins and friends to stay away from art and the humanities and opt for science instead as Steiner might have it ? Or might I simply opt for awe and beauty and cross my fingers that that in itself may have an effect ? After all, at least it does no overt harm does it ? The truth is, there are many times when I witness the perfect product of rigorous dedication – a chamber music recital (lieder or early music) for instance, or a perfect dance solo (Cesc Gelabert's recreation of Gerhard Bohner's *Im Goldenen Schnitt* to Bach) – and I think how can we possibly demand more of an artist ? Let them make their art, and let others deal with the troubles of society, inspired for a moment by such sheer beauty.

Or do I take heart from those small radiant pockets of hope and positive attitude that art can be both great and inspiring , as well as useful and uniting. All I can do is appeal to the conscience of the person, the artist, at hand. And if that person *does* desire engagement, then what course, what genre, might I recommend ? Can a play or a book or a piece of music, no matter how powerful, have an effect on realpolitik ? Can art stop wars or narrow the widening gap between rich and poor ? Surely it can still try.

One thing I do know is that contemporary visual arts have taken up the mantle of political engagement with much more fervour than any other genre ? And in a life of ' je ne regrette rien' I do wonder what might have happened if the high school I went to had allowed me to continue with my 'art' instead of denying me it and forcing me into the top science stream. At 12 I had accidentally come across a book about the Cubists and I copied them in heavy watercolour trying to emulate oils: by 14 I was working in oils. If only someone had recognised that this is how real artists start – and encouraged me to keep going – would I have taken that road and I would I now have been in a stronger position to comment on or influence the hard questions that arise in our societies ? Would my brush have proven stronger than my songs ?

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Yet even now I'm sure pessimists would argue that while the subject matter of much contemporary visual art may be overtly political, that work usually reaches only a small converted audience, and what actually reaches the grand public is the blockbuster from the past, or the fun and awe of the spectacular – Gormley's *Angel of the North* or *Another Place*, Jeff Koon's *Puppy* or Carsten Holler's slippery dips for Tate Modern.

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My guess is that I would still advise an artist first and foremost to make their art as best they can, and in all things advise 'to thine own self be true'. If political or social engagement is part of that truth, then let them engage, and in that case we must ensure that teaching institutions can make available not only the increasingly standardised set of skills, but also something of a) the processes of how to engage with realpolitik and b) a history of political engagement through the arts in all genres. Now there's a subject I'd like to teach!

The fact is that Fabre and Forsyth, Cassiers and countless others *do* make interesting, beautifully crafted work which also engages – just as do the kinds of projects which the Federal Cultural Foundation and others now fund. And exactly as I said previously that it would be remiss of arts teaching institutions not to nurture excellence, so it would be equally remiss these days to omit the kind of training for awareness that may even be *required* of tomorrow's artists. Volckers already warned of this last year when she wrote:

It is my hope that, in future, the Federal Cultural Foundation will support most if not all proposed projects on the condition that the artists and cultural producers invest a portion – let's say a third – of their working time in intensively sharing their knowledge and experience with others.

(Kulturstiftung des Bundes, August 31st 2005 p7)

While this does not advocate the neglect or simplification of an artist's craft, it certainly does provoke artists not to guard their hard-earned skills too preciously, and she does quote the example of Simon Rattle and *Dance It Is*.

If artists of the future are going to need this all-embracing perspective, then their training institutions are going to have to start preparing them for it, and of course, many are. For even now, more and more government funding for arts complexes, concert halls, theatres, festivals etc, already comes with stipulations about social engagement: it may be the kind of thing that our artists of the future encounter much more frequently. It also begs the question whether students of engineering, chemistry and car mechanics will also need to make a similar contribution to 'community' and whether their training institutions will be required to teach 'awareness', 'participation' and 'intercultural dialogue'. Why would only artists be required to have consciences?

And even if this is the sign of a populist present which may well pass, then arts institutions still have to take it on. All of us engaged in the arts should try to ensure that it does *not* result in that awful misjudgment of 'the people', which we call 'dumbing down'. Any of us fighting for a separation of excellence away from

engagement almost guarantees the continuation of dumbing down of the many: and this is not good for any of us. We very badly *need* intelligent and sensitive societies – not dumb ones.

When Alain Plaitel (making work for *Les Ballets C de la B*, a company resident here in Gent) shoes us his outcast souls playing out their bitter-sweet lives to the aching strains of Purcell or Bach, he is telling us that everyone has this beauty within and the capacity to recognise it through art.

It is Furedi's upbeat ending:

There is very little that we can do to force the elites [and by this he means *political* elites] to give up their instrumentalist and philistine world view. But we can wage a battle of ideas for the hearts and minds of the public. How we do it is one of the key questions of our time.
(Furedi, p 156)

By acknowledging the fundamental ability of *all* people to be inspired by beauty, talent, and great craft, and from that experience to enter a state of grace, we prepare the ground for societies in which the love of the arts, and the appreciation of artists can only become stronger. This is a world I love to imagine for the young ones I know and hold dear, and a world for which I am prepared to work very hard.

Robyn Archer

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