

A Love Filled Slap: A Manifesto for Arts and Health

In 2007 Professor of Philosophy at the University of Durham, Nancy Cartwright, authored a technical report for the London School of Economics and Political Science for their Contingency And Dissent in Science Project.

Her paper is called: Are RCTs the Gold Standard?
Her unequivocal answer was: no.

'There is no gold standard; no universally best method. Gold methods are whatever methods will provide a) the information you need, b) reliably, c) from what you can do and from what you can know on the occasion.'

In that same year, I'd just completed a three-year research project across the North West of England. Funded by the Treasury, it was focused on improving the evidence base for arts and health. It was a rich piece of work and harvested much more than we expected.

More than the gathering of data, it nurtured relationships – and in a period where arts and health practice and research was largely concerned with clinical environments, it made significant connections with public health.

On the ground and strategically, public health professionals and artists began to work together. Over 2007, the Department of Health and Arts Council England published their joint Prospectus for Arts and Health – the first high-profile advocacy document of its sort in England - surely this was the beginning of a golden age in arts and health?

But this was 2007 and the year that the 'global financial crisis' reared its ugly head, and it was inevitable that in the face of failed market models based on high risk and greed, that politicians would turn away from imaginative ways of thinking about health and well-being, and roll up their sleeves, whip off their ties and get to grips with the more important matters of the day - photo-opportunities, hospital bugs and cost-cutting.

However, this period of regional development seemed to be flourishing and a formal partnership between my university, Arts Council England and what was then the North West Regional Public Health Team provided some real cohesion.

We seemed to have found some momentum and on the back of the research I'd undertaken, these relationships I describe, had evolved into an informal regional network, responding to what people said they wanted in the field: sharing practice and research, developing training and more than anything else - getting together.

The North West Arts and Health Network grew as a virtual and occasionally physical entity and in 2008 I was thrilled that just over 500 people were registered as 'members'. An early free networking event in 2009, called North West Frontier attracted 200 people and explored an overarching question: '*How can culture and the arts impact on inequalities?*' This was an early public outing in relation to arts and public health, for Professor Richard Parish, then Chief Executive of the *Royal Society for Public Health* and we produced a spontaneous manifesto statement for arts and health. This wasn't the manifesto that's more widely in the public realm, but a taste of things to come asserting the place of the arts in 'everyday life and democracy': more of that in a moment.

With only 65% of the public turning out to vote in 2010, a hung-parliament in the UK was inevitable, as was the birth of a cost-cutting coalition government fixated on 'deficit reduction' in public spending.

So it was, that with the last days of the formal partnership that had enabled the earlier research and the formation of a regional network, that the idea of an arts and health strategy for the North West was muted. Strategies of sorts had appeared around the UK and further afield over the preceding years and had had varying degrees of use and relevance. Given the climate of 'austerity' and the ongoing cycle of governmental and policy change, what real benefit would another glossy strategy add to the debate? Would it be just another fat advocacy document left to fester on a civil servants' dusty bookshelf?

Facilitating networking sessions around the North West from Carlisle in the north to Chester in the south, it quickly became clear that people wanted to express themselves beyond case studies, and the idea of developing a manifesto of some sorts - *based on a shared vision and aspiration* - was born.

Over 2010 I worked with people in small and large groups around the region. In Liverpool over a hundred people under the same roof contributed and in a small rural town outside Lancaster, just 15 took part, but over the year just over 1000 people shared a similar process that gathered people together to give voice to this arts and health agenda. With something of the oft-quoted Margaret Mead mantra, we felt a part of something bigger than ourselves.

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

Central to our conversations was an agreement in the principles of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, particularly:

Article 19. *Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

Article 27. *Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits...*

In practical terms, a significant part of our conversation was taken up with the inevitable unrest at the political status quo, and an exploration of artists' manifestos and artists' work, helped shape the exchange.

I want to share some of those for a moment. And importantly, I won't share my naive understanding of the Easter Uprising other than to say that it is with something of the spirit of those poets and free-thinkers, that we embarked on our journey.

We looked at the Conservative Party Manifesto, and that of the coalition government. We looked at the false promises and lies in political manifestos per-se, and decided that this wasn't for us.

We explored DADA and Futurist Manifestos and although the Futurist Manifesto of 1908 was a celebration of power, speed, progress and aggression, in many ways, it was a worrying fascist rant, which includes some dubious aspirations. But it was the poetic language we immersed ourselves in and here's a section from it.

'We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.'
{...} *'And so, faces smeared with good factory muck—plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot—we, bruised, our arms in slings, but unafraid, declared our high intentions to all the living of the earth.'*

Significantly we looked to artists themselves, who through their work presented us with unintentional and deeply disturbing manifestos. Discussions around inequalities and poverty were addressed through Jonathan Swift's satirical essay, A Modest Proposal (1729) in which Swift, in the guise of a well-meaning economist, suggests a vicious solution to attitudes towards poverty and the 'cure-all' solutions of governments - the poor can sell their children to nourish the wealthy and provide a range of luxury leather goods.

This work (which caused just a little outrage) highlighted for those of us discussing the arts within the current 'fiscal climate', that regarding people as commodities and the reduction of all aspects of life by the 'dismal science' of economics - to dispassionate statistics - was abhorrent.

But perhaps the richest stimulus to those of us involved in this manifesto was our visceral response to the distorted gold standard of evidence, held up as unequivocal fact, in the UK Governments briefing report to Tony Blair in 2003.

Now known as the dodgy dossier, the report was used as the moral and financial justification for invading Iraq, claiming to draw "upon a number of sources, including intelligence material," around Weapons of Mass Destruction and cited by Tony Blair and George Bush JR as *quality research*.

We know now that much of the intelligence material was plagiarized from the graduate student, Ibrahim al-Marashi and plagiarized verbatim including typos, but yet with dangerous amendments including:

'monitoring foreign embassies in Iraq' - became
'spying on foreign embassies in Iraq'

'aiding opposition groups in hostile regimes' - became
'supporting terrorist organisations in hostile regimes'

According to the French academic Dominique Reynie, between January 3 and April 12, 2003, 36 million people across the globe took part in almost 3,000 protests against the Iraq war.

These were the largest demonstrations ever, which New York Times writer, Patrick Tyler suggests, showed that there were two superpowers on the planet, the United States and worldwide public opinion.

Only those voices weren't heard.

Jump forward to Baghdad, 5th March 2007 and to Al-Mutanabbi Street, a book market and a place of learning, imagination and free will; a place where in the blink of an eye, 38 people were killed and 200 injured in a car bomb explosion.

In 2009, the artist Jeremy Deller created a piece of work called - *It Is What It Is* - in which he shared the rusted and scarred shell of a car that had been caught up in that very same explosion.

He took the car from New York to Los Angeles stopping off in 14 towns and cities on the journey – a classic American road trip route – only he was accompanied by an Iraqi citizen and an enlisted American soldier.

This work provoked conversation beyond simple platitudes and brought people up close and personal with the consequences of war. For those of us exploring artists and manifestos this provided a serious focus on the power of artists as free thinkers and key witnesses to societal discontent.

With this and other work in mind we began to explore some simple questions, which included:

- what might the future look like?
- what do we want to achieve?
- how do we do this and what do we need?
- how do we know our practice works?
- what are we saying and who to?
- how do we embed our work, how does it grow?
- what are the questions we are asking - and why?

So, we worked together, argued a little, reached some common ground and just over a thousand words later, we had ourselves a *Manifesto for Arts and Health* of which this is a taster.

Our manifesto is just as much about education as it is health; the arts as it is science, communities as it is the individual. Well-being is central to our vision. The arts are central to fulfilling our fundamental human rights.

*this is not a quick fix
this is not about benign lumps of municipal sculpture
this is not about reducing the arts to a cost-effective
prescription
this is about well-being
this is about democracy
this is about human flourishing
this is about new ways of understanding impact and
value
this is about solidarity*

And responses to the work were exciting, from poets and politicians, to activists and artists, people way beyond our North West region were keen to respond. From a hospital registrar in Mexico City to a street artist in Kabul, messages of support painted a picture of a small-scale-global phenomenon that echoed the political within the arts and health agenda, suggesting that both public health and the arts are inextricably bound up in politics.

From a policy perspective, now Deputy Director for Equality and Health Inequalities, NHS England, Ruth Passman, suggested that, *'the manifesto supports us as policy makers and practitioners in exploring groundbreaking concepts of both 'wellbeing' and 'being ill better'.*

In the context of clinical care, former editor of the British Medical Journal, Dr. Richard Smith asserted that medicine has, *'...forgotten healing in an orgy of technology. The arts can help us heal not so much through comforting but more through challenging and making us fully human.'*

Former Chief Executive of Mersey Care NHS Trust Alan Yates put it more succinctly suggesting boldly; *'if the arts hadn't been invented we would do so now, as a front line health service.'*

Perhaps of all the feedback to the manifesto, it was that of the artistic director of Australian community arts project *KickStart Arts* that best summed up what it was all about.

Jami Bladel described it as *'a love filled slap in the face of consumerist society. {...} It's about Social justice, about joined up thinking, it's about a courage we fear might not happen in our lifetime. {...} It is at once bleak and hopeful, a troubled text searching for answers, asking questions and promising nothing if we don't start working (creatively) together. It is a starting point. It faces us towards the global revolution we simply can't afford not to have.'*

Since its inception in 2008, members of the *North West Arts and Health Network* have multiplied; from 500 then to over 5000 in 2016 and in truth, it's less regional and more discreetly global, with membership stretching beyond neat geographical boundaries and professions, and is bound by shared values and the possibilities of connecting with each other – virtually and where possible – in the flesh.

In February 2015 we held a free networking event in Manchester called *CHAOS & COMFORT*, which revisited the Manifesto prior to the 2015 UK general election in the. Much of our original ideals still held true, but we had new aspirations for what we might be by 2020. In some small way, it felt like we were breaking away from the traditional idea of arts and health – less focused on clinical settings, illness and disease and the sometimes 'happy-clappy' evangelism that can be leveled at our field - and seemed more intellectually, viscerally and practically engaged in the inequalities agenda.

Central to all our thinking, was an awareness born of a shared knowledge and experience, that the arts inspire and influence people, but so many people feel disconnected from the arts, particularly when inequalities in health and culture are endemic amongst the most economically disadvantaged people. To counter these age-old inequities our aspiration includes an increased focus on children's education and access to the arts, alongside health literacy – nurtured through passion and imagination.

We lambasted the reductivist nature of much research in the field that continues to slavishly instrumentalise the arts in terms of its impact on disease and morbidity, and recoiled at the emerging free-marketers' who commodity practice and research and appear devoid of values. As a counter-blast, we suggest that pessimism may be an alternative to the cult of happiness, and can be an appropriate healthy response to injustice - not just symptomatic of mental ill health.

With this in mind, we suggest that the wellbeing agenda needs to be understood in terms beyond selfish individualism and superficiality. As Steven Poole suggests,

'We live in the age, of the official promotion of "mindfulness", the aim of which is to calm the mind to a state of bovine acceptance, where nary a thought will trouble it. The modern idea of wellness is opposed to deep thinking. Instead it encourages us all to become happily stupid athletes of capitalist productivity.'

Whilst there's a constant obsession with happiness, let's not make the mistake of thinking our arts/health work is just about shiny precious objects. Art isn't just a magic carpet to happiness, but it gives us voice for dissent and cynicism too. The artist David Pledger in his book, *Re-evaluating the artist in the new world order*, provides us with a compelling critique of the systems that have seen more money put into marketing and management than into artists, with the artist being at the very bottom of the food chain.

Yet shouldn't the artist be at the heart of public debate? Scrutinizing, curious and enabling - questioning dominant ideologies and giving voice to those most marginalized by those in power? Pledger astutely suggests that *'managerialism sees itself as the antidote to chaos, irrationality, disorder, and incompleteness,'* - but aren't these the essential elements that are central to the arts? Have we been hoodwinked to justify culture and the arts in the language of pseudo-science and economics? - counted out in gold and silver?

Will our arts and health agenda just become a subservient tool of creeping political ideology? Are we just the *Weapons of Mass Happiness?* I'd like to think not, but it may require some brave thinkers to step forward and challenge the status quo. Without placing democracy at the heart of our agenda, how can we reframe thinking around social, cultural and health inequalities?

More than that, if we know that participation in the arts has an influence on long-term health – and we do know this – shouldn't our priority be to ensure that the most profound, highest quality and engaging art forms are available to the majority of people?

Our regional network was at the heart of the development of the National Alliance for Arts, Health & Wellbeing that in turn, has nurtured the new All Party Parliamentary Group for Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG). Arts and Health is certainly part of a growing political agenda and is working with others to influence policy through high-level political inquiries into arts/health.

Spearheading much of this work is former Labour Minister for the Arts, now Lord Alan Howarth of Newport. He was very interested in how the Manifesto might be shared in Dublin with people working on a shared agenda, and this champion of our field and co-chair of the APPG had much to input. In an email exchange that inevitably brought in both Keats and a post-Peterloo Massacre, Percy Shelly, he railed passionately about poetry and politics, and to conclude this short essay, I want to share some of his thoughts today in the context of the Manifesto.

'Poets are legislators in ways more subtle than direct commentary or intervention on the issues of the day. Poetry is language operating at its most intense and expressive. That is not, after all, the experience of most people reading Hansard. Poetry is the enemy of evasiveness, lazy thought, cliché, propaganda, language abused by politicians to achieve impact without nuance, precision or real commitment, public language that numbs sensibility.'

'Art is subversive and destabilising and that is its essential political contribution. Art is uncompromising. It transcends orthodoxy. It makes distinctions that chart and illuminate. It engages honestly with emotional experience. It shifts meaning. It offers us intimations of better possibilities in individual and collective life.'

He comments – *'Art always challenges, and that is why I have enlisted artists in the round tables that the APPG is holding in the first phase of our Inquiry. Before the politicians in the APPG attempt to formulate their policy recommendations I want them to be informed and inspired by listening to the testimonies of artists who are working to benefit the health and wellbeing of their fellow human beings and make a better society. I hope we will be able to bring art and politics together fruitfully.'*

'Your manifesto work bubbles up through this process. You have been stimulating people to think hard about these matters for a long time, and the APPG hopes to harvest some of the fruits of your work. I'm looking forward to {...} a strong personal link between your process and the process at Westminster.'

As Greater Manchester heads into health and social care devolution this year, we are exploring how arts & health as a *social movement*, might play a significant role in the devolution agenda, pursuing social change from the ground up – loudly and proudly. So we're not focusing on illness and morbidity, but across the whole population, and exploring how the arts might be central to new ways of thinking.

Culture and the arts provide us with both collective and deeply personal experiences, expanding our horizons, which writer Robert Hewison proposes, might just increase mutual tolerance, encourage cooperation and engender trust.

I wish I had read Nancy Cartwright's paper about 'gold standards' in 2007, but I only discovered it in 2014, by which time I'd been embroiled in many wasted conversations around how we understand the potency of the arts in relation to health and wellbeing.

For my part, we should understand the reach and value of the arts in their own terms and not be suckered in by the cult of scientism that sees culture and the arts only understood in terms of the measurable. Of course there's room for mixed methodologies here, but it's the dominance of pseudoscience, that is something I worry about. Is the arts and health agenda about finding a cure for disease? I think not, but it is surely about quality of life, for those with and without a diagnosis, or label.

Our Manifesto for Arts & Health and all that has come from it, shows us that we are part of something bigger. Tim Lang and Geoff Raynor argue in the British Medical Journal, that '*public health success is as much about imagination as evidence: challenging what is accepted as the so-called normal {...} public*

health must regain the capacity and will to address complexity and dare to confront power.'

From Jonathan Swift's outrageous provocation, to Jeremy Deller's road trip across the States, the arts in and of themselves, offer up responses to injustice and inequality, giving voice to people. Philosopher Pascal Bruckner describes the potency of the arts to reveal, '*...new aspects of life to us,*' and artists as '*...Sirens around us, solar, radiant beings who invite us to try on other destinies. They are the ones who experiment with new arts of living, wrench happiness away from its canonical definitions, and set it upon new avenues.*'

So - public health is about imagination and shared knowledge, and the arts, in and of themselves, offer up responses to injustice and inequality, giving voice to people and spearheading new ways of thinking, being and doing.

'All that glitters is not gold.'

The Manifesto for Arts and Health wasn't about quick fixes, middle management and market-driven cost-effectiveness, it was and is, a manifestation of solidarity between those of us who see culture and the arts as being central to fulfilling our fundamental human rights and who believe that things can be different.

Clive Parkinson
February 2016