

Everyone seems to be talking about participation - it's the buzzword for the '90s. Equal access isn't just about the number of burns on seats: it's about the quality of everyone's relationship with creative activity. Anita Holford takes a look at participation, the new rock and roll.

Participation for a brighter future

Participation and community involvement are key themes in much of government thinking now, reaching into areas such as health, environment, education, social welfare, and of course the arts. To many people, it must seem like one huge bandwagon that everyone is jumping on. Add a community and outreach department onto your theatre company, and you can tap into a whole new funding avenue. But the process of involving people more actively with creative activities isn't just dancing to the government's tune. It's about recognising the arts as something which is vital to the functioning of a healthy society.

Arts for everyone

The notion of everyone actively participating in creative activity isn't a new one. Before the industrial revolution, 'art' wasn't marginalised as a specialised activity practised by a particular group of people in certain environments. People sang songs and made music together to help them through the working day and to relax at the end of it; they created costumes and banners, poetry and songs, marches and dances to impart news, mark a particular occasion, or assert their membership of a particular group or community. The idea of a minority of artists providing arts products for the majority of people is a relatively new one, but is the reality that has for many years driven the arts funding system.

It's because of the way that we have tended to marginalise cultural activities that masses of people



Participation - a recipe for health and happiness

simply don't have access to them and/or don't see their relevance. The idea that art, culture, creativity is something that only skilled and talented people can be involved with, combined with lack of information, education or resources all contribute to this unequal distribution of opportunities.

Participatory or community arts has at its very roots the view that in a democratic society culture should belong to everyone, that everyone has the potential to be creative. Equality of opportunity is central to this, and so too is the social, rather than idealised, definition of culture - as the way in which people explore their lives, understand common bonds, communicate with each other and make meaning in the world.

So the argument for

participation is not just some vague idea that it's a 'good thing', it is in fact a fundamental human right, as well as being something that enables us to live fuller and more enjoyable lives. The evidence that exists about the 'feel-good' value is certainly impressive. The research reported in 'Use or ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts', by Francois Matarasso (Comedia, 1997), showed that of those people who participated in creative activity, 73% said that they felt happier, and 52% said that they felt better or healthier than previously.

Social accountability

Arts organisations and people who are involved in cultural industries are increasingly expected to be accountable, and although this

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may be a bitter pill to swallow, it's certainly raising some valid questions. At the Arts Marketing Association annual conference last year, people were talking about whether the arts are in a good relationship with society, and what we can do about this, as much as how to get more people into arts buildings. Words such as 'participants', 'creativity', 'accountability' and 'relationships' are the currency of the moment.

Because the participatory arts are about people engaging with the arts on their own terms, in ways which are appropriate to them, and which reflect their own lives and experiences, it's hardly surprising that they're getting greater recognition in the current climate.

What the government has latched onto is that through participation the arts can help them to fulfil some of their social and economic objectives too. This of course makes some people nervous - the last thing many people want is for the arts to become simply a means to an end. But the case for the arts can only be made stronger by demonstrating all of the ways in which they can contribute to society.

Impact

Participation can have many purposes and effects. Perhaps the most obvious is that it can help people to develop skills and confidence, and so empower people. This in turn helps build self-esteem and positive attitudes, improve social skills, and so can enable people to realise their full potential. In this way, participation can contribute not only to lifelong learning, but also to advocacy and community development. Policy makers in health, education, the environment, and social welfare, as well as the arts, are recognising that public involvement is the key to effecting meaningful change. They're beginning to recognise that people can be active citizens, who want a say in how their community is run, and who understand their own needs better than anyone else.

And of course 'community arts' aren't just about geographical communities. The social and

technological advances of the 20th century may have fragmented the traditional geographical communities but we identify ourselves with a wide range of communities now, defining ourselves by our interests, lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, and many other factors.

By working in partnership across sectors, participatory arts organisations are increasing access

Music on the Web

Eaton Orchestra Board has launched a creative music web site in a move to promote the internet as a way for local people to participate in creating music. The site will allow images and music from a collaborative music project. On the Edge, involving young people from youth centres in Hertfordshire. Visitors to the site will be able to hear and see extracts from the creative music workshops, send their ideas and comments back to 'On the Edge', and link to other music and club sites. www.edg.org.uk/ontheedge



to the arts as well as helping to address inequalities in other areas by encouraging a sense of community identity and self-determination, and assisting in the consultation process. You can just hear the ministers unfurling the 'social exclusion' banner.

Healthy lives

Musicians, visual artists, performers, environmental agencies, alternative therapists, health and social welfare agencies and cultural organisations are already talking to each other about the potential for working in partnership to promote healthy living through the healthy living centres initiative.

A prime example is a project organised with the help of Celebratory Arts for Primary Healthcare, who work in two

housing estates in South Gateshead, with local people, the local authority and local health authority, to create an annual 'healthy hearts' lantern project. The project involves 100 school children and their families, teachers, youth workers, librarians, health visitors, local churches, local volunteers and a handful of professional artists and musicians. Activities include a children's streetband with self-composed 'heart' songs and a sculptural lantern procession around the estates with a pyrotechnic finale.

Literacy levels in the area are low, so the project provides information about healthy living which is accessible because it's not in written form. The project brings creativity and community involvement in local health needs assessment and helps people to learn about heart disease and what they can do to prevent it. It's gathered huge popularity and commitment amongst local people, boosting morale, encouraging healthier lifestyle choices, and encouraging people to participate in the wider life of the community.

Shared Community

As Anthony Everett has said in 'Joining In', his investigation into participatory music (see bookshelf, p13)

"Participation in music is rather more than simply 'the right to have a go'. It is a means by which a social animal is able not simply to socialise or leisure, but to embody its sense of shared community -- this is of particular importance in an age of increasing individualisation where the stable, geographical communities of the past are giving way to provisional, multi-level and changeable groupings."

But perhaps the most important argument for participation in the arts is simply that it makes our lives, and everyone's lives, better.

It might not yet be the new rock 'n' roll but we're getting there. We need to reclaim the term 'the arts' and make it something that's part of people's lives and the nation's health. Dancing to the government's tune? Not a chance - we're about to take over the record decks and let everyone have a go.

"...the process of involving people more actively with creative activities isn't just dancing to the government's tune. It's about recognising the arts as something which is vital to the functioning of a healthy society."

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