

NUMBERS RACKET

ANDREW ROSS ON ART FOR ALL?

Mark Wallinger and Mary Warnock, eds., *Art for All? Their Policies and Our Culture*. London: Peer, 2000. 183 pages, £18. (For information, contact piertrust@btinternet.com)

AT THE DAWN of the postwar Labour government, its policy architect, Aneurin Bevan, depicted Britain as "an island of coal surrounded by a sea of fish." It was a memorable image of the nation's natural assets, and it captured his own party's midcentury appetite for nationalizing them. Fifty years later, film honcho David Puttnam offered an update: Britain

had become "an island of creativity surrounded by a sea of understanding." Not a winning phrase, for sure, but Puttnam's characterization was an equally faithful reflection of the temper of the New Labour government he would shortly join as an adviser on science

and culture. From the outset, Tony Blair's Cool Britannia would be a massive PR campaign to persuade the world that the country Napoleon once mocked as a nation of shopkeepers was now a nation of artists and designers, with the future in their enterprising bones.

By the '90s, with Britain's economy no longer fueled by the extractive resources that Bevan had memorialized, the country's managers were on the lookout for service industries that would "add value" in a distinctive way. In the bowels of Whitehall, an ambitious civil servant came up with an interesting statistic: If you lumped all the economic activities of arts and culture professionals and created a sector known as the "creative industries," you would have, on paper at least, a revenue powerhouse that generated £60 billion (\$88 billion) a year. Arts and design alone accounted for £7 billion worth of business. Even more interesting, for a policy wonk, employment statistics showed this sector had grown by 34 percent over the last decade, compared with 4.6 percent growth in general employment. For an incoming government jonesing to make its mark on the sclerotic post-Thatcher scene, the performance and potential of the creative industries were a godsend.

In 1997, Chris Smith was appointed to head the new Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and within a year his policy speeches and essays appeared in print under the title *Creative Britain*.

Propelled onto center stage, Britain's artists have been wondering, ever since, what hit them. Smith's policies have asked them to play more functional roles in society: assisting in the improvement of public health, race relations, urban living, special education, welfare-to-work programs, and of course, economic development. Above all, the new policies require funded arts activities to show a good return on investment (ROI, as the MBAs put it). Naturally, most artists saw these functions as more appropriate to entrepreneurial social workers. The Establishment toffs, colloquially known as "luvvies" (as in "We just love the arts"), lost no time in vilifying Blair's cultural nepmen as ruthless philistines.

Peer, a small, independent arts charity in East London, has performed an admirable service in collecting and curating a dossier of responses to the new policies. Winningly edited by philosopher (and peer of the realm) Mary Warnock and artist Mark Wallinger, *Art For All?* makes the national debate

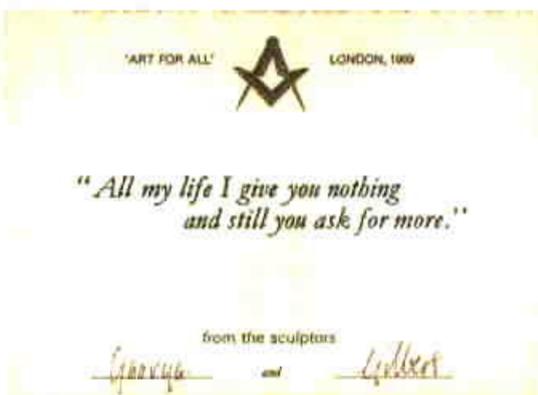
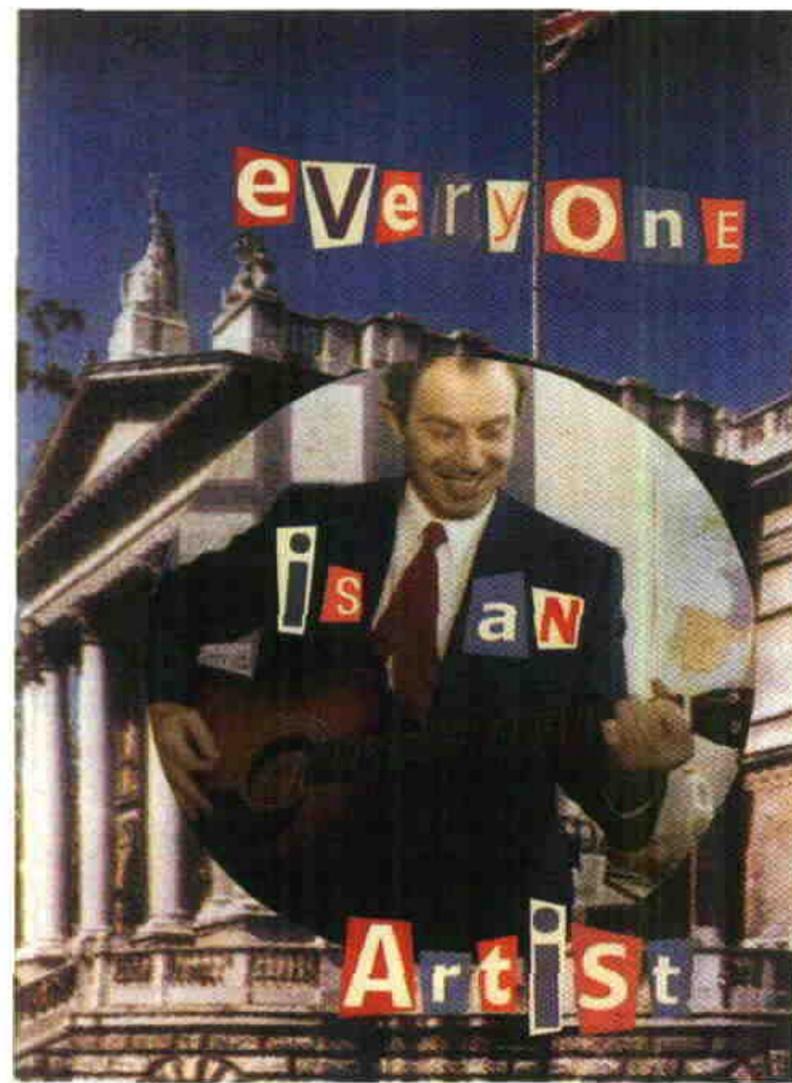
residents. Members of the House of Lords speculate on how the arts can help reduce crime, truancy, teenage pregnancy, poverty, and neighborhood deterioration. And why stop there? Richer fields, like human rights, global nutrition, and international trade, beckon.

In full-throated response, we encounter artists and critics slamming the government for making the arts into an instrument of social policy, thereby trampling on artists' freedoms. Art historian Andrew Brighton exhaustively compares Blair's slogan "Art for Everyone" with the principle of *narodnost* that drove the Soviet policy of socialist realism. Philosopher Richard Noble reminds us that artists cannot and should not be trusted to make socially useful art, since "they are just as likely to sow the seeds of faction and intolerance in their audiences." Wallinger himself captures the widely shared lament of artists that their work, once judged on its formal properties, is now "corralled into the box marked

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appear remarkably cohesive by skillfully assembling the opinions of a broad range of artists, critics, and politicians. An additional section of commentaries on arts policy, dating from the 1945 creation of the Arts Council, features an indignant Wyndham Lewis alongside a cantankerous Kingsley Amis and a militant Raymond Williams. Rising above the fray is the serenely mischievous John Maynard Keynes, the council's first chair, who described the evolution of its famous "arm's length" funding principle as having "happened in a very English, informal, unostentatious way—half-baked if you like." Apparently, England acquired its arts policy, like its empire, in a fit of absent-mindedness.

Keynes's batty boosterism—"Let every part of Merry England be merry in its own way. Death to Hollywood"—is a very far cry from the regimen of requirements demanded fifty years later by Smith. To qualify for funding, artists must show that their work promotes diversity, access, relevance, civic pride, community innovation, and social inclusion. Throughout the volume politicians blithely describe their own visits to homeless shelters or hospitals where the introduction of some worthy arts program has transformed the lives of



Left: **Gilbert and George, *Postal Sculpture*, 1969**, printed card, ca. 4 1/4" x 5 1/4".
Right: **Art in Ruins, *Party Time*, 1999**, collage, ca. 12 1/2" x 9 1/2".

'Issues.'" Others point out that Blair's New Deal expects artists to be socially conscious in passive and complicit ways: "The erstwhile *refusés* have been ushered into the official salon," former Tory MP George Walden observes, but only on condition that "they leave their weapons at the door."

As for the rights of the state, critic François Matarasso argues that a democratically elected government is entitled, perhaps even obliged, to pursue its policies through every available means. Yet not all politicians would welcome the opportunity. Indeed, Warnock and Wallinger leave us with a delicious extract from a House of Commons debate on arts funding, in which a Conservative MP for a West London working-class constituency sticks it to the luvvies: "Football is our heritage. It was founded in this country, but nobody seems to care whether Hartlepool United goes out of existence, because the

luvvies don't watch Hartlepool United but go in their droves to watch opera and ballet, kiss each other on both cheeks and say, 'Darling, how nice to see you.'"

Art for All? proves it is possible to stage such a national debate without being swamped by the prehistoric moralism occasioned by the Jesse Helms factor. What is lost in the British example, however, is the geopolitical context of the debate. Only once does this surface, in Keynes's account of the Arts Council's origins "in the early days of the war" when morale was "at a low ebb." From a US perspective, it would be impossible to ignore the impact of the cold war on cultural policy. The profile of the fundable artist as an exemplary free individual in the free world was a direct response to the massive PR needs of Washington for four long decades. With the end of the cold war, this heroic template of the autonomous artist instantly lost its appeal to the state. Recent policy documents, like the NEA's *American Canvas* (1997), promote a new template for the fundable

artist that is remarkably similar to the British case: as ideal citizen of the corporate state, a self-motivated entrepreneur who can work, in a flexible manner, with a range of clients, partners, and sponsors.

What lesson can we draw from the convergence of arts policy and social policy? It would be shortsighted to conclude that this debate is simply about mandating a wider audience for art or making artists more accountable to society. When you think about it, the traditional profile of the artist fits all the requirements of the ideal New Economy knowledge worker. Increasingly, we live in a valueadding economy whose managers want employees to behave, dress, and think like artists; to eschew job security and benefits like artists; to keep artists' unsocial hours; and to accept a cash discount (creative gratification as part compensation) for their labor. Look around. The industrialization of Bohemia is well underway. □

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