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“Making the Art of Fun Freely Accessible”: Community Arts Practices and the Politics of Leisure in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s

Mathilde Bertrand

- 1 In the summer of 1969, residents of Kentish Town and Chalk Farm (North London) were invited to come on board a converted double-decker, the “Fun Art Bus”, to enjoy an out-of-the-ordinary ride. Depending on the day, they would be entertained to a theatre performance, a poetry reading or a puppet show. The initiative was one among many other activities proposed by Inter-Action, a theatre and arts collective founded in London by American Ed Berman in April 1968. Literally and symbolically, the bus was a vehicle which allowed the opening up of spaces for creative expression, in boroughs where cultural venues were scarce or non-existent. The group's intention, suggested in its name, was to facilitate local residents' engagement with the arts, as spectators and/or as participants in inclusive projects. Yet by developing people's access to artistic activities, community arts groups such as Inter-Action hoped to encourage people to become more involved in the life of the community, therefore using the arts as a catalyst:

One of [Inter-Action's] main aims is to make the arts, especially drama and the media, useful and relevant to local community life, young people and the educational process. Another primary aim is to experiment with the arts and the media to develop new socially-rooted or educational applications for the purpose of an improved and more responsible community life (Inter-Action Trust 1).

- 2 Across the UK, on council estates in inner cities, in new towns or, more rarely, in rural villages, similar initiatives appeared, whether inspired by art collectives or generated by residents themselves (Arts Council Community Arts Evaluation Working Group 1977; Arts Council Community Arts Working Party 1974; Association of Community Artists 1980; Braden 1978; Nigg and Wade 1980; Kelly 1984; Crummy 2004). The flourishing of community arts projects from the late 1960s through the 1970s reflected debates in the

art world on the social role of art and on the elitist distinction between "high" and "low" art (Clark 1973; Cork 1978; Whitechapel Art Gallery 1978; Cork 1979). In 1968, art students occupied the Hornsey School of Art and called for a redefinition of the role of the artist in society, in rejection of the figure of the studio artist isolated from social life. (Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art 1969; Tickner 2008) Such challenges inspired community artists, many of whom had gone to art school (Crehan 2013). By starting projects in areas cut off from the dominant artistic institutions, they sought to confront the distinction between amateur and professional and break the elitism associated with the appreciation and practice of art. They agitated for the right for all to experience art, to practice and approach it from different perspectives.¹ By making artistic practices accessible, community arts projects addressed inequalities in cultural provision across the country and combatted the marginalisation of working-class cultural expressions.

- 3 This article contends that community arts practices raised fundamental questions on the social role of the arts. They highlighted the need for artistic expression in community life and development, in very close connection with debates also happening in art schools and art history departments, but also in the emerging disciplinary field of cultural studies. These non-institutional practices embraced the aims of making leisure, culture and the arts accessible. They challenged the boundaries between high and low forms of creative expression, with questions such as what is art and who can be an artist? Does artistic production need to be sanctioned by an authority to be recognised as art? Why not consider leisure activities as conducive to potentially empowering forms of artistic expression and invest them as such? Couldn't leisure *time* — defined as freedom from economically-rewarding work — be considered as a legitimate context for the production of art works, where such artwork was not meant for a market but for the cultural development of the community?
- 4 The research for this article was done on archives from several organisations: Inter-Action in London, (founded in 1968), Westminster Endeavour for Liaison and Development (WELD), in Handsworth, (Birmingham, founded in 1968), Trinity Arts in Small Heath (Birmingham, founded in 1972), Jubilee Arts in Sandwell (West Midlands, founded in 1974), Tower Hamlets Arts Project (London, founded in 1975). The documents used include correspondence, grant applications, annual reports, press cuttings, photographs, posters, leaflets. Interviews were conducted with photographers Brendan Jackson, from Jubilee Arts, and David Hoffman, who worked with Tower Hamlets Arts Project, as well as Graham Peete, a printer who was a member of Telford Arts. In 2015, Brendan Jackson launched a website which makes hundreds of photographs produced by members of Jubilee Arts accessible in digital format, as well as videos made from old film footage.

Leisure or arts? Does the distinction matter?

- 5 When going through the archives of community arts groups, studying documents such as annual reports for instance, one is struck by the sheer variety of activities offered by the different organisations in theatre, film-making and video, photography, dance, mural painting, handicrafts, printing and publishing, poster-making, community bookshops, poetry or music. The organisation of summer activities for children and teenagers, known as "play schemes" in the jargon of community artists, was a crucial

moment in the calendar, and an important part of the work of community arts projects. Street carnivals were often the highlight of the summer weeks, culminating in coloured processions, games and performances involving local residents and impressive numbers of children. The boundary between art and leisure was never a problem in community arts projects, who used the term "arts" in a very elastic way, in reference to creative practices in the visual, the musical, the literary or the dramatic fields. It is part of what constitutes community arts to have deliberately avoided to distinguish art from leisure, instead subsuming these two modes – artistic expression and play – into a common aim, that of opening up channels for creativity. What mattered was "to expand the creative expression of people" by creating the contexts for these processes to happen (Association of Community Artists 1977). This perspective in itself undermined bourgeois conceptions of the status of the artist and established community arts firmly in a radical tradition of defence of working-class art and culture (Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove 1985).

- 6 Leisure, with its rich associations with play, "fun" and recreation, with its dimension of pleasure and emphasis on imagination, was therefore given pride of place in community arts projects, and access to leisure activities was a priority. Leisure, a breach in the everyday occupations and concerns of school, paid work, home keeping, or unemployment, was exploited in community arts practices as a path towards a free exploration of creative forms of expression. "Making the art of fun freely accessible", to quote Ed Berman, spelt out a provocative political aim: that of opening alternative spaces for the sharing of cultural forms and of harnessing the dynamic and subversive dimension of creative expression, in areas lacking the specific resources and amenities. Also, the emphasis on "fun" was a way of signifying that leisure should be preserved as a quality of time that should be dedicated to personal development, to the free discovery of individual skills and the exploration of talents. This position contrasted with utilitarian conceptions of leisure which recuperate it as the possible context for controlling and disciplining deviance. Rather, community arts exploited the rich versatility of the word "play" in liberating ways: "as drama students we [...] knew the role of play in make believe and imagination, drawing on the possibilities of placing children in roles that could give them a voice and a window onto other worlds."²
- 7 Leisure and artistic activities were (pleasurable) means to an end, that of enabling people who were seldom given the chance to be heard to authorise themselves to take part and express themselves through the means they chose. In the words of Jubilee Arts member Kate Organ:

Jubilee is a community arts project, what that means is that we aren't community workers in Smethwick nor are we trying to teach the people here how to be Laurence Oliviers in their own back rooms. What we're trying to do is to get the people to express something about the way they live, about their own area, in fact to make changes in their area and take control of some aspects within their own area through the arts. We're artists so we do it through the arts but anyone can do it in any area. (Jubilee Arts Archive 1977)
- 8 The intention was close to the contemporary efforts of French cultural "animateurs", which the British community artists knew of. "Animation culturelle" sought to elicit forms of agency among socially disadvantaged social groups, by making participation in leisure activities one of the levers of social action and popular education (Meister; Augustin; Moser et al). In a similar way, community artists worked primarily with children, teenagers, school drop-outs, unemployed people, pensioners, women,

members of ethnic minorities, in an effort to create the conditions for expression, through the learning and sharing of creative skills outside of formal contexts.³

- 9 Community arts projects appeared in areas where artists, community workers, or residents themselves identified a lack of means, venues and facilities for the development of leisure and creative activities. Therefore, making leisure accessible became a political demand, a demand which had the capacity to federate people and catalyse energies.

"Wanted: a place to play": From access to leisure to cultural development in the community

- 10 A photograph from the Jubilee Arts Archive taken around 1974 shows Steve Trow, dressed up as "Mr. No-All" (*sic*), wearing a large white coat and a top hat, acting as a kind of clownish Pied Piper and followed by a group of children. They form a miniature street demonstration, and one of the banners reads "Wanted: a place to play". The event was one of the first activities taken on by the young members of Jubilee Arts in the summer, and the aim was to gather as many children as possible in Sandwell to show them where to find the local play centre which Jubilee had helped set up. The slogan on the banner encapsulated the concerns of early community arts projects regarding the dearth of cultural facilities in the concrete environment of new council estates. They chose to intervene precisely in these places:

Sandwell is a large metropolitan borough in the West Midlands. 300 000 people live in it. It's a very heavily industrialised area and used to be a lot of small towns which have now been formed into a large metropolitan borough. It doesn't have a city centre, the borough has no professional arts group and as far as provision for play for children goes, it has only twelve play centres to service the entire borough. (Jubilee Arts Archive)

- 11 Across Britain, community arts organisations in the 1970s all acted on the same observation that the cultural needs of residents in poor boroughs were not addressed. Kentish Town, Small Heath, Handsworth, Tower Hamlets, Telford, Smethwick... these councils, among many others, were all urban working-class areas suffering from economic deprivation and typically considered as problem areas. Choices in terms of provision of social services by local authorities were made at the expense of culture and the arts.
- 12 Inequalities in cultural provision for working-class communities were compounded by the transformation of working-class environments in post-war Britain. Indeed, the lack of access to leisure activities in deprived urban areas highlighted the broader issue of the failures of post-war town planning. In the context of reconstruction, town planning was enrolled in the endeavour to raise living standards. This chimed in with the emphasis on increased state controls over the economy and coordinated efforts to extend state provision. However, the construction of new council estates and the demolition of derelict inner-city housing as part of "slum clearance" was preferred to the alternative option of renovating existing housing in working-class neighbourhoods. (Greed 2014: 115, 280) Close-knit working-class communities were dispersed on new estates, in which high-rise buildings replaced the more traditional terraced houses.⁴ These choices transformed the way children were able and allowed to play. Working-class forms of sociability were considerably undermined as a result of these

transformations in the urban environment. Furthermore, the housing estates built in the 1950s and 1960s were designed and planned in ways which did not take into account the needs of the populations which were to be housed in them:

Planning was based upon a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach, with very little involvement of, and hardly a word of protest from, the people, who were meant to be the beneficiaries of the planning system. (Greed 153)

- 13 Community activists were at the forefront of campaigns meant to hold local authorities and planning agencies to account.⁵ They lent their support to tenants' associations, in their denunciation of housing problems (insalubrious buildings, disrepair) and in demands for play spaces and community centres.⁶ In many instances, they played a role in advocating greater consultation and involvement of the population in planning decisions affecting their very conditions of existence. A report written in 1987 by members of Free Form, a North London community arts organisation created in 1969, emphasised the role played by community artists and community activists in this shift:

Once the scale of the building failures began to be realised, people started to challenge both the power of the architectural profession, which had produced the vision, and that of the planning profession, which had helped put it into practice. [...] There were increasing demands by the public for a greater say in the decisions which affected them, and they were being supported by some professionals who were beginning to redefine their role, as well as by the voluntary sector. Since its beginnings in the early 1970s, community arts and community architecture have been recognised, established and are flourishing nationally and internationally. (Free Form Arts Trust Ltd. 2)

- 14 At a time when cultural studies were developing fundamental theoretical insights into the processes of transformation of working-class cultures in post-war Britain, community arts organisations agitated at a grassroots level to give a voice to the people whose lives were affected by these processes, yet whose concerns were disregarded and whose cultural expressions were dismissed if ever acknowledged.⁷ Community arts organisations were perfectly aware of the undermining if not wilful destruction of working-class culture:

Small Heath is a generally run-down inner-ring area in the midst of redevelopment, renewal and general improvement. The population [...] is predominantly working class, the culture of which has been almost totally suppressed in that opportunities for cultural expression rarely exist. (Trinity Arts)⁸

- 15 Community artists denounced the deleterious combination of social deprivation and cultural marginalisation in the neighbourhoods they worked in. Developing access to facilities and resources, was therefore part of a strategy to raise awareness within the community about the lack of cultural provision locally, and to encourage demands from within the community for more cultural activities and for a commitment from local authorities in the long term:

When Jubilee goes into a community, we're aren't trying to drop goodies on the people from heaven, what we're trying to do is work with local people for them to identify needs in their own area, not necessarily artistic needs, but for example are there play facilities for children, suitable facilities for old folks, anything like that, youth clubs... And for them to identify that need, and for us to help them find the right channels of resources, of communications, with the bodies that can help like the local authority, what we will do is that we will instigate the project, by doing a piece of street theatre, doing a pub show, doing a play scheme, but from there on end, we will respond to how that community takes up what we've set up. (Jubilee Arts Archive 1977)

- 16 Community arts organisations adopted very direct and pragmatic modes of action, opening cultural spaces, organising festivals, making connections between people, scraping together what grants they could get from local authorities, the Arts Council or specific programmes such as Urban Aid.⁹ A very efficient way of initiating projects was through the use of buses. Inter-Action's was not the only one. In the 1970s, several community arts organisations purchased converted double-deckers: Trinity Arts and Jubilee Arts all bought their own bus in the 1970s, while the Islington Bus Company used it for its lending library. These vehicles made excellent mobile resources, which could easily circulate to places where no play provisions existed. They were easily identified in the neighbourhoods on their different routes and provided points of focus for leisure-based activities in areas which lacked them. Equipped with video and photo equipment, materials for puppet shows or theatre performances, they could also be used as libraries or stage sets, and were transformed into bases for temporary play schemes deployed on patches of waste-ground.¹⁰ Women's groups, tenants' associations, as well as pensioners' groups also used them as meeting spaces. Thankful users from the Bermuda Mansions Tenants Association in Walsall wrote a cover letter emphasising

the important part [Jubilee Art's Bus played] in highlighting a number of tenants' grievances, redundancies at local firms and helping the unemployed to find a use for their enforced free time, [and] the importance of the bus to the youth of Sandwell and the roll (sic) it plays in taking art to the people who would otherwise not bother to seek art. (Jubilee Arts Archive c. 1984)

- 17 On a more symbolic level, therefore, these friendly and brightly-coloured buses did respond to essential needs and provide a much-needed resource, a safe space, and a rallying point for talents and initiatives locally. Because they provided a structure for the organisation of creative activities at a local level, community arts projects acted as catalysts for the expression of people's aspirations and visions, enabling communities to re-imagine themselves.

Leisure and empowerment: Enabling communities to reclaim control

- 18 The provision of spaces for leisure activities was a stepping-stone towards the recognition of common needs and interests within the community. The role of community arts groups, as Jubilee Arts recognised, was to ignite in people a desire to act together and appropriate the objective of "arts for all":

A community arts group must make available a structure for collective action which the community has not had hitherto the opportunity to explore — a structure which gives access not primarily to the products, but to the processes of a whole range of creative activities. In time, the control and organisation of such a project must become the responsibility of the local community as much as that of the artists involved. Only then will it be accepted as a legitimate organ of self-expression by the people with whom it works" (Jubilee Arts 1977: 2)

- 19 Community arts practices were part of the same impulse which characterised community action initiatives in the 1970s.¹¹ Peter Hain defined community action as "a style of political action through which people gain the confidence to agitate for their rights and the ability to control their own destinies" (Hain 1976: 21). These objectives were embedded in a larger ambition to generate processes of empowerment at the level

of the whole community. The concept of empowerment can be defined as a social process whereby individuals as well as social groups develop self-confidence and skills, as well as a critical consciousness of their material conditions, and begin to take action on problems identified by them and affecting their lives. Through collective action, people reclaim control over decision-making processes and become agents in their own destiny. From the 1960s and through the 1970s, the concept belonged to a radical rhetoric of social and political change from below (Bacqué; Biewener 2015). Community arts organisations were driven by such objectives. The notion of "self-help" is a leitmotiv in the discourse of community artists and how they conceived their action in the community. Away from the Victorian acceptance of the term, with its emphasis on virtuous individual reform (Smiles 1866), community artists tended to use the notion of self-help as a synonym for empowerment, to describe the process whereby people would seek to reclaim control over their community's destiny and improve conditions for themselves through their own agency.

- 20 One example of a local initiative which federated the energies of a whole community towards a common purpose was the Tower Hamlets Arts Project (London). The collective emerged from the resistance to an arts project proposed in 1974 by the Greater London Arts Council and funded by Thames TV, for which there had been no consultation with the local population. Ten thousand pounds were to be allocated to professional artists for the temporary use of commercial billboards, the idea being to bring the work of established gallery artists to the people: "Eyesites" was quickly nicknamed "Eyesores" in the neighbourhood. People active in the borough's rich voluntary sector objected to what they considered to be money inappropriately spent as well as a paternalistic gesture (Braden 23). They organised public meetings in order to debate over and propose an alternative project, defended their case to Thames TV and eventually managed to reverse the initial decision and win the allocated sum.¹² The rationale of Tower Hamlets Arts Project was that money should be used to support existing arts and media groups and help them expand. Tower Hamlets Arts Project coordinated the activities of the different community arts groups, with activities in video, photography, music, murals, theatre, creative writing... The Tower Hamlets Art Project Community Bookshop was created then, and still exists to this day as the Bricklane Bookshop.¹³ The budget made provision for the "Big Show", a large collaborative event consisting in taking over the exhibition space of the renowned Whitechapel Art Gallery for an entire month. The whole project had a definite impact both in terms of the development of provision for the arts locally and in the vision the local population gained of itself through its achievements. Symbolically, members of the community had managed to reclaim a project imposed on them and instead had defined their own inclusive, long-term and open project:

The Greater London Arts Association proposal had the unforeseen and beneficial effect of making a public issue of the arts in the borough. It also raised public consciousness over the high degree of creative activity that had been achieved by residents and professionals locally. (Braden 24)

- 21 Maggie Pinhorn, a filmmaker involved in the Basement Project (a community video group active in the Tower Hamlets Arts Project) described her role as being an enabler of other people's expressions, as someone who accompanied processes of personal empowerment:

I am in the business of building up people's confidence in order that they can express themselves creatively and use their imaginations. That is possibly the most

political act that you can be doing. [...] What I can see as a result of people having been involved in that kind of work is that they are not going to do it in terms of film or video or anything else, but in their personal lives. So you might build up somebody's confidence enough for them to complain about their housing conditions. To go along and demand a decent flat to live in. To get a job, to think and to write more, to do whatever else for themselves to improve their own quality of life. (Nigg and Wade 182)

- 22 The "Fun Farm" is another example of a collective endeavour involving a local community. It was one of the many activities developed under the umbrella of Inter-Action: a derelict building was refurbished on a patch of land in Kentish Town and transformed into an "urban" farm complete with animals and activities such as gardening, horse-riding, pottery, a repair shop, women's groups... "Land that was dead and cut off from the housing estates [...] has been reclaimed and through a voluntary body turned into a real leisure-producing enterprise."¹⁴ The organisation flourished because of the active participation of the local community, across age groups, in the project. The skills and the confidence developed by participants had direct positive effects on people's lives.
- 23 These examples offer illustrations of how economically deprived, working-class communities found the strength and resource, with the help and experience of community arts organisations, to develop their own initiatives and act locally on issues affecting their own lives. Leisure, used as a point of entry for participants, became a lever for processes of empowerment both on an individual and collective level.

Democratisation of culture or cultural democracy?

- 24 The activities enabled by community arts organisations challenged the narrow association of art with the taste of an elite (equated with "high art"). Instead, they defended the notion that artistic production should not be reserved to an exclusive class of people, mainly middle-class, but be enjoyed, practised and experienced by all sections of society. In its annual report for the year 1987-88, Telford Community Arts, made this idea very clear:

[This is] not the Royal Opera, but for the people of the Wrekin...¹⁵ To make their own art that is imaginative, exciting and effective, and expresses the interests of the working-class. We challenge the notion that the arts are something for "other people" to do, for the "well-off", for the "well-educated", or other privileged sections of society. (Telford Community Arts, 2)
- 25 Such a proposition challenges traditional notions that art must necessarily refer to a canon of established oeuvres, genres or artists. Instead, it places emphasis on the cultural, symbolic and aesthetic processes and meaning that artistic expression sustains, on the social contexts in which art take place.¹⁶ It is grounded in an analysis which combats processes of cultural hegemony and fights for the recognition of minority groups' cultural expressions as equally valid and worthy. To Steve Trow, founding member of Jubilee Arts, community arts were based on the "conviction that the creation of original work, rooted in local cultures, local experience and aspirations, has a potency and a resonance that can re-shape our perceptions of what is valuable and what may be possible." (Trow 1992:1)
- 26 Community arts practices absorbed and built on the theory of culture developed throughout the 1960s and 1970s in cultural studies departments, notably in

Birmingham. Cultural studies broke new ground in the study of ideology, power and culture: they both recognised culture as the sphere of production of conflicting meanings and signifying practices, and described the mechanisms of reproduction of ideological domination (Hall 1990; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1991). The perpetuation of the unequal distribution of the means of cultural production in society was one such mechanism. Community arts organisations embodied a struggle to intervene on this problematic: they addressed this imbalance by tackling the problem of access to the means of cultural production and circulation, and by fighting for the recognition of cultural pluralism and of people's agency as cultural producers. As artist Sue Braden wrote in 1978:

The truth is that *people make culture*. They make it in towns and cities, in villages and hamlets, on housing estates and in suburbs, in Hampstead and in Hull. It is to do with self-expression and social needs. It is active, not passive. It is neither a sub-culture nor an alternative. It is active and to be lived rather than passive and to be appreciated. (174)

- 27 As well as redefining "art" to include very diverse creative practices (theatre, video, photography, creative writing, silk-screening, murals, etc.), community arts recognised that processes were just as important as products and underlined the importance of the context and uses of artistic production. The notions of access, participation and collaboration, central to community arts, blurred the traditional distinction between artist and spectator, professional and amateur. These perspectives undermined the classic concept of the artist as an individual endowed with genius, and encouraged instead processes of collective authorship.¹⁷ Such conceptual shifts allowed to move away from the logic of the commodification of art, offering instead the idea that the means of expression and cultural production should be collectively shared and control, and remain outside of the commercial sphere.
- 28 In this fight, radical community arts practitioners defined their commitment to *cultural democracy* as opposed to the aim of *cultural democratisation*, a policy defended by the Arts Council. Through the 1970s, community arts organisations and the Arts Council were locked in a tug-of-war over competing definitions of art and culture and over which art forms and practices should be funded. The Charter of the Arts Council, redefined in 1967, determined two objectives: "to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts" and "to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain." From the early 1970s, the Arts Council seemed to consider community arts as a minor practice, a worthwhile experimental venture, but certainly not as part of the artistic traditions it usually supported. It did consider and respond to grant applications from community arts organisations through its "new activities committee" (1969-70) and "experimental arts committee" (1970-74). Largely due to the pressure exerted by the newly created Association of Community Artists (created in 1974), and thanks to the supportive conclusion of the report of the Community Arts Working Party (formed in 1974 and chaired by Harold Baldry), the Arts Council allocated a fraction of its funding to community arts projects throughout the 1970s.¹⁸ The Community Arts Committee was maintained until 1979.
- 29 Yet the two entities supported contradicting projects: the Arts Council construed its aims around the notion of the democratisation of high culture, interpreting its Charter to mean encouraging accessibility to the great works of art throughout the country, and privileging appreciation over practice.¹⁹ In contrast to this, from the late 1970s onwards, the Association of Community Artists defended the notions of cultural

democracy and cultural pluralism, which reflected a much more bottom-up approach to cultural production. To Owen Kelly, author of one of the few reference books published at the time which attempted to give a theoretical framework to community arts practices, cultural democracy meant "producing the right conditions within which communities can have their own creative voices recognised and given sufficient space to develop and flourish" (6):

[Cultural democracy] revolves around the notion of plurality, and around equality of access to the means of cultural production and distribution. It assumes that cultural production happens within the context of wider social discourses, and that [cultural production] will produce not only pleasure but knowledge. (101)

- 30 Understood as a radical social and political project, cultural democracy confronted the reproduction of elite culture, and worked to de-construct the ideological domination of bourgeois taste.

Community arts in the era of Thatcherism

- 31 By the beginning of the 1980s, the expanded community arts network appeared more structured. Even though the Arts Council stepped back from directly funding organisations in 1979, it facilitated the devolutionary process towards an increased role of Regional Arts Associations in supporting community arts (Arts Council of Great Britain 1980). Regional Associations became the main source of public funding for community arts organisations,²⁰ alongside local authorities, while private sources such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation remained supportive of the movement (Hewison et Holden 2006).
- 32 However, what the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher had in tow for culture and the arts was particularly worrying for the community arts sector. In keeping with the policy of cuts in public spending, the annual funding to the Arts Council was reduced and some of its committees axed in 1979 and 1980 (the Community Arts and the Photography Committees respectively). The Prime Minister made no mystery about her traditional conception of art: art was high art, heritage, the national institutions and the national canon.²¹ The State should remain aloof from intervention in the domain of artistic production for fear of generating a form of official State art. On the other hand, the government developed incentives for private businesses to increase their patronage of the arts and encouraged the view that the arts were to be considered as a productive, wealth-generating economic sector.²²
- 33 Already a minor voice in the artistic field through the 1970s, the community arts movement was now forced to adopt strategies of resistance against the new Conservative rhetoric and policies. As the Association of Community Artists was compelled to adopt charity status, under new directives in 1980 requiring that organisations applying for public money should be charities (therefore blunting their political edge), its campaigning activity was taken over by the Shelton Trust, which expressed its radical commitment to "an egalitarian and plural society by the extension of democratic practice to all social relationships" (Shelton Trust quoted in Higgins 2012: 34).
- 34 In 1986, the Shelton Trust reaffirmed the core political project of community arts practices around the concept of cultural democracy. *Culture and Democracy: The Manifesto* read as an unabashed socialist critique of ideological systems of domination

and of cultural hegemony under capitalism. It identified the necessity for struggles in culture and for cultural pluralism, against the cultural exclusion of alternative voices and traditions. It advocated for forms of cultural production understood as collective not individualistic, free as opposed to commercial and profit-driven, active and not passive: "in a genuine democracy people make their culture rather than have it made for them — locally, nationally and internationally" (Another Standard 1986: 39). Yet community arts, a field of practice which had greatly expanded from the late 1960s, was also divided on these objectives.

- 35 In spite of the enduring commitment to these values on the part of the more radical community arts organisations which managed to survive cuts in their funding in the 1980s, the ideological sea-change of New Right politics did take its toll on the radicalism of the movement. François Matarasso, a participant in, and a historian of, community arts practices, identifies middle of the 1980s as the moment when what was left of a radical agenda in community arts organisations was durably undermined. A telling sign of this, he points out, was the shift in the choice of terms and designation of the practice:

The path from "community art" to "participatory art", whilst seen as merely pragmatic by those who made it, marked and allowed a transition from the politicised and collectivist action of the seventies, towards the depoliticised, individual-focused arts programmes supported by public funds in Britain today. [...]
The trend of the past forty years had been from radicalism to remedialism.
(Matarasso 216)

Conclusion

- 36 A survey of the origins and development of the community arts movement in the 1970s and 1980s, through the prism of leisure gives insights into the structuration of the cultural field in Britain in that period. It highlights the way specific contestations were shaped, at the grassroots level of communities, from a struggle for access to leisure and creative practices to more radical demands for a recognition of cultural pluralism.
- 37 From its emergence in the late 1960s, the movement embodied a cultural opposition to dominant systems: an opposition to elitist conceptions of art and the effects of social distinction they entail; to a top-down conception and practice of politics; to commodified forms of leisure, based on a passive logic of consumption. The community arts movement played a central role in the definition of a socialist cultural politics, based on concepts of empowerment, diversity, collective authorship, democratic access to and control of the means of cultural production. At stake in the practice and theory of community arts, was the struggle to establish the conditions for a genuine participatory democracy, in which the arts would play a central role, as a vehicle for the expression of collective meanings and the definition of cultural alternatives. These practices belonged to the radical activism of the late 1960s and 1970s and embraced its core principle that social change should come from the people themselves.
- 38 Yet this type of radical discourse was jeopardised in the changed political and ideological landscape of the 1980s: the notion of public support for the arts was seriously undermined by the Conservative government's assaults on state provision, while the notion of empowerment was absorbed in a neoliberal discourse stressing individual responsibility and redefined in a way which neutralised their radical potential (Bacqué and Biewener). The versatile notion of "community" was itself

reclaimed in a conservative rhetoric for its connotations of traditional social order and moral regulation (Buckler 2007).

- 39 Community arts practices first appeared as interventions meant to tackle inequalities in cultural provision across the country, and agitated for more culture, not less, for all. However, the implementation of austerity programmes first under Thatcherism, then under the coalition government from 2010 and under the current conservative government, has meant that access to culture is yet again one of the first casualties of political arbitrations. The dramatic closure of public libraries in Britain illustrates the fact that cultural provision is never safe from attack. The fact that poorer constituencies bear the brunt of cuts tends to point to a persistent class divide in terms of access to culture and the arts.

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NOTES

1. Some projects specialised in one artistic practice while others developed a multi-disciplinary approach and offered activities in theatre, music, video, photography, printing, pottery or mural painting...
2. Kate Organ, Jubilee Arts, from "Dangerous Play", Ania Bas, 2014. <http://www.brendan.jackson.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Dangerous-Play-Web.pdf>.
3. Formal or disciplinary contexts such as schools for example.
4. A process observed from the late 1950s in the East London borough of Bethnal Green by sociologists Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1957).
5. The Community Development Projects, a national programme initiated by the Home Office in 1969 and abruptly ended in 1976 provides an interesting example of community workers challenging the government. The Home Office commissioned research and action projects in 12 boroughs considered as severely "deprived", with the assumption that poverty could be tackled through specific piecemeal interventions at a local level. The conclusions of social scientists and community workers on the ground was that poverty was structural and required considerable and coordinated state intervention. CDP workers advocated for a radical change in the way community development was addressed, away from paternalistic social pathology models (Loney 1983; Craig, Mayo, et Popple 2011).
6. Photographer Bill Dolce, member of Bootle Art and Action (Merseyside), and photographer Paul Carter, active in Blackfriars Settlement (South London), both underline one role photography had in a community arts and community action context, as evidence to denounce bad housing and insalubriousness, with some success. (Arts Council of Great Britain 1975; Bootle Arts and Action 1980)
7. One founder member of Jubilee Arts, Stephen Lacey held a Masters' degree in Contemporary Cultural Studies.

8. The story could be repeated in many of the environments where community arts projects developed. Inter-Action, based in Kentish Town, North London, for example, was an area notorious for its crime rate and youth delinquency at the turn of the 1960s.
9. Urban Aid was a programme implemented from 1975 to tackle social inequalities in inner cities, particularly by allocating money to community centres or law centres. (Greed, 119)
10. "We were very much celebrities, because our bus was bigger and more impressive and more sophisticated and it had a darkroom in it. We didn't just do Play-doh or stencilling. We were quite the sort of radical people of the play bus world. Because we weren't just a play bus, we were an arts bus." Jubilee Arts Archive, "Interview with Kate Organ", 2015.
11. These initiatives could take the form of setting up law centres, neighbourhood centres, claimant's unions, organising squatting actions to shed light on the housing crisis (Hain 1976: 71).
12. People felt that "the scheme was irrelevant to the borough because it did not meet any outstanding needs nor encourage enough involvement and the participation necessary to be of long term benefit to the community." *THAP News*, vol. 1, N°1, January 76, p. 101.
13. See <http://bricklanebookshop.org/history/index.html>.
14. "Investing in leisure. Out of the waste land", *Municipal and Public Services Journal*, 12 September 1975, p.1161. Inter-Action papers, Arts Council Archives, Blythe House, London.
15. Wrekin is a geological landmark five miles West of Telford, in Shropshire.
16. Paul Carter, a photographer involved in the Blackfriars Settlement (South London) and initiator of the "Photography Project", emphasised the value and meaning that art works have in the specific contexts in which they are created: "Many of the photographs used in the project are not what many people would consider good photography. They are not great images with a universal message able to transcend time and culture. They are very humble images. The important thing is that they work in the context. They are made by people of the community for the community. [...] I think the photographs produced are art. They are not elitist art. They are the people's art. They are people's expression and search for themselves and the power to create the kind of life they want for themselves." (Arts Council of Great Britain 1975: 93)
17. The "demystification" of art was a byword of many practitioners, that is, the challenge to conceptions of creativity as something reserved to a specific category of people, artists, but inaccessible to laypersons.
18. In 1972, the Arts Council financed fifty-seven organisations and artists described as belonging to the category "Community Arts" for a total sum of £176,000. The following year, £350,000 were attributed to seventy-five projects (Nigg & Wade 30; Kelly 15). A million pounds was reserved to community arts in 1978 (Sinclair 184-5, 224).
19. In particular Roy Shaw, General Secretary of the Arts Council, took position for the democratisation of culture in his essay "Arts for All", c. 1985.
20. Regional Arts Associations began to recognise the positive social impact of community arts and started funding projects in the 1970s. There remained regional differences in terms of financial commitment. The Greater London Arts Association, Northern Arts and West Midlands Arts were particularly supportive.
21. "[Art] is a vital part of our civilisation, of our vision, and our heritage. [...] The health of society depends as much on the discouragement of rubbish as on the fostering of excellence." (Thatcher 1980).
22. "The arts world must come to terms with the fact that Government policy in general has decisively tilted away from the expansion of the public to the private sector. The Government fully intends to honour its pledge to maintain support for the arts as a major feature of its policy, but we look to the private sphere to meet any shortfall and to provide immediate means of increase." Norman St John Stevas, Minister of State for the Arts between 1979 and 1981, in Sinclair (1995: 248).

ABSTRACTS

The concept of leisure offers an interesting prism for the analysis of the community arts movement in Britain. The emergence of community arts from the late 1960s was closely related to a critique of the exclusive character of mainstream art appreciation and practice and to the struggle for people's access to the means of cultural production. As a tool, leisure was used by practitioners to enable the expression of usually unheard voices, thus fostering processes of "authorisation". Instead of being considered as a secondary claim, access to leisure, with its rich associations with play, "fun" and recreation, was given pride of place in the movement's practical and political framework. It became a political aim: that of opening alternative spaces and of harnessing the dynamic and subversive dimension of creative expression in the encouragement of collective action at a local level. In a crucial way, community arts projects asserted the equal validity of all cultural forms and signifying practices, therefore challenging classical definitions of art. The cultural pluralism advocated by community artists confronted the distinction between "high" and "low" culture and sought instead to redefine art around the concept of expression, away from the figure of the individual artist and towards the possibility of co-authorship in the production of collective meanings. The article analyses the politics of leisure produced by community arts organisations both in discourse and practice. Based on archival sources from several organisations as well as interviews with former members, the study offers a survey of different practices and identifies core principles of the movement: accessibility, collective action, empowerment, and cultural democracy. These themes were jeopardized in the 1980s, in the context of the successive Conservative governments.

Le concept de loisir offre un prisme fertile pour l'analyse du mouvement *community arts* en Grande-Bretagne. L'émergence de ce mouvement à la fin des années soixante est étroitement liée à la critique du caractère exclusif des mondes de l'art, tant dans l'accès aux œuvres que dans la pratique artistique. Il participe d'une lutte pour l'accès démocratique aux moyens de production culturels. Le loisir peut être tout d'abord envisagé comme un outil à la disposition des animateurs, qui favorise l'expression de voix habituellement marginalisées et qui conduit à des processus d'« auteurisation ». Loin d'être considéré comme une revendication secondaire, l'accès aux loisirs, dans ses connotations riches qui incluent le jeu, le divertissement et la récréation, fut mis au premier plan dans le cadre d'action du mouvement. Il devient un projet politique : celui d'ouvrir des espaces alternatifs et d'exploiter la dimension dynamique et subversive de l'expression créative propice à l'émergence d'actions collectives au niveau local. D'une manière cruciale, les projets *community arts* affirment l'égale validité de toutes les formes culturelles et des pratiques signifiantes, remettant ainsi en cause les définitions dominantes de l'art. Le pluralisme culturel revendiqué par les *community artists* mettent en question la distinction hiérarchique qui séparent les formes nobles et populaires de la culture et cherchent au contraire à redéfinir l'art autour du concept plus ouvert d'expression créative. Ce déplacement permet de révoquer la figure de l'artiste individuel et d'évoluer vers la possibilité d'imaginer un partage de la fonction auteur dans la production de significations collectives. L'article analyse les enjeux politiques du loisir dans le contexte des organisations *community arts* à travers les discours et pratiques produits. Basée sur un travail dans les archives de différentes organisations ainsi que sur des entretiens avec d'anciens membres, l'étude met en lumière différentes pratiques et identifie les principes fondamentaux du mouvement : l'accessibilité, l'action collective, la mise en capacité des individus (*empowerment*) et la démocratie culturelle. Ces thèmes se trouvent mis à mal pendant les années 1980s, dans le contexte des gouvernements Conservateurs successifs.

INDEX

Keywords: leisure, community arts, community action, cultural policy, empowerment, radicalism, town planning, Thatcherism

Mots-clés: loisirs, maisons de la culture, action communautaire, politiques culturelles, mise en capacité des individus, radicalisme, urbanisme, Thatcherisme

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