# Response to Anna Bull (on Stella Duffy and 'everyday creativity')

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Last week Anna Bull published a response (**'Towards Cultural Democracy', July 10, 2017**) to the range of responses on this blog (**'Response to Stella Duffy on the arts, elitism, communities', July 6, 2017**) to an article in the *Guardian* by Stella Duffy (**'Excellence in the arts should not be defined by the metropolitan elite', June 30, 2017**). I and several other writers wanted to respond to Bull's arguments, especially where they refer to specific points each of us have made. The replies are below.

## Björn Heile

It's curious that Bull and others complain about my calling this 'Stalinist'. What drove me to the Zhdanov/Stalin comparison was the populist anti-elitism, the idea that 'the people's art' is good and 'the elite's art' is bad. The means of achieving that are different; for the Soviet variant, the artist has a particular role in serving the people but remains a specialist. The idea that everybody is equally artistic and that even training is suspect seems more akin to the Cultural Revolution. What it is decidedly not is democratic.

## Eva Moreda Rodriguez

I initially thought the main issue with Duffy's article was its conceptual vagueness. I didn't doubt for a second – and still don't – that Duffy has good intentions and formidable energy, and that many people derive lots of enjoyment from taking part in the Fun Palaces initiative. My initial comment on the article was aimed at asking for clarification: what exactly is different about Fun Palaces (and similar initiatives), when most arts organizations in the country are doing outreach in one way or another? I felt this was not clearly articulated in Duffy's original article, but it is crucial if she and Fun Palaces' supporters want to present what they do as something innovative that can bring about change.

In her blog post, Anna Bull provides some clarification. Now, I understand that Bull is not talking on behalf of Stella Duffy and of Fun Palaces, so her answer does not exactly address what I was asking, but it is a very welcome contribution nevertheless.

I would like to reiterate that I regard many of the community-led approaches that Bull describes as admirable, and I am sure they are doing inestimable work in terms of

giving access to the arts (both in product and process) to people who would not have got involved otherwise.

Still, I am slightly troubled by the either/or divide implied in Bull's response: outreach initiatives from publicly funded arts organizations (bad) versus community-led initiatives (good). Although as I mentioned before, Bull does not represent Stella Duffy, Fun Palaces or the "everyday creativity" movement, incidentally, this either/or mentality was also present in Duffy's original article, and it is even more obvious in two of her articles about Fun Palaces I have discovered since:

**http://cultureactioneurope.org/fun-palaces/**
**https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2015/feb/19/fun-places-2015-excellence-communities-stella-duffy**

And yet, it seems to me the reality is more complex than that, and I wonder whether the "everyday creativity" community (broadly understood) acknowledges this systematically. Here's a couple of examples and situations I can think of:

-*Some* of the individual events described on the Fun Palaces website sound very similar to *some* of the events organized by arts and education institutions (e.g. museums, universities, etc.). Would a random person off the street walking into one of these events without knowing anything about their genesis be able to tell the difference? Would they feel automatically empowered by the former and disempowered by the latter?

-Some arts institutions work very closely with individuals or groups from the community when delivering their outreach programmes, e.g. Scottish Opera with communities in the Highlands and Islands, so clearly some events are difficult to classify as either/or.


**Michael Morris**

I was one of the contributors to Ian Pace's collection of responses to Stella Duffy's article in the Guardian. You mention me by name in your response to Ian here. You say two things about what I said. First, you attribute to me the concern that 'cultural democracy' (I'll come back to this term shortly) will 'produce an awful lot of bad art, and no good art'. Secondly, you attribute to me (as well as Björn Heile) 'the assumption that democratising culture leads to abandoning aesthetic judgement'.

I'm afraid both of these attributions are wrong. I was not expressing the concern that 'cultural democracy' will produce a lot of bad art and no good art. I was not assuming that 'democratising culture' leads to abandoning aesthetic judgement.

Here is the whole of the response of mine which Ian Pace shared:

*The argument for democracy in politics is not that it leads to things being done better, but that it's part of the goal of politics that everyone should be a part of it. Similarly, there's no reason to think democracy in art will lead to better art; and it's not obviously a goal of art itself that everyone should be a part of it – even if that's something we all might want for other (most obviously political) reasons. What this piece presents is a political goal presented as an artistic goal. The problem is that*

*that then begins to look like a rather sinister politics, even, since it drills art, of all things, into conformity with politics.*

Perhaps it will help to bring out the point of this if I explain where I'm coming from. I'm a philosopher, so my business is to question fundamental assumptions. This doesn't inevitably mean casting doubt on those assumptions: it often means asking what their real justification is.

In this spirit, philosophers ask what justifies democracy in political systems. I think there is no plausible justification of democracy in political systems as the most effective method for bringing about some independently defined set of benefits: we don't actually know how effective it is, and we don't know that no other system would be more effective. The most plausible justification of democracy in politics is not, therefore, that it's an effective means of bringing about some independently conceived end, but that everyone's being part of government is part of the end which any political system must aim at. That was the point of the first sentence in my response.

Now let us ask: what would justify 'democracy' in art? (I'll come back to the very idea in a moment.) Again, and for the same reasons, it's not plausible that the justification, if there is one, is that it's the most effective means of bringing about some artistic goal: we don't know how effective it would be, and we don't know that no other system would be more effective. But this time we don't have the other kind of justification to fall back on. While it is plausibly part of the goal of politics to produce a system in which everyone is part of government, it is not plausibly the goal of art itself that everyone should be involved in it. It's not that this would not be a good thing: we would all love everyone to be involved in art. But it's not plausibly the business of art itself to produce that result.

That was the point of the second sentence, which your first attribution gets quite seriously wrong. I'm not saying anything at all about the likelihood of 'cultural democracy' producing bad art, or less good art, or anything: I'm simply talking about what the justification for 'cultural democracy' might be, and whether everyone's being involved is plausibly a goal of art itself, rather than a political goal which we might all share.

My third sentence involved an interpretation of Stella Duffy's piece. It seemed to me that it was presenting the involvement of everyone as a goal of art itself. Indeed, it seemed to be advocating a political policy – support of certain kinds of artistic project – which had at its core the idea that it is a goal of art itself that everyone should be involved in it. This seemed to me to be sinister, because it involves advocating a politics which favours a certain kind of art.

The objection here is not, as you seem to suggest, that 'democratising culture' leads to abandoning aesthetic judgement. On the contrary, the objection is that a certain kind of aesthetic judgement is incorporated into politics. The objection is that the policy is an attack on artistic freedom.

So much for what I meant. I'm disappointed that what I said was misunderstood first time round, but hope it is now clear.

In my response, I did not question the key terms 'cultural democracy' and 'democratising culture'. But I do think these terms are questionable. It is quite unclear that the proposals of this movement involve anything which would ordinarily be called a democratic process. In fact, Stella Duffy's piece seems to advocate populism, rather than democracy. And populism is entirely compatible with quite undemocratic systems (think of Julius Caesar and Napoleon, as well as some of the more sinister regimes of the 20th Century).

My own view is that the recommendations of the KCL report have nothing to do with democracy at all. (This is perhaps indicated by the fact that the term 'cultural democracy' seems to need constant repetition as a short-hand for 'promoting cultural capabilities for everyone'.) The core idea is what in other terms might be called a 'bottom-up', as opposed to 'top-down', approach to including people in art.

On this approach in general I have nothing very interesting to say. In common with many others (I can't speak for them, but I imagine this includes all of those whose responses Ian Pace collected), I would want as many people to be involved in the arts as possible. And like them (I'm sure), I want different genres and different traditions of art to be respected, and excellence valued and promoted wherever it is to be found. I don't have the empirical expertise to comment on this, but it seems to me quite plausible that this will be achieved by pursuing a bottom-up approach – though this need not involve abandoning a top-down one.

But none of this requires adopting populism about art itself, or attempting to denigrate serious art on the grounds that it is 'elitist'. This latter thing is what is pernicious and divisive, and this latter thing is what I (like others of those whose responses Ian Pace collected, I'm sure) was objecting to.

I do hope this important debate can be pursued further in ways which keep the different goals and issues separate and clear. Let's do what we can to involve people, and to respect different genres and traditions and value excellence everywhere. But let's not do it by attacking particular kinds of art for political reasons.


**Ian Pace**

Anna Bull writes the following:

*Several commentators make comparisons between a shift towards 'everyday creativity' and arts policies under fascist regimes. They draw on historical examples from the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany relating to the problem of addressing elitism in the arts via democratisation, and include an accusation that this kind of policy shift would be 'Stalinist'. While I think using historical examples to make a comparison can be helpful, it's noticeable that these comments leap straight to fascism rather than considering any other, less extreme, examples, such as the Greater London Authority's leftist cultural policy in the 1980s. This leap is the equivalent of suggesting that any form of economic redistribution leads to communism. By contrast, Stella Duffy gives the example of Fun Palaces, an organisation that has minimal central organisation and takes very different forms in local areas. Some Fun Palaces might draw on 'elite' forms of art such as literature*

*while others might make space for more participatory forms. Rather than fascism, this is an example of extreme localism, its opposite.*

The debate about Duffy's article was provoked by one individual's noting of what they felt were the Stalinist implications of Duffy's arguments. Several of those involved in the ensuing debate, including myself, are scholars whose work deals in part with the situation of music under fascist, communist (and capitalist) societies. The passage in Duffy's article which some found disturbing was the following:

*Those of us working in culture talk a lot about the arts ecology, but in any ecology some parts must die for new ones to thrive. It might be time to let go of some of our outdated practices. Our commitment to "excellence and quality" as defined by mainstream, metropolitan-based thinking many decades ago, might need to shift to a new version of "excellence and quality", one defined by a new generation of makers and creators – and this time from every part of society.*

*If we want cultural democracy, genuine culture for all, elitism must make way for creativity and community-led culture.*

Attacks upon elitism and elites, not to mention excellence and quality, do have a long and very undistinguished history, whether in Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, or for that matter amongst contemporary right-wing populist politicians. The Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde has traced the central role of attacks on elites in his books *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), drawing upon a range of other political scholars who have arrived at similar conclusions. The resonances with the language of Andrei Zhdanov in the late years of Stalin's Russia, but also similar rhetoric from right and left in China and Germany (and elsewhere), were quite obvious to me – I have read sentences like the last one as quotations from many dictators and demagogues. I remember clearly the time of Ken Livingstone's control of the Greater London Council (about which I have also read a certain amount since it was abolished in 1986): certainly there was a move on his part to distribute cultural funding to a more diverse range of groups than hitherto, which was welcome, but I do not recall anything like such shocking comments. Most of the contributors to the original set of responses would support some redistribution and decentralisation of cultural funding (some, including myself, are explicit about this), but this is quite different to a full-on attack on elites in the name of 'community'. This is why I do not find Bull's parallel with an equation of economic redistribution with communism to be valid. If Duffy had written something like 'If we want a larger demographic to be able to participate in the arts, then we must look at distributing funding more widely than amongst the traditional elites', then it might have been. I would also add that the opposition she presents between fascism and localism is also highly questionable: many fascist parties and politicians have sought their base in relatively small local communities, and expressed disdain for city life, with all it entails in terms of greater plurality of peoples and cultures. Fascism, at least as theorised by some, entails a degree of low-level organisation, supporters on the ground in local communities, in distinction to the top-down model of other types of dictatorships and autocracies.

Bull goes on to write:

*Pace comments that 'one should be wary of viewing 'community' as necessarily a wholly benevolent or benign thing'; communities can create divisions and barriers as well as overcoming them. In this, Pace is correct, but he could have gone on to say that currently, the arts contribute to reinforcement of the 'echo chamber' of white middle-class opinion and worldview. By contrast, writers such as Bev Skeggs have shown how different cultures and ways of life exist in the UK that are not reflected or even necessarily acknowledged by those who make policy. Working class cultures can be very different to middle class culture, but the latter is much more visible, and is therefore taken to be the unspoken norm. Cultural policy is,*
*therefore, already reinforcing existing historic divisions of class and race, for example by giving money to those forms of arts that organise themselves in the ways which are recognised by the state. In our report we discuss the example of BAME arts and cultural participation groups, which tend to operate on a local and short-term basis, for example coming together to organise an annual mela then disbanding till the next year. These, as well as 'community-facing' South Asian arts practices, as Jasjit Singh describes them, are not visible to funders such as Arts Council England. As a result, they don't garner funding in the same way as groups that have the resources, knowledge, and interest in organising in ways that are recognised by the state. Cultural policy has to recognise that existing arrangements for how culture is organised prioritise certain groups and certain forms of art over others.*

This paragraph uses various ideas and concepts in a very vague and ill-defined manner. What exactly is this 'white middle-class opinion and worldview', and how is it 'reinforced' by the arts at present? Is this equally true of the work of a new translation of Baudelaire, a cycle of *ars subtilior* motets, an exhibition of the paintings of Hokusai, a production by Théâtre du Soleil, or the performance art of Valie Export and Marina Abramović? Nor do I know what 'working class cultures' are, though I can think of many artists from working-class backgrounds. One example would be the composer Brian Ferneyhough.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxbpF_aW4vU

None of the above examples would have played much of a role in the white lower middle class milieu in which I grew up.

A statement like 'Working class cultures can be very different to middle class culture' is bland and meaningless without some definition of what these cultures entail, in the sense of cultural production, which is what is relevant in this context. I am not really prepared to accept either such 'cultures' can be apperceived other than as wholly heterogeneous entities which might have a large degree of overlap. Where I would make a distinction is between some culture designed for a more educated reader/listener/spectator/etc., compared to that for which no such education is required. It is undoubtedly true in much of the world that access to education, and the quality of that education, varies immensely depending upon social class, regionality, and so on. But I see that as an issue of inequality of provision rather than a problem with education per se. The world would be a much lesser place without such 'educated culture', and as such the priority should be to make such education as widely available as possible.

Bull also writes:

*Pace goes on to suggest that both the market and community-based art (by which I assume he means the everyday creativity we describe in the report) is 'unlikely' to produce 'a critical art, which can deal with uncomfortable and unsettling phenomena, represent non-populist and minority perspectives, and look beyond the existing world (and existing societies) towards what might be, not just what has been.' He is wrong to say that the market or everyday creativity cannot produce critical art; for example, Anahid Kassabian's (2016) writing on African American women making their own web series shows these women expressing a critical consciousness (including new ways of using sound in film) through grassroots cultural production. This example shows how critique may be occurring in ways that are not recognised, or even known about, by white middle-class culture.*

*[Kassabian, A., 2016. "You mean I can make a tv show?": Web series, assertive music, and African-American women producers, in: Hawkins, S. (Ed.),* The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender. *Ashgate]*

My exact words were:

*I believe it is vital that there can also be a critical art, which can deal with uncomfortable and unsettling phenomena, represent non-populist and minority perspectives, and look beyond the existing world (and existing societies) towards what might be, not just what has been. A space needs to be made for this in ways which are unlikely through the vagaries of the market, or for that matter through some types of community art projects.*

Bull equates something's being 'unlikely' to a claim that something 'cannot' happen; I made no such claim. But I have seen much less evidence of what I consider to be critical art having been produced under commercial or community-based conditions – at least in the sense that community is presented by Duffy. In some sense, any group of artists working together is a community; whether or not they inhabit a particular local community on a daily basis is immaterial.

But I had a look at Kassabian's article, which I had not previously read. The passage to which I imagine Bull refers is the following:

*With fewer resources to work with, especially in terms of funding, but very strong talent pools from which to draw, many of these artists [African American women] decided to use approaches that are much more assertive and attention-grabbing than mainstream film and television scoring practices. For example, in each of their debut episodes, Unwritten Rules and Black Actress turn to the musical sound of a record scratch, as is heard prevalently in rap tracks to mark an important shift in consciousness. [.....]*

*The specific sound that caught my ear, as it were, in the first episodes of both Unwritten Rules and Black Actress was the record scratch. The scratch is an important, powerful sound – first, it went from being a dreaded sound, the sound of a mistake, to being a significant musical means of expression over the past 30-plus years, and in particular, because of its roots in hip-hop, it has specifically African American roots and associations. Second, despite its musicality, it retains the overlay of error or dread. And, finally, it is a sound that is almost never heard in audiovisual texts, except perhaps as a sound event inside the narrative world; indeed, it is very*

*rare in uses such as these, where the characters do \*not\* hear the sound that the perceivers/audience do. The scratch is used (in both cases – see below as a unit of aural meaning, placed on a soundtrack as if it is dramatic scoring. without any other music to contextualise it; this is a radical aural moment.*

The following is the episode of *Unwritten Rules* in question.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbZjKDwy8vE&feature=youtu.be

*The rules for television sound have historically been quite realist, which is not to say that the original sounds are used in some semblance of the rules of Dogme 95 films, but rather that they aspire to "seeming" quite like real sounds, without abandoning their ability to draw attention towards or away from particular events or objects through sound choices. Instead, these sounds assert themselves quite vividly in the soundworld of the episodes. It is highly unlikely that anyone watching and listening to either of these episodes will fail to notice the scratches or the tinkle.*

I was astonished to read this (not least the suggestion that non-diegetic sound is such a new thing in TV); I remember hearing record scratches used regularly in various media from some time in the 1980s, yet Kassabian is presenting it as some type of innovation. The most prominent and widely-disseminated use of this sound may be in the series *Ally McBeal*, which ran from 1997 to 2002. The use of sound in this series has received scholarly consideration as well, in Julie Brown's article '*Ally McBeal's* Postmodern Soundtrack', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 126 (2001), pp. 275-303. Already at the time of publication Brown noted that 'This gag is now everywhere on TV' (p. 286), so it was very far from being a significant innovation when *Unwritten Rules* was produced eleven years later. Other scholars have considered the scratch and its various cultural meanings; examples include Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe, 'The racial politics of hybridity and 'neo-eclecticism' in contemporary popular music, *Popular Music* 21/2 (2000), pp. 159-172, or Kjetil Falkenberg Hansen, Marco Fabiani and Robert Bresin, 'Analysis of the Acoustics and Playing Strategies of Turntable Scratching', *Acta Acustica united with Acustica* 97/2 (March/April 2011), pp. 303-314, one of various writings on scratching with which Hansen has been involved (including **a 2010 doctoral dissertation on 'The acoustics and performance of DJ scratching'**). Even the more traditionally-inclined scholar Joseph Auner relates conscious use of the scratch, as used by Portishead, to a wider history of 'scratchy' recordings in his **'Making Old Machines Speak: Images of Technology in Recent Music',***ECHO* **2/2 (Fall 2000)**.

It is not clear whether Kassabian is aware of these writings; certainly none of them appear in her bibliography. A failure to consider an extensive history of such a technique does undermine some of her claims.

For radical use of sound with moving images, I would suggest that the following examples go much much further:

Shirley Clarke, *Bridges Go Round* (1958)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96gowaaVyo0&feature=youtu.be

Pramod Pati, *Explorer* (1968)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asQ9TgvEKvI


Peter Kubelka, *Pause!* (1977)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC2c-AJGKtM


Zhang Peili, *30 x 30* (1988)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dO8Uv_wDK0E


Carolee Schneemann, *Infinity Kisses – The Movie* (2008)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dO8Uv_wDK0E


Emeka Ogboh, *[dis]connect II* (c. 2013)

https://vimeo.com/25175013


To return to Bull's point, certainly there have been some striking examples of radical cultural work produced at the behest of private capital or from some artistic communities. But the possibilities for producing a sustained body of work in this manner, especially where expenses become considerable, are frequently limited when other requirements of finance, not least in terms of labour costs, are involved. It is true that, for example, experimental film has flourished more in the developed world than, say, in the African continent (though there are some striking examples of such work). To therefore portray radical approaches to film making as a primarily 'white' conceit is very short-sighted; world cinema would be greatly enhanced if it were possible for a greater number of film makers in African countries to benefit from the types of institutional support, distribution, and so on which are more common elsewhere, allowing the freedom to take approaches to film which may not generate major commercial dividends.

The money has to come from somewhere, and all things told, I do believe that a system involving progressive taxation and redistribution on artistic projects, for all the issues of institutional control involved, provide a more flexible environment for innovation and critical work than are possible by leaving things to private capital. I realise that the latter option is not what Duffy is advocating, but rather than subsidy of this type should be concentrated upon community-based projects which are open to all rather than through more traditional channels branded 'elitist'. As I have said, I am in agreement with the principle of a wider distribution of resources, including to a greater number of smaller or non-metropolitan projects. But it would never be

possible to fund everything, and so some choices have to be made. I am deeply concerned by a situation in which any aesthetic criteria, no matter how difficult these may be to conceive fairly, are jettisoned simply in favour of the demographic of the participants.

In her last paragraph, Bull writes:

*Arts Council England has made a progressive move with its 'Creative Case for Diversity' which requires the process of* creating *culture to involve a diverse range of people as well as expecting the audiences and performers to be diverse.*

I am also surprised by the concept that performers do not 'create' culture.