

The Arts Industry Article: <https://www.artsindustry.co.uk/feature/2340-taitmail-the-arts-healing-with-kindness>

TAITMAIL The arts, healing with kindness

Written on 14 January 2021.

That *The Guardian* should devote its entire leader column on Saturday to the arts was encouraging, but that it should be so positive – under the headline *The arts, though dealt a terrible shock, will help Britain recover* – was uplifting.

To be honest, what it said was nothing new if you've been keeping the faith with this column: the last ten months have indeed been "unimaginable, unprecedented", in which, despite theatres, museums and concert halls being largely closed, the arts have been revealed as "a means of solace, company and inspiration", the leader says; the arts have "immense power to heal", but must not be "crowd pleasing" *Guardian leader*. And however serious the government is about "levelling" the social strata in our collective life, it's what the arts have shown they can do.

Yes, the arts can nurse a recovery, but not without wholehearted government support in partnership with local authorities. There needs to be a completely new funding structure based on long-term low interest loans and therefore investment that encourages the ingenuity and entrepreneurship so admirably demonstrated through 2020; there needs to be a comprehensive visa system negotiated that allows our creative industries to operate freely in Europe; and there needs to be a safety network for the 70% of the sector's workforce that is freelance - the "engine room" as *The Guardian* puts it - to prevent any more of them leaving.

It's sad that Simon Rattle has decided to leave a non-European Britain for Germany, but his loss is not necessarily ours and the recovery is largely going to be invisible to the wider gaze (the decision seems mostly to be about travel arrangements); the Barbican's £300m Rattle Hall music centre we thought he had come to build is not now a priority. What happens further down the scale at the grass roots is more important, we now know from our Covid experiences, and there's a more basic job for the arts, in our communities.

The first Calouste Gulbenkian Civic Arts Awards whose shortlist was announced this week (with the winners named in March) gives us a glimpse of the ingenuity and connectiveness artists at the social level have revealed since last March, and why the local authority element can be so much more important than the national one. There are ten organisations on the shortlist and the winner gets £100,000, with £25,000 each for two runners up. It's a big money prize that will make a lot of difference, and it's worth noting that it was the Gulbenkian who introduced the then £100,000 Museum of the Year Award in 2003, now run by the Art Fund, which has lifted the public perception of museums to a higher plane; perhaps the £150,000 Civic Arts Awards will have the same effect for community arts projects.

Two years ago the Carnegie UK Trust published a report, *Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy*, by Dame Julia Unwin, the former CEO of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which revealed the one vital missing ingredient in civic life. She argued that a proper and valuable focus on regulation, measurement and efficiency has crowded out that one essential element in civic life, and the major challenges facing public policy demand

an approach that is more centred on human relationships. “Kindness” she said “is an issue of concern, not just for those working in communities, but also for those with power and authority... this is a question of urgency. With investments in technology and artificial intelligence transforming the world at speed, it is imperative that we focus equally on our emotional intelligence”. [Carnegie report](#)

Emotional intelligence is precisely what is brought to bear – Unwin may have been ahead of her time but her time seems to have come and those major challenges loom much larger now than they did in 2018. While she was compiling her report Calouste Gulbenkian were putting together theirs, [Rethinking Relationships](#), published in 2017, which showed the need for the arts to work more closely with their communities across the art forms.

There are ten shortlisted for the Civic Arts Awards, and in modifying what they do in lockdown circumstances each one of them seems to operate on a basis of emotional intelligence, in that they’ve thought first about what the community is in need of and then how their skills can be adapted to provide it.

So Deveron Projects, a “socially engaged contemporary art practice” in rural Aberdeenshire, found that what their neighbours needed was not art but bread, so instead of installing an artist in residence as planned they found a craftsman to be the baker in residence whose bakery has become a current version of the village pump from which was organised a global virtual marathon. Key Changes in London is putting musical mentors in touch with people with mental health issues. In Coventry EGO Performance, set up in 2006 to “unleash the creative energies and talents of a young and diverse community”, is streaming a weekly soap opera, “Corona-nation Street”, which picks up on and reflects the everyday experiences of a largely marginalised section. Quiet Down There in Brighton has homed in on the great unsung social hub of British community life, the launderette, and has made films and installations with six artists around the staff and users of 30 establishments. The Big House Theatre Company in Canonbury, North London, uses home-grown drama to help youngsters who’ve been in care and are struggling, and during lockdown has become a liaison with support services with which connection has stalled. With their young people the group has created *The Ballad of Corona V* which addresses what is happening to some of the city’s most marginalised youth.

There is no money in what these artists do. Some of them have Arts Council support but mostly they are sustained by local authority grants that are increasingly difficult for councils to afford. “Kindness” is not a word they would easily use, and “emotional intelligence” would not be in their vocabulary, but the new system, or “contract” as Unwin calls it, would be based on human connections rather than officially issued public policy. “Kindness changes things – and action on kindness in communities must be met by a new contract, fit for the 21st century” she concludes in her report. “This contract will recognise that we are at our best when we recognise the importance of emotions”.