The Art of Constructive Engagement

People, ideas and resources move round the world faster than ever before. At the same time global and local issues seem ever more connected. But with all this activity – and something like 2 trillion text messages being sent this year – trust gaps are growing, as is the realisation that government-to-government conversations and action won’t be sufficient to tackle today’s challenges.

It is a paradox that, as globalisation brings the world closer than ever, the distance between people gets wider. That means the trust gaps we need to work harder to increase international understanding and bridge trust gaps.

The excellence and innovation of the UK’s cultural and creative practice is one of the most powerful tools to do so, to pursue strong cultural relations and build engagement and trust between people.

A few weeks ago I attended the opening of Tate Britain’s exhibition, ‘Lure of the East’. An exhibition that we are touring to Turkey and the Middle East this year in partnership with the Tate. I was asked by a visitor to the opening why on earth we were sending this show to what he called ‘repressive regimes in the Gulf’.

I said we deal with people not governments - and the distinction is important. We believe that our people-to-people diplomacy provides enriching connections – in all senses of the phrase - for the UK. The arts are an important barometer of individual thought and feeling and an unparalleled way to communicate directly with people across international boundaries.

Exactly one week later I was at the next door gallery at the opening of a small exhibition. This was the result of joint work with the Tate education department and put together by a group of young artists in the art schools of Amman, Jordan and Damascus. This in microcosm is the power of the arts in cultural relations: an outstanding exhibition around which we will build discussion of the UK with links to the Islamic, married to a celebration of young artists within the UK.
Artistic engagement provides an unmediated channel to individuals. It allows the individual to frame and often reframe their world view.

Working in 110 countries, we provide a unique platform for the UK’s arts and cultural sector. And for over 70 years the British Council has harnessed the power of the arts to support our Cultural Relations mission.

Many of the UK’s most celebrated artists have worked with us and many - among them Margaret Drabble, Lucian Freud, Tracey Emin, and Anthony Gormley and filmmakers like David MacKenzie, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh - say our support when they were emerging artists was one of the key contributions to making them international artists. And such investment provides a strong return for the UK - in increased international kudos and respect for a society which nurtures such creativity – as well as a not inconsiderable return to the exchequer. Over time this respect becomes engagement, trust and influence for the UK.

**We believe that creative work speaks for the values and the vibrancy of the UK.** It expresses the values of our open society in a personal and imaginative way leapfrogging the barriers of language, politics, religion or tribe.

A few years ago, we sent an exhibition called Common Ground to Saudi Arabia. We commissioned photographers to capture aspects of Muslim life in the UK.

Some showed makeshift mosques. Some girls in hijabs playing on northern beaches. Others focussed on asylum centres.

Interestingly, the exhibition was challenged by some Parliamentarians who weren’t happy about a less than rosy picture of Britain touring the world.

But in Saudi, where there had hardly ever been an exhibition of contemporary art, let alone one of images of people, it was phenomenally well received. Its frankness, its ‘truthfulness’ if you like, was what particularly impressed its audience.

The freedom to be self-critical, to uphold different views, and to underline our belief in the diversity - even perversity - of the individual voice, are fundamental to the values of an open society. **And such values are integral to the arts.**
That’s why we were supported the National Theatre of Scotland’s production Black Watch. The award-winning play is challenging on a number of levels not least its questioning of recent foreign policy decisions and their impact on the individual and on a nation’s character.

**It’s not our job to answer those questions but we believe it is our job to create the space for conversations** about them and we can best do so by supporting innovative, contemporary work and bring it to wider audience.

That’s why we supported NTS to take the work to America – to even greater critical acclaim. For us, Black Watch provided an opportunity to engage in cultural debate about the nature of war and its effects on people. In doing so we projected not just another side of Britain but a more nuanced, fuller, richer view of us and our society.

*Presenting creative work from across Britain – from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales as well as from our English regions – is also essential to our policy of showing the diversity of today’s creative Britain.*

We have just selected Steve McQueen as the British representative at next year’s Venice Biennale. This young, black British artist makes work that is investigative and searching. His debut feature film, Hunger, won the prestigious Camera D’or in Cannes this year. And, as the official war artist in Iraq, he controversially produced a series of postage stamps showing the soldiers fallen in war.

His point is not about politics, but about remembrance and the importance of the individual, ‘Lest we forget’. It challenges the audience to question assumptions about the nature of war and victory but never to forget the nature of sacrifice; something common to all combatants, whatever their allegiances.

**We also work to increase the flow of talent and ideas into the UK.** This year we ran a very successful partnership with the London Book Fair and established the ‘Arab world’ as its official guest market.

Literally hundreds of writers and publishers attended our programmes, including marvellous writers such as Hisham Matar (the Booker -Prize nominee for his debut
novel about Libya), Ahdaf Souief, and Alaa Al-Aswany, author of The Yacoubian Building. Aswany’s novel explores contemporary Egypt through the huge range of characters that live in a block of flats in Cairo.

I met the Lebanese Culture Minister at the Book Fair and followed this up with a meeting in Beirut last month. The peace deal had just been agreed and the ‘tent city’ which had taken over the centre of town had been removed. On arrival our deputy country director told me about the snipers that had taken over her building and of the days she’d spent hiding in her bathroom with her young son.

But when I arrived, Beirut was alive. People were returning and reclaiming the streets. The arts were leading the change. Rock concerts were being planned, stages set up and art-house cinemas were starting to show banned films. Music stores were back and, somewhat incongruously, leading couture shops were reopening. The local Häagen-Dazs had started selling a reconciliation cone with three flavours!

For the Culture Minister, the Book Fair was an essential platform to show this other side of Lebanon. To tell it’s other story – away from war. The story of its creative and culture legacy and its unique ability in the region to find ways for people of different faiths to live together. The next stage for us is how to support the Lebanese government’s preparations for Beirut becoming UNSECO World Book Capital in April 2009.

All this is not just being a fair-weather friend. Our work is about developing and enlivening people-to-people connections and the arts are powerful vehicle for this when political tensions exist between countries.

When we first began to run cultural programmes in Iran in 2002, we were struck by the hunger among its young people to be connected to what was happening in the west.

We have been working with Iran’s contemporary creative artists: its film-makers, theatre directors, artists, photographers, graphic designers, curators, and publishers. Despite the worsening political climate, our work has continued, albeit ‘low profile, high impact’. And during this period, the BM has been doing a marvellous job of showing us the longer perspective of Iranian history, through exhibitions which take
us from Persepolis to the Safavid period – and which help make today’s Iran feel like not such an unconnected place.

At the Quartet’s discussion on the nuclear programme continue, Iran is actively looking to renew cultural ties in Europe. Only a few weeks ago, we were asked by the Iranian authorities to re-establish our contemporary exhibition programme in Tehran, and to begin again the dialogue between our young creative individuals.

This commitment to work over the long-term is an essential part of our cultural relations mission. We work people-to-people, finding leading voices and influencers in societies and invest in them – regardless of the political weather. That’s why we work in Zimbabwe there and our offices in Harare and Bulawayo remain open.

I have been CEO of the British Council for a year now, and am privileged to lead an organisation which has had such a proud history of presenting British art abroad. It’s right that we should look at what we are doing, and how we do it in the 21st century.

In doing so we have alarmed some but over the past few months we’ve been listening to the sector. As you all know we recently undertook a consultation with the arts sector. Between February and April we spoke to around 600 artists and arts organisations around the UK. We will publish an analysis of the consultation and an action plan on the 25th July.

The sector told us how important our work is to them and that supporting international links and promoting the best of contemporary Britain should remain a core part of our cultural relations mission. They told us how important our sectoral expertise is and that we should celebrate it and publicly commit to increased activity.

And I’m delighted to do so. We want to increase our total annual arts spend to £30 million by the end of next year. Because the arts are a central part of our work. They offer a unique take on contemporary Britain and are a unique way to explore ourselves and to help others do so too.

The arts transcend political, social, economic and religious differences and are one of the great success stories of contemporary Britain. We support and promote the very best of the UK’s creativity through our specialist teams and global network. Our
work inspires audiences worldwide and encourages them to look to the UK as a source of ingenuity and self-fulfilment.

But it’s clear to me that we can’t and don’t do this alone. The total creative output from the UK provides more than an economic return to the Treasury. It is a vibrant and powerful way for foreign publics to appreciate contemporary Britain: our multiple identities, our successes and our challenges.

Supporting such international arts activity is one of the most powerful ways to build engagement and trust between people.

And the international interest in Britain is as strong as our interest in other countries.

That’s why we are helping the Tate take a Turner exhibition to Russia and China, and in part, accounts for the monumental success of Neil’s Warriors exhibition earlier this year.

No single organisation can deliver all that the UK needs from its international cultural activity. Increasingly, many institutions have developed their own international strategies. But it’s not clear to me that – where they can be – they are joined up.

We need to work together better to increase our impact in priority countries and regions to ensure that the best of the UK is accessible by as many people as possible. Only in this way will we truly harness the power of the arts, if not to change the world, then to change people.