

Reason has left the building or why we need University-housed Art Schools in our Brexit-y times

Carola Boehm, Staffordshire University (68 days to the 3rd Brexit deadline)

While writing a foreword to a book to be [published next year](#), all about the joyful topic of arts and academia, I am constantly astounded how our basic expectations of human civility in our daily Brexit-y lives are under threat. Between our ability to be funny about the politics of the day and our seemingly biased media, we have become numbed to the routine of a disdainful pragmatism used by our political leaders, where anything – even referendum interference – is an acceptable means to an end (see The Guardian’s investigation around the [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#)). Between the current ongoing fear-inducing posturing of our UK’s current government’s attempt to get Brexit over the line and the rather suppressed and depressing outflow of news from burning rainforests and melting arctic glaciers, I ask myself what is in my toolbox that can cut through this quagmire.

There was recently a little bit of art-y news lost between the humdrum of big-boy politics. That news was of a former education secretary, Lord Kenneth Baker, [writing a letter](#) to the current Education secretary, suggesting that the EBACC as it currently stands has managed to “squeeze out” arts from the school curriculum. How important art and music in schools is for individuals has been evidenced numerous times but as an enjoyable example I would signpost those head-teachers in need of a bit of encouragement to reintroduce music into schools to the recently posted 100th episode of the podcast [Reasons to be Cheerful](#), recorded live at Abbey Road Studios. There is also WONKHE’s published posts of [Kerwin-Nye](#), or articles of [my own](#) covering the impact to the creative industry. It does need to be reiterated that this industry is as large as the financial sector.

But bear with me to the end of this piece, as I will try to lay out why - in our current era of Brexit and Climate Catastrophe – arts and music matters more than all of this and more than you might think. Because – by the time it will take finishing my own book about arts and academia – I am hoping for some of the chaos and downright criminal activity within our political systems to have dissipated. But my assumption will be that this is a long slog for humanity to work itself back from the brink of catastrophe. And whilst the world continues to burn, and the political discourse continues to be busy wanting to retain economic superiority and sovereignty (and this word has a complex underbelly), our creative professionals are already using that magic ingredient that allows us to fix various fissures in our broken societies, that powerful magic glue found in the power of arts and creativity.

As I have written in a prior [WONKHE article](#), ten years of Hunger-Game austerity have taken their Brexit-y toll also on our universities. Much discussion has been had on the demise of our democratic institutions in this era of Trump and Brexit, but what we are experiencing is more crucially (and shockingly) the long tail end of the age of reason. And if this seems too dramatic a stance, then consider how our current realities, shocked and shaken by what some have coined as the post-truth era, (including the existence of inhumane detention centres, the adhoc-ness of the Windrush Scandal and constant failings to adhere to basic human rights) provides an environment where science and facts seem to be not sufficient anymore to turn the minds and hearts of our democratically elected representatives towards leading us (with my obviously too high expectations of integrity) towards a more sustainable common shared wealth and wellbeing. We live in a time where rationality, science and evidence seem to be not enough.

And as much as I would like to bounce the blame back to the gaggle of fast-changing ministers in Westminster to solve the misery that they have created, I do passionately believe that Universities are the key to ensuring that our future societies will cope with the substantial challenges ahead of them. And one of the reasons for my confidence (or possibly desperate hope) lies in the knowledge that universities have started to use that magic ingredient of arts to ensure rationality and new knowledge have their needed impact. Universities see arts and culture as a way to make the university more permeable and evidence for this lies in the fact that there are an increasing number of universities that have created senior posts to provide strategic creative and cultural leadership for their institutions, such as [Exeter](#), [Kent](#), [Leeds](#), [Bath](#), [Southampton](#) and [Cardiff](#), to name but a few.

My personal belief is that when rationality has stopped working, art can cut through and ensure our messages have reach and impact. Thus, Arts in Higher Education becomes increasingly important as it contributes so heavily to the essence of what it means to be human. And it is also

important because we live in a period where we - as the Earth's most thinking and creative species - have to overcome our own most pernicious man-made ecological challenges. This is happening - apparently coincidentally, but we know to be very much linked - at a time where we seem to discount that same rationality and critical thinking which would allow us to solve the growing number of disruptions in the political, economic, societal, as well as ecological sphere.

And this is where the power of the creative arts comes in. When rationality has stopped working, art can reach on an emotional level. It might appear as the [biting image](#) of Canadian political cartoonist Michael de Adder presenting a real humanitarian crisis in the face of detached political leadership that trended and raised awareness like no factual account could. Or take for an example the depressing imagery of Banksy's [Dismaland Exhibition](#) with its imagery of its almost sinking dinghies full of refugees in grey-brownish dark tints. Or on a more positive celebratory moment, the [Repainting History Project](#) of Photographer Horia Manolache, who in detail captured individual refugee personalities in exact poses and backgrounds of known portraits of European Royals.

And then there is the cleverly put together popular music boy band The Breunion Boys, with their as cleverly constructed Song "[Britain Come Back](#)" (Breunion Boys, 2019), which is as funny as it is poignant, evoking in any Remainer that yearning back for a united Europe. Closer to home, the love of a lived-in region as expressed in the DIY songs of [Merrym'n from Stoke-on-Trent](#) singing about past garden festivals in the local area. The DIY nature matters here, as Stoke-on-Trent was one of those left-behind places where residents and citizens have taken up the baton themselves and developed a powerful DIY can-do attitude, mixed with a powerful creative talent, a pragmatic work ethos, and mixed with a strong community spirit that has allowed Stoke-on-Trent to fast become one of the most uniquely creatively-driven post-industrial cities that I have ever had the privilege to experience.

Thus I do believe that Arts Schools in our HE sector play a huge role in this context, because cultural participation has an indirect, but also demonstrable effect on Innovation, Welfare, Social Cohesion, Entrepreneurship, Local Identity and the Knowledge Economy, just as Luigi [Sacco](#) pointed out in 2014. Art and culture is important as it is "not simply a large and important sector of the economy, it is a 'social software' that is badly needed to manage the complexity of contemporary societies and economies in all of its manifold implications".

In this challenging climate, our universities and specialist institutions represent some of the largest arts hubs in Europe. Art, more often than not, lives in the intersections between university, society, industry and government. Art is inherently permeable, and constantly asking for an audience. Its actors live and survive through being social and business entrepreneurs within a seamless continuum. University-housed Art-schools allow institutions to make use of art's inherently permeable nature to create intentional and curated interfaces between what is within a university and what is outside of its boundaries. However, art subject areas are also inherently one of the most vulnerable disciplinary areas in today's higher education system as their highly fragmented impacts on the economy and society are less quantifiable in monetary terms, and thus less understood.

However, most importantly, art has the power to move us in ways that no facts or rational arguments are able to. It can touch us, and with that touch affect action in times when the process of normalisation, fear and societal trauma seems to have paralysed us to the point where we seem to allow the most basic human civilities to be undermined. When we feel the most helpless and consequently are in danger of becoming numbed by some of the acts of barbarism forced upon our fellow human beings, art is often the way we can communicate and cut through the barriers of partisan divisions to affect change. This is why we need arts in the academy to stay, and why retaining art in its diversity within our university sector IS sustainable and is actually essential.