

The Year of the Visual Arts 96: Local Initiatives, National and Global Trends

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At the beginning of the 1990s, the Arts Council of Great Britain launched the project "Arts 2000". Every year remaining before the end of the century, a town or a region in the United Kingdom had the chance to organise celebrations around a particular form of art, such as music, dance, theatre, literature ... The project was intended to be "a celebration of the artistic achievements of the country", and to take the first step towards establishing "the foundations for cultural life in the new millennium". Arts 2000 was a competition in which councils as well as regional organisations could participate. As such, the project was also presented as "a unique opportunity to draw public attention to the artistic strengths" of the candidate, "and help the arts promote growth and local pride".¹ A minimum financial funding of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds was guaranteed to the laureates, explicitly on condition of significant local investment.

The year 1996 dedicated to the visual arts VAUK 96 was coveted, won and organised by the regional art association, Northern Arts, which at the time, brought together the counties of Cleveland, Cumbria, Durham, Northumberland and Tyne & Wear [Pl.1]. From March to December the region prided itself on listing more than three thousand exhibitions, events, commissions and residencies,² on a direct and indirect structural investment estimated to approach sixty million pounds³ and on an unprecedented popular participation enabling it to have achieved an "extraordinary success".⁴

This paper will look at the process that led to the organisation of the event, examining the relation between the aims of the organisers, in particular, of Northern Arts who developed the project, including both its clients and the providers of public funding: the state through the Arts Council. We will consider how VAUK can be seen as a generic example of the paradigmatic change in the organisation of cultural and artistic events in Britain at the end of the twentieth century, in relation to political and economic shifts. We will also seek to understand the intermingling of local initiatives with national criteria and overarching economic as well as cultural trends, whereby poles of decisions or influences become embedded the one into the other in the course of modelling reality. Eventually, the paper will consider the impact of this combination of intents and actions on the local production and diffusion of the Arts in the North of England.

Forms and Words: the Bids

It is interesting to linger on the bids for VAUK, which were made by Northern Arts at the beginning of the 1990s, as they epitomise the duality of the project from the start. In the first instance, they expose a genuine programmatic idea presented for the benefit of the region, which focuses on its strengths as well as future development. However, necessarily, they have to fit within the frame set by the organiser of the project: the Arts Council of Great Britain. It thus, initially, had to respect orientations coming from above without which the project could not take place, and which guide some of its priorities.

The first bid entitled *Arts 2000 and this is only the beginning*, as well as the more thorough second and final project, *Art 96, Working Foundations – Practice & Place, Arts 2000*, and *Art 96, Site & Services – prepared*, enumerated the strengths of the application. These were, the vigour of the visual arts in the region, the originality of the proposition, the need to improve local infrastructures, the great length of time that would be dedicated to the festivities and the unanimous support shown by the local partners for the project.⁵ They also included a list of existing resources presenting regional galleries and artistic collectives, an outline of the programme, a marketing section, a project of international collaboration, a budget and appendices featuring a list of regional artistic organisations and an exhaustive compilation of official support from both the public and private sectors. Emphasis was put on the 'territory' and the diversity of actors to be potentially involved in a region transformed into an open gallery for the purpose of celebrating an enlarged version of the visual arts, so as to include photography and craft, or architecture and design.⁶ This stress on geography,

regional entity and diversity appeared to have been the strategic path taken by Northern Arts in an attempt to secure capital investment in a momentarily hypertrophied regional public spending scheme. This was in accordance with Northern Arts' own role and the history of art activities in the region. In a sense, outdoor qualities and a wide spatial network were fostered precisely in order to attract public expenditure on currently inadequate physical infrastructure.

The proposition was made by a regional organisation in the interests of the specific needs of its region, however, by sheer necessity, it had to adapt to the rules imposed by the organiser. Thus all the sections mentioned above are reformulations and developments of the selection criteria required in the first place in the Call for Entry. Furthermore, a number of criticisms were made to Northern Arts after the first draft – by then, the other competitors were the cities of Bradford and Glasgow. The jury deemed, amongst other things, that too many organisations were involved in the management of the year, that the staff potentially assigned to the project would be insufficient, that the proposition suggested a top-down directive approach which, consequently, did not sufficiently include the artistic community and finally, that the draft of the programme was mediocre.⁷

This critique had to be taken into account and addressed in the final bid if Northern Arts were to have a chance of obtaining a successful proposal. Adapted measures crucially included the systematic refutation of the – rather ironical – accusation of adopting a top-down approach and of keeping too strong a tutelage on local actors. A framework of collective creation was therefore established in order to convince and reassure the jury of the highly participative nature of the project. “Process” was thus declared to be its dominant theme, and other major themes of the reshuffled programme also bear testimony to the organiser's attention to the core of the artistic scene, including besides the landscape, the artist, the people, the producer and its public.⁸

Naturally it can be dangerous to take these very formal documents as truth incarnated in words. There is of course a great deal of anticipation and pragmatism involved in the writing of the bids and they can conceal an independent agenda, up to a point. However, if they are considered in the national British context, cunningness is to be discarded by the parallel lines that flow from other cases, which include not solely the culture and arts sector but any public development and management in the country. The sole idea of using competitive incentives between different regional or local actors to redistribute financial public support is a sign of the times, the use of the carrot, which the conservative governments imposed in the 1980s to spread its ideological programme. This program favoured a business-friendly attitude, reinforcing the amount of private-public partnerships and was generally greatly concerned with the role the Arts could play in the economy. It also prompted a public friendly attitude concerned with the role the Arts could have in society and with the channels by which public funds attributed to the Arts could be given back to communities and taxpayers. Complementary to this socio-economical function and in accordance with a revitalised entrepreneurial spirit, the Arts were to be a keystone of local development and pride: a firm belief in one's own merit and traditions were to contribute to the construction of one's own identity and 'sense of place'. The bids for the Year of the Visual Arts could be seen as tools for a specific end, however they still had to accept an exchange and include some if not all of the structural requirements of a political agenda, as applied to the production and exhibition of art.

Words, Action, Organisation and Production of the Event

Since management had been pointed at as a weak aspect of the original proposition, Northern Arts created a new company, Northern Sights, to ensure the co-operation of the wide-ranging regional interests and their democratic expression as requested by the national institution, as well as the efficient organisation of the event. The members of this company came from various backgrounds such as local authorities, the Northern Development Company, the Tourist Board of Northumberland and Cumbria, the private sector, Northern Arts itself and included one artist. It was, in essence, a melange of the public and private sectors, a further testimony of the recent private-public partnership prerequisite.

Northern Sights had both guidelines to respect and objectives to fulfil and these fell into two categories. The first aim was: "to change the perceptions of people in the region about the visual arts and the role that the arts can play in their lives".⁹ In other words, it had an audience development target. The second objective was "to change the perception of people outside the region about the scale, quality and diversity of visual arts activity within the region".¹⁰ If one of the objectives was to change the negative preconceptions that the local inhabitants might have towards the arts, its corollary was to fight the negative preconceptions the rest of the country might hold towards the artistic practices in the region. This was logically followed by the benefits expected to come out of the project and likely to "provide a major boost to tourism, not just in 1996 but in the longer term" and to "challenge perceptions about the region that inhibit inward investment".¹¹ The second category is to be thought of in economic terms so as to answer the question: what tangible material benefits can VAUK bring to the region and its inhabitants? Northern Sights in its approach was responding to problems and issues whose answers had been formatted by a decade of radically oriented policies. The fall of the Arts Council of Great Britain into the government's lap through the skilful and progressive exploitation of the Council's Achilles' heel as represented by the "Arm's length principle" in the 1980s, meant that the Council's view of what role the arts should play in society was in itself a reflection of the government's ideological reorientation. As the independence of the Council had relied on an informal acceptance by the different post-war political forces, it had become possible for a determined government to bend its relative autonomy by applying financial pressure and by progressively infiltrating its boards with nominated political allies. Obsession with the benefits of the arts and management efficiency were fostered in a newly branded unilateral adoption of the virtues of marketing. And it is this almost unaltered vision that emerges in the Northern Sights' constitution.

In practice, Northern Sights in conjunction with the regional Arts Council had two main priorities. One was to stimulate and coordinate the efforts of the largest number of actors from the local scene as possible. Considering the span of the media involved, the width and diversity of the region itself, it became crucial for Northern Sights and Group 96 - in charge of running the project to prepare a coherent programme.¹² As the Year of the Visual Arts itself started in March 1996 and continued until December of that year with a concentration of events during the summer period, the distribution in time of the different projects had to be supervised. Besides these time-scaled concerns, it was also their responsibility to supervise the content or 'quality' of these proposed projects. This did not imply that they could take part in the production of works and ideas. Rather, they had to make sure that the projects they would support would be relevant to the topics of the year as sold to the Arts Council. Moreover Northern Sights intended that these projects reflect the three main priorities, which were understandable to the producers and yet beneficial to the event. These were, to develop projects capable of attracting national and international attention, projects engaging with communities in the region and creating opportunities for artists.

Due to Northern Sights' involvement in the construction of the financial set-up available for the celebrations, it had a considerable influence on the appearance of the art projects in the region, if not on their actual contents. The coordination of the actors, galleries, museums, artists' initiatives, etc., could be compared to the tuning of an orchestra. All players had to respect the script in order to benefit from the available funds and like the original bid, one could consider the possibility that appearances which were respected could provide one's activities with the little financial help they needed without jeopardising its integrity. In all of the declarations of intents made by the participants with regard to their programmes for the artistic year 1996, one may spot these main lines defined beforehand as priorities creeping into their discourses alongside their specific intents.

The approach of Northern Sights to its tasks and to some extent of Northern Arts as its tutelary organisation may be classified as that of a marketing tool. Fundamentally its goals were the wrapping up, the presentation under various forms, such as historical, artistic or social and the branding of a product named VAUK 96. This was done as much with images

as a logo and a set of designs to be used by all the partners of the year, as with words and discourses which duplicate themselves with infinite variations from the top of the management ladder to the bottom individual project. Northern Sights here embodied the appearance of managerial structures as previously dictated by the government's policies of the 1980s. Similarly, its role as a merchandiser, a marketing company with the task of convincing local inhabitants of the interests of art - and as such to create consumers - and of promoting the region's image to attract inwards investment, is very much the product of the times where art is considered as an instrument for potential economic growth rather than for its own sake.

Impact: Continuity and Regeneration

What about the Art? Did this strategic planning or these phrased embellishments and compulsory guidelines have some effect on the art shown and produced in the region in 1996? The answer has to be mitigated. We have mentioned the fact that artists and art organisations had to devise their propositions in accordance with the general outline of the Year of the Visual Arts. Admittedly these axes were quite broad and a little amount of cooperation was often sufficient to get the backing of Northern Sights whose objectives as stated had little to do with art forms.¹³ Furthermore, it seems artists and small art organisations often develop quite naturally a certain sense of resistance toward management's imperatives. This is understandable – and probably fortunate – as they did not operate, quite yet, on the same plane of thought or action. Consequently, one can observe a certain amount of independence in the art projects which took place within the Year of the Visual Arts.

The programme included a series of events distributed among categories such as, exhibitions, commissions and installations, performances, conferences and seminars, digital technologies and a “capital program”. In fact, it primarily structured itself around the usual activities of Northern Arts' regular clients who were temporarily brightened by the hosting of this event. The programming of galleries, local authorities or artistic collectives became more prestigious following the momentary introduction of higher capital by their customary furnishers, essentially the Arts Council and Northern Arts, provided that at least a small dose of public private-partnership was secured. In accordance with at least one of the injunctions set in the general programme, the actors of the local art scene were able to propose a noticeably improved version of their otherwise traditional objectives. This enabled the region to organise a certain number of ‘blockbuster’ shows. These included the presentation of recent acquisitions from the Tate Gallery, the Arts Council and the Society for Contemporary Art at the Laing Art Gallery, the Hatton Gallery, the Sunderland Library and Arts Centre and the Sunderland Museum and Arts Gallery. We might mention the Lucian Freud exhibition at the Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendall, or the exhibition “Golden Age of Northumbria” at the Laing Art Gallery. The program also featured an increased number of commissions to internationally renowned artists. These works included Bill Viola's *The Messenger*, a video installation in Durham cathedral commissioned by the Chaplaincy to the Arts and Recreation in North-East England, Andy Goldsworthy's *Sheepfolds*, a series of a hundred sheepfolds restored in Cumbria by the artist on a commission by Cumbria Public Art, or David Mack's *Train*, a monumental public art commission from Darlington City Council. Similarly, if we were to consider an exhibition space dedicated to contemporary photography and new media such as the Zone Gallery in Newcastle, it might be noted that its curatorial line remained unaltered. Yet it recognised in its 1996 objectives “that increasingly opportunities are arising for Zone to operate within an international context rather than a solely UK arena”.¹⁴ With an increased budget it could muster an unusually striking international program, featuring Zofia Kulik, Bill Culbert, a collaboration with Camerawork in London on Japanese and British artists and an exhibition by the acclaimed French artist Orlan. The latter also gave a talk at the Association of Art Historians' annual conference which had been strategically scheduled that year in Newcastle. The balance between imported itinerary shows, small exhibitions of local artists and relatively ambitious proprietary projects changed in favour of the latter.¹⁵ The

Zone Gallery also showed interest in the organisation of new debates linked to the emergence of new media, as well as the importance of creating new opportunities for local artists and the creation of educative projects, “which work with regional and national agencies to create innovative educational models which target new audiences, broaden access to photographic media and debates and develop existing audience bases”.¹⁶ Thus, Zone Gallery clearly established its objectives and programme in accordance to its vocation as well as the principles stated by Northern Sights.

Concerning the individual result for those participants taking part in VAUK we may refer to a study carried out at the end of the 1990s and published by the Arts Council of England. It attempted to measure the impact of the Year of the Visual Arts on artists working in the North of England at the time.¹⁷ This research concludes that the year had a generally positive yet limited impact. Essentially, for the artists involved, it augmented activity and income, yet this effect was confined to a specific time frame as they promptly settled back to their pre-1996 rates afterwards. A similar effect of a temporary increase in activity, or a temporary gain in status marked the success and benefits of the galleries and art spaces, however, once the celebrations were over, their activities returned to their pre-1996 rigour.

Yet aside from these art activities, one of the more tangible aims set by Northern Arts was that of a physical infrastructural investment. This was not a hidden agenda, but possibly the real benefit expected to come out of VAUK. This need for structural improvement in the region had been clearly announced in 1995 when the year had been presented officially under the title, *A Case for Capital*. The list of major structural projects realised in relation to the event certainly confirms a success in that respect. We can mention the creation of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland, the refurbishment of the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle and the emergence of small dynamic gallery space such as the Waygood Gallery in Newcastle. Among the more ambitious projects, we can list the National Glass Centre in Sunderland, which, went on to have serious financial problems or the conversion of the Baltic Flour Mills into a Contemporary Art Centre in Gateshead.

Although the Baltic opened its doors in 2002 - ten years after the birth of the project - and Anthony Gormley's monumental sculpture at the entrance of Gateshead, the *Angel of the North* was erected in 1998 - scheduled for 1996 - these projects merge with VAUK in many aspects [PI.2]. Indeed one can consider that it triggered their inception, or provided fertile ground to develop these desired ideas. In fact, this venue and work of art were directly involved in some of VAUK's events to a certain extent, given that a model of the Angel was shown at the Shipley Art Gallery in Gateshead and the Baltic building was used as primary material for the commission and creation of three contemporary site specific works that year: Les Levine's *See It Be It*, Jaume Plensa's *Lightbeam* and a work by Diana Thater. These works were respectively commissioned by three internationally renowned curators, Declan McGonagle, Iwona Blazwick, and Sune Nordgren – who went on to be the director of the Baltic – were part of a project entitled “Temporary Contemporary”. This project grew alongside the vision of an art space on the Tyne and in having three outdoor contemporary works already on the Baltic in 1996, a statement could be made to the fund holders on the seriousness of Gateshead City Council and Northern Arts intentions of converting the building as well as taking steps towards the creation of “new audiences”, of a public that still had to discover itself and putting the Baltic on the map.¹⁸ But if these prestigious and consequent achievements can be understood as products of a local desire and elaboration, they also fit well within a more national scope or even within a global system or field of influence.

Conclusion

What belongs unquestionably to the regional actors, to the local impulse, rests in the necessary specificity of the VAUK project. It is unique, as it could not have taken place anywhere else as such and under the same format. Even in the calibrated wordings and discourses we have encountered, the particular identity of a regional entity appears and transpires out of formal necessities. The different projects, from the smallest to the large

expensive and strategic ones, always express the voice of a distinct actor. Nevertheless, this voice becomes embedded in the constraints of wider, more powerful influences; firstly with that of the Arts Council and consequently by government policies. If the intake of breath is genuine it is channelled by external necessity. Aims have to match, and targets are set according to the directions opted for by the holders of the pecuniary hand. With the 1980s and the rise of Margaret Thatcher, in art as well as many other fields, the law of “value for money”, and the well known “enterprise culture” rapidly came to dominate. The Year of the Visual Arts and the Arts 2000 scheme for that matter is a phenomenological example of economic liberalism as applied to the arts. Indeed, as local authorities and local ‘counter-powers’ came under fierce assaults in the 1980s, as budget restrictions came along with the new imperatives: public private partnerships, marketing and business sponsorships. Public funding didn’t completely disappear but was reinstalled through competitions whereby, pre-defined criteria could impose change in the more hostile of places. In that respect, the specificities of each project in a national competition are brought about by the system within a pre-determined framework, as each contestant is to build on its historical characteristics to achieve a local competitive dynamism. This local competitive dynamism is thus a rule of development that somehow homogenises cities and regional identities in paradoxically favouring their apparent heterogeneity. The “sense of place” is shared by everyone in a delocalised picture where global capitalism and post-modernity also find a role. Global capitalism having transformed itself since the 1970s from a Fordist-Keynesian system into a mode of flexible accumulation encourages such initiatives, as it seeks more and more loci of expansion - a shift paralleled by the political situation in the UK.¹⁹ The voice of the local is not discarded yet encompassed. In the case of VAUK 96, the expression of multiple projects reflects the opportunity offered to local artistic expression, yet the ‘packaging’ as well as the physical remnants of The Year, point to a road taken in various guises by many regional territories and cities at the end of the twentieth century.

¹ Northumbria University Archives, Cultural Policy Collections, Visual Arts UK 1996 Archive, VAUK/1/7, ‘Call for Entries 2000’, Arts Council of England.

² *96 from 96: a year in the visual arts in the North of England*, Northern Arts, 1996, 2. Foreword by Lord Gowrie, President of the arts Council of England.

³ Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/2/88, unpublished letter from Paul Collard, chief executive of Northern Sights addressed to his colleagues, undated. See also ‘Press release’ dated 10 May 1995.

⁴ *96 from 96: a year in the visual arts in the North of England*, foreword by David Morris, President of Northern Sights, 3.

⁵ Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/2/12, *Arts 2000 and this is only the beginning – northern region: application for visual arts 1996*, Northern Arts, 1990. The Head of Northern Arts at the time was Peter Stark and Peter Davies was the Head of Visual Arts.

⁶ These art practices were celebrated on their own in the Arts 2000 scheme, Glasgow being the year of Architecture and Design in 1999, and Yorkshire and Humberside hosting the Year of Photography and Electronic Image in 1988.

⁷ The jury was composed of eight individuals of which three members were part of the Arts Council: Ian Reid, Director of the Arts Coordination, Sandy Nairne, Director of Visual Arts and Professor Christopher Fraylin, President of the Visual Arts section of the Arts Council; one artist, Claire Higney; a Gallery Director, Sue Beardmore, Mostyn Art Gallery, Llandudno; a local authority representative, Chris Shepley, director of Urbanism in Plymouth; a representative of the private sector, Catherine Graham-Harrison, Director of Community Affairs, Citibank and the director of East Midland Art, John Buston.

⁸ “The dominant theme of both books is process. We use the words “we” and “our” throughout. Sometimes they refer to Northern Arts, sometimes to the broad visual arts constituency, sometimes to the leaders’ of the region institutions. In almost all cases we already have broad ownership of ideas ... A regional project of this scale can only succeed if it is collectively owned from the earliest stages. If it is to be, as it must be, more than the sum of its parts it must have time to develop and benefit from

gentle but skilful leadership". Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/2/13, *Arts 96, Working foundations – Practice & Place, Arts 2000*, Northern Arts, 1991, 2.

⁹ Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/3/59/2, 'Visual Arts UK, North of England', Northern Sights.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 'Group 96' was the name for a managing group within Northern Sights.

¹³ When a project was refused, even if temporarily, it was most frequently on account of its lack of expressed relevance to VAUK.

¹⁴ Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/3/59/4, Zone Photographic Gallery, 'Programme for Visual Arts UK 1996'.

¹⁵ The availability of increased funding significantly enabled the gallery to publish colour catalogues for all its exhibitions that year.

¹⁶ Northumbria University Archives, VAUK/3/59/4, 'Programme for Visual Arts UK 1996'.

¹⁷ *Visual Arts UK: public attitude towards and awareness of the Year of the Visual Arts in the North of England (summary)*, The Harris Research Centre, Arts Council of England, London, 1998.

¹⁸ *Temporary contemporary*, exh. cat., Baltic Flour Mill, Gateshead, 1997. It must be noted that there is always a gap, or a discrepancy, between the wordings of the official texts and the reality described, particularly in terms of audiences, which are a key problem in the northern regions. A mission of conversion has to take place in order to guarantee the role and existence of large projects such as the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art or VAUK.

¹⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1992, 166-7.