

Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt
ANGER IS AN ENERGY.

Hello everybody. Thank you very much for inviting me here this evening and thanks to everybody involved in this event, not least my trusty translator, who has produced a Polish version of what I'm going to say today; so, if anybody needs a copy of this sheet of paper, it is freely available.

I was one of the people who contributed to the 2015 report when it was initially published in 2005. The people who commissioned the report basically looked around at cultural policy in Europe at that time, and they didn't particularly like what they saw. At that time, I was based in Glasgow, which, as you know, is part of Scotland, and Scotland had acquired an independent parliament in the late 1990s, so it had become a kind of department of the United Kingdom. Rather than being directly controlled by the government based at Westminster, it had achieved partial autonomy, but, in reality, it had very little jurisdiction over what it could actually legislate for. In theory, culture was one of the main areas that the Scottish parliament was able to influence, irrespective of the Westminster policy. But, what actually happened was that New Labour came to power in England in 1997 - at the same time as the Scottish parliament achieved its autonomy; and Labour had also achieved a majority in Scotland, so the two governments were running in parallel. The neoliberal consensus that dominated at Westminster was very much adopted by the government in Scotland. So, in 2005, what I was writing about from Glasgow unfortunately applied to most of the UK. What had happened in the UK during the 1990s was that, as a legacy of the Thatcher government, even before New Labour came to power, businesses were very much encouraged to get involved in the arts through sponsorship. Rather than having a philanthropic, passive relationship to culture, business began to demand something in return, which tended to be a lot of publicity and brand recognition, so they would have their name mentioned, by sponsoring prizes or the openings of big blockbuster exhibitions at Tate or in the Royal Academy, for example. This also gave businesspeople a chance to invite their own guests to private views, where they were shown around by curators or had special hospitality events. Tate Britain is within walking distance from the Houses of Parliament, so politicians could be invited to exclusive VIP events at Tate Britain and businesspeople could lobby them to vote in favor of certain interests, against the backdrop of an exhibition they had sponsored. This is how the synergy developed between business and the arts during the 1990s in the UK; somebody in the audience asked me earlier what business had got out of this relationship, and that was obviously one of the things. Maybe you also remember the hype around 'Cool Britannia' which happened around that time; when Tony Blair came to power, he invited artists and musicians to Downing Street in an attempt to get credibility for his government. Businesses were complicit in this as they wanted London to be regarded as the financial capital of Europe. It was very much a mutually beneficial situation, the synergy between business and the arts. By the turn of the millennium, audiences were used to this strategy, and businesses could not get as much publicity out of sponsoring the exhibition as they might have done previously. So people, and most specifically the government, had to start to think of new ways to commercialize and commodify the arts. While I was writing my 2015 text, there were two main strands that were coming through. The government had started to think seriously about the development of a private market for art. Arts Council England commissioned some research into how the market might be developed and projected that a great number of people could be encouraged to buy art. All the forces available were harnessed to this effect, so you had lifestyle magazines talking about the kind of art that people could buy; the main high street furniture shop began selling posters and limited editions of different artist-designed objects.

The government provides funding to culture via the arts councils in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, which were set up in the aftermath of World War II as part of the welfare state. It was always intended that they should work at arm's length from the government, which means that they should be free from political agendas and interference. In the early years of this century, the public funding bodies started to follow the policy that was coming out of Westminster. They also retrospectively claimed that they had always worked in tandem with the art market, and that they would continue to do so. In fact, they began to contribute public funding to boost the art market; a significant amount of money was put into commercial galleries to enhance their profile and send them abroad so that they could take part in art fairs and keep up with their running costs. The main commercial gallery in Glasgow is called the "Modern Institute" and, until very recently, they were being given around £50,000 a year; they have now set up a "public" arm of their operations, called the "Common Guild," which is still in receipt of this funding but cannot claim complete autonomy from the commercial side of the operation. At the same time, the Scottish Arts Council set up a scheme

called "Own Art," which meant that anyone could have an interest-free loan from public money to buy an artwork from a commercial gallery. This is a way of providing "free" money for people to go and buy art with, which has to be repaid at some point, but the idea is that you benefit from much better terms buying art than you would do buying a car, for example. I mentioned that there were two strands according to which the government has sought to instrumentalize the arts, which were visible at the time this report was written. Aside from investing in the private market as a way of reducing artistic dependence on state funding, the government attempted to justify its investment in the arts in very instrumental terms. One of the phrases deployed during this period was "social inclusion," and the arts were harnessed in the government's drive towards social inclusion. When you unpack the rhetoric behind social inclusion, it depends very much on the idea that people who are disempowered in society will somehow become empowered through their involvement in the arts, and this would motivate them to play a more productive part in the job market.

This was the picture in 2005, which was projected ahead to 2015 in this report. We are about halfway there now, and I have to say that I'm pretty embarrassed, sitting in front of you here tonight, because I couldn't have imagined at that time how grim things were going to get. Of course, nobody could have predicted the depth of the current financial crisis, but there are various things that perhaps could have been seen on the horizon at the time which are now coming to fruition.

What has happened with the financial collapse is that the private market for art, which was supposed to assume the state's responsibility for supporting artists, is not able to do that. The art market has contracted massively and, just in the past couple of weeks, I have been speaking to gallerists who've been to the Basel Art Fair, and seemed happy they were able to break even. So, the market as it had been projected doesn't exist at the moment.

But, in 2005 in Scotland, it seemed like a moment of optimism, compared to what we are faced with now, because we were on the verge of finding out the results of a process called the "Cultural Commission." The Scottish Labour Party, as I have mentioned, was very allied to the Westminster government and Jack McConnell was the First Minister. He made very rousing speeches about the potential of culture and had instructed his Culture Minister to embark on a one-year consultation process. This starts to sound similar to your situation here, but at least the Scottish government pretended that this would be an open process and that they were seeking the views of the arts communities in Scotland. So, between 2004 and 2005, a small team was assembled; we were not quite sure how they were appointed as there are no actual government documents and no records as to how this team was assembled, so we can only assume they were hand-picked by the Culture Minister. These commissioners sought the opinions of various "stakeholders" in the arts communities across all the different art forms, so it wasn't just visual arts. A group of us, mainly from the grassroots sector, got together and made representations to the Commission. We thought about what we might want to see in the art world of the future in Scotland. We came up with a series of recommendations about archive facilities and residency programs and about giving grants directly to artists rather than relying on the trickle-down effect that was supposed to be happening from the galleries and museums but, in fact, was not working. We submitted these ideas in good faith, and I will come back to the results of the Commission later. Even then, we probably could have seen the signs of what might happen rather than holding out any optimism because, even as the Culture Minister announced this Cultural Commission exercise, he was speaking about an explicit focus on how to use public spending to stimulate the growth in the cultural and creative industries. So, he was basically seeking ways to make creative practice more entrepreneurial, to give Scotland some sort of competitive edge in relation to the rest of the Europe. In 2005, it wasn't at all clear what this might mean; in fact, we weren't quite sure whether the Scottish government, on a national level, or the councils, operating at a local level, would emerge supreme in the field of culture because there were also significant maneuvers being made at the level of the local governments, which have their own departments of culture. To turn to the local level a bit, we'll see why we started to pay more attention to them. Glasgow City Council is the biggest local authority in Scotland and Bridget McConnell, the wife of the First Minister of Scotland, was in charge of the Cultural and Leisure Services department there, so they had a nice little alliance between the local and the national government, and one can only imagine the chats about the cultural policy the McConnells might have had over the breakfast table. What Bridget did in 2007 was to make her department in the city council a private entity. She completely got rid of any kind of public accountability by setting up two private companies, collectively known as Culture and Sport Glasgow, to run culture in the city. These companies have assumed responsibilities for all the museums,

galleries, libraries, leisure centres and other culture activities within Glasgow. I'll not get into this too much, as I've written about it elsewhere ^[1], except to say that the personnel of these companies' boards is very much business-focused and very much tied into the fact that Glasgow will play host to the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Culture and Sport Glasgow seeks to regenerate this poor, post-industrial city through the arts, and they want to use the artists in this process, particularly in the East End of the city where artists are concentrated and where the Games will happen. They want to use artists as agents of gentrification, as we've seen in many other cities around the world, usually with disastrous results.

So, to go back to what was happening at a national level, which we found about after this Culture and Sport Glasgow fiasco came to light. The upshot of the Cultural Commission process was that the Scottish government announced that they wanted to create a new organization, which would again be based on a corporate model. It would be a hybrid company, based on the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen - which is the main film funding body within Scotland - and they would call it Creative Scotland. I went into the Cultural Commission archives and looked at the documents that had led up to this process, and I found some minutes of a meeting between the Culture Minister and some cultural bureaucrats, which happened about a year before the Cultural Commission was announced, in which they first came up with the idea of Creative Scotland. So it was very much a foregone conclusion - they had even thought of the name of the organization - which means the Cultural Commission consultancy process was pretty bogus; it was a consultancy effort to try to make people feel involved and make them feel that they had some kind of input, which is perhaps better than a situation that you face here, where there seems to be little willingness to engage. But, on the other hand, you would almost rather not be invited to engage, as you wouldn't feel that you'd lost anything, not least the time it took you to make recommendations. In the end, they've upset everybody and they've spent around half a million pounds in the process. One of the worrying things about Creative Scotland is that it removes this kind of arm's length principle I mentioned earlier that has been in effect since the war, which seeks to ensure that the government does not influence the priorities of culture. Of course, we all might know that lots of things happen behind the scenes, but Creative Scotland is a very explicit way of tying culture to the government priorities. Scottish ministers intend to take up positions on the advisory board of Creative Scotland, and they say very explicitly that they will have a remit to dictate what culture policy will be in Scotland. For us, this is a new thing, this kind of shrinking of the distance between the government and public funding bodies. And, based on what I've already said, you might guess that the creative industries are very much part of this focus, which creates concern within the visual arts communities which do not feel they can fit into this creative industries model.

The first time the Culture Bill was presented in parliament, in an attempt to create the legislation necessary for Creative Scotland, it failed; people didn't support it but not because of its overall ethos; it was just a matter of some tiny financial details that didn't stand up to scrutiny. So what the government did, in true democratic style, was that the Bill was withdrawn from the Parliament and inserted into the much bigger public sector reform bill, which is aimed at shrinking the number of public sector institutions funded by the state. This leaves the Creative Scotland bill open to much less scrutiny because it is amongst even more frightening public service reforms. One of our worries, because of the way things have been going and because of the lack of democracy and accountability and this interest in creative industries, is that Creative Scotland is going to have very damaging effects, especially on visual artists as they do not fit this entrepreneurial model. And you might remember something called "the poll tax" - a very unpopular regressive taxation - that Margaret Thatcher wanted to introduce during her reign; she tried it, first of all, in Scotland, so it wouldn't be a great surprise if Creative Scotland was used as a kind of test for this creative industries model in advance of being rolled out throughout the UK and other countries within Europe which are adopting the Washington Consensus model. I am very disturbed by this, and I hope that we'll be able to take this opportunity of us coming together here to discuss it more and perhaps even mount some kind of resistance to this drive towards the creative industries. I leave it there so we can open things up for the discussion.

Footnotes:

[1] Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt. 2008. "The New Bohemia". In Variant 32: 5-8.