

What is culture anyway? Everything!!

by Lucy Byatt

From Bristol's unabashed 'Best City in the World' to 'Glasgowsmiles Better' the clumsy slogan writers and marketeers make their living from the competitive processes that so many cities embark upon. The competition for the city of this, and the year of the other, seems all the more heightened with one particular outlandish competitive process; European Capital of Culture.

There is the inevitable build up, the years of planning and strategy, within this strategy, somewhere, low on the list comes visual art. Art and artists now have a pretty cool profile, and cool, with the current preoccupation for youth, is of course what the competing cities are all striving to be. It is clear that the expectation persists, that artists make objects, described formally, made intricately by gifted hands. The public sector is still unable to regard the 'idea' as having value, it cannot understand artists and their work without prescribing a function that is specific to their existing agendas.

Motivation for entry to the competition for The European Capital of Culture is a financial one. No UK local authority, French mayor or Dutch politician would ever embark upon a process of this sort without the carrot of lots of knock on investment. There is a clear expectation that the result of investing in a year long feast of cultural activity will be economic growth and development of every kind. Many cities need this sort of boost, but why is culture the route, and who is making the decisions about what culture is and what type of culture the city gets? Inevitably it will be the officers in council offices, answerable to voted members in council chambers.

Why does the word culture, manage to attract this sort of expectation? Culture is one of those useful words, that could mean anything. From the stuff that you find in a petri dish, to the National Portrait Gallery to the Museum of Football. But surely culture is a process, an evolutionary, untouchable thing that is about how we live now, and why we have got here.

Described in this way I can see exactly why we should celebrate culture, using this definition provides us with an inspirational and expansive starting point. The rub is, however, in the interpretation of the word. I suspect that the trickle down effect from the expansive interpretation to

the reality could mean that councillors and local authority officers of cities like Cork or Cardiff may well interpret the notion of culture as a nicely landscaped pedestrianised shopping area, or the moment when a city centre pent house goes on the market for over a million. Maybe this is what is being interpreted as both the result of investment in culture, and culture itself.

This year a record number of people have visited museums in London, up by 60%, because the entrance fees have been discarded. The majority of visitors are not willing to buy a ticket to a museum, the income comes from the sale of the cup of coffee, or post card.

So whilst the content of the museum is 'free', the experience of the day insists that the post card or T shirt is extortionate. If this is the norm and the income is in the souvenir, then surely every city particularly those with aspiration to be capital of culture could be turned in to a museum, a heritage or visitor centre. Places where details and complexity are thin on the ground, but where souvenirs are in abundance.

Are these cities interested in celebrating culture in all its magnificent complexity or are they just interested in a public relations exercise in profiling their city as contemporary, and currently nothing is more contemporary than culture.