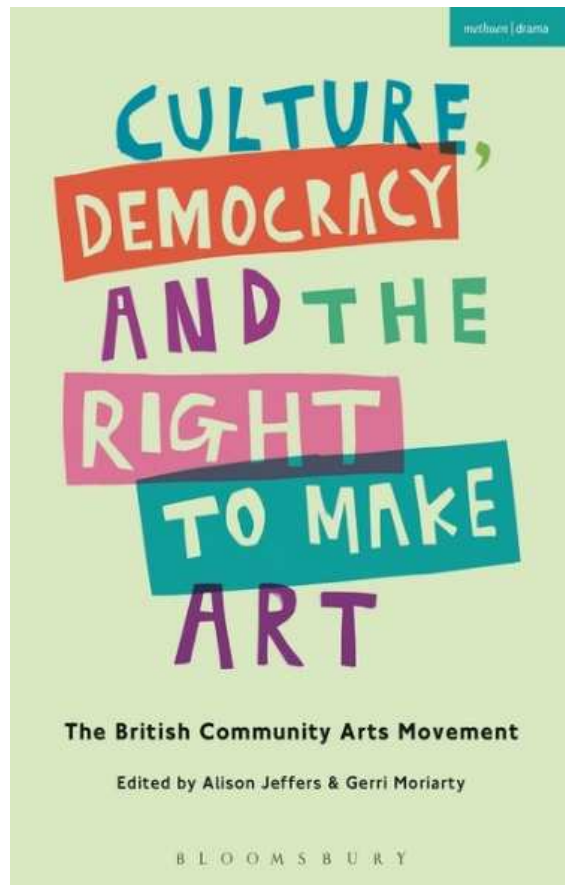


# A radical and unreported history

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Much of what I want to say today comes from the research that we carried out for this book. Edited by Gerri Moriarty and myself, it was published in the summer of 2017. We hope to announce soon more details about it becoming open access which means that anyone will be able to read it free online.

# cultural democracy and the democratization of culture



I'd like to begin with a story which is in the book – it's the story of the Travelling Musicians, a group of 6 female professional musicians set up in 1940 who were paid by the government through CEMA which was the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts.

CEMA had been set up to tour England, Wales and Scotland taking the arts to communities during the second world war. The CEMA artists gave concerts, performed plays, staged exhibitions all over the country but they were also charged with 'the encouragement of music-making and play-acting by the people themselves'. The Travelling Musicians were hugely successful by all accounts. As well as performing themselves they set up 36 new orchestral groups, 244 new choirs and organized 254 concerts – and remember there were 6 of them so we could gauge a very high level of participation through these stats. However, at the end of the war, as CEMA was becoming the Arts Council under the leadership of economist John Maynard Keynes, this kind of work was no longer encouraged. Keynes was interested in the best and not the most and one of his first moves was to cut the funds for the Travelling Musicians; not only that, but their work has been largely written out of the Arts Council's history.

I tell that story because it encapsulates two broad approaches to the arts that we are still living with many years later. Keynes and the Arts Council were interested in the elite arts and the ways in which these could improve the lives of 'ordinary people' - if only more people could engage with them. The Travelling Musicians and many others seized the opportunity to support and encourage the ordinary people to make their own art. These two broad positions have been characterized as the democratization of culture and cultural democracy. The democratization of culture, the so-called distribution model, is where people are encouraged to engage with existing art and cultural products. Cultural democracy, on the other hand, tackles the problem of what actually constitutes culture by giving people the means to make and create their own forms based on their lives and experiences.



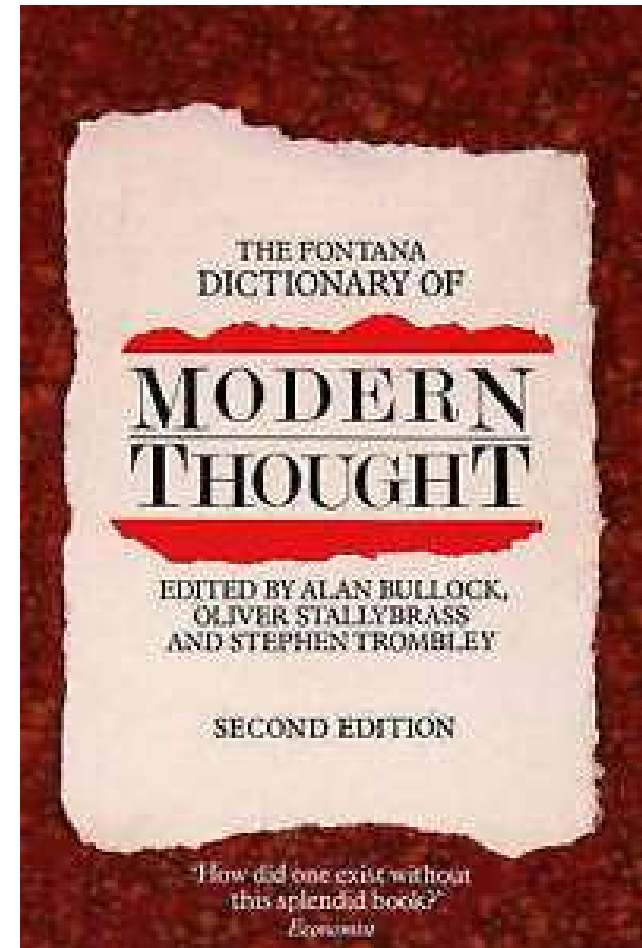
If a company decides to work in a borough like Sandwell with 57 000 council tenancies and large number of ethnic minority groups 'it may be that some of the choices have already been made for you'.

Steve Trow

- Cultural Democracy had been largely the thrust of the Community Arts Movement of the 1970s and 1980s throughout the UK. Gerri and I felt that this was a story worth telling and so we embarked on a period of research by talking to twenty or so people (out of possibly many hundreds) who had been involved in community arts at that time.
- What began to emerge was a picture which, while it had many overarching themes and connections, was necessarily conditioned by the place in which it was being developed. As Steve Trow put it, if a company decides to work in a borough like Sandwell (part of the Birmingham conurbation) with 57000 council tenancies and large number of ethnic minority groups 'it may be that some of the choices have already been made for you'. Not only were there local and regional differences but community arts developed differently in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland so we decided to tell this more detailed story in the first part of the book. It should be noted that another story can be and has been told about the development of community arts in Ireland and anyone wanting to know more about this should look at Sandy Fitzgerald's book *An Outburst of Frankness*.
- With the book we wanted to make the case for community arts to be considered as an artistic movement and determinedly held onto the capital letters CAM when it came under question from of the book's editors. But I argue it was a discrete movement in many ways with its own history, a distinct set of artists who subscribed to a particular way of working and with certain recognizable products as well.

‘among the media commonly used are mime, costume, movement, games, live and recorded music and the use of inflatables’.

*The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1988)



- Like all artistic movements the Community Arts Movement proved a very broad church and the movement was noted for its disagreements as much as its harmony. Also, like all artistic movements it suffered from misunderstanding and even animosity. In 1988 *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* suggested that it was characterized by ‘movement, games, live and recorded music and the use of inflatables’. Looking back on the early work in the 1990s another critic characterized it as being all about ‘festivals, face painting and murals’ but to me that’s a bit like saying that the visual arts are characterized by painting and theatre is characterized by plays – it’s a truism and it’s also inaccurate and over-simplified.



- Arts that belong to the artists cannot be community arts. Arts that can be let loose only within established citadels of the arts cannot be community arts. Community arts are those arts that are created wholly or in part by a community of people (however lightly defined); [...] It follows through, for the present, that the community artist is an *enabler* or *animator*, and cannot be taking part in the process in order to make a complete personal statement, or to exhibit a private ego in a public way, or to enforce a political, moral or aesthetic view upon a passive audience [...] It cannot be the purpose of such arts or skills to astonish a body of watchers into a delighted reception of already-perfected achievements; but to be able to reduce, withhold or allay themselves sufficiently so that the incipient skills of that community can begin to find expression. (Gregory 1980: 20)

- I particularly like the definition offered by community artist R.D.Gregory in 1980 who called community arts the 'love child of alternative arts and community action'.
- Gregory said then what I think still holds today, that
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# Cultural Democracy: practices and policies

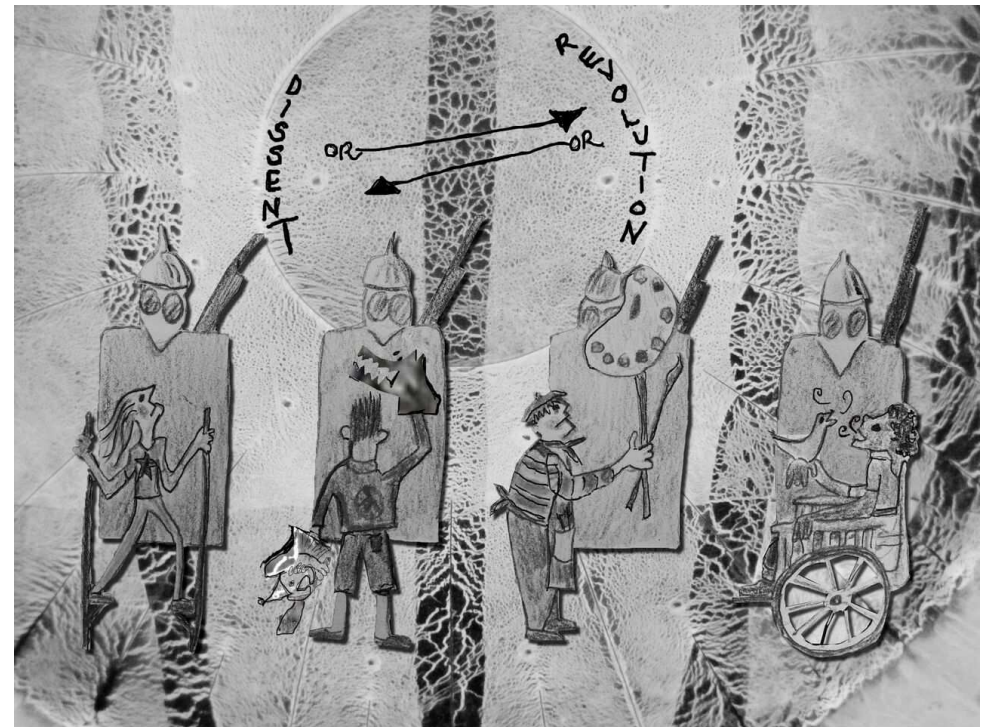
- Oliver Bennett – Memories, dreams and reflections
- Janet Hetherington and Mark Webster – From handbooks to labs
- Sophie Hope – From Community Arts to the socially engaged art commission
- Owen Kelly – Developing Technologies and Dividuality

- Time is short so I'm going to conclude with a brief indication of the way in which we tried to make this history matter by reflection and by bringing into discussion with contemporary practice and by thinking a little at the end about dissent.
- In the second part of the book we asked a number of people who had been involved in community arts at this time, or who had researched this period, what kind of traces and threads they saw running into contemporary practice and thinking.
- Oliver Bennett's rather gloomy picture of the non-efficacy of the Community Arts Movement nevertheless concludes that we should view community arts as part of a culture of optimism which 'sustained people in their struggles for freedoms and rights that we now take for granted'.
- Janet Hetherington and Mark Webster reflected on questions of training for community artists and the often uneasy relationship between the Community Arts Movement and formal educational providers with worries about professionalization and of artists losing sight of their roots in activism.
- Sophie Hope places the radical history of community arts against contemporary concerns with socially engaged arts which are often short, one-off interventions co-opted from outside communities and not part of grass-roots action.
- Owen Kelly looks at the ways in which those early dreams of access to the means of production seem to have been satisfied by digital technology and social media but concludes that this is a fantasy of mass consumption which gives a veneer of participation while control is still maintained by an elite.

# Dissent

‘No I do not accept this ... it’s the rebuttal of the thin end of the wedge’. Mark Thomas

Tactics ‘doing what you can with what you have’. Saul Alinsky



- We conclude the book by suggesting that, despite the revolutionary politics in the air at that time and the way that a lot of that was reflected in the rhetoric of community arts, the community artist was a dissenter rather than a revolutionary. Comedian Mark Thomas characterizes dissent as simply saying 'No I do not accept this'; he says 'it's the rebuttal of the thin end of the wedge'. Dissenters operate at the level of the small and local. They use tactics against the larger strategies put in place by decision makers who operate over their heads. Tactics means 'doing what you can with what you have' according to American community activist Saul Alinsky who was working in the 1970s.
- I started with a story and I'm going to finish with one which illustrates the effect of the tactics of dissent. Community artist Graham Marsden told us a story about the visit of the queen to Telford in the Midlands where he was working with Telford Community Arts. He got together a group of local people who painted placards which said 'God Save the Queen' and which everyone held as the Queen's car approached. As it passed they all turned the placards over to reveal another message which read 'And God help Telford's one in five jobless'. Doing what you can with what you have.
- Thank you.