

SCOTLAND- CREATIVE NATION

Cultural Summit, Scottish Arts Council, 25th-27th February 2008

SCOTTISH ARTISTS UNION RESPONSE

The Scottish Artists Union stated ahead of Creative Nation, advertised as a conversation of pertinent issues in the context of the development of Creative Scotland, that it was regrettable participation in the event required a commitment of time and money beyond the means of the majority of artists. Sure enough, a glance at the delegates list revealed a lamentably small number identifying themselves as creative practitioners rather than arts mangers.

As names such as Linda Fabiani, the Minister for Culture, Ann Bonar, charged with the transition between the Scottish Arts Council and Creative Scotland, and Richard Holloway, Chair of the nascent body's joint board, took to the floor and revealed what little they could about Creative Scotland it became depressingly apparent how amorphous the new organisation's thinking is, less than a year from the point at which it must take the wheel from SAC and Scottish Screen. The Scottish arts community has been holding its breath through a Cultural Commission, a draft Culture Bill, a change in government and now a cultural summit, hoping against hope for an end to this period of uncertainty.

As pleasing as it may be to hear reaffirmations of "a light touch", arms length principals as "sacred" and the promise of Creative Scotland as more than just a quango doling out cheques, the summit as a whole struck us and representatives from other organisations as a closed shop; a middle management conference in which the relative merits of various cultural models, metaphors and lexicons were discussed while both audience and creators were notably excluded. Worse, it was an event at which the SAC made it very clear it is well into the process of dismantling but their successors have barely begun to think about what to do next.

Perhaps the most disturbing new buzzword to be heard being bandied about liberally was "excellence". The over-arching concept of Sir Brian McMaster's recent report to Arts Council England, the man himself was in attendance on the first day of the summit to take part in an "excellence" debate. One might question what relevance the report has in a devolved Scotland, but if Creative Scotland's leaders remain as bogged down

in a consultative rather than decision-making process as they appear to be, then it's easy to imagine the McMaster report- rapturously welcomed by many critics and commentators- having an impact on their thinking. The concept of "excellence" as presented strikes us as very dangerous. Whose taste in art determines "excellence"? Artists? Audiences? Commissioners? Ministers? Can consensus be reached on such a subjective point? And how can "excellence" be determined at the funding stage, before work is completed? Worse, how does the product-focused definition of "excellence" presented square with the "innovation and risk taking" that McMaster calls for in his report and Richard Holloway contends must be a hallmark of Creative Scotland's ethos? Self-evidently, artists seek to do good work and arts authorities strive to make good decisions and should be encouraged to do so. But "excellence" surely comes apparent in retrospect; adopted as the central principle on which funding decisions are made, it will lead to money following money, conservatism and even entropy in Scottish arts. "Excellence" must be evident in the systems that support the artistic process, not just in critic-pleasing polished end products.

We fear a significant swathe of the Scottish public has yet to be convinced of the intrinsic power, joy and merit of art. Scotland's artists are ready and willing to reach them, but a cultural authority that adopts the elitist, out-moded McMaster doctrine of "excellence" will poorly serve both.