

Exploring the working relationships between brands and artists: What value do artists bring to brand collaborations that can enhance Corporate Social Responsibility Goals?

At its departure point, this period of inductive research initially set out to explore the broad picture of corporate social responsibility (CSR). To what extent do major UK brands use the arts to connect to consumers, and how can the arts help maximise the tangible benefits derived from corporate social responsibility?

Context

The arts have the potential to play a major role in addressing environmental and social issues (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Reeves 2002) by providing strategies for the critical engagement of audiences, opening dialogue around challenging topics and changing the perceptions of diverse audiences. Breaking societal norms can have wide reaching effects, empowering people to enact their individual agency and influencing / shaping new paradigms through individual and collective action. Through high impact artworks and mass public participation we can address environmental and social issues and foster policy change by challenging institutional status quo, connecting people to the realities of social and environmental challenges, and inspiring movements.

A growing body of research shows that the arts can have a profound impact on audiences, raising awareness and understanding of sometimes sensitive issues, affecting behavioural change. Several publications specifically explore this notion, for example ‘Participatory arts and affective engagement with climate change: The missing link in achieving climate compatible behaviour change?’ (Burke, Ockwell, Whitmarsh, 2018); and Roosen, L. J., Klöckner, C. A., & Swim, J. K. (2017), Visual art as a way to communicate climate change: a psychological perspective on climate change–related art; and ‘The Power Of Art To Engage The Publication On The Impacts Of Climate Change On The Coast’ (Merrick, 2012).

Arts Council England leads the way in the cultural sector in terms of best practice through delivery. Sir Nicholas Serota wrote in a Guardian article that the arts have a leading role to play in tackling climate change reporting that the Arts Council became the first cultural body in the world to include environmental reporting in long-term funding agreements. “Recognising that we had to create the conditions for change to happen, the Arts Council buttressed these requirements with a programme of support from Julie’s Bicycle. Together we substantially increased understanding about the role of the sector in addressing environmental issues and associated social challenges.” (Serota 2014)

Published research links ethical brand value and CSR to improved employee morale, retention and recruitment, as well as boosting external consumer profile. (Gill, 2014).

CSR has been a construct since the 50’s (Rahman 2011) and there has been an uptick in ethical brand management over the last two decades (Story and Hess 2010). There has been a significant growth in brands aligning their core brand values with CSR over recent years. This is

also coupled with a shift in consumer behaviour toward demanding products and services be ethical and sustainable, even utilising the power of the media to influence brand decisions and holding brands to account for their actions.

In the Harvard Business Review: The Truth about CSR, V. Kasturi Rangan, Lisa Chase, Sohel Karim say “Most companies have long practiced some form of corporate social and environmental responsibility with the broad goal, simply, of contributing to the well-being of the communities and society they affect and on which they depend. But there is increasing pressure to dress up CSR as a business discipline and demand that every initiative deliver business results. That is asking too much of CSR and distracts from what must be its main goal: to align a company’s social and environmental activities with its business purpose and values.” Brands need to consider alternative modes of measuring impact and success in CSR strategies.

In addition to a lack of standardisation in reporting processes and commitment to reporting, there is a lack of accountability. (Barkemeyer, Ralf et al. 2014, 2013, 2011) However, this is coupled with a growing desire from the general public for companies to be more transparent about their ethical approaches to business, their sustainability and wider commitment to society. It’s about narrowing the gap between perceived greed and profit with the needs of people and the planet - a demand for corporations to do more, contribute more and consume less. But there is little done to measure the outcomes and what we see is companies marking their own homework, publicly reporting their companies in a favourable light and providing a very high level overview of work conducted. Somehow this placates the public, often in a few simple sentences that describe a company's aims and approaches to giving back, with little detail about the true benefits.

The scope of this period of research intended to be narrow, exploring one pixel of a much bigger picture. But it became evident that such a narrow remit would quickly date and become irrelevant in such a fast moving landscape, and that the real value to this work was a more expansive picture, with broad strokes, marking the edges of the canvas for further study and perhaps highlighting specific forms within the wider vignette.

Personal perspectives:

In searching for answers and insight, it’s important to look at the many perspectives that brought me here.

I’ve been working in the creative sector for 25 years. During this time I have seen a multitude of perspectives, approaches and agendas. My early career included a local authority job - funding and managing arts organisations, strategic projects and high profile public initiatives. During this time I had freedom on the one hand and restraints on the other. I was not allowed to engage with businesses directly - I could not seek corporate funding, whether that be direct

cash, sponsorship or other inkind support. One early experience I had was the grooming of a major beer company. It was enlightening. A weird mix of give and take, posturing a nudge-theory approach to finding mutual ground, mutual benefits. I was shadowing the head of service and we were taken to lunch. For the beer company the relationship was an opportunity to be public sponsors, to seize a high profile platform to host their logo, and to be seen doing something positive. Essentially we offered the social engagement of its day.

The year was 2001. Post millennium, European funding was readily available and free festivals and opportunities for the public were vast, varied and expected - a staple in the regularly scheduled programming for any major city. I was young, starry eyed and somewhat naive. It was a new experience. Fast forward to 2017, a wholly different time, same city, same client (albeit contracted) different approach, expectations and outcomes. It was a major sporting event, televised and international. All I saw around me were colours, branding, posturing, advertising, and all were transient, ephemeral, consumptive. A huge price was exacted both from an environmental perspective and a financial one. A whole public square carpeted and subsequently disposed of, representing everything swept beneath it: greed, agenda, advertising, bias, waste, consumption. The shift was remarkable, representing 15 years of corporate growth, where people seemingly didn't matter any longer. It was a marked difference from promotion in a positive light, to outright brandwashing.

In the intervening years, I had a taste of many perspectives: local authority, local government, private sector, charity, public sector, voluntary sector and finally freelance. The struggles were different but the intent was the same. I've spent my whole career advocating for the rights of the artist, the participant, the public, the planet - demonstrating the power of the arts in addressing social and environmental issues a running theme throughout my practice. Community cohesion, health and wellbeing, and sustainability are all aims of my work. I've won various levels of funding, yet the work is always under-resourced. I've won and lost multiple battles in the securing of funds. Throughout every aspect of work and society, I recognise one strand, the need to promote one's best self, in whatever form that means.

In more than one of my roles, the ultimate objective has been to return the organisation to a positive public perception from a negative one which had resulted from poor levels of local and public engagement, deviation from the very reasons an organisation has been set up, or in recovering from a controversy. Each time the vehicle has been the arts used as a way of re-engaging disenfranchised communities, giving ownership back to the community and meeting their needs and expectations. It's interesting to reflect on this when considering how brands use CSR and marketing budgets to actively restore good PR or outweigh negative perceptions. It's also interesting to recognise that the original intention of some of these organisations was to create something for their community, to give back and create opportunities, contributing to wider agendas for health and wellbeing, community cohesion and targets for increasing attainment and reducing crime.

6 perspectives emerge to me in any given scenario. First is my own initial viewpoint from which I benchmark the rest. Second, I take into account the viewpoint of the client or commissioner - the person who initiated the work. The stakeholder, board or funder - those holding the purse or puppet strings - come third. Then I think of the audience or participant - those emotionally or physically engaged with the work. Next I consider the artist - the creator or visionary, those who seek to promote critical engagement and communicate their ideas. Finally I think of the wider public, hive minded, disconnected and often amazed or contrarily disgruntled. Returning to my role as Mediator / translator, I decipher the language and communicate across the great divides between artist, client, funder, participant and the public.

One thing is for sure, my experience in all of these many roles and sectors has consistently been the battle of funding and visibility.

Stakeholders and Clients

During this research, I considered the CSR and environmental statements of 100 major UK based brands. All were publicly available. All represented the public face of their brand, telling their story. Whilst there are countless approaches, strategies and work conducted, a number of notable points emerged:

Local impact

There is a very evident trend from companies who support local causes - often local to their physical locations. Often they give their staff a set number of hours to contribute to local good causes and charities, paid for by the company. There are a number of factors here that add value to the offer. There is the very visible difference that is apparent for hands-on activities - such as litter picking, fence painting and or coaching for local groups - a direct investment in community relations, particularly impactful for locals who work at the contributing organisation, demonstrating how their employee actively values its staff, their families and the local community. However this is also a very savvy trait of any company who might want to embed themselves actively into a local community - particularly if there has been some community resistance or upheaval in the locational process or previous negative PR arising from a situation or controversy.

This approach gives members of staff a real sense of ownership in how they are investing their time, further propelling into positivity how any employee sees its employer and feels valued at work. This is reflected in the research emanating from The Secret Power of CSR, A Goodup research report into the relationship between CSR and employee engagement. "The pressure on businesses to embrace corporate social responsibility doesn't just come from external sources (customers, politicians and the media) but increasingly from their own staff. Employees want to work on projects within their organisation that contribute to their own personal growth and something bigger than themselves."

In an interview with Forbes, Hilary Smith, EVP of Corporate Communications and Social Impact at NBCUniversal, explained: “There is a growing trend for companies to craft their corporate social responsibility strategy around their employees’ passions, first and foremost, as opposed to focusing mainly on their external brand reputation. Today, employees, particularly millennials, expect to work for a company that gives back. But they want to give back on their own terms and have a say in what causes their company supports and how and when they volunteer their time. It is important for companies to survey their workforce and forge relationships with non-profits in areas that their employees are passionate about, and with charity partners that allow you to customize employee engagement opportunities.” (Forbes, Corporate Responsibility -What to Expect in 2019.)

This type of CSR engagement is very visible and has immediate benefit. It’s quick win but in short measure, replicable and repetitive. It can be long lasting and far reaching, but it can also be one of the lowest levels of CSR activity. Through one meeting I conducted, I was informed that although a certain company offered its employees 5 hours per month of community work, it was unenforced and there was very little take up of the opportunity amounting to around 5-10% in any given period. However, the company counted every hour that was offered to all employees in their reporting back to stakeholders regardless of whether they were used. This presents a problem in terms of accountability, transparency and evaluating real engagement and social and financial return. It skews the statistics and indicates that there are other companies who might also be presenting the best version of reporting, with the poorest actual practice. It is also possible that it is damaging to the company itself, irregularly skewing internal figures, estimations and projections which may even hide more entrenched issues such as staff who are overstretched or underperforming. Overstretched staffing was the reason given why the staff of Company A failed to take up the opportunity. It is unclear if the managers and stakeholders of Company A are aware of the low percentage of take up on charitable hours, or even see a need for reporting and monitoring systems.

Foundations and Charitable Giving Arms

In the instance of some of the larger brands, charitable arms are set up as separate entities, dispersing funds based on the measures adopted by the parent company. These overwhelmingly only fund registered charities and focus mainly on health and wellbeing agendas, supporting numerous activities for communities, children, disabled and the sick. It would be useful to conduct further research into this area to see how many of those foundations do accept applications from organisations who are not charities and which recognise the benefit of arts activities in contributing to social, health and wellbeing and environmental goals.

There is no rule book on CSR. There are a wide variety of ways of conducting work with varying success, levels of engagement and types of activities. The common denominator is that in every single case, the decisions about the types of giving comes down to the individuals and groups of individuals in decision making roles - their personal values, how they may see themselves in the market, their life experiences, how they have been personally affected and how they feel they can give back. Some companies give money to charity and charitable causes, some make

sponsorship or donations, some offer staff paid hours. Some leaders take the decision to include staff in decision making by allowing staff to have a say in which charities or organisations receive support, or by allowing staff to run activities that raise funds, often being matched £ for £ by their employers. It's no surprise that approaches are made by the higher ups, even if in some cases that is directed by employees in job roles whose sole purpose is to improve relations, sustainability and staff morale.

Some, however, solely see their activities as that which most benefits their own company. A common trend in the construction and engineering industry is the provision of apprenticeships. This model of giving back has multi-fold benefits: developing the next generation of engineers whilst simultaneously benefiting from lower waged labour; augmenting workforces with additional skills and insight, providing yet more of the same to their employed trainers; accessing grant and government funding, tax reductions and off-sets. It is not to be underestimated how much time and investment is needed to run effective apprenticeship programmes however. This type of CSR is often an investment in society aiming for future returns.

There is positioning and framing to consider in all aspects of CSR particularly in how companies are honest with themselves.

Another major trait of this type of CSR are the companies who record and monitor (with a view to promoting) their impact as inherently benefiting the environment and society: focus on supply chain, improving and ensuring sustainability, reducing carbon emissions, reducing energy usage, reducing use of certain plastics etc. This is not very candid. These are billed publicly as the great things that certain companies are doing, and seem on merit very marvellous things to do, but only when the consumer takes a significant step back does the picture become apparent that for example, company B are actively investing time and / or money into CSR whereas company Z might only be conducting activities that they should and would otherwise be doing to benefit themselves - ultimately boosting profits for their shareholders - and promoting this as the best practice.

That said, there are other companies that are actively investing time and money into wider societal benefit, even new manufacturing techniques and technologies that contribute to both their own bottom line and simultaneously benefitting the wider world. This is not new and is reminiscent of early philanthropy and community investment.

The Lever brothers built Port Sunlight between 1899 and 1914, creating a model village to house workers, complete with school, concert hall, swimming pool, church and hospital. Lever invested in welfare schemes, provided education and entertainment for its community, encouraged organisations to promote work around art, science and music. Lever saw profit sharing instead as community investment. The same can be seen in the now UNESCO world heritage site of Saltaire, preceding Port Sunlight. Before that Owen established welfare and education programmes at the New Lanark planned settlement. Owen created the first primary

school in 1817 and invested in socialist programmes. This underpinned the community, enabling them to keep young children out of working at the mills and instead have them supported in education, whilst stimulating innovation in manufacturing.

Most of the brands considered seemed to be focussed on two main issues - environment and community, the former being more relevant now than ever before with the current movements gathering momentum and forcing businesses to take action. Consumers vote using their feet.

It is also important to note that it is right and proper for the businesses and their leaders to actively prioritise their values, whether they be personal or relating directly to their business. In this way they can connect both their purported ethics and be authentic in their approaches, matching personal, professional and company values with genuine contributions to sustainability and reducing impact on the environment, improving life in and out of work for their employees and their families, improving health and wellbeing, whilst simultaneously operating within a sustainable model for their own business.

In many cases, the CSR statements are distilled down to a few sentences, perhaps accompanied by social media coverage of specific activities as a means of continual engagement, but almost exclusively as a portrayal of the company's own perception of its work. In considering the CSR approaches of many notable companies, it is important to recognise that this learning is of limited benefit. This part of the study looked at many of the leading UK brands and it would be useful to understand how these big companies compare to smaller companies, considering levels of staffing and definition of roles; ability to act autonomously or with agility versus larger more mechanistic approaches; and the demographics of decision makers - old power versus new.

This research does not seek to understand all of the intricacies of CSR nor present an exhaustive overview of all the concepts or approaches. There is a lot of great literature which focuses specifically on CSR. Instead, it seeks to contextualise some of the key attributes which appear most relevant in understanding how the work of artists can add value to CSR for the benefit of the artist, audience, participant, stakeholder and businesses, and of course the general public and the planet.

Artist Interviews

During the research period, a number of artists were interviewed. These have been anonymised in order to ensure freedom of speech without fear or reprisal, to protect the reputation of all concerned. The interview were semi-structured and allowed specific questions to be addressed whilst giving space for expansion into areas of particular interest.

Artist A shared some interesting insights during the interview. He is mid-career, internationally renowned and has worked with numerous brands in multiple sectors, including manufacturing,

automotive, food, fashion and finance. These pieces of work are of significant size, ranging from the lowest at 50k up to significant 6 figure sums.

Having been engaged in a number of ways, Artist A's insight highlights certain trends which give an indication of the mindsets of larger brands. There is a clear distinction between two main ways of engagement - one through direct work with said brand and the other through an intermediary PR company. The artist spoke openly about the challenges of working through a middleman who often dilutes the process, loses the artistic translation and is not in a position to adequately develop work or take decisions, versus working directly with brands where creative expression can be actively brought to life, and the artist can lead and shape work that holds more meaning and impact and can actively develop audiences.

The underlying issue here is about who is genuinely the artist in the scenario. Artist A noted that where PR and advertising agencies were involved, the agencies already had clear ideas about the work they wanted to produce and the artist's brief in these cases was therefore restricted. "A lot of times in this sector, you are never asked to innovate... You are asked to replicate something that they [the agency] have previously shown the client, who have already signed off... But it doesn't have any critical engagement which they might have otherwise had". On more than one occasion, agencies have requested unoriginal work that borders on plagiarism. Of course, Artist A did not accept such work as that became a case of personal ethics.

Artist B described similar experiences of working with advertising agencies, where they stated that all of their secured work for brands was through PR agencies. They noted that most approaches by agencies have asked the artist if they could make something 'a bit like this', or replicate something the artist has previously produced. "It was buying, a bit like a commodity."

However, Artist B spoke about the creative process being really open in their experience. Speaking pragmatically about the process they noted about the agency "they want a lot of visibility into what the outcome was going to be and how it would exist... they didn't really want to direct the creative process, but to retain a sense of veto."

They went on to note that it was essentially "a piece of marketing, commissioned by a marketing agency. So ultimately its purpose was to promote the brand. In line with its current marketing thrust, which was always very clear throughout the process."

In a similar way to how a Creative Producer might devise a campaign and seek artists to fulfill the vision, the agencies are doing the same. They use their own creatives to design a campaign, sometimes complete with a clear artistic vision about the final outcome, only sometimes giving a wide remit for creative freedom in the process. But whereas a creative producer would create space for the artist to have creative freedom of expression, aiming to maximise the artistic value and engagement impact, the agency aims to maximise visibility, brand recognition and sales.

This can also be seen in some sponsorship models. Arts and Business aim to increase the investment from businesses in the creative sector through strengthening and developing relationships (now part of Business in the Community in England). In a brand enhancement case study showcased on their website, the brand Iris Colour spoke about their role in sponsoring a photography exhibition for a festival: "While we provided funding, we also produced the majority of the work and had control over the quality of work that was shown." (Arts And Business Northern Ireland website).

Artist A notes a shift in the type of work he is offered over the lifetime of his career. "Nowadays, people are approaching me more for collaborations because they are aware that actually they don't understand their audience or what people are interested in, in terms of product association". He goes on to talk about how institutions are quite open to risk and innovation in this realm, and brands are starting to move that way, recognising that there is value in exploring the narrative around themes rather than simply selling a product or service.

Artist B also spoke about risk in relation to due diligence and quality assurance. "If things don't turn out exactly as anticipated it's accepted that that's the risk of the commissioning process - the risk is quite high. Whereas in this, the risk appetite was very low. Because they are spending someone else's money. Consequently, they want to minimise their risk and inevitably that risk is transferred down to me."

Artist B is a mid career artist, working predominantly in the public realm on sizeable projects and is regularly commissioned for UK arts and maker festivals. Artist B has been commissioned to create pieces for national and international brands from the pharmaceutical, retail and food sectors, with modest budgets ranging from £5k - £35k, with all of them being commissioned by advertising agencies some of which are multi-national agencies. Each commission had a varying amount of direct contact with the brand.

Artist B sees their approach as commercially minded and pragmatic in working for brands, having always needed to make a living from the creative sector. In part a risk-taking artist, developing new work that is cutting edge, that promotes critical thinking and embeds engagement in all they do and switching to design-mind artist with a commercial approach, always finding a way to put their heart into it. This approach makes a business, one an artist can invest money into having the right tools for the job and that frees the mind for creativity.

Artist A stated that he believed all of his work sits in the entertainment industry. "It's always going to be great regardless of what the truth is. So that's actually a performance, made to look real, by the borrowing of artist authenticity."

There is a notable shift towards visual media which has inevitably been increasing since the advent of social media. Artist A spoke at length about expectation versus reality. In one case Artist A discussed his work with a particular manufacturer who set out to create a viral video and

the reasons for its failure. “People have this notion that you can make a viral video, and then as we know, you can make a video and whether or not it becomes viral is a different matter and they totally failed by how they filmed it.” The artist had produced an interactive digital experience, to elicit human interactions which would be captured by the brand’s PR company. However, there was little to no engagement with the artist about the best approach to capturing this. The result was a very visible film crew, too close to the work, that failed to capture anything other than a few exhibitionists and friends/stooges. They had assumed that they would organically capture a wide variety of people engaging with the artwork, but had not used the skills or expertise of the artist in gauging how to engage audiences with the work. And instead just about every person who might have interacted with the work was put off by the imposing film crew being so close and visible - alienating the very people they had hoped to capture. “So it didn’t have any authenticity and things don’t survive well online if they don’t have that.”

Artist B was engaged by a major brand to create an interactive artwork that was installed in a public area with high footfall - a heavily populated cultural quarter of a major city where the general audience expectation is to see things happening -- artworks, performances etc. The artist worked on the culmination of a wider campaign, a sculpture that would engage the public, with the agency aiming to create something socially viral and not overly branded as part of that approach. “I think they hoped that people would and they did take photos in front of the piece and enquire sort of ‘what’s this thing that’s turned up on my walk home?’ And it was that kind of experience that they [the agency] were looking for. Not that it was a big-branded, sponsored thing.” The artist noted that although the piece was not overtly branded, the colour scheme alluded to the brand, that there was an interpretive text and accompanying hashtag (notably not including the brand name) relating to the wider campaign and an expectation that the brand was so strong that it would commonly be known.

This indicated a greater level of awareness that in some ways echoed Artist A’s interpretation of performance and authenticity. The brand that Artist B worked with were wholly aware that the piece needed to speak to a wider public and be free from overt branding in order to generate the type of public engagement they hoped for. Similarly, they knew to work with an independent filmmaker to discreetly film the piece, sensitively capturing those beautiful moments of genuine intrigue from members of the public. Artist B recognised this when they stated that “they [the agency] wanted an artwork. It always needed to exist as an artwork rather than a functional object.”

Artist A spoke about another brand experience working directly with the brand’s own creative. This allowed a more organic experience, greater developmental period that evolved over time and developing trust which in turn elicits more creative freedom of expression. Ultimately, this experience was more rewarding overall than those through agencies, but experimental in nature and fell short of what the brand had hoped for. Again, the Artist spoke about lost opportunities of discussing at length the types of audiences and how best to engage them, something he is becoming acutely aware of for the future. Brands and agencies would benefit here from working with artists to better understand their current and potential audiences, not in terms of

segmentation, demographics and other data, but by aiming to engage consumers in deeper ways.

It is worth noting here about the lifetime of artworks in different contexts. Both the artists spoke about the shortening expectations of brands and PR companies. A move towards image based campaigns targets the Instagram generation. Expensive artworks are made for a single image. It seems to become more throwaway - a shorter lifespan could equal a lower risk both financially and in the public eye - quickly to be replaced.

In an article for the Atlantic, Culp discusses the role that brands now play in art patronage, highlighting a possible downside of the Instagram approach to commissioning art in the context of CSR. "Some artists and critics are concerned that this influx of branded capital may prioritize certain kinds of art production over others —i.e., works that are shiny, colorful, and Instagrammable, instead of conceptual, political, and challenging." (Culp, 2018) This need for visibility in a fast-changing social media world highlights the diminishing impact of traditional advertising.

Artist B spoke about being the central focus of the work in a fast moving campaign, that once it's complete there is no further involvement. They noted that the lifetime of the finished work was very short, sometimes just a day, a week or a month, and legacy was also very short. Another experience devised by an agency aimed to have a longer lasting and deeper engagement, "but it's not what we as artists would call an engaged process." Artist B intimated that it was surface level engagement, without a true understanding of a sustained and lasting effect created through deeper engagement. I have often referred to drop-ship initiatives - projects deposited for a short period of time aiming to, for example, reconnect a disenfranchised community through a creative programme, who are then immediately forgotten as soon as the funding dries up. This approach creates yet further disaffected communities in the long run.

Artist B noted that they have sometimes been given the opportunity to keep the work after its shelf-life, to reuse and repurpose the materials. In other cases the work is thrown into a skip at the end of its short shelf life. Decommissioning of work should be carefully considered from an environmental and sustainability perspective.

The conversations with Artist A kept circling back to this notion of performance and authenticity. One example given was a project which collected live data and the artist had apologised once he became suspicious of the quality of data being generated by the hardware. The brand wanted to continue regardless, but the artist was not as comfortable. "Even presenting the performance of truth is as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than the truth itself. So they [brand] are just interested in the performance of that as opposed to what it could actually achieve. They are interested in the brand story as opposed to the communication of the brand to people."

While Artist A has turned down numerous opportunities from brands for various ethical, political and pragmatic reasons, the artist would undoubtedly work with brands again in future, understanding that this type of well paid work can underpin other personal, more experimental or risky work. However, he states that this is with all his learned experience and that negotiating transactions in the future is vital, as is maintaining his own personal ethical integrity.

Artist B spoke about having previously turned down a major funder of one artwork based on ethical reasons. Speaking of the client, they stated “As a festival, it’s a difficult and different position viewed in that kind of context because you have a responsibility of promoting opportunities especially to young people in the borough. The question is should they be censoring opportunities available to young people because of their personal ethical standpoint? Very difficult.” It was very clear that in this case there was no way the artist could accept the funding but felt that the festival should take the funding. They added “Actually, in a sense it was harder to turn down potential funding when it came to it than perhaps I would have liked. Because essentially you are turning down quite a lot of money”. They went on to say that it’s “Difficult to benchmark personal ethics”, concluding that although they would work for brands again in the future, they would treat each opportunity on a case by case basis.

Where artists take commercial work, it allows them to underpin more experimental practice on riskier or speculative projects. Commercial projects pay commercial rates, the likes of which are seldom seen in the creative sector for artists. This therefore affords artists the opportunity to invest in themselves - either through the purchase of better equipment, materials to experiment with, space hire to develop projects, more time to write funding bids or apply for commissions, freedom of thought to take research breaks or try out new ideas. There is a strong argument for artists to take commercial work which aligns with their personal ethics.

It’s clear that both artists saw their roles as bigger than just their remit. Protecting one’s own integrity as an artist is part of the artistic process, it’s a reputational thing. Building an artist’s own brand inherently includes their personal values; their back catalogue of artwork, partners, collaborators and funders; their breadth of experience in creating work that engages and holds the audience or participants, that transcends communication barriers, aiming for genuine long-lasting engagement. It’s not just work for work’s sake, it holds a much deeper meaning, an opportunity to collaborate on something that has potential to reach a much bigger audience base for an artist, communicating a much more profound message.

Artist A adds “brands are definitely interested in things that make a difference and sharing that approach with people - so when they buy the product, they are not just investing in that brand or factory, they are investing in that company being able to make an ethical choice. The artists can sit in between brands and consumers and balance those spaces to enable the brand to have an authentic voice with that.”

The artist is concerned about their own reputation in any given piece of work, but also recognises the value that they bring to the collaboration. “If your work has credibility as an

artist, if you say no to advertising and you are in control, you pick and choose who to work with, you bring all the credibility you have developed. It's about what you stand for. If you are an artist in a specific field - getting them [the brand] to make a statement that the brand stands with your values as an artist - it's the value sharing that the artist can do that's different from, for example, sports or music personalities. Endorsement through a critical approach and enquiry of the subject - that's the key thing about artists in that space - it's all about the critical engagement that comes from the understanding that you will happily think it's good for the world. You have looked at the whole web surrounding a brand and decided to put your name next to that. As opposed to being driven by cash, the endorsement includes all the critical responsiveness that you should also bring to working with that brand, so you both grow out of that process if it's true collaboration."

Artist B noted that being detached from the brand allows them to transcend the strict brand guidelines and work more creatively, adding that the brands value that process. However, Artist B did not feel that brands are totally invested in deeper level engagement. "In a genuine process that reflects what people feel and believe, you create something that reflects a joint exploration of joint journey and joint understanding of where things have progressed to. They [brands] are more interested in inviting people to take part in a rather more specific interaction, from a point of view of being able to see *that* as an engagement with the brand and hopefully get something from it, or have some fun and find it playful. Then as an artist you are using your experience of what people engage with and trying to interpret it as then something that becomes playful."

Final Thoughts

Although the interviews are a very small sample, the attitudes align in many ways and offer an insight into the challenges artists face in developing work commissioned by brands. There seems to be a gap in the developmental process that is alleviated by working directly in collaboration with brands, rather than through PR and advertising agencies.

One thing to note is that for both the artists, the work they undertook contributing to CSR was actually funded from advertising and marketing budgets. There is a misalignment that is happening in this space. There seems to be less desire to take risks on creating work and time is a major factor in directing how and when work happens through an advertising route. Perhaps if funding was derived from a different pot, such as Research and Development streams, there would be more opportunity to explore creatively, to take risks and innovate, and to potentially fail, or to develop work which ultimately exists with the main purpose of engagement, rather than focusing on returns and sales.

Artists producing work for the service of brands, yet paid by marketing agencies, are providing a very different and less authentic response to those who are given free reign by a brand to create original work.

The main opportunity for brands is understanding that there can be a much more involved process in working with artists. This could, perhaps, still include a third-party agency, but the structure of collaboration would need to be carefully considered. There seems value in separating out the work that is predominantly advertising from work which aims to capture and engage a deeper understanding of an idea in which a brand can demonstrate an ethical approach to sustainability and community engagement through genuine CSR. Whilst the latter assists in raising the profile and positive working ethos of a company, advertising alone falls short of having the critical engagement and authenticity to enable behavioural change to happen. It is likely that there would be greater confidence from audiences about the genuine reasons for the work, where it is not immediately dismissed as an advertising campaign.

The growing consciousness around environmental issues means consumers are demanding brands become more responsible. In a poll featured in Forbes, 88% of consumers want brands to do more to help them reduce their environmental and social footprint. (Townsend, 2018). This could mean considering supply chains in product creation, or other CSR actions, but it also includes opportunities to work with artists to raise awareness of issues and how they might be empowered with their own agency to take action. Millennials grew up with the internet and expect two-way dialogue, with their voices being heard. They see through thinly veiled advertising campaigns and equally they recognise authenticity.

Artists can help drive change and bring with them their values. It is important for artists to negotiate working terms with brands that align with their own ethics and to share a space with brands and advertising agencies to drive the narrative with value-based decision making. This requires careful collaboration to harness its potent power that results in true change. There is more ground to cover in communicating benefits for businesses in terms they understand, but evidence suggests there is an appetite for more arts engagement practice in CSR initiatives and a developing understanding. “Many corporate leaders value the arts’ capacity to contribute to the kind of transformational community or social change they see as critical to the success of their CSR investments.” (Stern, 2018)

Brands can benefit from working in more divergent ways, utilising the skills of the artist. They should maximise on this experience and explore new ways of engaging audiences and consumers; exploring challenging and sensitive topics with artists and contributing to progression; demonstrate to the wider public that the brand has authenticity in how it conducts its CSR work and to report transparently.

A key feature of this research has been considering location based activities, both locally to a brands physical location and in acknowledging the research about location based artworks. Ockwell notes when writing about an artwork in the public domain “This integration of the artwork within the local environment and its integration into people’s everyday lived experiences appears to play an important role in engaging those who might not otherwise be motivated to learn about climate change.” Ockwell et al (2018). There are valuable lessons in local activities and artworks that capture audiences in familiar surroundings, sometimes by surprise, that

harnesses a deeper connection to the work and its meaning. Though environmental and society issues are often thought of globally, there is merit in a local approach to addressing this. An emerging term sums it up perfectly - Glocal.

This emphasis on location can also be seen in the recent Arts Council England research, *The Value of Arts and Culture in Place-Shaping*. It highlights the lack of investment from businesses in local arts activities, citing lack of awareness of the value that arts activities can bring to businesses and noting a lack of networking opportunities. (Wavehill, 2019)

There is no 'one size fits all' approach and It's important for brands to find the right fit for them, particularly in the type of work they choose to undertake - the right artist that reflects their brand. Honouring their local communities, their employees and their families, finding gaps and aiming to fill them, recognizing opportunities to contribute more to CSR overall. It's good for society, the planet and it makes good business sense.

In an interview with Forbes, Daniella Foster, Senior Director of Corporate Responsibility at Hilton stated: "The bottom line: Sustainable and inclusive growth is good business and the companies that have aligned their business growth strategies to their ethics will be a step ahead in future-proofing their business." (Forbes article Corporate Responsibility: What To Expect In 2019, pub 14 Jan 2019). However, aligning a brand's CSR goals with value and purpose to its business models is not solely the answer. What is needed is action.

It's important to recognise that there are not always immediate quantifiable returns on investment when it comes to deeper engagement through CSR. Sometimes there may not be a direct return to it's funder at all, instead seeing ripples of benefit through extended communities disenfranchised from the brand, more akin to a 'pay it forward' mentality. We should explore alternative modes of measuring the impact, and consider the wider value that the arts in particular can bring to global issues, improving methods of evaluation that align with business needs for stakeholders. The Arts have the power to change the hearts and minds of individuals, leading to a collective shift over time. It's about all facets of society playing a role in the bigger picture, holding strong values that cascade through every aspect of our work, portraying it authentically.

Suzie Cross
March 2020

References:

Barkemeyer, Ralf; Preuss, L. Corporate engagement with the challenge of corruption: an international comparison. (2011)

Corporate Reporting on Corruption, an International Comparison. (2015)

Barkemeyer, Ralf; Christophe Faugère; Olivier, Gergaud; Lutz, Preuss. Media attention to large-scale corporate scandals: Hype and boredom in the age of social media
CEO statements in sustainability reports: Substantive information or background noise? (2014)

Barkemeyer, R; Comyns, B; Figge, F; Hahn, T. Sustainability Reporting: The Role of “Search”, “Experience” and Credence” information. (2013)

Belfiore, E and Bennett. The Social Impact of the Arts. (2006)

Burke, Miriam; Ockwell, Dr Dave and Whitmarsh, Lorraine. Participatory arts and affective engagement with climate change: the missing link in achieving climate compatible behaviour change. (2018).

Culp, Samantha. In writing for The Atlantic. Brands Like Nike and PepsiCo Are the New Art Patrons. (2018). <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/10/brand-patrons/568153/>

Gill, Dr Robert. Why the PR strategy of storytelling improves employee engagement and adds value to CSR. (2015).

The Giving Machine, Corporate Social Responsibility - a simple guide
<https://www.thegivingmachine.co.uk/corporate-social-responsibility-simple-guide/#>

Goodup. The Secret Power of CSR: A Goodup Report into the relationship between corporate social responsibility and employee engagement. Research-csr.com/

Henley, Darren. The Creative Dividend. (2017).

Iris Colour case study. Arts and Business NI (Website).
<https://www.artsandbusinessni.org.uk/business/brand-enhancement-case-study/case-study-iris-colour-belfast-photo-festival>

Jowit, Juliette. In writing for the Guardian. Howlers and omissions exposed in world of corporate social responsibility (2011)
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/nov/24/howlers-and-mistakes-in-company-csr-reports>
<https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2011/11/corporate-social-responsibility-csr-is-deeply-flawed-but-is-there-a-viable-alternative-to-guide-policymaking>

Knight, Helena. Collaborative Value Creation: How Arts and Business Organisations Create Value for Society. (2015)

McPherson, Susan. Writing for Forbes: Corporate Responsibility: What To Expect In 2019, pub (2019)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanmcpherson/2019/01/14/corporate-responsibility-what-to-expect-in-2019/>

Merrick, The Power Of Art To Engage The Public On The Impacts Of Climate Change On The Coast'. (2012).

Rahman, S. Evaluation of Definitions. 10 Dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility. (2011)

Rangan, Kasturi; Chase, V; Sohel, Lisa and Karim. Harvard Business Review: The Truth about CSR. (2015) <https://hbr.org/2015/01/the-truth-about-csr>

Reeves, M. Measuring the Economic and Social Impact of the Arts. (2002)

Roosen, L. J., Klöckner, C. A., & Swim, J. K. Visual art as a way to communicate climate change: a psychological perspective on climate change–related art. (2017)

Serota, Nichola. Writing for The Guardian. The arts have a leading role to play in tackling climate change. (2018).

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/20/arts-climate-change>

Stern, Corporate Social Responsibility and the Arts. 2018

Story, J and Hess, J. Ethical Brand Management, Customer Relations and Ethical Duties. (2010).

Townsend, 88% Of Consumers Want You To Help Them Make A Difference. 2018

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/solitairetownsend/2018/11/21/consumers-want-you-to-help-them-make-a-difference/#171fcb116954>

Wavehill, The Value of Arts and Culture in Place Shaping, 2019

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value%20of%20Arts%20and%20Culture%20in%20Place-Shaping.pdf>