

New Directions for *Visiting Arts Mobility Grants*

Background

Visiting Arts was established by the British Council and Foreign & Commonwealth Office in 1977 to promote cultural relations by facilitating the presentation of the arts of other countries in the UK. Its creation was due in part to the fact that the UK Government did not have an instrument that would fund reciprocal visits of foreign artists and arts organisations to the UK in fulfilment of bilateral cultural agreements. Its early history was somewhat troubled, partly because of misunderstandings about its role and, and not unconnected to this, because it was seen by the UK Arts Councils, who helped finance it, as too close to the British Council, which hosted the organisation and provided the main funding for it. The main concern of the arts sector though was the limited resources it had to distribute.

By the mid 1980s, Visiting Arts was making available one-off grants to British promoters and presenters interested in collaborative projects with artists and organisations in other countries that would lead to the public exhibition or performance of their work in the UK. Preference was given to arts from other countries that were geographical priorities to its principal paymaster, the British Council and to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. However, its role was increasingly seen as that of an adviser and broker for international visits to the UK, rather than as a funding body.

During the 1990s Visiting Arts expanded its operations to produce publications (notably detailed profiles of countries – primarily outside Europe – for UK presenters) and develop training (e.g. for foreign cultural attaches working in the UK, or for programmers and promoters on practical aspects of inward visits to the UK of foreign arts). It also extended its advisory role and took on project development – not least to raise additional funds. By the time of the New Millennium it had also moved from being a semi-independent joint venture of the British Council and UK Arts Councils to becoming an independent registered charitable organisation.

How it works

Visiting Arts' mission has undergone significant change in recent years. Today, Visiting Arts' prime purpose is to work with artists and cultural professionals "to strengthen intercultural understanding in the arts". There are three strands to its work:

- Providing information and intelligence to strengthen intercultural dialogue. This it does through advice, help sheets, online country directories, online guidelines on work permits, visas, tax, etc, an e-newsletter and targeted cultural briefings. VA is a founding partner in Culturebase.net, an online database of hundreds of contemporary international artists and practitioners.
- Creating opportunities for artists to explore new directions – e.g. by fostering opportunities for ground –breaking artist exchanges, residencies, promoting cutting edge exhibitions and supporting innovative festivals.
- Expanding the knowledge and skills of new, as well as more established, cultural players. Thus it organises training programmes, runs in-country workshops, and, to a modest extent, supports research and development visits and networking overseas.

The Artist-to-Artist International Scheme illustrates Visiting Arts' support for artist's engagement and mobility. Running for four years, it provides opportunities for artists from overseas to spend a week in the UK working with a UK based artist. Although there is no prescribed outcome to the scheme, the expectation is that, through an exchange of ideas and information, it will strengthen relationships and lead to further collaborations.

The Creative Collaborations programme is another example. This has sought to stimulate new connections between UK and international artists working with young people in education and the community. A partnership with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the programme has funded projects that nurture creativity, and enable young people and local communities to participate in intercultural activity. Each successful project involves a residency in the UK and the creation of new work for public presentation. In 2007/08 the programme focused on collaboration between UK and African artists. In 2006 four projects were supported involving artists from Belgium, Hungary, Argentina, Brazil, China and Trinidad with UK partners. However, the future of this programme is uncertain.

Visiting Arts collaborates with the Gulbenkian Foundation UK in the support of projects involving Portuguese and UK artists, which is open to UK arts organisations.

Various programmes have supported UK presenters, producers and arts managers to go overseas and see work in situ. For example, UK promoters attended a major showcase of contemporary theatre and dance in Moscow in 2006 as part of the Golden Mask Festival. UK curators went on a research visit to Romania in 2005 and attended the 2nd Moscow Biennale in 2007.. Arts managers Placement Programmes have helped UK professionals go overseas. Similarly, a Critics Programme has supported visit of young writers to new places to view new work.

Much of Visiting Arts' work includes practitioners in countries outside Europe. For example it has been a partner with the British Council and Arts Council England in Artists Fellowship exchange programmes with China and Taiwan in the contemporary visual and performing arts. The fellowships involve residencies in the respective countries aimed at the development of new work, interaction with local artists and building professional contacts. Cultural Management workshops have been run in India, China and Iran.

For some years Visiting Arts has been running a programme that introduces foreign cultural attachés to arts work in the UK.

Its most recent initiative, the Square Mile project, is a partnership with the British Council and five local authorities – Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester and the London Boroughs of Southwark and Waltham Forest – and is a three year pilot programme that will involve artists from overseas working with communities in the UK, and British artists going abroad to work with local communities and ecologists. Initially, artists will take up three month residencies hosted by an arts organisation, with the aim of exploring the cultural, biological, aesthetical and environmental diversity of a square mile of urban space. The objectives are: to celebrate the UK's cultural diversity and address negative perceptions of different cultures and faiths by introducing, to the UK, creative talent from overseas, especially from the countries of foreign diaspora groups. The Square Mile project also seeks to reflect global issues by encouraging a sense of shared futures within communities and across borders through cultural responses to such things as the protection of biodiversity, pollution reduction, conservation, etc, as well as enhancing access to participating arts across different social groups.

There are no set criteria in terms of age and experience for Visiting Arts grants. Recently Visiting Arts has been moving towards an open-ended framework for support, which is ideas and artists led in preference to specific programmes.

Results

In its 31 years existence, Visiting Arts, often working in partnership with other organisations and with relatively modest resources, has helped support the introduction and presentation in the UK of many European and extra European artists and arts organisations. Its information and advice have enhanced

the knowledge base of UK presenters and promoters of overseas arts work and facilitated the building of contacts and long term relationships between foreign cultural professionals and their UK counterparts, while its training related programmes have developed the capacity of arts managers internationally.

In 2007/08 Visiting Arts' budget was slightly under GBP 1 million. Of this sum 334 080 GBP was for arts projects and schemes and 353 700 GBP was for professional development workshops and support.

From 2005 to 2008, the Artist-to-Artist International Scheme has supported 38 foreign and UK artists (and an artists' collective) through 19 awards.

Visiting Arts acted for many years as the national agency responsible for promoting the flow of international arts into the UK and developing related cultural links abroad to strengthen cultural awareness and cultural relations. However, with the extension in recent years of the international interests of the UK Arts Councils and the broadening and promised enlargement of the British Council's support for international engagement, Visiting Arts is now one of several UK players whose work promotes international engagement and mobility. Key funding partners, the British Council and Arts Council England, no longer provide core grants to Visiting Arts, forcing it to seek other project partnerships, e.g. with local government. While retaining a cultural relations perspective, it has moved away from support for more traditional forms of international engagement, such as touring, towards initiatives that recognise the role of the artist in promoting intercultural dialogue and respond to artists' ideas. It continues to provide information and advice for those interested in presenting arts activity from overseas in the UK, as well as for UK presenters and practitioners interested in discovering more about the arts and their context in other countries. Arguably, however, the name Visiting Arts no longer accurately reflects the nature of its work.

Sources

Visiting Arts website: <http://www.visitingarts.org.uk>

Responses to questions to Yvette Vaughan Jones (Director), Felix Barnes and Andy Kyriakides at Visiting Arts.

Fisher, Rod, (compiler & editor), 1992, *Who does what in Europe?*, London, Arts Council Great Britain
Various press cuttings on Visiting Arts since 1990.

Selected Visiting Arts publications

Author

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