



Boster Group

CULTURE: THE CURRENCY OF SOFT POWER

Another Vernissage week has passed in a whirl of pavilion openings, stimulating installations, and overcrowded vaporetti. The 58th Venice Biennale shows us once again that art has the power to inspire not only great debate but also, as we have seen in the reviews, occasional divide, as well as the exceptional ability to unite and bring together a wealth of values, experiences and expressions.



This last capability of arts and culture is what Boster Group focused on last week; on Thursday 9 May we hosted a roundtable discussion on culture as a vehicle for soft power in our increasingly interconnected yet fragile world. In “achieving objectives through attraction and persuasion” [Soft Power 30 Index], culture and arts are nearly unparalleled in the arsenal of tools to broker relationships and promote values.

Today, however, art’s intrinsic role within soft power is under threat, with the rising tide of nationalism and populism, and the increasing demand to evidence an often intangible effect. Countries and organisations (both public and private sector) are trying to determine how to leverage and activate an effective soft power strategy utilising the arts. Together we tackled some of the misconceptions of culture that have been perpetuated by the promoters of virtuous populism: that art is undemocratic, a tax-subsidised party for the few; that museums scour the developing world for stolen objects and hide them away; and that culture is out of touch and out of date.

Joined by senior-level representatives from the worlds of finance, luxury, government, major arts institutions and museums, energy, the public sector and commercial art, we have captured some of our discussion below.

Britain in a Changing World

By some measures the UK leads the world in soft power, but the Elcano Global Presence Report recently scored the European Union highest for soft power presence. How will this change in a post-Brexit, de-globalising world? As one of our panellists commented, “Soft power doesn’t just happen – like its harder counterpart, someone has to pull the trigger and mean business.” The UK government has been very clear that a soft power strategy is at the core of post-Brexit negotiations, and Boster Group is looking forward to the publication of that strategy.

Joining us were representatives from the British Council, who reminded us that the surge of nationalism and populism after WWII led directly to the founding of the British Council, which aims to combat these dangerous forces. One concern with cultural outreach in this political climate is that initiatives in the UK are mostly taking place in London, but in the UK, US and France, the real groundswell of populism is happening in the ‘left behind’ towns and remote areas. There is a pressing need to look outside the capital cities to the regions, and take action where people benefit most from the transformative effects of the



Boster Group

arts and young people are given the opportunities for creativity that they are fast losing at school.

The president of the Chinese arm of a luxury corporation shared some fascinating thoughts about the parallel development of cultural soft power in China. China has an unfathomably rich cultural history but the most notable thing in the present is that people are seeking a new cultural identity – valued for its economic power, the soft presence of culture is in the mind of politicians, cultural makers, and the public alike. The current issue in China is to develop a contemporary way to make culture that can be shared and well understood by the entire world. This is being driven by a younger generation that is interested in social and economic development, and is more immersed than previous generations in the global context.

Ralph Rugoff's *May You Live in Interesting Times* theme at Venice this year is being felt across the world, and within the context of a city flooded with artists and decision makers from all over the world, the question of how to use soft power on the international stage is one that everyone in the room will be taking home with them. Rugoff talked about highlighting a "view of art's social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking." The Biennale is a wonderful example of a group of people willing to tackle the difficult questions, using an unparalleled setting to develop relationships and explore the deeper issues that the artists are bringing to our attention.

The Post-Colonial Question[s]

Part of exploring the future of an interconnected and international cultural world is considering the impact of the past on the future.

The status of objects forcibly removed from their original nations and now housed in Western museums has dominated headlines, beginning with Macron calling for a return of all museum items seized from colonial-era Africa, Germany now pledging \$2 million to explore restitution of cultural treasures, and Easter Islanders securing a pledge from Norway to repatriate objects taken from them.

Our guests agreed that the provenance and return of museum items is not the end point, or even the most important topic within this area. Working at both a country and individual level, it is essential to create platforms for previously marginalised countries to share their artistic identity and access routes to developing technical expertise in the cultural sector.

A representative from a major UK-based and internationally-recognised museum talked about the inherited complex past of their collection and their evolving policies, for example working in West Africa with emerging institutions to collaborate on best practice and inform a new museum infrastructure, and providing training for a new generation of archaeologists in the Middle East.

The Ghana pavilion, the first time the country has shown at the Biennale, is one of Boster Group's top recommendations; it explores the country's history, present and future with an extraordinary dialogue between six artists. One of its key supporters spoke at our roundtable about how the actual space is partly created using soil from Ghana, and that they have in a real sense brought Ghana to Venice and to the rest of Europe to show that Western art is not the only art – and several pavilions explicitly referenced finding their own way beyond the impact of Western art. Crucially, the Ghanaian pavilion relied on the support of a government that values culture – and unfortunately not all governments recognise the value of culture, especially within the context of soft power.

This Biennale, and in Boster Group's roundtable, it is clear that looking beyond the traditions of Western art to emerging nations, as a source of talent and creativity, is vital



Boster Group

in our changing world. This cannot be achieved without institutions sharing their knowledge globally and, crucially, the support from government to effect real cultural development on a grander scale.

Culture and the Private Sector

Many corporations have already unlocked the values of engaging with culture – creating and strengthening valuable relationships, ownership of neutral spaces, and extending a brand’s reach and reputation. As one of the significant corporate donors at our roundtable noted, enhancing access to excellence in arts serves society. The untold story is the positive impact and the feedback from those who have benefited is that access to the arts has changed their life.

A major European bank talked about their investment in contemporary art, and emphasised that their way of building partnerships in the arts has shifted significantly in the last few years. Embedding the UN Sustainable Development Goals and using arts partnerships to achieve social impact (a topic that Boster Group [explored in more depth](#) at Davos this year) is a strategy that many companies are adopting. Deutsche Bank, for example, has brought art to a ruined former palace in Berlin, creating the Palace Populaire alongside the 95% of their collected works that are on display, and BNP Paribas’ AccessArt25 at the Tate and RA are bringing people into a cultural world that they may have thought was not open to them. Through these access initiatives the public are brought onto a journey that has longevity.

Looking to the Future

Culture and digital are increasingly going hand in hand, and representatives from the luxury sector shared some thought-provoking insights on how brands rooted in heritage are thinking about the future. 80% of British luxury production is destined for sale overseas. Digitisation has helped disseminate the beautiful work this sector produces harder, further, and faster. In China, the opportunity to creatively engage younger consumers in a way that both encapsulates the art behind luxury brands and demonstrates their values has been a key part of growing this industry.

Looking to the immediate future of the arts in an era of extreme challenges with funding, something that several attendees expressed concern about is the notion of ‘acceptable charity’. The virtuous populism that has created conflict and headlines around who sponsors our greatest museums and cultural institutions can have serious consequences and lose sight of the value of major supporters stepping up to provide funding. There was a consensus at our discussion that independence is an essential factor, whether that is an organisation taking its own approach to funding without external pressure, or the executives and chairs of corporations directing funding with an independent approach.

Conclusion

It was inspirational to see so many sectors and countries in passionate agreement about the power and necessity of culture. To paraphrase the rousing words of one of our attendees, art holds the keys to the mysteries of life, whether that is objects, music, or dance. The arts and culture provide a powerful vehicle for conveying national interests and messages, but also a tool to effect real change, whether on an individual, industrial, or social level. This can provide the solution to some of our most pressing concerns in these interesting times. We need to continue the campaign for everyone to join the discussion, and continue it beyond the Biennale.