The Economy of Art

In November 2009, DACS hosted the first in a new series of high-profile debates on visual artists in the 21st century. Chaired by Alan Yentob, a distinguished panel comprising artists Susan Hiller, Paul Graham, Michael Landy and economist Alan Freeman explored the value of the visual arts to the economy and society at a time when the value of traditional economic sectors are being seriously challenged.

How do we begin to measure the value of art at a time when other parts of the economy which we believed to be valuable have proved to be a chimera? In the aftermath of the recent global economic crisis, the value of assets on which multi-million pound financial transactions depended, have been revealed to be worthless. Should this change our perception of what is valuable? Is it time for us to re-assess what we designate as our nation's assets?

The debate addressed how society attaches value to what visual artists do and make. Panellists questioned whether society fully understood the "value chain" from the point at which an artist has an idea, to the process of making work, to the economic impact of the creative industries as a whole. What follows is an edited transcript of that discussion.

Alan Yentob (AY): To start this debate off, let me start by framing the discussion. We're talking about value and the way that art is valued not just by individuals but by public institutions. How do they value artists and how do they represent their interests?

Susan Hiller (SH): I have a very cynical view of the way art is valued. There is a vast pool of underpaid people propping up a huge superstructure of salaries: people in institutions, museums, people making a profit from art, those buying and selling, and the people who work in those situations. In both the private and public sectors, we have people benefitting economically from art and yet 'what is it about what artists do which makes them so very special and particular and different?' In order to answer that, you have to see that all societies have something or other that we could call art and the producers are treated with enormous regard. In some societies they are outcast people, who take almost 'polluted' materials and make them into objects of value and it's through that transformative process that the value is achieved and then of course we have societies such as the Renaissance in which well known and adulated artists were working for the State in a sense. This is the range of treatment that artists get. There are artists, a movement of people called artists, and then you have all these other people who have more clearly defined roles that wouldn't exist if it weren't for artists. If there were such a thing as a successful arts strike, which there never has been, I think a lot of people would be in trouble.

Paul Graham (PG): As an artist no one welcomes you with open arms into the world, you have to force your way into it by making your art and trying to get exhibitions. I remember being very angry in a practical way about how difficult it was simply to get invited in to see a show, even to get a card to a private view. And all these people who had salaried jobs, who were working in institutions or had a gallery and made money, all the auctioneers, they were all invited and none of the artists were. And even being more established, this still didn't change. At the point when I was curating an exhibition, I insisted that for every person on the invitation list who gets a salary – every writer, every critic, everyone who has a paid job at the Arts Council –there should be a one- to-one ratio to artists who are invited. This is a very small practical point, which demonstrates what Susan is saying about the superstructure and the way that artists sometimes feel marginalised from the industry.

AY: We're saying that the relationship and the ratio is the wrong way around; that the dependency of the artist on these groups and organisations should really be the other way around. In other words, the artist, you're suggesting, doesn't get enough respect?

Michael Landy (ML): I remember when I first left college, one was expected to serve out one's time at a certain point and then maybe someone would give you an exhibition a bit further down the line. This particular day Damien [Hirst] came up with the idea of putting on an artist exhibition called Freeze, back in 1988, the year that I left college. At the beginning, we imagined that we could do it for ourselves. We could circumnavigate the

commercial gallery, we could represent ourselves, sell out own work and work for ourselves but that didn't last very long.

AY: Why didn't it last very long?

ML: Because people get poached. It's not a collective, as-in a group ethos. They're a motley bunch of individuals basically.

AY: That is an interesting point in itself; that the whole nature of being an artist is that you are an individual more than anything. So the idea of a collective of artists is a tall order isn't it?

Alan Freeman (AF): I think we need artists because only artists can get us out of the recession. John Maynard Keynes said the same, that's why he's set up the Arts Council.

AY: When the Arts Council was imagined by Keynes, his idea was that it was 'for the artists'. Well clearly that hasn't quite worked out the way he expected.

AF: To quote Keynes directly, he said: "If I had the power today I should surely set out to endow our capital cities with all the appurtenances of art and civilization on the highest standards of which the citizens of each were individually capable, convinced that what I could create, I could afford – and believing that the money thus spent would not only be better than any dole, but would make unnecessary any dole." I think what he was saying was you don't actually live what the artist has done until long after. That's when you realise the virtues, so invest in it now, because if you look back, every great advance in civilisation is shaped by artists. We have a tremendous obsession with the things of life, and we don't understand the role spiritual and cultural activity plays. Everybody talks about the book, I mean about the printed press, materials and so on, but what they don't talk about is literature or reading. You don't really know what you're getting until afterwards, and if you create a framework then people will subscribe to it, so it has value for the future. The other thing is that artists have an effect on all of us. There is an enormous amount to get from simply being surrounded by design and art and culture.

AY: We have aesthetic pleasure from buildings we look at, from spaces we've created, and all these things, one way or another, are made by artists and artisans and they are the environment and spaces in which we live and put like that it is important.

SH: You're saying there are aesthetic pleasures or spiritual ones and I would probably go along with that. But I think that we're too far down that road that mystifies what it is that artists do and a lot of the work of the past years in art has been an attempt to do away with that romantic idea, the last expression of which was Abstract Expressionism. Since then nobody has really wanted to go back there.

AY: The aesthetic argument is not meant to undermine the other more disturbing aspect of art, the working process of the mind. [Turning to Michael Landy], when you took you all your possessions and destroyed them in Break Down, this clearly was and is a work of art, an expression of an artist, and you were also making a comment on society and value and about consumerism among other things, so this was not a taboo area for the artist to explore?

ML: My work talked about an examination of consumerism, literally taking things apart, trying to understand them. My possessions, such as my fax machines had one value, my telephone a certain value and then I shred it and it had a different value. The fact is it wasn't functional value, I couldn't use the phone or I couldn't send faxes any more, but it had a different value.

AY: So in the other sense, one of the reasons why art is so essential to those of us who care about it is because it is also a way of understanding the world and all its beauty, its horror, its complexity and its simplicity. The process that you go through makes people think differently and feel differently about things that they didn't expect.

PG: And it's interesting how a government can have a strategy to make things happen. It's surprising that these things do work, like the Farm Security Administration (FSA) set up during the Great Depression in America, and the way that I know about it is through the photographic art that they commissioned – Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange - who went out to make social documents of Dust Bowl life and then produced one of the most powerful bodies of work in pre-War American photography This was engendered entirely by a government programme - an enlightened government programme.

AY: What is the trigger for these things? If we're talking about the Renaissance, well, wasn't it the Medici's and the others who had the means or the money to enable its path? Someone had a vision didn't they?

PG: Of course they did but in this case it was Roy Striker at the FSA. The problem is that for every success there are the ones that fail or where art has been manipulated by governments, from Communism to Fascism in Nazi Germany to the CIA promoting post war contemporary American art. Art has been manipulated in ways both good and bad.

AY: Let me ask another question. We are talking about economic value and to some people, the economic value placed on art – whether its $25million or not very much – might appear to be a distortion of its value. Does that distort the value of art? Is it the people who run all of this who are exploiting and manipulating the economic value and thereby, damaging art?

SH: Forget about the Renaissance, we're not in the Renaissance. We're wherever we are and the fact is that works sell for a huge amount of money and are prestige symbols, just as when an Ashanti Chief commissioned a mask for a dance; it's always a status thing to have the best art, whatever your society calls the best art. That seems to be universal, that's not the problem. I think the problem is that there is an absolute conflation of economic value of art. When people started saying to me about 10-12 years ago, "Oh, I'm so excited about art!" I said: "No you're not. You're excited about money." So art becomes just a token of the money and that is harsh for artists.

AY: We'll come to all of this, whether it's quite fair, I don't know. I'm not sure I agree actually. When Carl Andre's bricks were presented to the Tate fifteen years ago, there was shock and horror and the Arts Council of Britain was worried about upsetting anybody. I think that was a far worse state of affairs than the way it is now. Actually I think a lot of positive things have happened over the last twenty years, lots of galleries, and an explosion of interest in art. Maybe not all of it good....

SH: What I'm saying is that if there hadn't been the money there wouldn't have been the explosion. I'm saying that the two worlds would collapse together. That's why we're in a new situation now perhaps. It's interesting that art has retained its value at a time financially where everything else is collapsing. That means that art has another kind of value. The buzz in galleries in recent years hasn't been about the great contribution that this or that particular painter was making to the way everyone in the room was thinking about the world; the thing that was interesting to everyone was how much the paintings were selling for.

ML: The London art world is a completely different place now to what it was twenty years ago. There were only a handful of galleries such as D'Offay, Reynolds, and Maureen Paley and now there are so many.

PG: No one can deny the economic impact that the YBA generation has had to the value of the arts industry in Britain in the last 20 years or so since Freeze started in 1988 – it was phenomenal.

AF: My worry is that we are underestimating the value of art. Surely one of the capacities that art has is to be transformative but one can't necessarily pin down the transformative effect. I was going to ask you [Michael Landy] if you knew beforehand what the effect on the audience would be when you did your exhibition? Art is an engagement with an audience, and I think that an aspect of participation is that you don't always necessarily know what effect you're going to have on that audience.

ML: At the time people looked at my stuff and they must have said, 'it's not particularly different to anyone else's. Then suddenly people got it and they made a mental inventory of how much they possessed.

AY: One of the positive factors of the last twenty years, I would say, is art and education and the way that public institutions today, from the Tate to the National Gallery to the British Museum are obliged to have an education programme of some kind that can engage and enthuse young people so they grow up with the arts. As a result, you will have a society which appreciates art and can make valued judgments, not feel unable to do so because they have no understanding of the idiom of contemporary art. How important is it that art can reach the parts that other things can't reach?

PG: Well I'm self taught so I didn't have an art education. I remember talking to John Sarkowski who was the Chief Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. He referred to the great ushering in of post war art photography in America: soldiers coming back from the Second World War, being put back into further education, photographers employed for their technical skills would go back into education and this then led to the setting up of arts courses, some in photography, some in fine art, and then photography came

into all our schools and somehow this community of people who are appreciative of the true art form of photography developed.

AY: We're not all going to be artists, but we are all going to have our lives enriched if we have an understanding of art and if we grow up with it and that is after all the purpose.

ML: In another sense though, there are more art fairs now, there are more galleries, and there are more artists!

PG: 20 years ago there were no professional photography artists in this country who actually made a living, who didn't have to do something else, teach, or do commercial work. And that has changed.

AY: Looking at art generally, the fact that some artists' value has inflated, that there are stars and celebrities, has meant that more artists of this generation can actually make a living out of art, more so than the generation that preceded it?

ML: A market is a market, isn't it? I remember the first piece of work I sold. I remember the first time someone put something into auction, you felt that there was some kind of betrayal. This exchange went on where they said they would look after it for the rest of their lives, and then of course, two or three years later it's in auction, and you take it personally. Then the market decides how much you're worth, the value of your art at that particular point of time.

AY: Can you really appreciate art if you don't in some way participate in producing it at some level? If you want to make your contribution to the value of society, you want to change the way society participates in art. Of course, different people play different roles in that, but the artistic public should be a producing public at some level, otherwise how can it appreciate the artist?

ML: There's nothing wrong with play and playing with materials and all those kind of things; there's absolutely nothing wrong with it.

AY: It's important that people get closer to art by trying to do it and that's what's supposed to happen in primary schools and other places.

SH: Do you then think that it's a good idea that most of the arts budget in this country goes to projects that really should come under education? We have to be very clear about the difference between aspirations for art and how that's put into practice. To my mind education and art are different. When art is just art, when any picture is art, and anything made with materials is art, there's no understanding that art is actually a discourse around ideas and fashions. It's about values and ethics; it's not just painting...

AY: What you're saying is that the Arts Council is putting too much money into educational projects and not enough into artists who are struggling?

SH: If you want me to explain why I think there's too much emphasis on education, what I mean by that is that there's too much emphasis on the instrumental value of art. When you apply for an Arts Council grant as an artist you have to say which groups of people are going to learn something from your project, how many there will be and which ethnic groups they come from, and so on. I think this is really a dreadful distortion and it's like measuring art as though there was a clear cut educational programme involved in the work of each artist.

AY: I absolutely agree with that, and one of the thorny issues that we haven't dealt with is this issue of measurement and evaluation and people's obsession with that.

Audience: I really want to call for a rejection of using economics to understand art, because it always brings us back to the same question – how much? These questions are short term and they're all about guarding the economy. It shows disrespect for intellectual life. Art is more about intellectual and cultural engagement, not about how we can create better products.

PG: Artists in general are engaged with struggling to identify and expand a creative space for them to work in. That can sometimes be a completely new space; it can sometimes be the expansion of an existing space so that they create new artistic territory for themselves. One of the most powerful and creative things anyone can do, be it in photography, painting, video, music, is to create a new artistic space and expand our boundaries. The market then eventually recognises that, dealers move in, museums make shows, it becomes known as a phenomenon, it becomes known as a movement and economically it gets advantageous to be used as such, for the artists and for

society. Can the government step in and help artists in the creation of this space, as the FSA did where they found this artistic space between traditional documentary and fine art photography? Somehow the FSA inadvertently created and established this new artistic territory which everyone involved in the arts now knows and recognises. Whether economists and government institutions can step in and help artists in this process of discovery and exploration is the key question for me.

Audience: What has intrigued me is the concept of an artist strike. An equivalent for the arts might be to close the museums for a day. But I think you need to go beyond that and remove art from people's homes. People would grasp the concept when art is removed and this would show how widespread it is in society and would be more powerful in reaching the general man on the street rather than those already in the arts.

AY: It's taken for granted, that's what we're saying and I think that's a point that you [turning to Alan Freeman] started off with, when you talked about all the things which enhance our lives.

AF: I wrote a paper with Graham Hitchin because we felt a dead end had been reached in this attempt to instrumentalist the benefits of art. The problem is that public choice is posed in monetary terms. That's a difficulty but things could be improved if the arts world could enter into the debate on the same level as health and education, and all the other special pleadings; if you could start to say, 'well actually all this unknown, unconcealed art, actually we can set some numbers to it'. If the art world did start to say let's work with the culture departments on this, who have some methods and techniques for doing this, you would be astonished at the value that the public sets on what you do. My provocation is I don't think art has anything to lose by attempting to say 'the valuation of the market is wrong, the valuation of the funders is wrong, why don't we try and put a value on what we're doing in consultation with our public'.

SH: I tried to say briefly at the beginning that art is inevitable, it's universal, in one form or another, and artists have a specific thing that they do which is to find a format for social and cultural values, presented out there in a curiously complicated way, where it allows people to reflect on it and on themselves and their relationship to it, and thus creates the possibility of change or stability. So it's inevitable, it's going to happen without funding.

AY: But that's its Achilles Heel, isn't it?

SH: Yes, that's its Achilles Heel. Somebody said why doesn't art get itself together. Who is this 'art'? We have people who represent artists already, and perhaps it gets a little distant from us in that way. How can art speak for itself except by doing what it does?

AF: I am rather intrigued by this idea of blanket strikes. I'm imagining grey storage blankets over everything in the Tate and the National Gallery, more as a day of awareness than a day of strike.

Audience [Paul Hobson, Director, Contemporary Arts Society]: I think that the way financial value around contemporary practice is articulated is enormously complicated and involves a very wide range of artists and galleries, the publicly funded sector (funded by the Arts Council), policy bodies, public collections and collectors who are involved in an extremely complicated and interesting range of transactions. If we think of contemporary art apart from economic value as a form of both knowledge and experience production, then the dissemination of discourse and the critical apparatus of art is enormously reliant upon the art world that you seem to be saying is somehow detached from artists. I'd like to think that we're all in this together but the gross instrumentalisation of the value of culture over the last twenty or so years means that we still talk about art as if it's a form social work, or as if it's a form of education or regeneration of a local area, but we haven't worked with artists sufficiently to identify the intrinsic value of art.

PG: From an artist's point of view, the contradiction inherent as a practising artist is on the one hand that you value your art above everything in your life, you have dedicated your life and your youth, your spirit to it for decades, whether you've had success or not, and then on the other hand you don't value your art because as Michael has said there's this big shock when someone suddenly starts putting a figure or a number to your work, and then you have to work out the value of what you're doing on a personal level. So sometimes asking artists to value the art is a very difficult issue because they are very conflicted about it, emotionally they're deeply invested, financially they're incredibly insecure and unsure as to its worth.

AF: I'm just wondering about this phrase that since art is inevitable there's no need to fund it. I'm surprised that's not more challenged because what one needs to think about is what the world would be like if there was no public funding of the arts, which is the policy makers equivalent to the artist strike. I think that the world would be

shaped by collectors and philanthropists who by definition are people who have a lot of money, and it would be a bit medieval.

SH: I think art is inevitable because some people simply have to be artists, and they do it. The way this discussion is going has led me to a very strange thought, which I will try out on everybody: artists are artists and they make art. It is society which is questioning the value of art, wanting to talk about it, these are points you raise, and it's not about the artist. It's about how this society can be sure that it continues to allow art to happen. What are the best circumstances for art to happen?

We do what we do, because that is what we do. That's what we have to do.