

The art of Brexit



Sun breaking through the fog, Houses of Parliament. Monet, oil on canvas c. 1904. Photo © Kunsthaus Zürich, licenced under Wikimedia Commons & adapted from the original.

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Brexit is viewed as a challenge by many working in British arts and culture. But it also heralds important opportunities for the sector. Graham Sheffield and Kate Arthurs examine what British arts can do to help us understand and project who we are as a country – and create strong foundations for dialogue as the UK negotiates its new place in the world.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has repeatedly said that leaving the structures of the EU does not mean the UK will be leaving Europe, and that the UK may wish to extend its cultural and educational ties with Europe. This point is of cultural as well as political and economic significance. This is something with implications which the arts sector must also consider. Brexit has posed big questions for British arts. What do we value about Europe? How will we access talent? How can we bridge divisions? But Brexit is also an opportunity for it to help present an authentic view of the UK domestically, to Europe, and to the wider world – and to increase further the UK's global standing as an open and creative nation.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Understanding Brexit's complex economic impact on the sector is work in progress. Yet getting to grips with the whole EU funding environment is vital in order to substitute or replace.

The most immediate concerns involve existing contacts with Europe. A recent Arts Council survey showed that most of their national portfolio organisations working internationally see Europe as their most important market: the EU makes up [59% of all international activity in](#)

[the English arts sector](#). When testing out international working, Europe and the US are often the first ports of call.

This is important for the UK. The economic argument for the creative economy is now well understood: the creative industries are the UK's fastest growing sector, worth more than £80 billion each year and constituting [9% of British service exports](#). Many have welcomed their inclusion in the government's new Industrial Strategy. But has this understanding spread to the role of the arts in creating jobs, or providing the foundation for international political and trade relations? The arts were conspicuous by their absence from the recent Brexit White Paper. Many prominent sector leaders are trying to reposition the arts at the heart of the national debate. As one museum director recently said, Brexit is a chance to get government to take the sector seriously – for its social and educational role as well as its economic and artistic value. Therefore the plea to government is to factor in the arts across the board from small business issues to economic development to reflect its potential contribution in such areas.

Meanwhile strong voices – particularly in Wales and the North East – have reminded us how European funding helps the cultural sector, including through the 'Creative Europe' programme. Whilst nobody would object if the processes were simpler, this is seen as an important vehicle. Nor is it necessary to be an EU member: indeed there are currently 11 non-EU countries with either full or partial participation including Norway. The economic case is simple: the UK gets out more than it pays in. The UK receives 12.47% (€40m) of the Creative Europe budget, compared to its [10.7% estimated contribution](#). 9.3% of respondents in an Arts Council England survey received funds from Creative Europe. The scheme helps build collaboration with Europe, which are important artistically and foster friendly links between the UK and its neighbours. Wider benefits include developing the sector's innovative capacity, sharing skills and best practice, and building the reputation of British creative industries in important overseas markets. In 2014-15, Creative Europe supported 230 British cultural organisations, helping to maintain the UK's world-leading creative reputation. The sector is calling for the UK's continued participation.

European Capitals of Culture is another popular programme, and the recent economic and cultural success of Liverpool and others have led to forceful sector voices arguing for the UK's continued participation in this too.

Woven around these official collaborations is a rich patchwork of connection between artists and organisations, who make a passionate case for collaboration beyond borders. International arts engagement is driven by the urge to expand creative horizons, discover new forms of practice, and engage with diverse audiences.

The British Council is helping strengthen the UK's links with other cultural relations organisations across the continent. It is also taking a lead for the sector by strongly articulating the benefits of including the arts in the Brexit negotiations. We recently initiated an 'EU-UK Culture and Education Series'. The first conference, recently held in Berlin, investigated the future structures for cross-border cooperation in these fields after Brexit. The series is a way to listen to the sector and the EU's other 27 nations. One message coming through is that continued access to funding and ease of movement for sector workers are top of the list of concerns. We've also re-affirmed our membership of EUNIC

(the European National Institutes for Culture) and are continuing to work with other European cultural institutes.

ARTISTIC EASE OF MOVEMENT

Large scale performing arts – including opera, ballet and some theatre – draw on global talent, much of it European, both long term and at very short notice. For example, 21% of British orchestra members come from the EU.

How to manage this in future? The sector's call is for the Brexit negotiations to prioritise ongoing ease of movement for artists and creative professionals.

Many have also argued that homegrown talent should now be championed. Given the ability of arts subjects to improve confidence and [critical thinking](#), can Brexit create the impetus to nurture skills? This could be an opportunity to make the case for a more coherent creative education approach in the UK, which many argue is declining. [Creative jobs are hard to automate](#), so investing in these skills is also forward-looking.

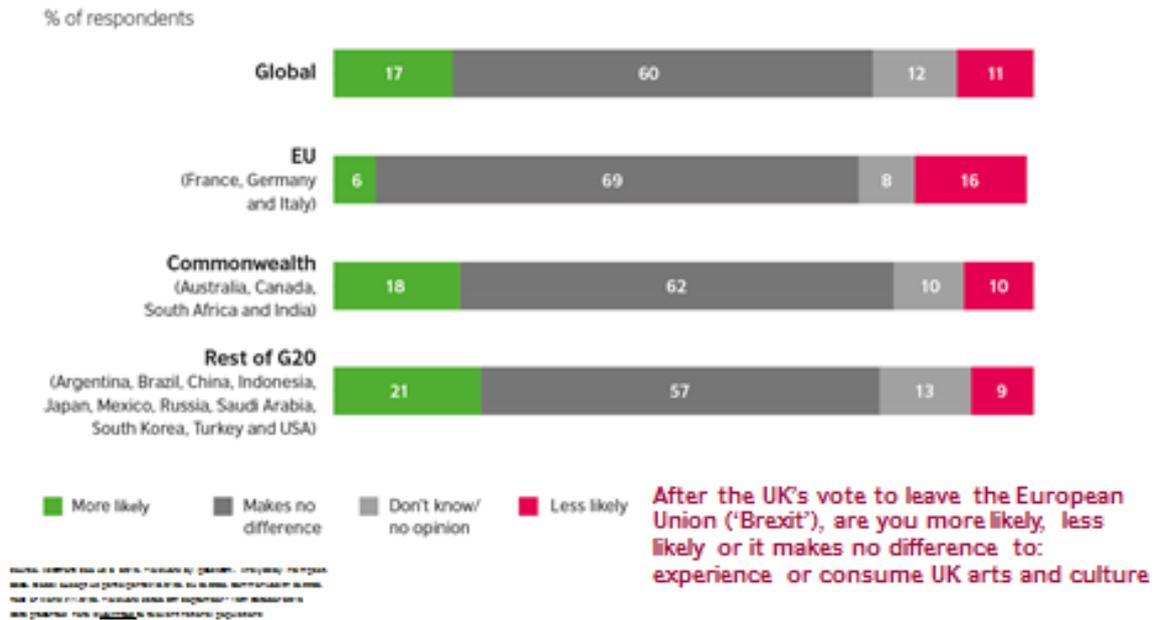
Technical, regulatory, and intellectual property concerns are also important for major companies – particularly in the media, digital and games arenas – as well as sole traders. Whilst a 'Great Repeal Act' would ensure consistency with EU regulations for now, long-term compatibility between English and EU law should be maintained in relevant areas to avoid legal barriers to creative exports.

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONFIDENTLY PRESENT A CREATIVE NATION TO THE WORLD

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Meanwhile, arts and heritage remain among our country's most attractive features, and major reasons why people [visit, study, or do business with the UK](#). The sector is asking how it can keep showing the best of the UK as part of its soft power. At this important moment in our national story, the arts also have a vital role helping us to understand who we are. The arts can use that understanding to create deeper connections between us and others. This will be vital if a 'Global Britain' is to present itself confidently on the world stage.

Interestingly, the British Council's [latest survey data of young people in the G20](#) suggests an overall increase in global likelihood of engagement with British arts and culture resulting from the referendum, with negative reactions in Europe being outweighed by positive reactions in the rest of the G20. This suggests important opportunities for the sector to engage more with the rest of the world.



Brexit has a positive impact on likelihood of engagement with UK arts. Ipsos MORI for British Council As Others See Us 2. [Base: Global except UK (18,010); Fieldwork dates 8/9 – 16/10 /2016. Weighted to national populations.]

As we approach negotiations it also becomes more important to maintain relations in less politically contentious arenas with our partners in the EU and beyond, which again brings the arts to the fore. The arts are particularly well suited to this as they can act as a form of dialogue in themselves – a power that negotiators would do well to remember and support in the years ahead.

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In conclusion, the British arts sector should deploy its trademark inventiveness in its response to Brexit. It is already making the case for continuing British participation in structures like Creative Europe, EU Cities of Culture, and EUNIC, for ease of movement for creative professionals and students, for support for British culture getting out into the world via seasons and exchanges, and for commitment to future EU/UK cooperation on intellectual property. More profoundly, it should help examine and confidently present who we are as a country to ourselves and to the world. Seizing these opportunities could help set the right foundations for the country to make the most of its strengths as it negotiates its new place in the world.

Post-Brexit, the UK will need to maximize its cultural links and artistic genius to the full to demonstrate what an open, tolerant, and creative nation it is.

Graham Sheffield, Director Arts and Kate Arthurs, Director Arts Strategy, British Council

See also

[The science of Brexit](#)

[In praise of wisdom](#)