Post-Brexit Artistic Education and Isolation

Danielle K. Szymanski
danielle.szymanski@valpo.edu

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On June 23, 2016, nearly fifty-two percent of voters in the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Prime Minister Theresa May acted to initiate the formal withdrawal on March 29, 2017, with the full withdrawal expected in March 2019. What does this mean for the residents of the United Kingdom? The effects of “Brexit” are current, evolving, and unclear; however, among the arts community, a great fear of “artistic isolation” under Brexit exists. Arts professionals—who overwhelmingly voted to remain—believe they know what lies ahead and their prognosis is grim. On the flip side, Brexit supporters see this as an opportunity to bridge connections with other regions of the world, to encourage support and curiosity of British artists, and to invest, once again, in the education and cultivation of British talent.

One issue which led to Brexit was the belief that an influx of European Union residents was streaming into the United Kingdom, taking up British jobs for less pay (Herman 47). The legitimacy of these claims is unsubstantiated though, at least in the creative industries. In the United Kingdom, the creative economy employs one in every eleven working people and is the fastest growing sector since the economic crash of 2008 (6). This sector generates jobs at three times the rate of general employment (Romer, “Arts and Culture”). Despite the plethora of jobs in the creative industries, the United Kingdom is experiencing a long-term shortage of skilled workers due to inadequate training programs, lack of satisfactory school programs, and increasing demand for skilled labor. The shortage will only be further increased by any Brexit-stemming regulations which increase restrictions regarding immigration and labor (Easton 3). Before Brexit, the employment gap was less obvious, as highly skilled creative professionals
from the European Union helped to fill the void, occupying approximately six percent of the creative industry jobs in the United Kingdom (6).

To remedy the shortage of arts professionals, and fill vacancies with British citizens, the changes must come from inside the United Kingdom and be mandated through educational reform. Prime Minister Theresa May has stated that key economic sectors, not excluding creative industries, will be identified, and promised to “do everything we can to encourage, develop, and support them.” She further addressed school reform, noting that there will be “not just a school place for every child, but a good school place for every child. A school place that suits the skills, interests, and abilities of every single pupil” (Hill). If this is the true intention of Parliament, education policy should fit hand-in-hand with the mission of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and they should be given full support to implement educational policy change.

Two sides exist on every issue—both of which are often skewed in opposing directions. This research examines the looming concerns of those arts professionals who voted to remain, as well as the potential benefits of this artistic isolation touted by those who voted to leave, and the effect Brexit may have on the arts within the United Kingdom and around the world. The goal of the research is to consider these issues, as a non-European arts administrator, with an open mind, and to paint a picture of actual changes, positive and negative, that Brexit is most likely to invoke in the arts industry of the United Kingdom over the next half a decade and beyond. Finally, the enquiry will make suggestions to British arts professionals on how to best weather the storm, persevere, and receive Brexit over the next year before the withdrawal from the European Union is complete.