

Why isn't comedy funded by the Arts Council?

Standup comedy can be as inspirational – and expensive – as any other art form, yet it attracts almost no public money. Things need to change

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Spot the difference ... Why was Daniel Kitson's Stand show at the Edinburgh festival 'comedy' while his Traverse show was 'theatre'? Photograph: Murdo Macleod

In 2006, standup comic [Terry Saunders](#) hit upon the idea of hosting an event in a Camberwell children's library. The event featured comic [Josie Long](#) and sketch group [Pappy's Fun Club](#). Saunders went on to promote nights in charity shops, the British Museum and someone's front room. This year's [Edinburgh Fringe](#) saw Welsh comedian Mark Watson present [The Hotel](#), taking over a 10-room building on Edinburgh's Queen Street and inviting audiences to sample observational comedic delights in each room. Earlier this year, visual artist [Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva](#) presented a [month-long residency in Gloucester Cathedral](#), exhibiting visual and sonic artwork responding to her surroundings.

All of which begs a big question. Why do some of these projects count as art, and the others as comedy? Are they really so different? Earlier this year, promoter Lisa Keddie approached [Arts Council England](#) for funding for a municipal comedy event. She was turned down, and told that the organisation only funds "art". According to ACE, it funds under the categories of combined arts, dance, literature, music, theatre and visual arts.

So how does the Arts Council assess artistic quality? Its official blurb says it considers three dimensions of artistic work: idea (the concept behind the work), practice (how the work is carried out and the impact it has on those experiencing it) and development (the contribution the work makes to the development of the artist, art form and the arts more widely). The UK is home to the world's biggest arts event, the Edinburgh festival, and 35% of its events are comedy. Yet apparently comedy isn't art.

"The aim of comedy is purely to make people laugh," said a friend of mine this morning. But, in that case, the aim of music is purely to provide people with nice stuff to listen to. Good comedy goes far beyond laughter. Take an ordinary standup with few conceptual-art trappings, such as [Daniel Kitson](#). The reviews describe him as "inspirational" and "emotionally impactful"; the standups of the late noughties have been heavily influenced by him; and his comedy, most would argue, has a central idea behind it. Kitson does much more than just make people laugh: he fulfils all the "artistic quality" criteria above. And why is it that he can peddle his one-man musings on life at the [Stand Comedy Club](#) in and call it standup, while over at the Scottish Arts Council-funded Traverse theatre, he can put on a one-man show – C90 – featuring, er, one-man musings on life?

The main argument against comedy being considered an art form is that it's seen to be self-funded. The UK's comedy circuit has no shortage of private individuals or companies happily making good money from well-attended gigs. There is an assumption that comedy doesn't need money; all it needs is a stage and an audience, right? Wrong. The fact is – as the theatre world knows only too well – it takes time and money to find and target an audience. It also takes time to write – it doesn't spring forth readymade from comedians' lips (unless they're really lucky). And venues, especially during festivals, are costly to hire.

Of course, it makes little sense to fund commercially robust projects with public money. But, if you think about it, that happens all the time anyway – consider the RSC, which has a healthy box office and yet still receives about £15m a year from ACE, or of Tate, which sees massive visitor figures but is funded to the tune of £54m by central government. Yet someone like Simon Munnery has been plugging away, [developing new comedic technologies](#) for which he will probably never see any huge financial reward, but which have filtered into the comedy circuit, on to TV and into saleable products. Why should he and his ilk do it for nothing?

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