

Cultural Policy and Arts Management

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“In the pursuit of increased resources, too much attention is being paid by policymakers to the social benefit and economic significance of the arts. A ‘Back to Basics’ approach in this sector requires the assertion of the primacy of aesthetics”. Discuss.

1. Introduction

The following contribution aims to examine two aspects of cultural value - the intrinsic and instrumental values of artistic initiatives and their representation of two different focuses in describing and measuring the impact of cultural practices.

Arts professionals tend to stress more the intrinsic value and the role of culture for individual and collective identity, their value systems and human development. Policy makers and funding providers, on the other hand, typically tend to base their strategy and/or programme documents and funding criteria on the instrumental, measurable aspects of the arts. These two focuses refer to the problem of different legitimacy for the support for the arts and are perceived as an opposition between the “back to basics” approach emphasising the social benefit and economic significance of the arts and their intrinsic values sometimes described as the “primacy of the aesthetic”.

The definition of the intrinsic and instrumental values and for the purposes of this contribution will be based on two pamphlets by John Holden “Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: Why Culture Needs a Democratic Mandate” published in Demos series in 2006 and in “Capturing Cultural Value: How Culture Has Become a Tool of

Government Policy” aiming at “finding ways in which to express the value of things that are difficult or impossible to measure”¹ published in Demos series in 2004.

Further reflection on intrinsic value will be based on the question whether the intrinsic and aesthetic values of the arts belong to the same category or refer to two different aspects of artistic practices and should be treated as different qualities. The specific character of aesthetic value will be examined. Finally, critical reflexion on how far it is possible to establish the “primacy of aesthetics” in arts policy documents and on the potential positive and negative results of setting the aesthetic criteria in the policy documents will close up this contribution. The question will be posed whether policymakers pay too much attention to the social and economic outcomes of culture and miss emphasising and asserting high aesthetic standards of the cultural initiatives they support. A set of conclusions and recommendations will be included.

2. Intrinsic versus instrumental cultural values in the context of state funding for the arts

Most arts practices do not generate sufficient economic revenue to cover their costs. Therefore, the arts, similar to education, the health services and other public sector expenses, often have to depend on financial support through public and/or private sponsors. However, the funding of the arts is paltry when compared with the funds spent on state defence, subsidies for farmers or expenses for R&D and even if compared with state-funded education, which is most similar to the arts in its nature.

The specific character of the arts poses a difficulty in formulating a comprehensive justification for their importance in society and often provokes policymakers and private

¹ J. Holden in: Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, Demos 2006, p. 12

sponsors to look at them rather as a tool in the realisation of their own, specific political agendas than as a vital part of human life and a healthy society. This issue with legitimacy often means that funding schemes are designed to provide measurable criteria for the decision makers based on the economic or social outcomes with marginal attention being paid to the intrinsic aesthetic values. “Moreover, beneficiaries are often expected to fulfil the strategic expectations of those individuals and bodies who grant them funding. The problems caused by this approach will be further discussed under the “instrumental value”.

Aesthetic criteria, because of their complex and abstract nature as well as their immeasurability, are very difficult to specify in detail. An in-depth understanding of the problems of aesthetics and current arts practices are required in order to work out a precise set of aesthetic criteria. This is experts’ knowledge which tends to be represented rather among arts critics, arts theorists and practitioners than among arts policymakers.

2.1 Instrumental values

Instrumental values are defined by Holden as “(...) values relating to the ancillary effects of culture, where culture is used to achieve a social or economic purpose. They are often, expressed in figures. This kind of values tends to be captured in ‘output’, ‘outcome’ and ‘impact’ studies that document the economic and social significance of investing in the arts.”² The instrumental values of culture tend to be more of interest to politicians and policy makers because of their potential to support political and/or social purposes, i.e.: access policy (participation of children, women, elderly people, younger audience,

² J. Holden in: Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, Demos 2006, p. 16

immigrants etc.) can be set as goals for various arts organisations or strategy programmes and captured in statistics.

Instrumental values can generally be measured and therefore provide relatively easy benchmarks for assessing whether strategic goals have been reached and whether programmes have been successful. They can also be set as criteria for funding providers forcing arts practitioners to design their programme according to the given guidelines if applying for funding because “those things that [are] easy to measure, tend to become objectives, and those that [are not, are] downplayed and ignored.”³ This quantitative approach seems to have become the standard in the funding criteria and arts policy documents, though it also runs the risk of the arts (and arts professionals) becoming instrumentalised, misunderstood and reduced to some side effects of their activity.

Holden provides serious critiques on the methodology of setting up instrumental criteria and collating data for their evaluation in meeting these requirements in both pamphlets. An important argument undermining putting the main focus on the use social or economic outcomes of cultural initiatives is based on the fact that these outcomes cannot be predicted and a clear cause-effect relationship between the programme and its impact is out of the question. Other related problems identified by Holden are:

- arts professionals complain that the essence of culture has been lost because they are forced to focus on funding assurance and collection of data or evidence for the application processes.
- solid data collection does not match the fluid character of the cultural initiatives and projects. Collection systems are inflexible but artistic meanings, and outcomes are ambiguous and context-dependent.

³ J. Holden in: Capturing Cultural Value, Demos 2004, p 17

- funders tend to be prescriptive or directive in setting goals related to the audience group and their makeup and leave out the specification of aesthetic criteria because they lack the expertise necessary for an aesthetic judgment
- many artists lacking the communication and administrative skills to deal with bureaucratic procedures often give up their projects and aspirations and divide their active time between earning money and their artistic practice
- the objectivity of the data collected with the aim of satisfying the requirements of the funders can be easily questioned

The final and probably most negative aspect of the focus on the instrumental values by the policymakers is the fact that cultural funding bodies might support a cultural mediocrity because it is more easily accessible and attracts a bigger audience while avoiding investing in new artistic developments and experimental arts. This might lead to artists being tempted to stick to tried and tested styles and practices.

Although the negative aspects of the dominance of instrumental principles in the arts policy documents and funding criteria are very serious and fully justified some positive aspects of them should be considered.

The evidence of the social impact of programmes based on audience related data can improve the self-understanding of every organisation and therefore also of an arts organisation and help it to meet the funding criteria. Moreover, the awareness that the presented programme is an important social tool and can influence and attract different social groups is significant for people responsible for artistic initiatives. This effect of the arts also opens possibilities for interdisciplinary initiatives between the arts and other

social areas. Not without reason have the arts in Europe during the 20th century permanently swung between their “engaged arts” and “l’art pour l’art” attitude.

However, the question should also be addressed whether arts practitioners should be concerned with the instrumental aspect of their work or whether this is rather the responsibility of the curators and directors of the organisation like galleries, arts centres or theatres. In many cases, the financial limits resolve this issue.

A “not only, but also” approach considering both the intrinsic and the instrumental aspects of cultural value by both policymakers and arts professionals would make life on many artistic organisations somewhat easier and policymakers more genuine in their striving for a better society.

2.2 Examples of social agendas in arts policy documents.

In the recent years the new idiom of joined-up societies and following on from this, support for participatory and education arts has become an important part of many arts strategy documents and funding allocation criteria in Europe and Ireland. If looking at some examples of the arts policy documents in Ireland – those issued by State bodies (e.g. the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism’s Strategy Document 2008-2010) and those specific particular cultural institution (e.g. Arts Council documents) it is striking that there is a stronger focus on the instrumental values of culture and their more explicit formulation than of the intrinsic or aesthetic values.

Access, ownership, equity, diversity and inclusiveness are all stressed by both policymakers and arts organisations. Cross-sectoral partnerships also belong to the register of participatory arts initiatives (arts and health, new communities, rural infrastructure or even enterprise). The Arts Council and other organisations are obligated by policymakers to articulate their support for this agenda and to make it visible in their allocation of resources.

A whole set of documents was produced in Ireland by the Arts Council and some governmental bodies stressing their support for participatory arts i.e., “Partnership for Arts”, “Per Cent for Art” scheme, “Civil Arts Inquiry 2002-2004”, “An Outburst of Frankness 2004”. All these documents refer to the “Policy Framework for Education, Community, Outreach” published in 2004 by the Council of National Cultural Institutions which makes recommendations for this new agenda for all ten National Cultural Institutions.

Although the general goal is that skilled artists should collaborate with communities and groups to promote creativity and engagement with the arts and that best possible artistic quality is provided for these initiatives in the listed documents, the main focus is not the promotion of the artistic objectives but rather the social interaction which is enabled. High artistic quality is required in all these documents, but the very little specification is given to this aspect.

It is necessary to examine whether this situation is caused only by instrumentalising approach towards the arts by policymakers or whether there are some other problems specific to the nature of the intrinsic and aesthetic values making their explicit formulation difficult if not impossible.

2.3. Intrinsic values

Holden defines intrinsic values as follows: “Intrinsic values are the set of values that relate to the subjective experience of culture intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. It is these values that people refer to when they say things as ‘I hate this; it makes me feel angry’ or (...) ‘this tells me who I am’. These kinds of values can be captured in personal testimony, qualitative assessments, anecdotes, case studies and critical reviews.”⁴ And further: “Intrinsic values are better thought of as the capacity and potential of culture to affect us, rather than as measurable and fixed stocks of worth.”⁵

All these values are crucial for arts recipients, participants and the artists; all of them are highly subjective and therefore very difficult if not impossible to measure.

Diversity in the practice of art does not contribute to a clearer specification of art’s intrinsic value. Also, the problem of relativism and the context dependency of qualities like beauty or truth etc. does not make understanding or judgment about intrinsic cultural values any easier. Another problem is that because of the complex language used for describing the intrinsic and aesthetic values a strong focus on them tends to be criticised as elitist and snobbish.

Nonetheless, the awareness that the culture contributes to education and tolerance, as well as to personal and collective development is widespread among both policymakers and the broader society. In general, however, society and its institutions

⁴ J. Holden in: Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, Demos 2006, p. 14

⁵ J. Holden in: Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, Demos 2006, p. 15

leave a reflection on and formulation of abstract artistic qualities to artists, philosophers or journalists.

It should also be noted that the array of cultural experiences available to the average person has never been as rich in Europe as it is currently. Never before was creativity as common, and the access to the cultural goods as easy. Also, artists enjoy more support and freedom than has ever been the case in our history. From this, we can infer that the society values the arts and that it must be qualities other than those that are purely economic or social. Maybe the language and the formulations in the arts policy documents create the impression that the gap between life and the arts is bigger than it is? If so, then maybe the language used is the problem and the real ground for the alleged legitimacy causing the funding shortage for the arts?

2.4. Aesthetic value

Intuitively it seems that the aesthetic criteria might belong to the same group of abstract qualities as the intrinsic values, but it still needs to be examined whether they can be treated as the same category.

In “Capturing Cultural Value” Holden cites a categorisation by David Throsby dividing the intrinsic value in historical, social, symbolic, aesthetic and spiritual values as useful criteria supporting a better understanding of the intrinsic values of the culture.

The aesthetic category belongs here to intrinsic values. Nonetheless, it seems that in contrast to social, historical and symbolic aspects which can be more easily described, aesthetic criteria and qualities provide a problem for discussion and specification.

The fact that there is no intrinsic essence that makes an artefact a work of art demonstrates the abstract and complex character of the aesthetic quality. From the point of view of aesthetics or the philosophy of art there are no sufficient and necessary (conditions which on their grant the status of art on an artefact.

Arthur Danto, one of the most influential contemporary philosophers and art critics, proclaimed, therefore “end of art” in his essay called “The End of Art” published in 1984 (Princeton University Press, 1997). The end of art means the change of our narratives to describe what art is. In his analysis of what art was before this change, Danto starts from the ancient “mimesis” theory of the meaning of the imitation of nature. This understanding of arts was in use up to the modernism although throughout this period new schools and styles of art kept developing and displacing the previous ones. The fact that many of these schools and styles were operating simultaneously and although they followed different principles all their works were called and perceived as pieces of art, contributed to the realisation in the 20th century that there are no stylistic constraints or rules about what a piece of art needs to be. Danto stresses that even by looking at something we are not able to tell if it is art or not. This means that art and aesthetic criteria as they used to be before modernism reached their end, the “end of art”. The fact that currently, everybody can be an artist and everything can be art does not help to define specific aesthetic criteria and to set up the high aesthetic standards in arts policy documents and for the purposes of the funding criteria.

Even though the battle for clear aesthetic criteria might seem to be lost in the context of purely academic reflection, there are some attributes helping us to identify a piece of art and evaluate its aesthetic quality. One of them, also provided by Danto, is the “meaning”. The meaning is the idea embodied in a piece of art; it is the specific perception of the world or its fragment and its expression in a piece of art. Of course, the whole school of formalism combating the idea of representation in the arts would question this assumption.

However, if the “meaning” gets combined with what in ancient Greece was called τέχνη [*techne*] which might be translated as the ‘mastery of craft from which some aesthetic criteria can be derived. The specification of these criteria needs to be carried out by specialists, which means by experts familiar with the field of the particular artistic activity, its reality and challenges. The ability to communicate the sought “meaning” to the audience, to evaluate their response and interest should also be considered, but not set as a decisive criterion. The opinions of experts seem to be the most reliable.

Even though using all these supportive techniques, I do not see a way in which serious aesthetic criteria can be formulated in policy documents, especially when considering the opposing nature of the arts and the policies designed to govern their production. The arts are specific, particular and depending on the context, in contrast to this the policies are general and aiming at wide purposes.

Also in the historical context, there are rather very negative examples of aesthetic specification by policymakers. Two extreme and negative examples are the Third Reich with its approach to “healing” the arts and to combatting the “entartete Kunst” and the similar approach by the Communism in its espousal of the social realist style.

I would rather suggest that the arts policy and funding bodies should involve arts experts when making judgements about the aesthetic quality and that they concentrate on providing environments for the presentation and development of the arts in society. Cultural diversity and the broad presence of various art practices are the basis for the growth of aesthetically interested productions although logically they do not guarantee their creation - some trust and awareness of the fact that creativity also needs to be learned can support this goal.

The argument of cultural diversity and some other environmentalists idea applied to the arts by Holden will be further elaborated in the last section.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The instrumental approach towards the arts is rather a standard and also as old as European cultural history (mimesis approach) therefore the focus on social and/or economic values dominates the funding eligibility criteria. Our awareness of intrinsic cultural values remains vague and fuzzy, and the aesthetic criteria are underrepresented in the arts policy documents.

To make the discussion about the legitimacy and the value of arts in the individual and social realms more arts- and society-friendly, “politicians need to understand the value of the arts and what public value about culture.”⁶ However, great sensibility and expertise are required when setting aesthetic criteria.

⁶ J. Holden in: Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, Demos 2006, p. 13

Education in creativity, in the role of the arts and artistic understanding among society and its politicians needs to be widely carried out and supported. A change of some thinking habits and a wider understanding of arts are required. It is a long and challenging process, but there are some motivating examples in our history demonstrating that a paradigm change is possible. i.e. women's emancipation.

Holden's strategy is to make arts professionals aware of their possibilities to use bureaucratic tools and standards, i.e. the use of "intangible assets" to build up and to present their real assets seems to be a useful approach. However, Holden overlooks the fact the verbal (also written) "propaganda" is the weakest one of all possible. However, a new language stressing cultural values needs to be determined. Some expressions from the context of environmentalism proposed by Holden⁷ seem to be valuable:

- "duty of care" - stressing the fact that some cultural goods are finite resources
- "intergenerational equity" – leaving as diverse an environment as possible to future generations
- "fairness of distribution of benefit" – public investments in the arts should guarantee wider and easier access to the arts
- "biodiversity" and "fecundity in places of diversity" – fecundity occurs in places where more differences meet

The idea of biodiversity in particular could be a very helpful argument for supporting various forms of the arts because accordingly to Holden: "The resilience of whole systems depends on there is a rich diversity of individual elements, so that if part of the system disappears, the systemic gap can be filled by the adaptation of other parts of the

⁷ J. Holden in: Capturing Cultural Value, Demos 2004, p 38

system”⁸ and further: “A vibrant culture needs a rich tapestry of historic buildings, archives, landscapes, artefacts to sit alongside libraries, theatres, galleries, concert halls, rappers, buskers, fashion colleges and so on. The broader and deeper the overall cultural ‘system’ the more resilient it will be in adapting to the changing needs of the society which it both forms and reflects.”⁹

All these elements seem to be of great value to everybody who understands the arts and is aware of their importance. However, in some ways, it is preaching to the converted because for many others Holden’s environmental arguments will probably produce the same kind of indifference as the environmental postulates do. Nonetheless, these are some valuable tools for the public debate about the importance of the culture and arts.

However, the real promotion for the arts can only succeed through an engagement with the audiences and through nurturing their interest and commitment. Furthermore, creativity needs to be widely taught, and creative activities made widely accessible to enable developing of high aesthetic standards.

Of course, the relationship with the audience will always tend to rather be an “affair” than a long-term commitment from the point of view of the audience: always ready to go for something more “attractive” or maybe more “meaningful”. Of course, the majority will prefer the mediocre and not challenging production, but this should not be an argument against supporting the more sophisticated and experimental arts. Referring to the “biodiversity” argument, some sustainable, reliable and accessible funding facilities for the whole range of cultural initiatives need to be developed. The

⁸ J. Holden in: Capturing Cultural Value, Demos 2004, p 38

⁹ J. Holden in: Capturing Cultural Value, Demos 2004, p 17

experimental arts as an “investment in the cultural future” should also be included without being forced to bring money and attract mass audiences.

Similar schemes are already in successful operation in other areas, i.e. the research facilitated at universities and various institutes could be an example for providing basic funding for the creative projects.

Good reviews, international impact, large audiences and social relevance should only lead to more funding – similar to scientific centres of excellence which not only do research but also register new patents, develop new applications etc. To make this happen there is a need for arts practitioners to do something they often tend to reject – they need to become politicians, arts politicians and they need to create a more appropriate language, supporting arts understanding and then to use it as a basis for their policies with the hope of creating the right cultural environment where high aesthetic qualities can be achieved. Freedom of artistic expression and good facilities can ensure this more than policy documents with formulated aesthetic criteria which will always remain beyond artistic realities.

References

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