

# How should we value arts and culture?<sup>1</sup>

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What is the value of arts and culture? Even asking that question often annoys arts practitioners and regular arts participants. The word 'value' is associated with financial returns, or at least with clear benefits that might impress governments, foundations and corporate funders. We must nonetheless insist upon the concept of value because the term's breadth goes far beyond monetary consideration. It is, after all, a high-minded sense of the term that moved Oscar Wilde to have Lord Darlington observe in *Lady Windermere's Fan* that a cynic was 'a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.' The priority of value over price (or over other merely monetary measurements) should move us when we ask about why arts and culture matter. That is why asking about the value of arts and culture is so important, but it may also be why it has become so fraught.

Discussions are often fraught because they have become mired in very short-term arguments about public funding. The rise of the New Public Management in the 1990s, and its insistence on targets, outputs and audit to justify public funding has been augmented over the last decade by financial crisis and ensuing austerity in public spending. In this context, the return on public spending on culture had to be demonstrated through forms of cost-benefit analysis, and the cultural sector's value became entwined with other government agendas. Those in the arts felt obliged to make the case for public funding in terms different from that of the cultural experience itself, and the consequences of that experience, pointing instead to benefits to the economy, social inclusion, towns, health and education. In 2007 it provoked a simple artistic response by Grayson Perry in a ceramic work titled 'This pot will reduce crime by 29 per cent'.

We need to step back from the preoccupations of the last 20 years and take a broader approach, one that stretches the parameters of how we understand the value of arts and culture. How should we stretch them? Firstly, by starting with a quest for understanding rather than advocacy. So long as our discussions have as their primary goal that of persuading government to sustain or increase public funding, we shall direct them at the benefits thought to resonate with governments, such as economic impact, urban regeneration or educational attainment. Notwithstanding extensive research that questions the methodologies or the simplistic findings, the stories told are largely positive ones.

Let's seek understanding before advocacy. And that means stretching the range of arts and culture in which we're interested, so that it doesn't just focus on publicly-funded activities but also captures commercial provision which is, after all, the dominant way in which people experience culture, and the amateur and participatory which are equally overlooked. Virtually all film, literature, games and music is provided commercially and most of it, along with television, is experienced at home. Drama societies, choirs, crafting at home and the myriad of other amateur ways that people participate are barely on

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<sup>1</sup> This piece rests upon the AHRC Cultural Value Project of which I was Director, and its report published in 2016. For the full analysis and evidence see Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, *Understanding the value of arts and culture*, AHRC 2016  
<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

the radar when the case for the arts is made. Surely, we need to start by asking what value is derived from all arts and culture before asking why some of it should receive public subsidy?

We should also stretch the methods and the evidence by which we study these issues. An explicit hierarchy of evidence places randomised controlled trials and the experimental method at the top, with all other methods somehow deemed inferior. And, parallel to that, a belief that quantitative data carries an authority that qualitative cannot. There are different reasons for collecting and analysing evidence about the difference that engaging with arts and culture makes. The first is research, whose goal is to advance our understanding. The second is evaluation, carried out by cultural organisations to produce results for funders as part of accountability. The third is for cultural practitioners themselves as part of reflective practice, to know whether their objectives, artistic and other, are being achieved. All three matter and they obviously overlap, but until arts organisations come to see the real benefits for themselves of evaluation it will continue to be carried out with little enthusiasm and for reasons of accountability. And funders themselves might also benefit from the results of a more varied palette of methods.

The cultural world is about complex interactions in complex situations. It offers some of its most powerful evidence through the methods of the arts and humanities, for which rigorous case studies drawing on language, images, discourses, observation and history are fundamental. Case studies, carefully analysed and presented, create in-depth understandings that would have escaped a large-scale trawl for data. This, surely, is one of the great strengths of what the arts, humanities and qualitative social science bring to society's knowledge and understanding. I am in no way decrying the methods of science or of quantitative social science. There is no hierarchy and one should not be privileged over others. What matters are the approaches that are appropriate for the understanding that is being sought and the rigour with which they are used.

## “Cultural engagement works obliquely, forcing us to reimagine and disturbing our complacency”

Finally, our approach to understanding the value of arts and culture needs to be stretched by repositioning personal experience at the heart of enquiry into cultural value. If we prioritise impact on economy, cities and health then we neglect issues such as reflectiveness, empathy and imagination which have been shown to have their starting point in personal experience, whether individually or in social settings. Many studies have shown how engagement with different art forms is associated with just those qualities, which themselves can be seen to underpin a society of engaged citizens with a capacity for civic participation and responsibility and for fuelling a broader political imagination. Whether we look at art in prisons as a starting point for the journey towards desistance, the use of cultural engagement to develop empathy amongst professional carers, the association of reading good literature with developing Theory of Mind or the use of arts practice to help people think about climate change if used not didactically but as a stimulus for reflection, evidence accumulates of how central arts and culture are to our personal reflectiveness and wider citizenship. Cultural engagement works obliquely, forcing us to reimagine and disturbing our complacency.

Giving greater attention to the ways in which cultural experiences generate reflectiveness, uncertainty and imagination enables us to return to the benefits conventionally claimed for arts and culture. This reaffirms their contribution to the economy, towns and so on, but often reconfigures how we understand that contribution. When government and cultural organisations look at the contribution of arts to the economy, the emphasis is always on economic impact, on the gross value added (GVA) contribution of a sector or organisation to the local or national economy. There are real doubts about the robustness of the methods and conclusions of such studies, whereas there are key economic

themes more fundamentally linked to what arts and culture actually do: the way a broader cultural environment feeds into the creative industries; the way a population that is challenging and creative is associated with wider innovation; and the part played by cultural vibrancy in attracting talent and investment to a country or city. These all seem so much more potentially important for the economy, as well as being more rooted in what arts and culture are about.

The other most prominent claim made for arts and culture is its role in regenerating urban areas through new concert halls, art galleries and cultural complexes, or through the fostering of vibrant creative and cultural quarters. Yet, this regeneration of places through culture usually leads to gentrification and the rise of the experience economy, with an associated disruption and exclusion of existing residents, amongst them creative producers. Places may have been regenerated but communities are not. Research on US cities, however, suggests that more sustainable benefits for urban communities may come from small commercial, community and participatory arts – the presence of design studios, small music venues, community arts groups and so on, which may provide a more balanced path to regeneration. Arts and culture certainly bring benefits to cities and to urban life but, in the context of structured urban inequality, we need far more clarity about what those benefits are.

*“The contribution of arts and culture to health and wellbeing is another area where genuine benefit has been shown”*

The contribution of arts and culture to health and wellbeing is another area where genuine benefit has been shown, for example for people with health problems both physical and mental, for those living with a dementia, and for those whose process of ageing is improved by arts engagement, both long-term and short-term. Here too, it is personal experience that is often the starting-point for the benefit, whether through addressing mental health problems, securing engagement with community health programmes, aiding recovery from strokes through reducing clinical levels of depression, and much more.

Let me conclude with an area of particular interest to users of the Arts in Education Portal. Proponents of arts education in schools regularly claim that it improves attainment on standardised tests. The evidence of research from both the US and the UK is unconvincing on this, with any improvement marginal at best and often non-existent. On the other hand, research shows the benefit for factors that underpin learning such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, curiosity, problem-solving and, of course, the imagination and questioning that are fundamental to both wider learning and the needs of the future workforce. A good example is the evaluation of the [In-Harmony](#) music project in West Everton in Liverpool. So why don't we focus on that, rather than on improvement in attainment itself which is not confirmed by the many studies that have been carried out?

The answer, of course, is that we too frequently start with the very set of presuppositions that this piece has questioned: that the aim of examining the value of arts and culture is to persuade government, rather than initially to understand, that persuading government must follow rather than influence government agendas, and that simple quantitative data is the best form of evidence. As this piece has argued, we can do better than that. And when we've done better than that we may discover that the value of arts and culture is even greater than we once thought. But with value that is more nuanced and more interesting than we might have expected.

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