How We Value Arts and Culture

John Holden
Visiting Professor, City University, London

Abstract
Culture should no longer be thought of as a set of binary oppositions between elite/popular, refined/debased, individual/mass, high/low. Instead, we need to conceive of culture in three highly interrelated spheres: publicly funded, commercial, and home-made, each with its own definition, gatekeepers and critical discourse. The huge increase in home-made culture over the past thirty years, mainly but not entirely fuelled by the internet, has changed the possibilities for all three spheres. How culture is valued depends on the perspective and interests of different groups. Culture can be valued for its intrinsic, instrumental and institutional values. These values are complementary, not mutually exclusive, and each has its own language and way of being measured and narrated.

Biography
John Holden is an Associate at the U.K. think-tank Demos, where he was Head of Culture 2000-2008, and is a Visiting Professor at City University, London. He has Masters Degrees in Law (from Oxford) and in Design History (from Southampton). Publications include Democratic Culture, Capturing Cultural Value, Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, and Publicly Funded Culture and the Creative Industries. John is a member of the Strategy Board of the Clore Leadership Programme, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a member of the United Kingdom's Advisory Board of Arts and Humanities Research Council.
Introduction

Right across the world, the value of arts and culture has become a topic that’s become more pressing and that people want to hear about and talk about. It’s happening not simply because the arts need to find ways to describe their value in order to attract private and public funding – they have had to do that for a long time – but rather it is because there has been a fundamental change in the role of the arts and culture in society. This paper argues the need to rethink what we mean when we use the word culture, and that we need to have a more sophisticated approach to how we value the arts and culture; one that takes into account both the several types of value that are embedded in culture, and also the plural perspectives and interests of different groups in society.

The Past

There was a time, about forty years ago, when the value of the arts was pretty much taken for granted, and the subject did not cause too much anxiety. There was a reasonable political consensus that the arts were necessary, although they were marginal and not part of the real business of politics which was about the economy and foreign relations. But even back then in the twentieth century, when a spade was a spade and not a postmodern designer implement with the embedded potential to move earth, even then, we had a lot of trouble with this word culture. For a really compelling discussion of it, I would point you in the direction of the Cambridge Professor and cultural critic Raymond Williams, and his seminal book *Keywords*, first published in 1976.

Back then, culture was principally used in two senses, and many people still think of it in this way. On the one hand it meant ‘the arts’ – and the arts were an established canon of art forms (opera, ballet, poetry, literature, painting, sculpture, music and drama). These arts each contained their own hierarchies, and they were enjoyed by only a small part of society, a part of society that was also generally speaking well educated and rich. This social group defined its own social standing not just through money and education, but through the very act of appreciating the arts, and thus artistic consumption and social status became synonymous, causing the arts to be labelled as elitist.

But culture also had a different meaning than the arts, an anthropological meaning that extended to include everything that we did to express and understand ourselves, from cooking to football to dancing to watching television.

These two meanings of culture led to much confusion because they were essentially oppositional. Culture in the sense of the arts, and popular culture were mutually exclusive: one was high, the other low, one refined, the other debased. As an *individual*, you could aspire to high culture, but by definition, high culture could never be adopted by the mass – if it was adopted by everyone it would no longer be high culture.

These two, essentially contradictory notions of what culture meant led to all sorts of confusion, not least in politics, where approaches to culture cut across the left/right divide. You can find the arts attacked from the left for being a middle-class toffee-nosed pursuit, and attacked by the swashbuckling monetarists of the Reaganite and Thatcherite right for being an interference with the market. But you can also find the arts *defended* on the left for being one of those good things in life that everyone should have access to, and defended on the right as being a civilising and calming influence on society.
The New Reality

The old model of culture then is an either/or model, but we now have to understand a new reality. And that means we need to abandon these old ideas about culture as a set of oppositional binaries of high/low, refined/debased, and elitist/popular. The new reality demands a different way of looking at what culture means, and hence new ways of looking at the value of the arts and culture. It demands a shift in the political response to culture, and it requires changes in the way that cultural funders and cultural organizations go about their business.

In attempting to explain how I see this new reality, I believe that now, for practical purposes, there are three, deeply inter-related, spheres of culture: publicly funded culture, commercial culture and home-made culture. They are not separate or oppositional, they are completely intertwined, but they are different from each other in important ways.

In publicly funded culture, culture is not defined through theory but by practice: what gets funded becomes culture. This pragmatic approach has allowed an expansion of what culture in this sense means, so that it can now include things like circus, puppetry and street art as well as opera and ballet. Who makes these decisions about what to fund, and hence to define this type of culture, is therefore a matter of considerable public interest. For example, official responses to the cultural production of different community, social, ethnic and faith groups carries deep significance in terms of validating or accepting different cultures within the definition of what government sees as culture.

Commercial culture is equally pragmatically defined: if someone thinks there is a chance that a song or a show will sell, it gets produced; but the consumer is the ultimate arbiter of commercial culture. Success or failure is market driven, but access to the market — the elusive ‘big bucks record deal’ of Bruce Springsteen’s Rosalita, the stage debut, or the first novel — is controlled by a commercial mandarin class just as powerful as the bureaucrats of publicly funded culture. So in publicly funded culture and commercial culture there are gatekeepers who define the meaning of culture through their decisions.

Finally there is home-made culture, which extends from the historic objects and activities of folk art, through to the post-modern punk garage band and the YouTube upload. Here, the definition of what counts as culture is much broader; it is defined by an informal self-selecting peer group, and the barriers to entry are much lower. Knitting a sweater, inventing a new recipe, or writing a song and posting it on MySpace can be done without much difficulty — the decision about the quality of what is produced then lies in the hands of those who see, hear or taste the finished article.
In all three of these spheres individuals take on positions as producers and consumers, authors and readers, performers and audiences. Each of us is able to move through different roles with increasing fluidity, creating and updating our identities as we go. Artists travel freely between the funded, commercial and home-made sectors: for instance publicly funded orchestras make commercial recordings that get sold in record shops and exchanged on file sharing websites; street fashion inspires commercial fashion; and an indie band may get a record deal and then play at a publicly funded music venue.

The rapid and enormous expansion of the internet as a space for cultural communication and as an enabler of mass creativity has changed the possibilities for all three spheres of culture and all forms of cultural expression within them, presenting, across the board, a wealth of new opportunities (such as new audiences; new art forms; new distribution channels) but also a set of questions (what to do about intellectual property; investment in technology; and censorship for example).

Crucially, it has changed the debate about quality, from being one where the arts are naturally superior to popular culture, to one where quality is debated in niches, wherever it is found – is that a good TV programme? Was that a fine performance of Otello? How do these jazz players rate? And so on.

The internet is credited with driving the mass creativity that is found in home made culture, but in reality it is only one of the factors that explain it. Cheap musical instruments, the availability of digital camcorders instead of expensive film, new public investment in galleries and theatres, the education system – all these things have played a part. And as you can see from that list, the public, the commercial and the homemade have become inextricably linked and interconnected, riffing off each other and feeding off each other. We have an overall culture where these three spheres are intensely networked.

The significance of culture

Now, does all this matter? Is this switch – from a binary model of the arts and popular culture, to a triple model of funded, commercial and home-made culture - anything other than a nice theoretical exercise? Well, as you might guess, my answer to that is very definitely yes. It is profoundly important. Under the old model, politics could confine cultural policy to a very narrow field, and hence it had a very low value in the pecking-order of governments. In the old model, popular culture could be left to its own devices. You might want to put some limits on the content of books and films, and censor them, you might want to licence the playing of live music in pubs, but popular culture could more or less get on with it. As for the arts, so-called high culture, well there you might want more people to have access to it, because you think that’s a good thing; you might want to argue that as a matter of national status you should have a gallery and an opera house, but you would conceive of culture as something essentially peripheral, a leisure pursuit, an ornament to society, something to be afforded and indulged in once the hard business of the day was done.

Additionally, there are many, perhaps the majority of politicians, who still see the value of culture in exactly those terms. Indeed recently the United Kingdom’s shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, was questioned on television about the state of the economy. He said that government would have to cut spending, and the first place he said that should be done, the first thing that popped into his mind, was to cut the Department for Culture Media and Sport. Now if you have in your head a mental model of the arts and culture as being about recreation and leisure, that's entirely logical. But under the new model of culture that I have been talking about, his reaction – to cut culture as a knee-jerk response – is profoundly misplaced, because cultural policy is no longer confined to a small budget line and a narrow set of questions about art. On the
contrary, if we understand culture in the terms that I have outlined - as a networked activity, where funded, home-made and commercial culture are deeply interconnected – then we can start to appreciate the wider value of culture in and to society.

Let me give you three examples. The first relates to the economy. Creative work, brain work, added value from design and from cultural production are increasingly important features of successful economies. Indeed it is this part of the economy that has shown the most rapid growth over the last twenty years across the OECD. In London for example, the creative economy is now equal in size to the financial services industries and employs just as many people, something that twenty years ago would have been unthinkable. In fact, these are old figures, and given the turmoil in the financial industries, it is likely that the creative and cultural economy is now relatively even more significant.

This strikingly successful performance in things like film, fashion and music has created enormous prosperity and huge economic spin-offs. Significantly, the areas of the economy that appear to be weathering the credit crunch best are related to the cultural and creative industries. Try getting a ticket to the national theatre in London, try booking a good restaurant. Tourism is holding up. What’s happening? It seems that people are valuing experiences, and the things that give their lives meaning. They are letting go of the consumption of goods sooner, than letting go of their consumption and production of culture. So, even looked at and valued from just this economic perspective, culture has become much more important in its own right, and also across a much broader economic canvas.

The second example of somewhere where culture has become much more important is in foreign relations. Mass tourism, 24-hour news, cheap flights, internet news and citizen journalism have combined to shrink the world. We are all having much more interaction with and exposure to other people and other nations. We encounter difference at every turn, and what happens on the streets of New York one minute can lead to riots in Islamabad the next. In these circumstances we understand each other, and misunderstand each other as well, through the medium of culture. This is why, for example, the way that a museum deals with objects from another country; or the fact that Israeli and Palestinian musicians can play together; or the way that Ancient Persians are portrayed in a Hollywood Film, become significant way beyond questions of aesthetics or artistic quality.

The third example of the increasing importance of culture is in relation to identity, where we now define ourselves not so much by our jobs – because those come and go – and not so much by our geography – because we commute and move around – but by our cultural consumption and production. I am who I am, and you are who you are, because of what we watch, read, listen to, write and play.

In all these three examples – the economy, foreign relations and identity formation, culture has moved from being something at the sidelines to something at the centre. That profoundly changes how we should value culture, and how we should judge the significance of culture. It also makes cultural policy a lot more complicated. For instance, whereas giving a thirteen year old schoolchild the opportunity to visit a museum might once have been a nice-to-have experience, that brought a civilizing influence to bear on a young mind, now a visit to a museum is an essential part of plugging that young person into the network of tripartite culture. And that will affect that young person’s job prospects, their ability to operate in a globalised world, and their sense of their individual and communal identity.
Just as cultural policy is now interconnected with wider issues, so too do those wider issues affect what happens in culture. For instance we need to be thinking about how visa policies affect visiting artists and hence international relations, and how planning policies act to create or destroy the growth of creative industries. Above all, we need to think about how education policy can release the creative talents of everyone, and not just those destined for careers in the arts.

Cultural policy interventions then, are becoming much more complicated, because they need to happen in all sorts of places right across this mix of funded, commercial and home-made culture, and indeed beyond. It is essential that we understand how culture works, what it means, and in particular what it means to different people, before we think about how culture is valued. Because the value of culture, and how you describe that value and measure it, differs, depending on who you are.

The triangle of value

My theory below suggests a simple diagram to try to articulate the different values that culture can have to different groups in society. Put briefly, the argument is this: that you can look at the value of culture in three ways, using different sorts of language in each case. These three viewpoints are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary they are complementary, but depending on who you are, they are more, or less, important. At the top of the triangle is intrinsic value. Intrinsic means integral to, or an essential part of. So this implies that museums, dance, theatre and so on, have a value unique to themselves. In particular I argue that intrinsic value establishes the arts as a public good in their own right and that we should value dance because it is dance and poetry because it is poetry, and not only for other reasons, such as their economic and social impact. But intrinsic value is also used to describe the way that art forms have individual, subjective effects on each of us. Intrinsic value is what people are talking about when they say ‘I love to dance’ or that ‘painting is rubbish’ or ‘I need to write poems to express myself’.

Now, intrinsic value is notoriously difficult to describe, let alone measure, and the rational econometrics of government simply can't cope with it, because this aspect of culture deals in abstract concepts like fun, beauty and the sublime. It affects our emotions individually and differently, and it involves making judgments about quality. It really doesn't fit with the hard-headed machismo that is supposed to dominate in business, politics, sport and the media. These days, if you can't count it, it doesn't count, and how do you put a number on something such as Olafur Eliasson’s Weather Project at Tate Modern?

But to me, or to you, as an individual, it is our subjective response to culture that really matters. When I sit in a darkened auditorium listening to, say, Benjamin Britten, my feelings are awakened and I think ‘this is lovely, it’s amazing, it’s astonishing.’ I don’t sit there thinking, ‘I’m so glad this performance is driving business prosperity and helping to meet tourism targets.’

So if we are talking about the value of culture to individuals, we need to talk about quality, excellence, physical and intellectual access, and audience demographics. We need to take qualitative factors into account – to argue about what is good and bad art, what excellence consists of, and how audience experiences can be improved. It is important to realise that when we are talking about intrinsic value, we are using value as an active verb. I value something, you value something, they value something. That process of valuation is subjective. You can tell me that a painting is good and try to explain why you think it is. You can give me the statistics that show that dancing will benefit me in all sorts of ways from making me healthier to making me happier. But only I can value the painting, or the dance. This, I think is a crucial point because when we
turn to the second type of value, *instrumental* value, we are dealing with an objective concept, so here we have to think about value differently.

Instrumental value is used to describe instances where culture is used as a tool or instrument to accomplish some other aim - such as economic regeneration, or improved exam results, or better patient recovery times. These are the knock-on effects of culture, looking to achieve things that could be achieved in other ways as well. This type of value has been of tremendous interest to politicians and funders over the last thirty years or so, and at some points it has become so overwhelmingly important, that the other values of culture have been forgotten.

I believe there is a perfectly understandable reason why that has been the case. From my point of view as an individual, what matters to me is my individual experience of culture, whether I like the play, or whether I enjoy the music. But my individual pleasure really isn't something that is of interest to politicians. They are much more concerned about whether cultural experiences will have some kind of measurable effect on masses of people. The American writer Philip Roth puts it in these terms. He says that "Politics is the great generaliser and literature the great particulariser, and not only are they in an inverse relationship to each other they are in an antagonistic relationship. How can you be an artist and renounce the nuance?" he asks. "But how can you be a politician and allow the nuance?" (Roth 1998). Stravinsky was making a similar point when he wrote "it is the individual that matters, never the mass. The "mass," in relationship to art, is a quantitative term which has never once entered into my consideration" (Stravinsky 1946). And from a political perspective, Lenin put it another way when he said that he hated listening to Beethoven because it made him want to caress people's heads, when he should be banging them together (qted. in Bottomore ed. 1991).

The point here is that politics wants to achieve mass social outcomes, and so it values culture in terms of what culture can do to achieve those outcomes, whether that be better recovery times in hospitals, or reducing the rate of recidivism among prisoners, or integrating refugees into society. All of which are perfectly worthy and sensible aims – of course. Politics will always want to look at culture in this way – it makes perfect sense – and that means that politics will always have a highly ambivalent relationship with culture pulled in two directions at the same time. On the one hand, politicians want to keep their distance from culture for lots of reasons – because the arts can be oppositional and troublesome, because in free societies they don’t want art to reflect state ideologies, and because they don’t want to have to defend artistic experimentation to a skeptical press. On the other hand, they want to interfere in the arts, to try to make sure that the arts are achieving their wider goals for society, and to make sure that public funding is properly accountable.

Now if we want to *count* instrumental value - the contribution that culture makes to specific economic and social policy goals, then we have a number of hard and soft tools at our disposal. Here we are looking to capture objective benefit – did children's behaviour improve? Did reoffending decrease? Did businesses move into an area when we built an art gallery? The counting can take place at the level of an individual project, or in relation to a specific arts organization, or at some aggregated level – a town, a region, an art form or so on. Now, there are many pitfalls and practical difficulties inherent in this, especially when we try to build a long-term, generalized picture, but there are numerous studies and research papers that witness the instrumental value of culture across a whole range of areas.

The fundamental things we should be looking for in judging the value of these exercises is their objectivity, because research and advocacy sometimes get confused, and their
transferability, which is also often problematic because the circumstances and context of one arts project sometimes don’t translate into different circumstances.

In returning to the triangle, the third type of value is called institutional value. This is all about the way that cultural organisations act. They are part of the public realm and how they do things creates value as much as what they do. In their interactions with the public, cultural organisations are in a position to increase - or indeed decrease - such things as our trust in each other, our idea of whether we live in a fair and equitable society, our mutual conviviality and civility, and a whole host of other public goods. So the way in which our institutions go about their business is important. Things like opening hours, meeting and greeting, providing opportunities to grow and to learn are not simply about customer care as they would be in the commercial world. They are much more important than that, they can act to strengthen our sense of a collective society and our attachment to our locality and community. After all, culture is the major place where citizens interact voluntarily with the public realm: you have to send your children to school; you have to go to court if you get a summons; but you go to a theatre, a museum or a library because you want to go. This seems to me to be something interesting, and something that politics should take much more account of. Institutional value should therefore be counted as part of the contribution of culture to producing a democratic and well-functioning society.

The question is how to count institutional value? In contrast to instrumental value, where you are trying to find out the objective, measurable benefits of culture, here, what you want to know is the value that people collectively place on culture. And so you must ask them. One way is by using economic contingent valuation techniques; another is through the type of measurements of wellbeing that are advocated by the New Economics Foundation (NEF). Indeed, I would suggest looking at their website as useful place to learn about what NEF calls Social Return on Investment, or SROI, which is trying to aggregate the soft and hard, quantitative and qualitative factors that accounting for culture demands.

To sum up our value triangle, you can see these three ways in which culture can be valued: intrinsically, instrumentally, and institutionally. I want to stress that these are not three distinct categories where we put different experiences or art forms. It’s not that contemporary dance is all about intrinsic values and theatre all about institutional values. More to the point is that all three values are viewpoints or perspectives of equal validity, and they should be considered together. For example, if a schoolchild is taken on a school visit to a museum, she may well have a moving emotional experience that can be talked about using the language of ‘intrinsic’ value; she may be taught about an artist, and reproduce her learning in the exam room, and that becomes a measurable ‘instrumental’ benefit. And she may get a sense of civic pride from this local museum,
feel part of her community, and see the museum as a public place that she is entitled to share with others - and that would be an example of ‘institutional’ value.

Seeing all three values as essential aspects of culture, or as equal viewpoints, avoids the predominance of any one of them. If too much emphasis is placed on ‘intrinsic’ value, art ends up as precious, captured by an elite, and you start hearing museum directors saying there are too many people in museums, and experts complaining about ‘dumbing down’. When too much emphasis is placed on ‘instrumental’ value, the artists and professionals are alienated and find themselves being used as a means to an end to correct social deficits. When too much emphasis is placed on ‘institutional’ value you can lose sight of the art. But put all three together and you have a robust mixed economy of value, a stable three-legged stool to validate culture. And that mirrors the financial economy of state, public, corporate and private funding that underpins the arts and culture, where again, reliance on any one tends to lead to trouble.

Conclusion

Understanding the full value of culture then, is a complicated business, though experiencing it and seeing it in action can be very direct, powerful and simple. What you value, and the language and metrics that you use to describe that value, depends on who you are. Motivation seems to me to be crucial: an individual will want to judge and evaluate their own experiences. Someone running an arts organization, will want to know what contribution they are making to the development and health of their art form. They will be keen to demonstrate to their funders how they have fulfilled the funder’s demands, be that at the level of individual projects the organization itself. They will also want to have some way of assessing their audience satisfaction, and whether they are meeting the needs of those they are serving and hoping to serve.

For funders and politicians, well they will want to assess the contribution of individual organizations, and of the aggregate cultural infrastructure, to the achievement of a broad set of political priorities; partly because they have to make judgments about the relative worth of culture compared to other calls on their available funds, and partly because they want to get re-elected.

But we need a model of cultural value that can not only accommodate all these perspectives, but can help people to understand the perspectives of others. I believe that these concepts of intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value at least make a start.
Bibliography


Stravinsky, Igor (1946) 'Film Music' in *The Musical Digest*

Williams, Raymond (1976) *Keywords*, Glasgow, Fontana Press

New Economics Foundation accessed at: http://www.neweconomics.org/