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Duncan Robert McKay  
*Edith Cowan University*

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### Trading in Freedoms: Creating Value and Seeking Coalition in Western Australian Arts and Culture

Duncan Robert McKay

#### Abstract

#### Introduction

As a visual artist it seems to me that the ideal relationship between government and cultural producers is a coalitional one; an "alliance for combined action of distinct parties, persons or states without permanent incorporation into one body" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The word "coalition", however, is entirely absent from the document that forms the basis of the analysis of this paper, *Creating Value: An Arts and Culture Sector Policy Framework 2010-2014*, from the Government of Western Australia's Department of Culture and the Arts. Released in March 2010, *Creating Value* has been introduced by the DCA's Deputy Director General Jacqui Allen as the "first arts policy in Australia to adopt a public value approach" (DCA, *New Policy Framework*) whereby "the Department of Culture and the Arts is charged with delivering public value to the Western Australian community through our partnership with the culture and arts sector." As indicated in Allen's press release, this document achieves its aim of providing "clarity in [the DCA's] relationships with the culture and arts sector". As an artist, cultural worker, or someone generally interested in the cultural wellbeing of Australian communities it would seem timely to consider just how this new and influential policy framework envisages the specific working relationships that make up the "partnerships across the culture and arts sector, government, the public and private sector" (DCA, *Creating Value* 2).

In this brief paper it is my intention to interrogate the idea of "coalition" in relation to the evidence provided in the DCA's Policy Framework, *Creating Value*, in order to examine the extent to which this State's involvement in culture and arts may indeed be considered coalitional. In approaching the notion of the coalitional I take the position that there are two key elements to this idea, the first being the notion of an "alliance for combined action" and the second being that the distinct parties involved are not incorporated into one body. What is difficult, at this intersection between the strategic advances of governance and the more organic development of culture, is to distinguish between levels at which the interests of both parties in a coalition or partnership are served by the alliance. As I will argue later in this paper, there is an important distinction to be made between working under temporary contract to specifications (in which one party's design is realised through a primarily economic exchange with those providing the requisite goods and services) and the kind of negotiated relationship between means and ends that is required to support the genuine development of culture. The question is whether the artist (or other cultural producer), receiving funding to produce cultural work according to "public value" criteria, is able to develop culture or merely able to reproduce an understanding of culture given by the funding brief and assessment panel? It seems to me that significant cultural development is only possible where the public value of the outcomes of cultural production is subject to continuous negotiation and debate – surely it is in the coalitional outcomes (the alliance of distinct parties for combined action) of such discussion that a meaningful identification with culture occurs?

In the following discussion around *Creating Value* my approach is to focus upon some aspects of the policy framework that provide particular evidence of the kind of "combined action" of government and the culture and arts sector that the DCA is proposing in this document. When seen against a more cultural understanding of the "action" of making art and the dynamic processes of producing and identifying with culture, it becomes clear why it may be considered that the DCA and many Western Australian cultural producers may not be engaged in the same project at all, let alone be in effective partnership or coalition.

#### "Public Value" and the Specifications of Cultural Production

Eliseo Vivas observes that in the process of creatively applying symbolic order and understanding to the physical world, humanity acquires culture and an ability to better exploit the world. He also notes that in this process "of constituting the world, [human-kind's] merely physiological needs are complicated by new needs" (129); new systems of cultural values that assume no less importance in human activity than our more basic bodily needs. Vivas pertinently states, however, that more often than not in human society within a complex and existing symbolic order these cultural needs simply become an aspect of our practical functioning (an extension of survival), and we tend to inhibit our capacity to constitute the world through creative and symbolic endeavours. This depiction of cultural production as an activity that is constitutive of the world is particularly significant in relation to the DCA's *Creating Value*. Despite noting that "it is through creative people that we better understand our world" (DCA, *Creating Value* 8), which echoes with Vivas's contention that "the poet is needed to give the practical man his stage" (Vivas 129) the policy framework seems rather to exemplify the inhibiting of culturally constitutive activities (production) in favour of "practical functioning" (reproduction).

What can be observed particularly well in the DCA's policy framework is how effectively ideas associated with creative and cultural production have been co-opted to the cause of "practical functioning". Looking for instance at the notion of "creativity" within *Creating Value* we discover that "creativity is the driving force of the arts and culture sector" (DCA, *Creating Value* 5) and that "creativity" is one of the "priority public value principles" for the policy framework, along with "engagement". Reading more closely one understands that creativity is seen as producing the "distinctive" and the "unique", a brand that is recognised as Western Australian and which, through such "recognition" and "significance" and through its "enriching" and "transforming" capacities (7), is seen to "add to a sense of place and belonging" (11) for the WA community. This in turn makes WA a "better place to live, work and visit" and ultimately delivers "economic and social outcomes that encourage and support growth" (2). The DCA's strategies appear to have little to do with a dynamic conception of culture in which new worlds and systems of values may be constituted, but is focussed upon the optimisation and rationalisation of economic outcomes under the guise of "public value".

My contention is that, as difficult as the notion may be to entertain, a department of culture and the arts ought to understand that creative and cultural production are part of a dynamic system that continually engages in a process of tentatively constituting the world. The arts and culture sector undeniably has an important role to play in the formation of and identification with a national cultural identity, which can manifest in international prestige, tourist dollars and other forms of economic growth (Abbing 246; Chaney 166-67). Western Australian culture is not, however, as the DCA seems to perceive, a static and monumental edifice that acts as a singular landmark for Western Australia in local, national and international contexts. The DCA's arts and culture policy framework talks of its strategies "reflecting the DCA's vision, values and strategic objectives" (DCA, *Creating Value* 13) and in a number of places suggests that it will "respond to changing needs" (2, 5, 8). Surely an approach that was interested in the specific value that creative and cultural production has to offer to the community would recognise that it is not in a singular vision but in the world creatively renegotiated and reconstituted by different people and groups of people that such a value and identification is to be found? Furthermore, if Vivas is right, then the support and promotion of culture ought to be as much about cultural needs not yet anticipated, for cultural products whose significance is not currently recognised, as it is about being responsive and catering to the demands of those whom the DCA identifies as the present consumers and stake-holders in WA arts and culture. What is missing from the partnership, as conceived by the DCA between itself and the culture and arts sector, is an adequate mechanism by which "public value" is recognised as a system of constantly changing values in which the culture and arts sector play an important role in developing, extending and negotiating *through* their creative and cultural production.

As Jürgen Habermas suggests, to approach culture strategically in terms of outcomes and deployment is to compromise the internal development that actually provides arts and cultural work with its meaning and significance (Habermas 71). Culture becomes not a distinctive composite of differing and changing world views linked by the "living" process of their "nature-like" coexistence and development, but a monolithic identity or brand with representative products (no matter how diverse those products may be). This policy framework document would suggest not a coalitional "alliance for combined action" but more accurately a process of putting the various strategic goals and cultural aspirations (with "public value" specifications) of the DCA up for tender in much the same way that another Government department might seek tenders for the construction of a bridge or building. It is perhaps telling that *Creating Value* is described as a "road map to help the Department achieve its vision" (DCA, *Creating Value* 2).

#### "Engagement" and the Use Value of Freedom

*Creating Value* states that "there is a complex relationship between creativity and engagement, which are the principles driving the delivery of public value outcomes" (DCA, *Creating Value* 5). The policy framework goes on to suggest that the conception of "engagement" that informs the document is geared towards notions of participation, access and interaction in response to the demands of society for "more than passive enjoyment of cultural experiences" (5). Ultimately, as the "Framework Measurements" (15) in *Creating Value* suggest, the public values associated with engagement are about quantifying access and participation in arts and culture, and polling audiences and the public regarding "their satisfaction with their level of engagement" (15). I have been arguing that the public value of creative and cultural production is the result of engagement, but I do not think that it follows that the cultural value of such engagement can be assumed to be the correlative of high attendance numbers or measures that indicate a high level of consumer satisfaction. Nor can one assume that the "impact" or "reach" of a cultural or creative experience can be assessed adequately while the box office is open and the door counter is operational, let alone prior to a project being granted funding.

Some of the genuine complexity in the relationship between creativity and engagement and its bearing upon public value can be seen in George Steiner's writing on the nature of "creation". Steiner suggests on the one hand that the act of creation is "irresponsible" (Steiner 43); that the work of artists occurs at one remove from world of material consequence. On the other hand Steiner notes that external resistance to artistic production has the effect of reinforcing the necessity and significance of artists' work, freeing them from "justifying [art's] vital functions and dignifying its motivations" (189). In this understanding of the value of creativity, it seems to me, there is a delicate balance to be struck between "freedom" and "consequence" in artistic and cultural production. The cultural producer is most able to

constitute the world in new or innovative ways when he/she is able to work irresponsibly, however, such culturally constitutive actions are most significant and valuable when access to a freedom sought is denied or challenged and the motivations and mores of our cultural institutions are brought under question.

Herbert Marcuse wrote in *One Dimensional Man* that the high culture of the past, "free from socially necessary labour," was "the appearance of the realm of freedom: the refusal to behave" (Marcuse 71) but he also suggests that in advanced technological societies such as our own, the "good life" of administered society "reduces the use-value of freedom" (49). Marcuse claims that the achievements of rational society have transcended those of the "culture heroes and half-gods" (56) and, given that rational society appears to be steadily advancing towards the best of all possible worlds (or at least the best of the existing alternatives), the inclination to "hope" and to look beyond our own world and for other means of advance has been lost. Here again there is a sense in which the creative activities of culturally constituting the world have lost significant ground to the administrative concerns of "practical functioning". What is interesting, however, is that it is possible to see the residual traces of the importance of the concept of "freedom", however illusory, to the notion of the public value of creative and cultural production, even in *Creating Value*.

In *Creating Value*, the valuable conception of "freedom" occurs obliquely in the insistence that the policy framework supports and encourages artistic risk taking (DCA, *Creating Value* 5, 8). A closer examination of *Creating Value* and the DCA's *Arts Grants Handbook 2010* reveals that "artistic risk" (DCA, *Arts Grants* 17) is understood as a strength in a proposal that is indicative of artistic merit and quality, and quality, understood in the public value terms of the policy framework, is measured by "the distinctive, innovative and significant elements of the creative experience" (DCA, *Creating Value* 15). The value of risk-taking in the pursuit of innovation is a recurring theme of some of the literature concerning the creative industries over the past decade. Concepts such as the "no-collar workplace" (Florida) and the "arts/science lab" (Edwards) have the appearance of promoting a relatively unfettered space apart in which creativity is unhindered by practical obstacles and institutional barriers. However, the concept becomes problematic as soon as there is an expectation that such a space apart will be "productive" in an economic or any other existing sense. Steiner's notion of "irresponsible" creation, importantly suggests a creativity that defines its own productivity, in which the consequences of artistic or cultural production are contained within the context of the creative space apart.

The greatest risk in a creative project is at the point of engagement, where it is met by consequence, where the public value of the work becomes available for negotiation and debate. The process required in applying for a DCA grant is actually a process of modelling, anticipating and containing the risks associated with artistic or cultural production. The conspicuous absence of genuine consequence in this schema suggests that the DCA seeks to manage the "engagement" to produce its own series of desired outcomes. Yet active control of the relationship between funding organisation and the funded artists may inhibit the production of arts and culture. What is required instead is a coalition of interests and aspirations that has the potential to produce (rather than merely reproduce) culture. In such a circumstance the coalitional relationship will be one where meaning, significance and identification are established in a negotiation between diverse entities and interests. In a realm of cultural values the capacity for these "combined actions" to be meaningful and significant (to possess genuine public value) seems to be compromised by the dominance of the authoritative vision of the Department.

## Conclusion

The coalitional premise that underpins this paper is predicated on the notion that the "combined action" that is the motivation for the partnership between the Department of Culture and the Arts and the culture and arts sector is to enrich the Western Australian community through "unique and transforming culture and arts experiences" (DCA, *Creating Value* 1), as stated in the DCA's strategic charter. What my brief engagement with the DCA's 2010 policy framework, *Creating Value*, suggests, however, is that the DCA's vision is not conceived in terms of the coalitional development of culture, in which culture is acknowledged as a collective work in progress, but rather as a strategic project with instrumental aims. The concept of "public value" that is at the core of *Creating Value* is not ultimately the product of, or productive of, an ongoing discourse or debate into which cultural producers contribute their various creative outputs. Instead it is presented as a static set of assessment criteria designed to channel creativity into economic growth and to contain the risks associated with cultural production. The ideal of the "coalitional" should inform the concept of public value, as the ongoing work of "combined action" in which creative and cultural producers (through their production), Government (through venues and funding) and the public (through attendance and participation) are engaged in a dialogue whose outcomes provide an indication of public value in a dynamic cultural sphere.

George Walden writes:

Democratic peoples must be more creative than non-democratic ones, if only because the idea that the opposite might be the case is intolerable. Whatever the merits of the contention that repressive or authoritarian regimes have produced the finest literature or most brilliant artistic movements, it would be a bold politician who took the next logical step in the argument... Like health care or education, art is a public good, a commodity whose provision must be officially guaranteed and overseen. (Walden qtd. in Timms 68)

Artistic and cultural freedom, according to this observation, is not actually a freedom at all, but rather a political imperative for welfare states such as ours, which in turn makes the support for creative and cultural production a "socially necessary labour", that performs instrumental and political functions (Timms 68; Abbing 239) that are at least as important as the cultural wellbeing that seems to be promoted. In contrast Pierre Bourdieu suggests that ultimately the state is the "official guarantor" of "everything that pertains to the universal – that is, to the general interest" (Bourdieu & Haacke 72). If culture is to maintain a critical perspective, he argues, "we should expect (and even demand) from the state the instruments of freedom from economic and political powers – that is from the state itself" (71).

Somewhere between "socially necessary labour" and "critical distance", Charles Esche posits the idea of an "engaged autonomy" for creative and cultural projects operating unavoidably within the economic hegemony of capitalism, whereby they work in "tolerated cultural enclosure called 'art', able to act according to different rules," but "still totally inside the system" (Esche 11). Or perhaps, as Tony Moore suggests:

A new cultural renaissance will not be built by bureaucrats subsidising elitism or "picking winners"... but by entrepreneurs and public institutions bold enough to harness the diverse creative energy in the community from suburban garages to inner city garrets. (Moore 122)

Ultimately the issue of state interests, support and patronage for the arts is the same balancing act between creativity and engagement, or freedom and consequence, that I introduced referencing Steiner earlier in the paper. The point is, however, that creative irresponsibility brought into an effective engagement ought to lead to a negotiation that allows for the dynamic processes of culture to develop around a debate on public value. Creative and cultural producers should be amongst the coalitional co-creators of contemporary Western Australian culture rather than the contractors brought in to make the DCA's vision of culture a reality.

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