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

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"Engagement" and the Use Value of Freedom

Introduction

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 engage 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 "Framework Measurements" (15) in participation, access and interaction in response to the demands of society for "more than passive enjoyment of cultural experiences" (5). Ultimately, as the Government department might seek tenders for the construction of a bridge or building. It is perhaps telling that provides arts and cultural work with its meaning and significance (Habermas 71). Culture becomes not a distinctive composite of differing and changing world views 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 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? The DCA's vision, values and strategic objectives" (DCA, 2010). 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 8) 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? Further, 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 participation, 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, expressing and negotiating those values through their creative and cultural production.

As Jürgen Habermas suggests, to approach culture strategically in terms of outcomes and identify 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. Vivianly 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 pertinent states, however, that making the work of society within a 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 (?), 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 not merely a side-show to the main event, but an integral part of a continuous and ongoing world. The policy framework should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a process of learning and development that is continually evolving. In this context we should not be surprised 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 participation, 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, expressing and negotiating those values through their creative and cultural production.

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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 be held” (Marcuse 71) but he also suggests that in advanced technological societies such as our own, the “good life” of administered society “reduces the high cultures to a ‘cultural veneer’” (Marcuse 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 existence 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 through “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 some 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 Cultural Affairs 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 funding 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 repression 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 & Hakke 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 custodians of the fine Western Australian culture rather than the contractors brought into to make the DCA’s vision of culture a reality.

References


