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The discussion on public value of culture is here to stay

Revaluing culture is the name of a publication last week by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (www.wrr.nl) in the Netherlands. It was received well within the cultural sector because it seemed to stress the artistic value of culture and playing down the importance of proving the social and economic value of culture.

Many art VIP's sighed in relief: artistic value comes first again and we do not have to worry anymore about the social and economic value. How wrong they will be. The discussion about the public value of culture and how to prove it will not go away. It has just begun!

Exemplary was the reaction of the Minister of Culture, Ms Bussemaker on receiving the report: "We must be careful not to instrumentalize art. But the culture sector, in turn, should further strengthen the relationship with the outside world. That's a warning from my side."

UK experiences

Where does this discussion about cultural value come from? In the UK it has been going on for 20 years where it originated in the principles of New Public Management (NPM). It stresses the efficiency and effectiveness of public investments and results in auditing methods looking at measuring impact of all public policies. So in the cultural sector they went looking for cost-benefit analysis, first in economical impact studies and then in social impact studies.

They never reached consensus on the meaning of cultural value of culture and thus failed to impress the auditing services of the Uk government.

At the moment cultural value seems to refer to four meanings:

Cultural value as a characteristic of cultural activities and objects
Cultural value as a unit of measurement
Cultural value as a description of the interaction between people and communities with cultural objects and activities

Cultural value as a legitimation of public support
(p.131, Cultuur Herwaarderen, WRR, 2015)

Social-democrats, liberals and conservatives

The discussion on cultural value will stay. Why? Because it fits roughly within three main political lines of reasoning:

The social democrats always stress the value of culture for children and for those who score on the low end of income and social status.
The liberals look at public subsidies as investments in culture and want to know what the return on investment is
The conservatives value culture most as cultural heritage and want to attract large numbers of people to that heritage. So audience reach and efficiency are important to them.
And usually at least one of these three will be in political power. So all will look at the public value of culture in the future, although maybe in different directions and stressing only one or two of the four meanings of the concept of public value.

The artistic value is necessary for any other value and precedes it. Yes, we know that is the starting point of any discussion on public values of art and culture. But the discussion on the public value will not go away anymore.

Lessons to be learned?

What can we learn from the UK experience?

We have to be much more precise about the meaning of the concept of cultural value. The standard division in economical, social and individual impacts of culture within Dutch policy documents is not enough.
Research into the value of culture has to be intensified. Most impact studies are not sound enough. Yet. We just started. And we might need other kinds of qualitative research too. So let us acknowledge we need at least another 10 years or more. This is an important message for those who are developing *research agendas* at the moment.
In the UK they have not seen a public discussion on the values of culture, only a

debate between experts, scientists and policy makers. But every poll within the population shows that culture is an easy target for budget cuts. A *public discussion* on the value of art is hard to develop. But the cultural sector has to try. To make the connection with the outside world, as the Minister of Culture says.
In the Netherlands there are several bodies involved in this challenge: the Council for Culture, The Ministry itself and the 2-year program The Art of Impact.

I am curious to see their reaction and from the rest of the cultural sector.

And what about your country? Let me know….

Update

NESTA in the UK just launched today a social impact fund for the arts of 7 million pounds. The fund is a cooperation between charitable foundations and a bank. It works through repayable loans. The fund aims to find out if and how such a social impact fund for the arts could work.

Quite different from the Dutch Art of Impact program that subsidises art projects that aim at a social impact.

Which approach will work best?