

Which Way to Nirvana? Unravelling the Difference in Discourse about Art, Culture and the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

Over the past decade or so understandings of arts, culture and their connection with industry have shifted. It could be argued that there are several sides to the debate. There are those who promote a broad definition of culture, are anti-concepts of high art and usually embrace the cultural industry/creative industry nexus. Then there are writers who argue for an economic framework for the arts embracing the industry and business constructs. Finally there are writers (usually with an arts background) who dispute the orthodoxy of these two positions and argue against the absorption of the arts into the general pool of culture, and resist the categorising of the arts into industry constructs. In this paper I explore various positions within this debate and try to discover if the truth lies somewhere in between. I relate this discussion in particular to government involvement in the arts, comparing changes in language and approach occurring as a result of the broader changes in discourse.

Keywords

Art, culture, industry, business and government

Introduction

In *Culture in Australia* (Bennett & Carter 2001) it is argued that since the 1980s there have been significant shifts 'not only in the understanding of what we mean by culture but also in the actual structures and 'situation' of culture in Australia'. In particular, the authors emphasise important changes to 'the contexts within which culture is produced, circulated and received'. (Bennett & Carter 2001:1-6). They note:

"In short, policy makers, producers, practitioners and analysts have become accustomed to understanding culture in terms of the cultural industries. This once negative term, introduced to indicate the mass produced and therefore inferior nature of 'mass culture', is now used positively as a way of acknowledging that culture is not simply a matter of individual creation and private consumption but the product of complex institutions, sophisticated technologies and specific economic relations" (Bennet & Carter 2001:2)

There is an assumption within this statement that the normalising of the arts sector into an 'industry' by policy makers, has made everyone recognise that artistic undertakings

are an industry and that acceptance of this norm should be mandatory. Yet there are many commentators who resist this 'normalising' arguing that that the industry construct is a highly problematic if not destructive approach, for arts practitioners. (Bereson 1999, Horne 1988, Pick & Anderton 1999, Tusa 1999). For instance Jeffcutt, Anderton and Pick note that "...economic and artistic success does not necessarily coincide" (Jeffcutt et al 2000:137). On the other hand those who embrace the industry paradigm see the arts as one aspect of a post-modern context, which has moved on from simple notions of artistic excellence and access to broader understandings of cultural diversity and enfranchisement (Bennet & Carter 2001, Cunningham 2002, Roodhouse 2001, Smiers 2003).

A positive side of the concept of the industry construct is that the arts are seen as part of an industrial sector which generates income and jobs, rather than a sector that is draining of the public purse with no real 'measurable' benefits. This is illustrated by quotes from Australian government documents such as:

"...Culture employs. Around 336,000 Australians are employed in culture-related industries"(Creative Nation 1994: 7).

or

"The arts make a vital contribution to our economy, stimulating creativity and attracting tourists. We are all enriched by our engagement with a creative community."(Bracks in Creative Capacity 2003)

Instead of arguments around the arts being essential for a civilised society, governments in the past decade have focussed most of their reasoning behind supporting the arts, within an economic and industry construct (*Creative Nation, Creative State, Creative Capacity*). Certainly the 'arts as industry construct' makes good sense for government investment as the arts are seen as employment multipliers (Bennet and Carter 2001). The embracing of the industry paradigm by those within and outside of the sector, does create contradictions however. If the arts are an industry why do they need government subsidy?(Brook 1995) Shouldn't they be self-supporting? Throsby notes that:

"...An industry development strategy, say, which emphasized only the creation of economic value by the cultural industries, would be telling only half the story" (Throsby 2001:163).

An emphasis therefore on only the economic benefits of the arts skewers the discourse and arguably ignores the fundamental essence of what the arts are about.

Disappearing the term 'art' from the discourse has difficulties also (Tusa 1999). What does 'art' mean when included in the generic term of 'culture'? Are governments supporting arts practise or supporting cultural practise? Is there a difference? Goodall, while debating the positioning of cultural studies and the rejection of high art in the cultural studies construct, notes that:

"It is a matter of common observation that different texts or practices fill different roles in culture at different times, that the popular work of one period becomes the high art of another, and vice versa. For this reason it seems important that the categorisation of culture should not be reified."(Goodall 1995:171)

It is also recognised that there are important reasons for broadening the definition and understanding of culture as noted by Smiers:

"People in the West have now come to know that there are many cultures, in a broad anthropological sense, within which completely different forms of arts play many distinct roles" (Smiers 2003:11)

So the new discourse produces a conundrum. While it is important that definitions of art are broader than high art, and there is an acknowledgement of cultural diversity, does the exclusion of 'art' as a concept become problematic and self-defeating? If government arguments for the support for the arts are wholly industry/economically constructed, what happens to arts practise that falls outside of this construct? Arts practise for instance that is 'experimental', 'community based' or 'art for art's sake'. Conversely why should these forms of arts practise receive government support when they do not have the capacity to earn a large amount of income and do not fall within an industry construct?

Tusa believes that there has been a diminishing in the understanding of what 'art' means and why it matters to society. He says:

"The arts matter because they embrace, express and define the soul of a civilisation. A nation without arts would be a nation that had stopped talking to itself, stopped dreaming, and had lost interest in the past and lacked curiosity about the future" (Tusa 1999).

Tusa (1999), Greenhalgh (1998), McGuigan (1998) and others in the UK, have critiqued New Labor's approach to the arts sector as a 'dumbing down', perhaps in their view, getting closer on the spectrum to rewarding 'creativity' and 'populism' rather than 'art'. A former Chair of the Australia Council, Donald Horne, says:

"...the practice and appreciation of what we think of as the arts is an essential part of being human; it is one of the principal ways in which we distinguish ourselves from other animals; it is a chief form in which we can define existence and achieve forms of criticism or celebration of the human condition; it provides us with one of our few potentials for liberation, yet in modern industrial societies such as Australia, in this essential part of being human many of us are crippled" (Horne 1985:6).

So defining 'art' and recognising or acknowledging its place in society is in Horne's view, a contested field. Thus the intervention of the industry and business paradigm into the discourse about the value of arts, the role of government towards the arts, the necessity for accessibility and the role of popular culture, are all impacting on the way the arts sees itself and the leadership of arts organisations (Pick and Anderton 1999, Tusa 1999).

Arts and Government

As the industry and business constructs have become the norm, the relationship between arts and governments has changed dramatically. Williams commented about the Arts Council of Great Britain, that the purpose of the organisation was to 'intervene in the market' (Williams 1989: 143) so that a particular kind of arts activity could occur. There was a recognition therefore in the decision to put government money towards arts practice, that market forces could have an influence on what art would be produced. It is noted by Cummings and Katz that:

“...one possible objective of a program of subsidies would be to insulate the arts from the commercialising pressures of corporate donors”(Cummins and Katz 1987:11)

Thus subsidising arts practice by government provided the potential for the artist to have more artistic freedom, rather than being dependent on the whims of the market place. Additionally subsidy was instigated because policy makers realised that populism did not necessarily equate with ‘art’. In fact arts practise that is commercial or popular in intent could be seen as an excuse for governments to withdraw support, as it would be perceived that art which has the potential to make money, does not need government support. Indeed over the past decade in many western countries, there has been a shift by governments to provide less public sector support for the arts, while simultaneously supporting a view that the market should determine which arts practise survives (Cowen 2000, Pick & Anderton 1999, Reis 1998; Stevenson 2000).

The converging of arts as business or arts as industry not only has changed the rhetoric about the reasons for government intervention, but the relationship between the arts and government funders, has also changed dramatically. Perhaps the appointment of the former director of the Association for Business Sponsorship in the Arts (ABSA) in the United Kingdom, to head up the Arts Council of Great Britain in the mid eighties (Luke Rittner), illustrated the shift in attitude by government in the UK to both the arts and subsidising artistic activity. Rather than appoint a conventional arts administrator from the not for profit sector, an individual was appointed who had played a significant role in converging arts *with* the corporate sector. In Australia this trend is also reflected in the appointment of the last two chairs of the Australia Council who have been drawn from the corporate sector (David Gonski and Terry Cutler). Generally Chairs of the Australia Council have formally been drawn from the academic or arts world. It could be concluded that the appointment of businessmen to head up the national arts funding agency gives a clear message to the arts, that government sees the future of arts funding in the corporate world, while consciously embracing an industry paradigm. In fact Gonski in a recent speech in Adelaide as Chair of the Australia Council said just that.

“It’s important to illustrate how the arts contribute to local and regional economies, tourism trade, given diplomacy. As part of that, we need to ensure funding to broaden our access and appreciation within Australia -- funding not only from government but also from corporate sponsorship and individual philanthropy.” (Gonski 2004).

So as Chair of the national arts funding body, he sees that part of his role is to encourage the engagement of the corporate world with the arts. Rather than being an advocate for more government money, Gonski is advocating for more private sector support.

Arts and Business

Chong when discussing the formation of organisations to link arts and business such as ABSA or the Business Committee for the Arts in the US, suggests that:

“The most significant impact of the BCA, CBAC, ABSA (A&B), in promoting business alliances have been to inculcate the current ‘arts industry’ environment: big business feels comfortable supporting the arts; arts organisations deem support by big business as an essential ingredient for financial success; and target audiences are made aware of the corporate contribution to cultural life.” (Chong 2003:47)

The 'cultural wars' in America over the late eighties and nineties resulted in the funding for the National Endowment for the Arts nearly disappearing (Kimbis 1997; Brustein 2001). It has been noted for instance that in the United States in 2001, corporate sponsorship of the arts totalled \$600 million dollars whereas the National Endowment of the Arts had a budget of just over \$100 million dollars (Keyes 2003). Given the imbalance in financial support in this equation, sponsors are more likely to have a greater influence on the product of arts organisations than governments. At the same time there has been an encouragement of arts organisations by government funders, to increase both their earned income through the box office and retail sales or seek corporate sponsorship usually with strings attached (Caust 2003; Kimbis 1997; Nugent 1999; Pick & Anderton 1999; Throsby 2001, Wu 2003).

Chin-tao Wu provides an overview and critique of the impact of corporate intervention in the arts since the 1980s in the US and in the UK in particular. Wu notes that the purpose of sponsorship, as articulated by Association for Business Sponsorship in the Arts in the UK is:

"...a commercial undertaking, i.e. a payment by business to an arts organisation for the purpose of promoting the business name, products or services. This is a commercial deal between the parties concerned, rather than a philanthropic gift." (Wu 2003:128).

Wu argues that the articulation of corporate sponsorship of the arts as a business transaction rather than patronage or philanthropy, clarifies the nature of the relationship with the arts, where the arts are used as a tool for promotion of the corporate identity or brand (Wu 2003:126 -131). Wu notes that in the case of unpopular products such as tobacco or mining, the corporations blatantly use the arts as a way of sanitising their own product, as a way of getting cheaper advertising for the product or even as a way of getting *any* advertising for the product (such as the case of tobacco companies where advertising of the product is illegal) (Wu 2003:129 -131). Thus in Wu's view the relationship between the arts and the corporate world is purely mercenary on both sides, with the arts world bending over backwards to please the corporate sponsor (Wu 2003: 149). In fact Wu concludes that the intervention of corporations in both sponsoring and production of art has impacted on both the way the organisation functions as well as the art that is produced and promoted.

"By taking over art museums, corporations have significantly changed the ways in which these institutions function, as well as our perception of them and of the arts housed under their roofs. By enclosing art works within their premises, they have reframed the space and redefined discourse on contemporary art. While public arts funding in a capitalist democracy certainly has its limitations and its weaknesses, it is at least a forum, and one that is arguably open to public debate and criticism." (Wu 2003: 303)

Thus Wu is arguing that the increasing involvement of the corporate sector in the arts increases the elitism and lack of access to the arts as well as privileging one sector.

An opposite perspective to Wu on the impact of capitalism and commercialisation on the arts, is provided by Tyler Cowen. He begins his treatise *In Praise of Commercial Culture* by making a statement that:

"Artists work to achieve self-fulfilment, fame, and riches." (Cowen 2000:15)

Cowen believes that the majority of artists want to be wealthy and will adopt any means to achieve this objective. Essentially Cowen is presenting the American dream as the dream of the artist per se. He argues that capitalism has given the capacity for the artist to be different and suggests:

"That the bohemian and, the avant-garde, and the nihilist are all products of capitalism." (Cowen 2000:18)

Cowen asserts that America is the leader in most contemporary art forms and that this is a clear result of a capitalist system where government funding represents a very small percentage of arts support (Cowen 2000:37). He notes in fact that:

"The American government has done a good deal to support the arts, but most of the successes have come from outside of the NEA"(Cowen 2000:38).

He believes that through the American system of tax deductibility for donation to arts organisations and the exemption of not-for-profit institutions from income taxation, the American government has framed an approach for arts support that is consistent with capitalist values without requiring direct government intervention (Cowen 2000:38-39). Cowen believes that:

"Contemporary art is capitalist art, and the history of art has been a history of the struggle to establish markets." (Cowen 2000:36).

Thus Cowen is arguing that the American approach to the arts of a free market with minimal government support, is the appropriate model for a democratic capitalist system and produces, in his view, the best art (Cowen 2000:37).

Cowen's position could be interpreted as another approach to an economic rationalist view of the world, where the role of the marketplace determines every kind of outcome, including cultural. As Nevile notes:

"An economic rationalist...believes that there are very few exceptions to the rule that the market is the best way of deciding what is to be produced and how it is to be produced" (Nevile 1997:5).

This economic interpretation of the world as a market place is further extended when discussing the relationship between the private and public sector where priority is given to the private sector.

"The perceived superiority of private sector practices and technologies has led advocates of the market driven approach to the inescapable conclusion that the distinction between public and private sector management is an illusion" (Terry 1998:4).

In a sense the neo-capitalist model as described by Cowen, is the 'norm' and there is no recognition that this is again another ideology. Clark notes when referring to the American writer Fukuyama, that his version of the 'end of history', is actually:

"...that the US-developed form of liberal democracy and capitalism had become the benchmark for a globalised system. From the American century we moved to Uncle Sam's hegemony." (Clark 2002:22).

It could be concluded therefore that the hegemony of the primarily American economic model has had a considerable impact in the arts and cultural sector internationally. This

is exemplified over the last decade by the prioritising of the marketplace, the reduction of government support, increased engagement by corporations in the cultural sector, the industry construct, and the focus on a business modelling for the sector. This also begs the question of whether these examples illustrate the impact of American cultural imperialism in the cultural sector.

There have been some recent publications which have addressed the concept of the 'arts as business' trying to understand what is different about the making of art. For instance Guillet de Monthoux in *The Art Firm* attempts to unravel the mysteries of making art while contextualising arts practice in the late 20th century. In addition the mystery of aesthetic management is explored (Guillet de Monthoux 2004: 43-56). Guillet de Monthoux comments that:

"Art work is different from other jobs. A design engineer creates a shell protecting the components of product, delivering an elegant form into which the matters fracture, the technical and functional parts of product, are neatly packaged. Art is not equal to design in that respect, nor is rational planning for attaining preconceived goals as economically and effectively as possible. An artist therefore seldom differentiates between means and ends. An artist's end results are frequently expressed in the medium used as the instrument of work. The score is the music not just its method of notation. The colours of a painting are unified with its form, not mere instruments of coloration" (Guillet de Monthoux 2004:52).

So art making according to Guillet de Monthoux, does not follow the normal rules associated with manufacturing. According to Guillet de Monthoux the process is more mysterious and more complex. The 'cost disease' as noted by Baumol and Bowen (1968) articulated the challenge of the performing arts where a particular number of musicians and a particular amount of working time is always required to produce a symphony and this cannot be rationalised or downsized. Caves argues that:

"...creative goods and services, the process of their production, and the preferences or taste of creative artists differ in substantial and systematic (if not universal) ways from their counterparts in the rest of the economy where creativity plays a lesser (if seldom negligible) role." (Caves 2000:2)

Many writers such as Caves have observed that the arts and cultural sector presents particular challenges in terms of economics and understanding of work practices. The management of the sector in fact has been isolated as a distinct discipline of its own (Evard & Colbert 2000). Increasingly there is a developing literature relating specifically to the special nature of arts management which discusses the challenges of managing and leading a sector whose goals are not single bottom line focussed (Byrnes 2003, Christie 1998, Chong 2003, Creese 1997, Dimaggio 1988, Evard & Colbert 2000, Fitzgibbon & Kelly 1997, Hagoort 2000, McDaniel and Thorn 1990, 1993 and 1997, Pick & Anderton 1996, Radbourne & Fraser 1996). In this there is an implicit recognition of the different needs of the sector requiring a management approach that suits its needs.

Conclusion

So interpretations of cultural and artistic practise are contested in relation to understanding, interpretation and purpose. While some writers conflate arts within a larger cultural sphere (Bennett and Carter 2001) others argue for its distinctiveness (Tusa 1999). There are writers who locate arts practise within an industry (Caves 2000,

Cunningham 2002) and others who reject this categorisation fiercely (Bereson 1999, Horne 1988, Pick & Anderton 1999). There are those who argue for the arts within a business model, contextualising it entirely within a commercial construct while rejecting a dependency on government subsidy (Cowen 2000). Others challenge the impact of a market driven approach and show concern for the increasing influence of business on arts practice (Wu 2003). While many writers have recognised that arts practice has unique qualities in terms of work processes and outcomes (Bjorkegren 1996, Caves 2000, Guillet de Monthoux 2004), what this means in terms of how it should be packaged, supported and sold is still in dispute.

Perhaps in this next century arts practice will be valued for its unique qualities, framing it as an essential activity rather than a periphery one. At the same forum in Adelaide in early March where Gonski spoke about the need for corporate engagement, the CEO of the Australia Council Jennifer Bott said that:

"...there are huge limitations to seeing the arts in industry terms, no matter how impressive the statistics. In that regard, I believe we need to shift towards positioning the arts as being integral to the fabric of our society. The arts are central to our sense of identity -- as individuals, communities, as a nation -- and how we relate to each other and the world" (Bott 2004).

If the arts are seen as central, then solutions for its adequate support and framing might relate more to its intrinsic needs and less to its role in supporting other activities, however they are framed.

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