Is cultural diversity good or bad for the arts and creative economies?

Descrizione

Introduction

Within the span of two months, September and October 2012, no fewer than four arts policy-related events convened international scholars and the general public to problematize the connections between cultural diversity, democracy and cultural policy. All four events, discussion of which will be interwoven here as I address their respective concerns, posed some version of the following question, which became the guiding line of inquiry for this paper: “Is diversity the building block of the universal in the arts, or are the politics of diversity and identity corrosive of the universal?”

The present article does not attempt to answer this question directly. Instead, it unravels current Western European and US perspectives on cultural diversity, democracy and artistic value through a review of carefully chosen recent additions to the policy literature. Most of the literature cited here focuses either on cultural diversity in democratic systems or on methods for valuing the arts. I try to synthesize these topics toward an answer to the question posed in the title: “Is cultural diversity good or bad for the arts and creative economies?” This synthesis provides the reader with a backdrop for the “arts debate” currently raging in cultural policy circles on both sides of the North Atlantic. What becomes clear from the evidence presented here is that though there is a marked difference between Western European and US perspectives—largely due to differences in how the arts are funded—there are also many more, sometimes surprising, similarities.

Democracy and the arts share a diversity problem

On 25 September 2012, three social scientists in Riverside, California, came together to address the question “Is Diversity Bad for Democracy?” In this panel discussion sponsored by Zócalo Public Square, a project of the US Center for Social Cohesion, the commentators spoke about whether the polyglot US has become simply too big and too culturally diverse to continue as a healthy and vibrant democracy. One panelist cited rising diversity as the trigger for a recent decrease in political participation. All

agreed, however, that the geographic self-sorting and political polarization that is relatively new to American politics is more a result of affluence and technology than diversity, as it is with increasing frequency that people choose the media they consume, as well as where they live, based on their socio-political standing. Yet the arts have recently been called on as social problem solvers with the assumption that they can promote effective civic engagement (NEA 2007, RAND 2008, Stern and Seifert 2009, Sidford 2011).

The above authors are not alone in suggesting connections between a thriving democratic system and vibrant cultural institutions. In the context of cultural policy, democracy usually means that people have the right to experience that which the system's cultural institutions have deemed "good art." (Blomgren 2012). The most important questions to ask when studying the relationship between cultural policies and democracy are: "Who are the agents in cultural policy-making processes, and which interests do they represent?" and "What rights and demands do taxpayers have with respect to a government-supported cultural sector?" (Vestheim 2012b).

The latter question does not often provoke a heated a debate in the US, in which a "facilitator" government leaves arts and culture largely to market wisdom and private philanthropy. Regarding the former, however, Roberto Bedoya has identified a disconcerting chasm between two types of US arts agencies and the effect this chasm has on cultural and artistic diversity (2004). The "first tier" arts service organizations (the American Association of Museums, Americans for the Arts, American Symphony and Orchestra League, and Opera America), Bedoya claims, function primarily as large-scale delivery systems and have a direct voice in cultural policy discussions. The "second-tier" organizations, however, (the Alliance of Artists Communities, the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, and the National Association of Artists Organizations) are usually composed of artist collectives and smaller ethnic minority groups, and while they are more involved in artistic creation (as opposed to delivery) they are largely absent from policy making. For Bedoya, this raises a red flag concerning the question of fair representation. In many Western European countries, on the other hand, in which there are "patron state" systems and corresponding arms-length arts councils, professional artists often have a stronger influence on policy decisions (Vestheim 2012).

The great arts debate: instrumental or cultural value?

In Western Europe, as in the US, the recent economic crisis caused a sea change in arts and culture funding. We currently share a climate of economic uncertainty and broad-based cuts, which has led to louder demands to determine the social impact and economic value of the arts. This is nothing new, according to Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, who affirm that arguments for the instrumental benefits of the arts are at least 2,500 years old and have “always had a defensive character, in the sense that they were relied upon to ‘make the case’ for the arts’ value and legitimacy at times of perceived threats” (2012:3). We may not be facing a new situation, but communicating the value of the arts is weighing heavily on cultural policy researchers. On 13 October, the UK-based Battle of Ideas hosted a roundtable discussion entitled “What Is the Value of the Arts?” at the Felix Meritis Centre for Arts, Culture and Science in Amsterdam to assess the relationship between creativity and inspiration, and economic value. What is relatively new, as panelist Tiffany Jenkins noted recently, is that even though societies have long debated how to value the arts, until recently this debate had little bearing on arts funding (2011). What is the future of the arts in a society that assesses their value primarily in terms of social impact or economic benefit? In the UK, this has meant New Labour using socially engaged art to steer culture toward policies of social inclusion. While this strategy has, indeed, led to increased arts funding, according to Clive Gray, when cultural policies “endowed with modest means propose imperatives as generous and general as those of social integration or economic development, it can only lead to disappointment” (2009).

Culture used in such a way can also be a means to deflect serious discourse about social class issues such as unequal economic power (Bonet and Négrier 2011). The US movement of arts-based civic engagement to date seems a feeble replacement for its institutions of higher education, which were, until the 1960s, the very heart of intense public discourse and vocal citizen involvement. Those institutions, too, have been decimated in the past forty years by reduced public funding, the deprofessionalization of the professoriate, and increased corporate reach into the classrooms and laboratories of university campuses (Scott 2012, Newfield 2011). Notwithstanding critiques against them for damaging l’art pour l’art aesthetics, the various forms of socially engaged art have a great distance to travel before they are considered a widely accepted form of reclaiming democracy and civic engagement in the United

States.

Data-gathering for arts advocacy in creative economies

The relatively small impact public art has had on civic engagement—as it is likely to engage citizens who are already civically minded—has led some in the US and Western European arts worlds to consider affinities with businesses as a way to integrate more successfully into local economies. Tara Aesquivel (2012) wrote recently in this journal about the brave new world of collaborations between business and creative industries spurred by Richard Florida in his popular book endorsing the creative class in cities (2002; revised 2012). As artists and arts organizations become more proficient at marketing their services to the corporate world, business leaders, increasingly aware of how new media technologies have a direct impact on their profitmaking, find it more appealing to brand themselves as social beings by aligning with creative industries and adopting more robust corporate responsibility initiatives, such as cause-related marketing (CRM). Americans for the Arts is one national organization taking advantage of this new CRM movement through a specially designed “pARTnership” system created to enhance business and arts partnerships. Partly in order to better express return-on-investment to their corporate partners, arts managers have begun to gather more reliable data about the economic impact of the arts in local and regional economies. Americans for the Arts provided an example of data gathering that is as broad-based as it is ambitious, the newly released report Arts and Economic Prosperity IV, which studies the nonprofit arts and culture industry’s impact on the US economy (2012).

This sharp turn toward research for advocacy in the US directly informs arts management policy’s deliberate shift away from supply of the arts toward the cultivation of demand, the idea being to develop the capacity of individuals to benefit from arts experiences. Several recent RAND studies seem to urge this realignment of priorities as a way of surviving tough economic times (Zakaras and Lowell 2008, Lowell 2008). A related initiative of Americans for the Arts, the National Arts Marketing Project (NAMP), best shows the extent to which research for advocacy and market logic have informed arts management. The annual NAMP conference offers marketing strategies to optimize return-on-investment practices and return-on-participation goals. An NAMPC blog entry entitled “Value is All in the Mind” by contributors Tim

Baker and Steven Roth asserts, “value not communicated is valueless. The better you communicate the true value you offer – value as defined by the consumer – the more you increase that value, the more likely the customer will buy” (2012, my emphasis). In the US, then, where the arts must compete with entertainment and new technologies for support, we sometimes bypass the question of intrinsic value entirely, assuming that consumers (no longer merely audience members, since they effectively vote with their dollars) are the only qualified assessors of an art activity’s value. Questions of diversity and representation are similarly dispensed to the market. Bedoya points to the growing tension between administrative culture and creativity reflected in the decision an arts organization must make “whether to deliver art to audiences in the most economically effective way or to take risks and be an incubator for innovation and diversity” (2004:7). But at a recent conference in Sweden, the notion that one must choose between economy and diversity was rejected. Instead, panelists argued, the arts may be something not everyone is meant to “get.”

Does diversity trump artistic excellence?

At the Arts and Audiences conference in Stockholm on 11 October, a group of panelists debated the question “Can We Get All the Arts?” (NB: The panel’s organizer, Tiffany Jenkins, posed the question on her blog as “Can We All Get the Arts?” which seems to better address the panel topic of arts policies on diversity). While seeing “great art for everyone” as a worthy goal, one that grounds diversity as a building block of the universal, Munira Mirza argued that the politics of diversity and identity are actually corrosive of the universal in the arts. Claire Bishop, who recently published a searing critique of the participatory art movement, would agree with this view. Especially by the political left worldwide, participatory art has been seen as one of the most promising movements in the field of social art, but Bishop roundly rejected the premise that lies behind most of this art: that it should be evaluated by ethical rather than purely aesthetic standards. Participatory art, Bishop wrote, “forecloses the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer.” (2012:241).

Calls for a return to cultural (aesthetic) value

Not all art, after all, has a direct social or economic impact, or even a clear message. Art that is polysemic, defies category, or is controversial often suffers in discussions of

non-aesthetic value. Several authors have called for an end to the “values for money” debate in favor of a discussion of “money for values.” Maurice Davies and Sara Selwood, in a special issue of Cultural Trends devoted to the arts policy debate, identify the main purpose of assessing cultural or aesthetic value as being intimately associated with making the case for public funding (2012). To them, that continued emphasis on research for advocacy is disappointing. Apart from advocacy, they posit, developing a more nuanced understanding of cultural value could help clarify the purpose of organizations and funding, improve organizational management, assess success and progress of initiatives, and allow funders to make the best use of their funds.

Several authors have questioned the notion that diversity as a virtue is a sacred cow—one that we need to stick to (Kawashima 2001:487). Tyler Cowen posits that it is not diversity per se that is valuable but the development of innovation and mutual understanding through exposure to diverse cultures (2002). This argument falls on the side of diversity as a basic component of the universal. Perhaps the most promising new research, however, to offer a perspective on the universality of art comes from neuroaesthetics, a field not more than fifteen years old. Neurobiologist and Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel has attempted to establish the biology of the beholder’s emotional response to art, expanding on the recent dearth of scientific literature on mirror neurons, which enable humans to empathize (2012). Kandel argues for art as an evolutionary adaptation fundamental to an understanding of human cognition and motivation. Any future attempts to collate the various benefits of art to the individual must take into account this new area of inquiry. Cultural critic Camille Paglia would agree that art is a necessity for civilization and a fundamental component of creative intelligence, but her latest book, Glittering Images, attributes the waning of the traditional arts in social life since the 1970s to a hyper-technological environment where primary aesthetic experience is grounded in industrial design (2012). Paglia will speak at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, California on 25 October in a presentation titled “Why Do We Need High Art?” where she is expected to emphasize the continued necessity of cultural value, particularly in tough economic times. For those who accept Paglia’s assertion that aesthetic value can be found outside the traditional arts, it is no wonder that arts industries in the Western world are struggling to keep up.

Conclusion

Cultural diversity has often been a convenient target for those who see it as subverting universal values in a democracy (which requires robust participation) or in the arts (which require an engaged audience). This is because the more culturally diverse a society is the more difficult it is to assign specific cultural (aesthetic) value to a work of art. In the absence of clearly defined cultural value, in turn, other methods for valuing the arts (such as social benefits for individuals and communities, economic impact, and market value) must rise to take its place for a creative economy to thrive. The challenge, if adherents to cultural value are to reclaim it, is to come up with innovative ways to "make the case" for aesthetic value in order to turn policy discussions—on both sides of the Atlantic—away from a "values for money" debate toward "money for values."

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