The hidden costs of the ‘reenchantment of art’ by Eleonora Belfiore

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Writing in 1991, and building on her previous critique of modernism’s aesthetics (2004 [1984]), artist and critic Suzi Gablik offered a prediction for the future development of art which has proved remarkably acute:

> If modern aesthetics was inherently isolationist, aimed at disengagement and purity, my sense is that what we will be seeing over the next few decades is art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that rejects the myths of neutrality and autonomy. The subtext of social responsibility is missing in our aesthetic models, and the challenge of the future will be to transcend the disconnectedness and separation of the aesthetic from the social that existed within modernism (p. 4-5).

The intervening quarter of a century has indeed witnessed a remarkable growth in prominence of what is commonly referred to as socially engaged arts practice – participatory in nature, and with a clear intention to act as intervention in the social and political sphere, or in Sophie Hope’s (2017:203) definition, as ‘artist-led, non-object-based encounters, performances, and collaborations with others’. Most notably, compared to the radical and fringe status this forms of artistic practice had when it developed as part of the 1960s and 1970s countercultural movement, socially engaged arts practice, and more generally initiatives that are aimed at fostering arts engagement through collaboration and participation, have been increasingly featuring among the range of activities that receive public financial support. Historically, this support has been justified by a renewed focus, on the part of policy makers, on the societal benefits of active participation in arts and culture, and the promise that they might support wider strategies to foster social cohesion and inclusion.

The tactic of using ‘social impact’ as a proxy for ‘value’ in making the case for arts funding has proved to be, at best, a double edged sword (Belfiore 2012); yet, it is beyond question that seeing the delivery of social benefits as a sufficiently compelling rationale to warrant and justify public subsidy has resulted in socially engaged arts practice now being more visible (if never adequately supported) within contemporary arts provision. Elsewhere, I have referred to this historical development as ‘defensive instrumentalism’: a self-justifying strategy to be deployed at a time in which traditional rationales for arts funding are seen as no longer holding water with neither public nor politicians (Belfiore 2012). On the face of it, the current quest for arts with social benefits might appear as the realization of Gablik’s (1991: 7) vision for ‘the emergence of a more participatory, socially interactive framework for art,’ and ‘the transition from the art-for-art’s-sake assumptions of late modernism, which kept art as a specialized pursuit devoid of practical aims and goals’. Yet, I would argue, reality is more complicated than it appears at first glance. Whilst the move of participatory and socially engaged practice from its 1970s niche of ‘community arts’ to the mainstream of national and local arts provision is a phenomenon to be celebrated in many respects, it has not come to pass without issues and problems.
In this chapter, I intend to explore some such issues and problems. Not because I do not see the value of socially engaged arts practice. Quite the opposite. Many of the observations that will follow have been developed through my experiences researching the practice of - and, more recently, working with - socially engaged practitioners. Over the past couple of years, I have had the immense privilege of collaborating (alongside fellow academics and colleagues from the artist development organization Counterpoints Arts) with several socially engaged artists from a migrant or refugee background as part of the Who are We? exhibition that took place at Tate Modern in March 2017, a collaborative endeavor part of the Tate Exchange Programme.¹ These are all artists whose practice has involved collaborations with refugees in Calais and other camps, displaced communities, people fleeing war and torture, and generally facing unimaginable challenges. The resulting artworks, often the product of an active collaboration between artists and communities, have been some of the most moving and affecting I have ever experienced, and audience evaluations seem to suggest my experience was not unique in this respect (Tiller 2017). What follows is indeed a tribute to the commitment, dedication and the labour of love that these and many other socially engaged artists feed into their practice and a token of my appreciation for their generosity with their time, experiences and candid conversations.

The strategy that I have referred to as ‘defensive instrumentalism’ and its concern for the delivery of socio-economic benefits through the arts as a legitimating tactic has resulted in a focus on the participants in the collaborative endeavor that is socially engaged arts practice. Consequently, much of the debate, both within the sector and in academia, has long focused on the degree to which social impacts resulting from participation might be evaluated, measured and quantified in line with funders and politicians’ expectations and demands. Time, resource, energy have all gone into the critique of current evaluating frameworks and tools, the quest for better ones, and the assessment of the improvements made in our grasp of how the arts impact participants - or indeed, lack thereof (Crossick and Kazynska 2016).

I would like to offer a different, yet complementary, discussion to those prevalent in arts and cultural policy circles, by focusing attention on the other partner in this collaborative endeavor: artists. As a policy scholar, I am inevitably fascinated by the policy-making and administrative implications that such a shift in perspectives brings with it, and the moral, political, and social justice issues it poses. It is my contention that a better awareness of these is key to the mission of developing more effective ways of working within collaborative and participatory arts practice and enhancing the opportunities for artists working collaboratively in Europe and beyond.

Placing the spotlight on artists

What follows here is a personal reflection borne out of my experience researching aspects of socially engaged arts practice over the past fifteen years, and particularly through an

¹ https://www.whoareweproject.com
emerging collaboration with photographer and socially engaged artist Eva Sajovic\(^2\). As part of
the collaborative endeavor resulting in the already mentioned *Who are We?* project in 2017,
we worked together on a Learning Lab entitled ‘Unlearning the role of the artist’, in which
Sajovic reflected on the art of ‘unlearning’ common preconceptions about the role, function
and power of the artist, whilst also posing challenging questions about ‘the politics of
representing others in an age of global displacement’\(^3\). The Learning Lab took the form of a
performed auto-ethnography by the artist followed by contributions from critical
respondents, rapporteurs (including myself), and open debate with the Lab participants. One
of the key questions the event explored was:

> What support can artists expect from commissioning organisations when using
participatory methodologies, knowing that the boundaries between the artist-as-
professional and artist-as-friend in process-based participatory work is fluid, blurred
and prone to misinterpretation?\(^4\)

This had been a question that I had already been grappling with for some time, from the
perspective of a cultural policy researcher, and I agreed with Eva about the highly problematic
nature of its neglect in current policy and sector debates – at least public ones, for it had
become clear by then, that this is in fact a question that practitioners themselves have been
long discussing amongst themselves. An emerging collaboration started precisely from this
shared unease around the dearth of public discourse around the contexts and the conditions
in which socially engaged practice involving vulnerable individuals and communities takes
place. This chapter is an opportunity to begin to articulate a series of key points which make
up both a research agenda for the future and a space for political campaigning for better
working conditions for artists working in a participatory practice.

Like many other cultural labourers, artists share the precariousness, and the exploitative and
self-exploitative nature of creative work. The working conditions of cultural and creative
workers have been well documented, alongside the ways in which socioeconomic background
still remains a factor in accessing creative careers (Banks 2007). We also know that the
precariousness, informality and the demand for flexibility that characterise this type of work
have particularly negative impacts on women, disabled people and minorities (Conor, Gill and
Taylor 2015). We similarly know that, notwithstanding its fundamental shift from the counter-
cultural fringe to the publicly subsidised mainstream, socially engaged arts practice remains
structurally under-funded, especially so in our present times of post-financial-crash austerity.

The question of resourcing participatory and socially engaged practice in a way that could
provide the community arts movement with a chance of sustainability has been a long
standing issue: in 1978, Su Braden in her seminal *Artists & People* had already identified the
growth of public funding as a very mixed blessing, and as a form of intervention that was
altering the radical nature of the activities being carried out, whilst doing nothing to ensure

\(^2\) [http://www.evasajovic.co.uk/](http://www.evasajovic.co.uk/)


the long term sustainability of the work of artists in communities. Braden (1978: 124) lamented the funders’ failure to accept that a genuine commitment to the agenda of community arts entailed ‘a long-term commitment from them as administrators and that this commitment necessitates patient year-by-year programming in which communities and artists can grow together’. This vision of an organic approach to nurturing collaborative arts practice was destined to remain unfulfilled: in 1984, Owen Kelly was already writing about community arts’ ‘grant addiction’, the resulting dependency from funders, and the inevitable embrace of the their priorities and agendas on the part of the recipients of funding. More recently, Sophie Hope (2017) has discussed the persisting problems posed by the prevailing short-term, project-based approach to the socially engaged arts commission. She suggests, moreover, that professionalization and the reliance on one-off funding grants might be at least in part responsible for the less politically radical inclination of much contemporary socially engaged arts practice, for ‘there are funders to please and careers to protect and so rocking the boat too much might jeopardize future funding and commissions’ (Hope 2017:218). Sophie Hope (ibid.) also argues that project-based funding does not sit comfortably with socially engaged artists’ preference for fluid structure and naturally evolving collaborative activities. This means that pinpointing exactly when a project ‘ends’ is not always straightforward (as the running out of the funding does not always coincide with the natural conclusion of the activity), so that attending to the aftercare process for both artists and community participants is not always possible within the scope of the project as understood in terms of the timescales and expectations of a grant.

Something that emerged powerfully for me a few years ago, when conducting a piece of research on a participatory heritage project involving the Gypsy and Traveller community in Lincolnshire was the extent to which all of the artists involved, as well as the project managers and communications specialist reported – unprompted – having contributed to the project a disproportionate amount of free labour, in order to be able to deliver a successful programme of activities and so as to fulfil the expectations they felt the project had created in the participants. The driver was, clearly, commitment to the communities who had placed their trust in them, by allowing their children to be involved in a project exploring and communicating their cultural values, and in spite of previous traumatic experiences of having their culture exposed for the amusement of the entire nation through TV programmes such as My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding.

One of the community artists employed on the project talked very candidly and emotively of her difficulties in letting go of the relationships formed through the project, to the extent that, almost two years after the conclusion of the project, she was still offering guidance, creative mentoring and psychological support to one of the young project participants. She was honest about the implications, both material and psychological, that this had for her: as a low income single mum working as freelance, the emotional labour invested in the extra care for her participant was time that could have otherwise be billed for. However, it was clear that the real toll was the weight of responsibility she felt for the welfare of a young girl facing the well-known challenges that young people from a Gypsy and Traveller background routinely face. Never having received training to deal with situations which normally are the domain of professional social workers, she reported being plagued by self-doubt and anxiety: was she

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5 For a fuller discussion of this project, please see Belfiore (forthcoming).
offering the right kind of support? Was a well meaning intervention what this kid really needed? Could it be counterproductive? How long could she go on offering this support when she herself had more of her fair share of responsibilities for her own dependants?

The heartfelt dedication towards the notion of duty of care towards participants emerged from all the interviews I conducted as part of this small scale project, and it unleashed a series of questions that I have tried to explore ever since: whose burden should participants’ after care really be? If, as it seems to be the case, it is effectively artists who often end up taking charge of such duties, should they not be trained to do this safely and appropriately? And most crucially, should not this emotional labour be acknowledged, recognised and suitably remunerated? Unsurprisingly, this invisible labour was something that the artists in the Who are we? collective were very familiar too, and which they had taken on in extremely challenging geo-political contexts.

This invisible emotional labour indeed seems such a recurring feature of the working conditions of artists who practice collaboratively with communities (and often with communities facing social disadvantage, discrimination, displacement and other complex challenges) that it is worth reflecting in more depth. The cultural labour literature highlights the inequalities entailed in a creative career path predicated on beginnings made up of unpaid internships and labour exchanged for contacts, networking opportunities and visibility rather than payment. However, what we see in the subsidised socially engaged arts practice is a systemic under-resourcing that affects practitioners well beyond their early careers. This, alongside the problems we have seen resulting from funding-by-project, effectively means that socially engaged arts practice can survive only because of what we may call an “invisible subsidy” on the part of the artists themselves at all stages of their careers.

Whilst artists’ ‘invisible subsidy’ might not have been commonly labelled as such, the phenomenon itself is nothing new. However, at least in the UK, the tacit expectation on the part of funders that artists will shoulder the extra burden of project after-care is further compounded by the consequences of a prolonged austerity policy. As noted by the Warwick Commission report, the contraction of welfare provision has reduced significantly the welfare support that had traditionally benefitted both artists and the communities with which they work in socially engaged practice (Neelands et. al 2015).

These working condition conditions and the matter of invisible subsidy pose a problem which is two-fold. On the one hand, we have the practical problem of sustainability of artists’ careers and their own psychological wellbeing, and on the other, their implication for the moral political economy of arts subsidy.

What should policy do?

‘To create today is to create with responsibility’.

This was Suzi Gablik’s (1991:8) motto for the renewed, participatory aesthetics she called for in The Reenchantment of Art. She wrote this with artists in mind, but I would argue that we
need to extend this expectation to the agencies that are part of the bureaucratic infrastructure of arts support and provision if we are to ever realise Gablik’s vision for ‘a new connective, participatory aesthetic’ and ‘a value-based art’. The weight of responsibility that Gablik refers to needs to be shared out more equally than it is at present: it is currently artists working in socially engaged contexts, as we have seen, who shoulder the costs of rigorous and respectful practice which fall between the cracks of project funding:

We need an explicit effort to bring our public cultural institutions to task in relation to what Mark Banks (2017) calls ‘creative justice’, by highlighting the mechanisms of systemic exploitation of artists within a funding infrastructure that is very comfortable using the rhetoric of collaborative, participatory and socially engaged arts practice, but does not quite follow those principles in its own conduct. Current funding practices, and the ways in which project-based funding rarely incorporates, as a matter of course, provisions to ensure the fulfillment of duties of care towards both artists and participating communities, are a key example of these ethically questionable practices.

In this context, it is crucial that we develop fresh thinking on the moral economy of the subsidised arts sector. As Mark Banks observes, “[w]ork is always subject to the norm and values of the particular society in which it is embedded (Banks 2017:42; emphasis in the original). Moral economy approaches help ‘emphasising the normative environments that both ground and connect different individuals, institutions and structures’ (ibid.). It is my contention that the normative environments of contemporary arts funding point to a clear moral failure of cultural policy. Here are the grounds for such a conclusion:

- Poorly funded socially engaged arts practice is too often relied upon to provide evidence, case studies, support and legitimacy for arguments around the social benefits of the arts that are deployed by the (much better funded) arts establishment to help “make the case for the arts”, thus offering fodder for advocacy based on what I have referred to as ‘defensive instrumentalism’.

- This, in turn, effectively reinforces patterns of funding that advantage established public arts institutions whilst keeping socially engaged forms of activity under-resourced. Practitioners find themselves thus open to exploitation and self-exploitation driven by a sense of responsibility towards project participants and their wellbeing during the project and often well beyond its conclusion (or at least beyond the expiration of the funding).

- In other words: the prevalent strategy for the legitimation of discursive formations that aspire to justify arts subsidy is predicated on the systematic exploitation of cultural workers involved in publicly funded socially engaged practice. In reality, the most precarious, lowest paid cultural workers heavily subsidise the public cultural sector via their poorly or unpaid work, their invisible and unacknowledged emotional labour, and by the bearing of the hidden but significant psychological costs of duty of care towards project participants.

Cumulatively, I would argue, these issues amount to a moral failure of public policymaking, and a betrayal of the official rhetoric the arts sector deploys, with its foregrounding of the
values of collaboration, inclusion, transparency and fairness. This is the challenge we need to address if we want to see socially minded collaborative and participatory arts work flourish.

What, then, might the way forward be if we are genuinely committed to the goal of an aesthetic practice driven by responsibility and a truly collaborative ethos?

We need a willingness to hold public institutions and funders to account in the name of fairness and social justice, even when this might lead to uncomfortable conversations with funders, policy-makers and cultural sector partners. This can only ever work as a collaborative strategy, however. Resisting the exploitative tendencies of the arts funding infrastructure cannot be a task reserved for arts practitioners alone. Success will only be achievable through a collective strategy, and the coming together of different actors: artists, for sure, but also academics and intellectuals, arts administrators committed to progressive change within the sector, and – crucially – international coalitions of values and interests much like the one this book project documents.

Bibliography


