

Spectres of Evaluation Conference Rethinking:Art/Community/Value

6 – 7 February 2014 | Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne

INTRODUCTION

This international conference examines creative and critical approaches to evaluation and value in relation to community engaged arts practice. Through diverse and creative formats and a range of local and international speakers, these timely conversations also explore the relationship between established community arts practices and the appearance of new forms of collaboration and engagement across a range of disciplines, from participatory design to social practice.

LEARNINGS FROM THE CONFERENCE

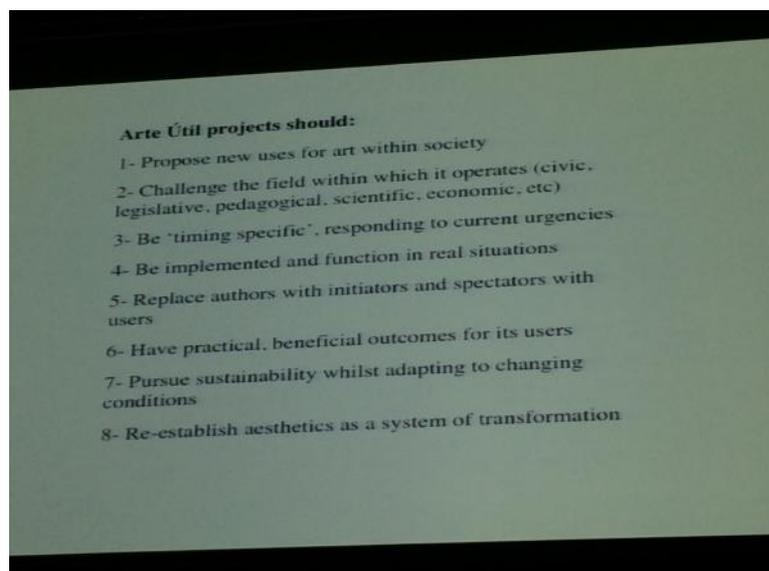
Evaluation requires an ongoing conversation

It is important that evaluation is talked about in an open and transparent manner, and frequently. It should not be assumed that practitioners, programmers, administrators and policy-makers

understand the intentions and processes behind evaluation, and with different intentions and approaches between partners and stakeholders, all the more these conversations across difference become important. Otherwise, evaluation often earns a negative reputation and becomes ineffective in ultimately serving the communities worked with, and takes its toll on the people wanting to effect positive change.

Evaluation and the politics of value

There are many ways to talk about and language evaluation. Presenters at the conference examined them from the perspective of reciprocity, to resilience, to well-being, to social networks and so on. More importantly, evaluation is about placing value on something, and with this comes the notion of power – what is valued, and who does the valuing? How does value become attached to art? How do we effectively evaluate community arts? This invites complication because of the diversity of the field. All these questions are good reminders as there is much focus and attention on arts in communities currently in Singapore and often by focusing on technical challenges to evaluation, we avoid the deeper questions and the politics of value.



The principles of "Arte Util" or "Useful Art"

Evaluation and aesthetics

It was interesting to hear about the aesthetics of arts in communities and how this goes beyond art forms that are traditionally recognised and that we are used to. There is now the recognition of “vernacular creativity” and cultural forms present in the everyday, which are used, ‘performed’ and expressed by communities, perhaps to greater or different effect and outcomes when facilitated by artists who are able to heighten the aesthetic frame, and mix social forms.



An artist presenting a traditional Samoan song during intermission

Some examples provided were of an artist who travels around different parts of a city in the United States on a regular basis for the past few years, offering free sewing services to the communities he goes to, and through the encounters, engagement takes place, narratives are exchanged, reciprocity occurs, relationships are formed while performing a social good. Another example was Suzanne Lacy’s work which involved the public refereeing a basketball game and through that experience, the community dialogued about power, how differences in perspectives lead to certain decisions, and so on, thus allowing the community to clarify who they were.

These artists doing work in communities are impacting culture, engaging publics, enabling community and in some cases, community development. One of the guest speakers challenged us that perhaps we should speak about and evaluate projects/programmes as to whether they are “interesting projects” versus “interesting art”. In other words, we need a new way, a new aesthetics of understanding artists doing work in communities, and the way we evaluate works like these should be different to how we traditionally evaluate and understand works of art.

Evaluating art and social change

A keynote speaker, Tania Bruguera is an artist who practices socially engaged art. She advocated for a “practice with consequences” where the act of creating the art work not only focuses attention on an issue, but the process of engagement actually produces real change. For her, socially engaged arts should question existing systems and structures, challenging old ethical regimes.

She spoke about evaluation and political art, and her practice of working with migrant communities. For her, her aesthetic includes using the tools of contemporary art, the ‘what if’ environment, latent creativity and the emotional spectrum present in communities to enable them to construct their future.

This aesthetic includes a collaborative relationship with communities, with the right to say things that people do not want to hear and an ongoing process of self-reflexivity, regulating and adjusting. Ultimately, it is very much about letting the community direct the project and relinquishing the artist’s vision.

In this context, she cautioned that evaluation tools can be abusive when there is an expectation of certain results emerging at a predetermined time. She spoke about projects having a natural rhythm and progression which means there may be times when results may not be forthcoming. The attitude should instead be one of being open to possibilities, where power is negotiated and not imposed.



A panel discussing art and social change

Evaluation - from multiple perspectives

Associate Prof Peter Wright from Murdoch University distilled several principles for evaluation. based on his work evaluating projects by Big hART, Australia's most awarded participatory arts organisation.

“Change is emergent, evolving and dynamic”

- Human agency is fundamental to projects and programmes, NOT the project management cycle
- Embrace diversity by working with multiple sector stakeholders and activities
- Focus on the relationship between process and outcomes and learn to manage the dynamics
- Change is complex and can happen at multiple levels : individuals, organisations and systems
- Accommodate local culture, be open to and be ready to capture unexpected and emergent outcomes or change

“Evaluation is about improving rather than proving”

He also suggested several key concepts that are a departure from conventional wisdom. Rather than focus on measuring outcomes according to SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timebound) he introduced SPICED indicators (Subjective, Participatory, Interpreted, Cross-checked, Empowering, Diverse).

He urged the audience to leave room for discovering not only tangible outcomes, but intangible and unanticipated ones as well. The end goal, he says, is not measurement, but understanding – where deeper meaning making with the community takes place through the process of evaluation and that, ultimately is more likely to promote valuable action which leads to improved conditions for the community.

Evaluation as creative practice



A workshop on utilising the Photovoice methodology to conduct evaluation

One of the speakers noted that since the arts is a medium of communication, it is only natural that the different art forms have the potential to elicit data for evaluation. In fact, the different modalities availed through the arts may emerge responses that have a very different quality of emotion and perspective from an otherwise straight interview or survey. In that sense, evaluation and art-making can come together as creative practice.

One workshop that we attended utilised Photovoice as a methodology to give back ownership of the storytelling process to the community. This approach may be used not only for evaluation, but also needs assessment and project planning.

The process involves :

- Identifying a theme for investigation
- Imparting simple visual literacy, giving community the vocabulary to express themselves through imagery
- Encouraging community members to tell their story through a photo or a sequence of photos.
- Facilitating discussions around responses elicited

OBSERVATIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

“Simply by sailing in a different direction, you can conquer new lands”

The conference seemed highly relevant as evaluation of arts in communities is an important area for the sustainability of practice and programmes, and not often examined critically and dialogued about sufficiently. For this to be the focus of an international conference seemed to be a rare and an excellent opportunity for learning and exchange.

What was immediately obvious when we arrived at the conference was the seemingly lack of ethnic diversity amongst the participants, who were mostly Caucasian. Is this the state of affairs of arts in

communities practice in Australia, at least in Melbourne? Where were the so-called ethnic minorities in terms of being arts practitioners, programme leaders and facilitators, and even academic students?

Based on the presentations attended and conversations had, it seems like there is a gap in terms of understanding and experience practitioners in Australia/Melbourne have when it comes to evaluation. There is a camp that does not fully see the value of formal evaluation and is suspicious, and emotionally affected by these expectations; and another which appreciates and invests in robust evaluation processes and methodology. It was unfortunate that the conference did not directly address this gap or make attempts to facilitate the dialoguing of these two camps. It was also hoped that the conference would demonstrate innovative approaches to evaluation of arts in communities work, especially arts-based approaches to evaluation but this largely did not materialise.

The conference provided a wide range of sessions and presenters, including guest speakers from other countries. Many of the presenters could have been more coherent and accessible in their sharing but instead adopted a more academic and theoretical approach. This meant that the immediate applicability of what was being presented to practice was not always obvious.

That said, there were enough nuggets of wisdom that we were able to mine, a few sessions that were practical in nature with tangible frameworks we can build upon and extrapolate to the local context. More importantly, it was assuring to know that even in the international arena, practitioners in the field are asking similar questions. In the quest to find better answers as a community, in the praxis of community-based arts practice, we can only yield richer insights in time to come.