

Salzburg Global Seminars
Session 468
21-25 February 2010

Working Group III: The Creation of Value

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Summary of Discussion:

This working group was charged with discussing the following questions: “What value do we create and how do we articulate the compelling value of what we do? What are the arguments that really matter, that are well-grounded, and to whom? Which arguments resonate in contemporary society? What are the instrumental values of the arts, and, perhaps more importantly, what are the intrinsic values and how do we find the language to communicate them effectively?”

This session began by having the 12 members of the working group describe their own personal values derived from the arts.

The conversation revealed some common themes. Many saw the arts as providing a space for the exploration of the human condition – we discussed the importance of self-expression and self-esteem; discovering universal themes across time, place and people; the possibility for lifting and elevating people from their routines; providing beauty and enchantment; and importantly, helping individuals achieve empathy. In short, at their best, the arts are fundamentally about producing human understanding and meaning and as such create an alternative set of values than those that drive economic and market concerns. They are an important antidote to a world increasingly organized around economic value.

We identified nine general categories or “buckets” to help sort the dozens of values listed. These categories include:

1. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (identity, self-esteem, emotional development, self-expression, spiritual)
2. HUMAN CAPITAL (mastery, talent, creative skill, discipline, teamwork)
3. HERITAGE/HISTORY/CULTURE (connection to history, community identity)
4. RESISTANCE AND POWER (political expression; challenges to existing order)
5. CHANGE/PROGRESS/ADAPTABILITY (art that produces change or that helps societies, communities, and individuals deal with or understand change)
6. HUMAN UNDERSTANDING (tolerance, understanding and engagement with diversity and difference, empathy, connection).

7. SENTIENT (beautiful, emotionally resonant, exciting, enthralling, pleasureable, enchanting, playful, entertaining)
8. ECONOMIC (jobs, taxes, tourism)
9. CIVIC PURPOSE (solving social problems in the community – health, schools, city design).

The group then struggled with the notion of having to “articulate” or argue for a single value of the arts. Many expressed the opinion that value is infinitely diverse and context specific. We can not know the value of something prior to an experience. Value and meaning are produced in interaction and it will differ for every participant.

We acknowledged that arts leaders may at times be forced to make arguments and defend the value of the arts to those who control potential resources. In these cases, leaders should listen to the values that are important to the relevant stakeholder and emphasize the most convincing value proposition – often focusing on instrumental benefits. There is reasonably good evidence to argue for economic impact or civic and social benefits. Again, advocates need to remain flexible and use the proper tool or argument for the case at hand. While recognizing the strategic or tactical value of such arguments, these are not the values that motivate work in the arts or that sustain deep engagement with audiences.

Skeptical that we could or should come up with a convincing argument for the value of the arts, the group arrived at the following questions to consider when thinking about value, argument making, and communication around the arts:

1. Is it possible to say something about the arts in general or does this need to be parsed further?
2. Value to whom? Value can mean many things to many people even at the same time.
3. Are we defining value to help us do our work better or defining value in order to persuade?
4. How do we talk about value when ideas of value undergo change over time? How often do we need to revisit the question of value in a rapidly changing context?
5. How do we communicate a value which transcends words?
6. How do we link value to particular stakeholders (e.g. differentiating value) even while looking for something more universal?
7. What will we do with the answer to the question: “What is the Value of the Arts?” and would the answer to the question be different if different people were in the room (especially people who don’t self-identify as art enthusiasts)?
8. Isn’t value either demonstrated or not? “The proof is in the pudding...”

9. Should we be asking where is value rather than what is value? In other words, perhaps value doesn't exist in the artwork, but rather in the relationship between artist, institution and audience.
10. Do we have a crisis of communicating value in the arts? Or is our problem lack of relevance?
11. Rather than asking how do we talk about our value, should we be asking instead whether we're doing a good job at providing the values we say are important?
12. What is the particular value of the arts in this particular moment of change? Of the many values provided by arts engagement are some more important now than before?

The group also talked about grassroots activity around the performing arts and “tree top” activity. Both are important. The grassroots creativity tends to happen at a smaller scale, in communities and neighborhoods, and often emphasizes the self-expression and creative capacities of citizens. But, there is also a need for powerful and ambitious productions that can focus attention, create a common conversation, and advance the important and difficult goal of raising consciousness and human understanding. The group raised the prospect that the arts field may be delivering too many performing arts events that neither unleash grassroots creativity, nor rise to the level of producing a “focusing event” that can be transformative.

In the end, crafting the right arguments and language seems like a short-term and ultimately unpromising pathway. Artists and organizations need to talk about value less and demonstrate it more. They need to listen to their audiences and communities. They need to develop programs that advance those values that lie at the heart of much artistic efforts – especially the ability to expand people's lives and provide access to feelings of empathy and human understanding. When people (audiences and participants) value the work we do and when they choose to collaborate in the production of meaning and experience, then we know that we have created value. Rather than marketing, advocacy or argument-making, artists and arts leaders need to invite people to join them in exploring the value of the arts together. They need to build relationships, not audiences.

Finally, the group felt optimistic about the value of the arts in lean times. In particular, there was a sense that the current economic downturn might usher in a new post-consumerist/post-materialist way of life. If that happens, then there might be an opportunity to help individuals and communities discover alternative, non-economic values that elevate their quality of life. The performing arts stand ready to assume an important place among other alternatives (religion, family, the environment). But artists and arts leaders will have to demonstrate their value, not just advocate for it.