

Is there a Measurable Benefit to Public Art?

In the Western world, it's widely assumed that making works of art easily available and visible to the public improves people's lives in tangible ways. Having lived in half-a-dozen major American cities and one English city, I've seen public art everywhere. Much of it is funded in whole or part by the taxpayers. But what, exactly, does it do for people?

Whatever it is, it doesn't seem to be measurable. Writing in the London Telegraph last week, classical-music critic Ivan Hewett discussed a report recently unveiled by the Humanities Research Council. The council is one of seven government-funded research councils—yes, seven—created to “champion and develop areas such as science, engineering and the humanities within the UK.”

What did the report conclude? [Here's a summary:](#)

The 200-page report, which took three years to compile and is based on more than 70 articles, workshops and discussion groups, is called Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture, and it is dynamite.

So, what's the dynamite? It challenges, on empirical grounds, every argument that's been used to justify government funding of art projects, such as:

...the initiative in which major artistic centres are celebrated as a “City of Culture”; as well as the use of arts in promoting health issues, improving children's performance in the classroom, healing divisions between communities in conflict; and promoting the rehabilitation of prisoners. Each section of the report attempts to assess the success of these initiatives with a fresh and objective eye.

In nearly every case, the report states, there are no measurable benefits. That result is troubling—or, rather, it should be troubling to the people who should be taking note of it.

For if there are no measurable public benefits, contrary to the dogma we've heard from our cultural and political guardians, how can one justify the devotion of tax resources?

Alas, some might find it more convenient to dismiss or ignore the report. A not inconsiderable number of careers are invested in sustaining the funding for such projects. Nobody on the gravy train, and few providers of the gravy, wish it to stop.

Suppose, though, that the report's lessons are heeded. Does that stop the train?

Not necessarily. As Hewett [notes](#):

...underlying message is a plea for something you might think obvious: to restore the individual's experience of art to the centre of the debate. That experience has been sidelined, because it can't be deployed in a government policy...

Appreciation is unpredictable. One can never know for sure what impact a work of art will have... That isn't just true for the person faced with the work of art. It's also true of the person who made it. Art is a venturing into the unknown, for both receiver and creator. This is why, at its heart, art resists being made into a tool of policy...

But once you have admitted that, you are also admitting that the arts really are different from other human activities, at a very fundamental level. And if that is so, the instrumental view of the arts, which judges culture by its usefulness, flies out of the window.

That's what makes this report, in my opinion, so profoundly

subversive. It suggests that the arts can indeed have positive effects, but only if we give them the freedom to be themselves.

Rejecting the “instrumental view of the arts” is vitally important for keeping them healthy. The same, I’d suggest, goes for the humanities.

If it’s true we can’t measure the benefits of art, so much the better. The true values of art need not be measurable; they are real enough. Distinctively human, in fact.