

## Can we measure the intrinsic value of the creative arts for research assessment?

How do the current criteria we use to evaluate the quality, engagement and impact of research relate to the priorities of creative arts research? What do these criteria capture and what do they miss?

In organisational and governmental debates about the primary value of the creative arts, instrumental and extrinsic criteria, including economic, social and industrial factors, are routinely employed. Julian Meyrick has observed that “Australian governments have conflated the nation’s cultural creativity with its economic prosperity” (Meyrick 2017). However, it is necessarily the case that the most important value inherent in creative arts research is something intrinsic to that practice: that the value of creative practice research is that it is a creative practice.

What criteria might capture the intrinsic value of the creative disciplines? Can we measure whether an example of creative arts research meets the standards of performance for such criteria? If the point of creative arts research is to be creative - to paraphrase Stephen Scrivener, who suggested “the proper goal of visual arts research is visual art” (Scrivener 2002) - then we need to determine what is of value in that creativity and, subsequently, how to measure it.

Before we turn to this question it seems appropriate to situate the matter in relation to how creative arts research is currently evaluated through the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) exercise. Do the ERA’s Engagement and Impact (E&I) guidelines offer any assistance in addressing the above questions?

The E&I documentation is clear as to the indicators of Engagement, which clearly function to support Julian Meyrick’s above assertion. These include:

- Cash support from research end-users
- Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) categorised research income, Categories 1-4
- Proportion of HERDC income per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) academic researcher
- Research commercialisation income

The E&I indicators for Impact are rather less clear, articulated as “explicit evidence, for example cost-benefit analysis, or adoption of public policy that leads to changes in behaviour” (ARC 2018). This appears to be both a narrow indicator, that excludes many of the areas where the creative arts can have impact, and vague, offering few clues as to what a good example of impact might look like. However, a section of the E&I documentation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research impact studies offers a glimmer of hope, where it is stated “the impact study should demonstrate the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance arrangements were integrated into the activities and processes” (ibid), suggesting that research may contribute to or engage with

how communities define and enact themselves. This offers hope as it is an indicator that could be understood to relate to the intrinsic value of creative practice, as we will see later when discussing the work of anthropologist James Leach.

The E&I document lists a number of examples of engagement in its appendices, including those that might be considered as speaking to the intrinsic value of creative practice:

- Co-authorship of research outputs with research end-users
- Established networks and relationships with research users
- Connections to cultural institutions, seminars/workshops, internships and engagement with the public
- Co-designing and collaborating on performances and exhibitions

But are these indicators enough to capture the intrinsic value of creative arts research?

A significant problem emerges when consulting the ERA's E&I guidelines. Consistent with the main ERA exercise, research is defined as "the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings" (ibid). The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) uses a similar definition of research but omits the term 'knowledge' in favour of terms such as 'understanding' and 'insight'. This apparently minor difference is important, especially for creative arts research, as it has been argued that the creative arts are not a means to knowledge creation. Stephen Scrivener, whose work informed the development of the UK Research Council's definition of research, has argued against the work of art being expected to encapsulate knowledge, reflecting on the import of subjective interpretation in the creative arts, stating;

I will not claim that the visual art object cannot communicate knowledge – it can. Instead, I will argue that this knowledge is typically of a superficial nature and cannot account for the deep insights that art is usually thought to endow into emotions, human nature and relationships, and our place in the World. (Scrivener 2002)

If creative arts research struggles to satisfy most of the criteria of the ERA and is seen to be non-compliant with the definition of the very thing the ERA sets out to evaluate (research) then where does that leave us? How can something subjective and open to interpretation, as opposed to objective and determined, be considered of value within the context of the ERA?

One criteria of value that has been promoted, similar to that of Gross National product, is that of the 'happiness quotient' (Ura et al 2012), which could be conflated with the notion of 'wellbeing'. However, is it the aim of the creative arts to generate happiness and/or wellbeing? If that was the case it would be a rare work of art that sought to engender unease or anxiety, yet many important contributions in the creative arts have intended to do just that - evoking the paranoia of a Kafka short story, the terror of a Goya black painting

or the existential dread of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Even here it would seem that the expressive outcomes of a creative work will not be useful as a measure of objective value, given how subjective each person's experience of a creative work might be.

Salman Rushdie observed 'Those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts' (Rushdie, in Grant 2019). This suggests that the value of creativity might be in how we negotiate our agency in respect of our coming into being - or, as Hegel would have it, between nothing and being (Hegel 1969). Rushdie is proposing that it is in how we invent and shape our realities that we acquire agency, as a process of becoming, and that this is the purpose of story-telling and the creative arts more generally.

Anthropologist James Leach has suggested this process of creative becoming is not just a personal activity but a collective one, inherent in everyday culturally shared creative practices, often involving places and things, stating that communities

... generate new people, who emerge from these places, and objects which facilitate or even participate in these creative processes. Making people and places involves relations to other people and to spirits and ancestors that embody, through song/design/dance complexes, the generative potential of land itself (Biggs & Leach 2004)

If the value of creative practice is in the generation of people and places, individually and collectively (what could be considered *cultural generation*), then perhaps it is to that we should turn our attention to evaluate instances of creative practice. Subsequently, we might see how this relates to some of the terminology and frameworks of the ERA E&I; specifically those elements concerning how people define themselves and establish agency, as evidenced in the discussion on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research.

This might seem an overly nuanced assessment of how creative arts research might be evaluated against extrinsic value criteria, whilst reconciling this with the intrinsic value of the creative arts. However, it might offer insights into why the Fields of Research (FoR) associated with the creative disciplines performed well below other disciplines in the 2018 ERA, with FoRs 12 (Built Environment and Design) and 19 (Creative Arts and Writing) placing last and second to last in the rankings (Woodrow 2019). This raises two questions that might inform the processes of research evaluation going forward;

firstly, were there E&I submissions that sought to foreground strengths of intrinsic value in the creative arts and, if so, how did they perform?

secondly, were the E&I assessors provided with the criteria and instruments necessary to assess intrinsic value or were they only able to arrive at their assessments employing extrinsic indicators of value?

Pursuit of these questions would require an interrogation of the criteria and methods the ARC employs in the assessment of research but, more significantly, also challenge us to question the value systems that define our academic practices.

Simon Biggs, April 2019

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#### Biography:

Simon Biggs is a media artist, writer and curator. His work has been presented in the UK at Tate, National Film Theatre, ICA, FACT, Ikon, in Europe at the Pompidou, Academy de Kunste, Maxxi and elsewhere at Macau Arts Museum, Walker Art Center, San Francisco Cameraworks, Total Seoul, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Adelaide and Edinburgh Festivals. Publications include *Remediating the Social* (ed, 2012), *Autopoiesis* (with James Leach, 2004), *Great Wall of China* (1999), *Halo* (1998), *Magnet* (1997), *Book of Shadows*

(1996). He is Professor of Art, University of South Australia and Honorary Professor, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.littlepig.org.uk/>