



Cultural Value Project Launch Event, March 21st 2013

Audio Transcript

Geoff Crossick

I'm Geoff Crossick. I'm the Director of the Cultural Value Project and this really is an exciting moment for the project itself: it's its formal launch. It comes at the end of a very special week for the cultural value project.

The week began, as most weeks do, on Monday and we were in Glasgow for the first of the town meetings: about 60 people there, very positive response, people from the academic sector and from the cultural sector and from local government. And then the next day we were in Manchester: 110 people, the same positive response. This morning: 160 people in London for a meeting, the same positive response.

What is extraordinary, we found, is the enthusiasm and the engagement across the higher education and cultural sectors for this. People involved in research councils in this room will be astonished to find that we had all these people together for long meetings - an hour to an hour-and-a-half of questioning and there was not a single criticism of the AHRC and not a single criticism of the project. We are getting something right and now we've come to the formal launch and it feels very special.

And speaking for the research project's splendid Project Researcher, Patrycja Kaszynska, and myself as Director, we're really pleased to have such an impressive audience here for this launch: people across the cultural sector, government, public bodies, and higher education, and to hear the very positive words from such significant speakers. David, thank you for your words and your commitment and let me say that as many of us know, your support for the arts and humanities is always important and it's something that we don't take for granted. And also Jude, thanks for such inspiring words, for your real interest, and your appreciation of what this project is about.

What we're trying to do in this project, is something new in its breadth and in its ambitions. And let me stress that it is a research project. We don't know what answers we'll get and we must be prepared for some answers that we don't expect and that we don't even welcome. But as a research council, it's imperative that the AHRC steps away from the tradition of advocacy of the arts and culture and seeks to support its domain through serious research. And it does so, I think, in four innovative ways and I want to highlight four ways in which I think this project is trying to be different.

The first is we're starting with *all* arts and culture. We're not just starting with publicly-funded arts and culture. Most previous work has focused on a case to government and that means it's been shaped by advocacy to government and by the case the sector thought governments wanted to hear, and David had things to say about that: about the

limitations of the economic impact studies, that both sides played the game of wanting and yet both sides knew that that's not what art and culture was most fundamentally about.

We're casting our net much wider. We want to embrace the breadth of arts and culture, models of arts and culture: that is the commercially-provided arts and culture, the publicly-funded, the third sector of not-profit organisations, and also the informal participatory arts. We're interested in the reading clubs, in the amateur dramatic societies, in the choirs, in the group of young kids who get together to practise for a band that probably is never going to play in public, but they practise vigorously because they care about the music they're making.

All of that we want to capture, as well as the more formal art and culture, and across a full range of art and cultural activities - that is obviously the creative and performing arts, but also museums; film; new media; literature, which often gets neglected because it's mostly such a private activity; design; heritage, and not just the built environment but the natural environment, because as a historian of this country, I know full well that if the urban environment was built, then the natural environment that we experience is just as constructed by human beings over the generations, over the centuries. So we're casting our net very wide.

Secondly we want to start with the value that's irreducibly located in the artistic and cultural experience, not the secondary instrumental benefits to the economy, to cities, to health. All of those are relevant, all of those matter, and we do have to research those and evidence them but without the arts and cultural experience, none of those would happen. We tentatively call this dimension 'the reflective individual and the engaged citizen'. The way that culture enlarges experience, the way that culture gives one an appreciation of others, the way it gives one a sense of one's own place in the world - locally, nationally, globally - and also the way in which artistic and cultural experience provides a way to encounter difficult subjects in more nuanced settings.

One very good example is the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, in which the issue of what it means to be British, with all its complexity and diversity, was presented through art and provoked conversations for days, weeks to come, which a simple lecture on what it means to be British would never have generated. It's the neutrality and the nuances of art that matter. We can confront issues like ethnic relations, death, conflict, diversity, prejudice, through artistic and cultural experiences and think about them in more sensitive ways. That's a benefit to the individual. It's also a benefit to society, though I would make one important point: let us not, in this project, assume that all the effects of art and culture are good.

I like to point to the significance of art and culture in post-conflict reconciliation. We know in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, in South Africa, it's been actively used to bring peoples together, but remember that those very conflicts all started, in part, because art and culture was used to fuel hostility between people. So let us not just assume that everything art and culture does is good. Let's try and understand its power in different ways.

The third distinctive element about the project is that we're not looking for a single notion of cultural value. We're looking for a framework. We want to identify the full range of components of cultural value, starting with the reflective individual and the engaged

citizen but also thinking about the many benefits to the economy: not just economic impact, not just tourism, but issues like inward investment. Corporates who come to locate in the UK, all are part of activities because they know their young, smart, highly-paid staff will love to live in a country with such a vibrant cultural scene. Or the way in which that vibrant arts and cultural environment attracts talent, generates innovation way beyond the artistic and cultural world itself. All of that matters to the economy.

The benefits to health: we know how much in physical and mental health, art therapies are used. We also like to know how well the role of arts and culture plays in actually keeping people healthier, particularly in mental health, as well as managing these issues for an ageing population. Actually all the populations are ageing, but you know what I mean.

There's the benefits to towns, to regeneration, and community cohesion, the reconstruction of the centre of so many towns. There's the benefits of the way in which a country is seen internationally, not something as crude as cultural diplomacy, but rather the way in which the trust in a country is engendered by experience of its culture. And there are probably forms of value we haven't even thought of yet. Our funding call to researchers to come up with ideas for work they want to do to be funded by the project, is genuinely for the first call, an open call. We want to get the ideas from the research community and from the cultural sector on this.

And that leads to the fourth and final dimension of the project: the fourth difference about this project. And that is the challenge to find - and it refers back to both what David and Jude have said - to find the methodologies and the evidence for each of these different forms of value. How should we evaluate them? Note that I said 'evaluate', not 'measure'. Qualitative evidence, in my view, is not what you seek when you can't get any numbers. What we need is ways of evaluating and types of evidence right for each component. Often it will be quantitative data that will be right but when we don't have quantitative data, we shouldn't then feel that we've let ourselves down because there are many areas where qualitative data, case studies, is what we need, but those must be done rigorously, in a way that stands up as research, not simply anecdotally.

The cultural sector is great at telling anecdotes about how people have been changed by art and culture but as somebody once memorably said, 'The plural of anecdote is not data.' We need to get to a position where we can do case studies in a way that's rigorous and that people, even the Treasury, take seriously.

To do that we need to cover and draw on the experience of a range of disciplines: of course the creative disciplines and of course the humanities, but also sociology, economics, ethnography, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, and much more. Where people are thinking about these issues, we need to draw on that.

My starting point was that the project does not start with trying to make the case to government and I think that's important. But we do hope that the outcomes of the Cultural Value project will help those who *are* making the case to government in the future and we're already talking to DCMS and we will talk to the Treasury about how we can do that most effectively.

Let me say, as I've said at the beginning, how encouraged we are by the tremendous response we've received to the launch of this project, to its ambitions and to its

approach, from the cultural sector and higher education in this country; from many other countries including, in a recent visit I made to the United States for a whole series of meetings in Washington, Philadelphia and New York, where there was tremendous support for the sheer breadth and ambition of what we're trying to do.

The time is right. I think the time really is right for a new look at how and why arts and cultural engagement matter: why they matter to individuals, why they matter to society. We do indeed face the challenge of economic growth and the arts and culture will contribute in very important ways to economic growth. But we also face the challenge of constructing a more responsible, thoughtful, healthy, balanced, self-questioning society and the arts and culture will make a very important contribution to that.

Jude and I did not plan our final little peroration, but mine links very closely to what she said. In Britain today, we tend to take for granted what arts and culture bring to us all and that's a mistake at a time when so many in the arts and culture, worldwide, struggle for the freedom to express themselves, whether through new creative ideas or through re-imagining of their own inheritance. I was struck by the fact that the first big international gathering in Myanmar, organised after the reforms got underway, was a literary festival. They hadn't been able to have literary festivals before.

If we want to know just how important art is, then ask repressive regimes around the world, who see it as a priority to repress the freedom of the arts and culture. In that context, I think we all agree, that we should be embarrassed if we ever find ourselves treating culture as an unnecessary luxury.

Thank you.