

Can policy be Artist-led? Perspectives from a researcher and policy analyst

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In January 2007, I was invited by MidWest to contribute to a series of discussions on the role of artists in policy-making under the common title 'Know Your Place'. My involvement started with a conversation with a group of artists from the West Midlands. In this meeting, it became clear that some of the main issues concerning the artists involved in this consultation were their feeling of being excluded from the policy-making process, lacking confidence to overcome existing barriers, the perception that decision-makers did not pay sufficient attention to artist-led initiatives and, particularly, the feeling that there was not a shared language through which to resolve the existing tensions between arts and policy needs.

In this paper, I offer an overview of the key issues presented in response to these realisations. These are organised around three main topics:

- What is cultural policy?
- Can artists influence cultural policy?
- Can the language of research and evaluation offer a bridge between arts and policy needs?

1. *What is cultural policy?*

In order to address the question of whether artists can influence policy or, more generally, whether policy can be artist-led, it is important to understand first what kind of policy we are speaking about. Generally, the area of policy that will be of relevance to artists is defined as 'cultural policy'. The notion of 'cultural policy' is often ambiguous, without clear delimitations, but the following definition by Miller and Yudice offers a relevant starting point,

Culture is connected to policy in two registers: the aesthetic and the anthropological. In the aesthetic register, artistic output emerges from creative people and is judged by aesthetic criteria, as framed by the interests and practices of cultural criticism and history. The anthropological register, ... takes culture as a marker of how we live our lives, the senses of place and person that make us human - neither individual nor entirely universal, but grounded by language, religion, custom, time and space. ... Cultural policy refers to the *institutional* supports that channel both aesthetic creativity and collective ways of life... (p.1, my emphasis)²

In this definition, policy is presented as an institutional bridge between the aesthetic and anthropological dimensions of culture. Miller and Yudice go on to specify that cultural policy is embodied in *systematic*, regulatory guides to action that are adopted by organizations to achieve their goals. As such, it must be understood as *bureaucratic* rather than a creative or organic process.

One of the main issues that emerged in the original conversation with the artists and is implicit in the previous cultural policy definitions is that of a 'language'. The paragraphs above support the notion that the language of policy is bureaucratic, systematic, regulated. Its purpose is to guide action and, as such, it emerges out of "legal doctrine, citizenship education, tourism aims, impresarios' profit plans or philanthropic desires" (ibid). With this as a background, we can start considering how artists are placed to influence the process of policy-making.

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² Miller, T. and Yudice, G. (2002) *Cultural Policy*, Sage.

2. *Can artists influence cultural policy?*

The dichotomy between a highly regulated policy language and the organic and ever-changing language of the arts seems to suggest a barrier and difficulty for the artist to communicate with and influence the policy world. However, the act of policy-making is not only the result of highly deliberate practices. Decision making in policy also results out of *ad hoc* decisions, on an inconsistent basis, responding to public or political pressure. As noted by Miller and Yudice, "performativity rather than constativity characterizes policy" (ibid).

Artists can thus influence policy-making if they are able to create the kinds of pressure that policy-makers cannot overlook. In order to achieve this, artists should act as an organised group, as opinion leaders representing the needs of a community. This is because the policy maker will respond to requests that are placed on behalf of a 'common good' rather than individual demands and aspirations. In order to act as an organised group, artists should thus work towards finding a common ground, learning to lobby. In other words, they should act as brokers, protecting 'practice' beyond particular interests.

Such a process requires a compromise and does not allow for all dimensions of arts practice to be equally protected and represented. Arguably, this suggests that the policy setting cannot address all artists' needs, as it must operate within coherent and 'easy' to regulate frameworks. As such, artists need to consider which areas of policy they should try to influence, and which areas should remain outside the policy remit in order to protect other non-easily regulated interests, such as the artist's capacity - or responsibility - to challenge the status-quo.

An additional element for artists to consider in their drive to influence policy is the wider political framework within which policy operates. Although cultural policy decisions in the UK have been mainly placed within apolitical organisations, the political agenda often drives policy beyond the arm's length principle agreed in the post-war period. This is undertaken on the basis of agreed values and targets that justify spending efficiency - again responding to notions of the 'public good'. Due to the growing demand for transparency in the political process, 'evidence' is branded as the ultimate justification for policy decisions, thus avoiding the criticism that political interest may be too close to policy-making.

In this sense, the emergence of 'evidence-based policy making' as a potentially more transparent and rigorous language, may offer an additional platform for artists to influence policy. But, can the world of research and evaluation coincide with and support the interests of the artist?

3. Can the language of research and evaluation bridge arts and policy needs?

Evidence-based policy making has become an important part of the current jargon within policy circles. In this sense, the language of research, measurement and evaluation could be a relevant reference point for arts-practitioners. Any artist relying on public grants will be familiar with the requirements of funding return forms, which are usually designed to 'prove' the value of investing in arts practice. However, the most challenging dimension of the current 'evidence-based' policy agenda for arts practitioners is that the kinds of evidence on demand tend to focus on the ability of the arts to demonstrate that they can have a positive impact on other realms, in particular, the economic and social realm, so as to help achieve selected social and policy objectives. In contrast, little discussion exists on the value of assessing the 'cultural' or indeed 'artistic' impact of the arts.

Recent discussions within the Arts Council of England, in coordination with the Arts and Humanities and the Economic and Social Science Research Councils (AHRC and ESRC), aim to address this gap and update the debate around what kinds of evidence and what approaches to research are relevant to understand the impact of the arts and culture. Some of the key (traditionally assumed) issues that are being revisited are: can the arts deliver the kinds of evidence that can inform policy? Can research and evaluation provide adequate measures for the arts?

Indeed, the challenge in this process is to ensure the 'quality' of the evidence being presented. One relevant approach would be for arts agencies to be more pro-active in the research agenda. They should be prepared to liaise with policy-makers and provide hard and soft evidence in support of their case. Moreover, they should argue for appropriate key performance indicators rather than accept imposed measurement systems. Indeed, in this process, it is also necessary that these agencies represent the interests of artists - which again implies the need for artists to act as a group and lobby for particular interests in order to inform policy. To advance the negotiation of these conditions, research councils should form partnerships with arts organisations to commission work and thus move away from advocacy, which policy-makers assume is not offering 'neutral' evidence. Finally, a way to give the arts a stronger voice is for researchers to be more confident in shaping evidence.

Overall, in research as well as artistic terms one of the key needs is to establish a shared 'language' with policy. For instance, push for an expansion of the terminology currently in use, so that the main focus is not around 'measure' but 'value' and 'assessment'. Furthermore, present a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence that provide an appropriate basis to reflect the core values of arts practice without being exclusively framed by economic or social imperatives. As argued at a recent AHRC and ESRC meeting, assertiveness on the need for alternative evidence should be used to convince government about the current limitations to appreciate the value of the arts.

Finally, an additional element to consider when exploring languages of reference to influence policy, is the approach of other interest groups outside the arts world. Creativity is not exclusive to the artist, but all areas of human enterprise. As such, the arts world should not be considered in isolation from other areas of human creativity. The corporate world can be a relevant point of reference for artists, as it has been for the public sector, by providing the language of 'entrepreneurialism'. The world of science can also provide relevant reference points. In sum, in the attempt to create the kinds of lobbies of pressure groups that may influence policy-making, the research, business and science worlds, can be good allies for the arts. Returning to the questions posed by the artists at the start of this paper, this is an approach that can lead to artist-led policy-making, help breaking perceived barriers and ensure that the policy world is listening - and equipped to understand and respond to the demands of artists.