

# The civic role of arts organisations: A literature review for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

## Executive Summary

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has initiated an inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations. The inquiry seeks to increase awareness of the civic role that arts organisations play nationally and in their communities. Through research and consultation they will develop understanding of what constitutes 'next practice' and create a movement of organisations committed to demonstrating it. This literature review provides a starting point for the research that supports the inquiry.

## Defining the civic role of arts organisations

A real challenge at the heart of this work is defining precisely what is meant by 'civic role'. It brings to mind politics, community, rights and responsibilities. The arts can be used to provoke, to catalyse, to enable and inhibit the way that people engage with the world around them. After reviewing the relevant literature we have taken the civic role of arts organisations to mean: The ways in which arts organisations animate, enhance and enable processes by which people exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of communities.

## The dual aspects of 'civic role'

The literature on the civic role of arts organisations tackles a variety of themes that are broadly grouped under two main headings: the effect of arts organisations on places and on people. Unsurprisingly, the literature is strongest (and most abundant) in settings where there is the greatest amount (and most sophisticated manifestation) of an explicit attempt to support and evaluate the civic role of arts organisations. We believe we are able to identify five distinct groups of arts organisations vibrantly pursuing their civic roles: those that commission work, organisations that have re-configured themselves, organisations that exploit their assets, building-less organisations, individual artists whose work is relevant, and Arts Councils that have policy to support this work.

## Multiple disciplines have examined these phenomena

This review has drawn from a complex mix of different attempts to understand the civic role of arts organisations. Each intellectual tradition and academic discipline has its strengths and weaknesses. A cultural studies approach emphasises the subjective experience of art upon people. Urban planning, human geography and cultural economics bring another set of perspectives. These disciplines attempt to capture what

is characteristic of a place (for example, what are the attributes of places) whilst also capturing data on activity that happens therein. A sociological perspective is built upon the recognition that the phenomena being studied are culturally specific and contested, and that there are hierarchies in society that may not be immediately identifiable. Finally an arts-based approach considers art as a manifestation of people's engagement with the world and seeks to understand it on those terms.

### The prominence of these approaches in the United States

The bulk of activity (and resulting literature) undertaken to support and understand the civic role of the arts seems to have occurred in the United States. There may be a few reasons for this. Firstly, there is not the long-standing infrastructure or tradition of public funding support for the arts in the US as exists in the UK and in continental Europe. Secondly, the febrile social history of the US during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the arts used as a conspicuous tool for empowerment and self-expression in social movements in the service of civil rights and urban renewal.

### Arguments for and against arts organisations pursuing their civic role

We have not found any arguments *against* arts organisations acknowledging or developing their civic role. Arguments in favour of this role comprise the following:

- The inherent argument: Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes 'a right to participate in the cultural life of the community' and that it is in the duty of every arts organisation to reach out and be an active part of their communities, especially if they receive public funding or protection.
- The social justice argument: We live in unequal and divided societies and arts organisations are well placed to articulate this disparity and (furthermore) enable social action by, with and for the disadvantaged to ameliorate the situation.
- The intrinsic argument: Arts organisations are uniquely placed to engage in civic matters since they are seen as neutral or third spaces and that people respond to the material of the arts using different values and faculties from those they apply to explicitly political media.
- The dutiful argument: In a society in which trust, engagement and investment in traditional civic organisations (such as churches, political parties, etc.) is seemingly declining, arts and cultural organisations represent a last resort (or perhaps preferred agency) through which to mobilise and animate citizens in democratic processes.

### The challenges of evaluating the civic role of arts organisations

Two fundamental shortcomings hamper attempts to evaluate the civic role of arts organisations. The first of these is the methodological difficulties that dog all evaluations seeking to understand the impact of these interventions: the impacts can be

diffuse, the means to collect data can be intrusive or inappropriate, and the resource (in terms of people and money) to do it properly can be prohibitive. The second shortcoming is the lack of well-considered theories of change. These shortcomings are further compounded by a “literature gap”: either great work is taking place that is not being sufficiently evaluated, or there is energy and enthusiasm expended on projects that have no measurable benefit.

### **The barriers and opportunities for arts organisations seeking to become more civically engaged**

All of the literature seems to concentrate on intrinsic rather than extrinsic barriers, offering advice and observations about how organisations (rather than policymakers or third sector agencies) should go about the business of civic engagement. The barriers can be summarised as: a lack of funding and austerity, a structural lack of attention and skills assigned to this work, reticence with the arts to be leaders and be confident about the arts’ contribution, a disconnect between artists and communities regarding what art is and what art does, and finally the ways that the arts can be hampered by its association with privilege. Conversely, we found at least two clear opportunities identified in the literature: work with young people has the possibility to shape the future for the better; and digital technology creates new ways for the arts to fulfill their civic role.

### **Looking to the future**

There are two concurrent trends which are likely to place an ever-increasing emphasis on arts organisations to develop their ‘civic role’. These are the continuation of cuts to public services under the premise of austerity and the ongoing push from policymakers and the public for greater measurable benefits from investment in the arts. The work that the Gulbenkian is proposing is vital to supporting and sustaining a vibrant and relevant arts sector in the UK. This forward-thinking project will potentially shape the future direction of the arts sector and allow it to be better prepared for increased demands that this review has shown are likely to be around for a while.