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## Evaluating artistic work: Balancing competing perspectives

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The artist is frequently uncertain, when he or she begins to create a work, how the completed work will look or sound. However, the corporate business model, which is premised on a rational and instrumental worldview, suggests that in a market environment, art should be evaluated objectively, based on clearly stated and measurable objectives – often prior to that work being commenced. This paper explores the difficulties that art has in fitting into a corporatist worldview. First, the paper examines the historical materialization of the corporate model, and how it has infiltrated non-profit arts. Second, the paper investigates the likely reasons as to why instrumental rationality and managerialism have been embraced so enthusiastically by bureaucrats, arts marketers and funders. And third, the paper suggests a research approach by which artists, managers and audiences can evaluate art within a framework that is sympathetic to the art and the artist.

**Keywords:** art evaluation; corporatism; instrumental rationalism

### Introduction

Most music is based on a kernel of ideas – musical ideas, not mental ones, musical ones – that occur without you having felt that you have, in any way ... forced it. Naturally if you accept a commission to do a work for a certain orchestra, and you're pressed for time, then you, sort of, force yourself to think musically, whether you are in the mood or not. But the really good pieces are those which are based, I think, on a sort of spontaneous combustion. (Copland 1984)

Creativity often does not have a complete, explicitly functional or rational purpose. Romantic composer Gustav Mahler, for example, said: "An artist shoots in the dark, not knowing whether he hits or what he hits" (1990, 105). However, because artists and arts organizations are often funded by public monies – through facilities such as government grants, fellowships and commissions – it is considered important that some form of evaluation is devised to satisfy government, business and corporate outcomes. In addition, with the growth in corporate sponsorship, artists and arts organizations are being encouraged to be more business-like in their approach to the development of their creative works.

One particular element of the corporate model that has become more common with the growth of managerialism in the arts has been the requirement for professional artists (those who seek to earn some, or all, of their income from arts based activities) and arts organizations<sup>1</sup> to be more focused on outcomes and objectives, and to benchmark their proposed work in terms of comparative advantages over other activity in

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that art form or sector (Arts Victoria 2006). Often, these funding bodies require artists and arts organizations to include measures devised to examine how an audience might respond to the artistic “product,” as well as factors such as potential audience numbers. Terms such as “creative industries,” and statements such as “an economy based on innovation” from government policy documents, further support the trend towards a more commercial and economics driven approach to the arts (Arts Victoria 2007, 3). In a managerialist world, even the language of evaluation is framed in a way that excludes or reduces the importance of the art experience.

Therefore, the implication is that the artist does, or should, have a purpose in the creation of art. Invariably, this purpose is couched in terms of stakeholder evaluation and assumes that stakeholders (audiences) are able to use language to describe or reflect upon how art influences their attitudes and behaviours. This approach suggests that the artist should approach their work in an evaluative way and begin their creative processes with the end in mind, by following a corporatist model of setting objectives and considering the potential audience and their needs. In practice, however, this is rarely the case (McDonald and Harrison 2002). How art might be evaluated in the typical managerial framework, predominantly based around rational and functional considerations of outcomes, should be an important area of interest amongst marketing academics and practitioners.

### **Competing arguments in the evaluation of art**

There are many competing arguments as to how art might be evaluated. In addition, philosophers continue to dispute the nature of art, beauty and the aesthetic experience (Dickie 2000; Sibley 2001). Relatively recently, art as a form of consumption has also received prominence in the marketing literature (Holbrook 1998; Brown and Patterson 2000), as well as being considered from psychological (Funch 1997), sociological (Bourdieu 1986; vom Lehn 2006), economic (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007) and anthropological (McCracken 2005) perspectives. From a more pragmatic, and arguably managerial, perspective, the value of art, and how it might be evaluated in some systematic and structured way, is also receiving prominence amongst policymakers, funders, commercial sponsors and philanthropists through government enquiries and research reports. The objective of this paper is not to summarize all the possible perspectives in art evaluation (for an excellent summary, see Charters 2006); however, a number of models are worth considering.

Beardsley (1982) argues that there were general standards about what makes an artwork “good,” and any artwork that satisfies these standards is better than artworks that do not. This approach has been termed the “generalist” model. Alternatively, Lyas (1992) argues that what makes an artwork good from one perspective, may not make it good from an alternative perspective. In other words, every artwork should be judged on unique grounds. This approach is referred to as the “particularist” model. Both of these models are now considered in more detail.

The “generalist” approach to the evaluation of art relies on a basic evaluative schema that is heavily influenced by a belief in a linear rational model (Saul 1999). Hence, the generalist model works on the presumption that artwork is good if it produces the right kind of aesthetic experience (Beardsley 1982). Beardsley suggested that the primary properties of the right kind of aesthetic experiences were unity, complexity and intensity. Ultimately, the generalist approach provides a relatively objective means to evaluate the quality of artwork, insofar that it conforms to rational

interpretation of the function of art. However, the generalist approach still allows for a subjective interpretation of the critical properties, i.e., unity, complexity and intensity. The weakness of the generalist approach is the assumption that the properties of unity, complexity and intensity (or within the definitional limitations of these constructs) always make an artwork good. However, there are cases when these properties may be not be appropriate for evaluation. Dramatic intensity, for example, may be appropriate for a serious drama, but may not be appropriate for a comedy or musical.

In the field of aesthetic philosophy, an alternative perspective to the generalist model is the “particularist” approach (Lyas 1992), which implies that all artwork should be judged on unique grounds. In other words, evaluation is subjective and arbitrary, according to a schema determined by the individual viewing the artistic work. The particularist approach is in direct opposition to rational models of individual self-interest and instrumental rationality, which are predominant in managerialism (Saul 1999). Each of these models, therefore, is in direct conflict with the scientific models that have been adopted by business, i.e., the testing, through hypotheses, of observable, empirical and measurable evidence, combined with (mostly) linear, causal paths and generalizable outcomes.

Some musicians, for example, maintain that music has no meaning outside itself. Stravinsky, for example, said: “Music expresses itself.” He described music as “supra-personal and supra-real and as such is beyond verbal meanings and verbal descriptions” (Stravinsky 1936, 53). It is clear, then, that the appeal and effects of art cannot always be entirely rational or cerebral. For example, art can be used to stimulate mass emotion, but rational sciences, such as mathematics, cannot (except, perhaps, for a mass gathering of mathematicians).

### **The commodification of art**

Since the Renaissance, and in particular with the growth in consumption, there has been a shift in society to see all experiences as a commodity, i.e., to place a universal value on everything (Walsh 2004). Individualism advocates a commodification of all experiences, i.e., “What’s in it for me?” It is arguable that consumers have been convinced that it is appropriate to weigh up their options in terms of what is being offered from a utilitarian and “rational” perspective. Art grapples with this context because what is being offered by the artist is, ostensibly, abstract and subjective. This movement has been largely brought about with the growth of neo-liberal economic ideologies that argue that consumers should be free to choose how and what they consume (Friedman and Friedman 1990). The problem with this argument is that consumers are likely (and have been encouraged by economists and marketers) to respond to their first-order (or short-term) preferences and satisfy desires as quickly and efficiently as possible, rather than responding to second-order (or more long-term) preferences (Minkler 2004).

Western consumers’ evaluative schema has become heavily influenced by economic theory and, in particular, instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality views abstract concepts, such as art and heritage, in terms of utility. In other words, art and heritage are considered a set of more or less valuable resources and thus transformed into a commodity. Therefore, it is argued by instrumental rationalists that consumers should be encouraged to evaluate an abstract idea based on its degree of utility, or how it will reward them, e.g., does the art make me happy, make me sad, move me, give me value?

The rationality of the economic world since the industrial revolution, and amplified in the Reagan and Thatcher economic rationalist era, has meant that non-rational things have been transformed into marketplace commodities. As a consequence, previously non-marketed entities, such as the environment and the arts, have been forced to conform to a market view of their worth (Hamilton 2003). In this context, art – which might rely on an internal and personal perspective with no clear objectives, or alternatively a perspective that incorporates collective needs – is likely to struggle with the marketplace, as the marketplace is intensely impersonal and is a place where actions are motivated by self-interested gain for individuals (see, for example, Friedman and Friedman 1990; Fukuyama 1992).

One of the prominent values in a rational and libertarian society is that consumers are entitled to individual choice and (immediate) satisfaction from their consumption experiences. Particularly in “secular” societies, people are encouraged to shop around for the best value; the mantras of choice and customer satisfaction are the drivers of most marketing strategies. To some degree, a surfeit of choice has become a pseudo-measure of happiness (Schwartz 2004), when the reality is that too much choice may lead to a reduction in satisfaction and a demotivation to choose (Iyengar and Lepper 2000).

All of these factors have inevitably influenced how consumers (or audiences) are being asked to evaluate their artistic experiences. Further, these factors have the potential to influence how a funding body, or sponsor, makes a decision about what artistic endeavours it will fund.

### **Instrumental rationalism and the functionality of art**

The ideal of functionality supposes that we always know in advance what we want something for. It assumes that we always come to objects with quite precise plans about what we want from them. (Armstrong 2006, 23)

The approach to artistic evaluation amongst many marketing researchers and practitioners, and in the field of funded arts bodies, is that the art is good insofar as it serves its end purpose, which is indicated by measures such as attendances (e.g., sales, membership, tickets sold), customer satisfaction, perceptions of value for money (Hume, Winzar, and Sullivan-Mort 2004), brand trust and customer loyalty (Kotler and Scheff 1997; Soutar et al. 1997). In the field of arts management, this evaluative schema has become heavily influenced by economic theory and, in particular, instrumental rationality. In this context then, it is argued that art should be viewed predominantly as entertainment or diversion (Rousseau 1997) and, therefore, can be evaluated in rational terms.

Richards (2004) suggested a complementary approach to artistic evaluation, by arguing that artworks should be assessed in terms of “fit.” This is not a new concept, as the eighteenth-century actor, David Garrick, had used a similar means to argue against Hogarth’s attempts to define “beauty” (Armstrong 2004). In Richards’ model, however, artwork is evaluated for its fitness relative to the varying tastes and capacities of the individuals experiencing the art, rather than making a definitive assessment of the object with regard to its use. This approach is not as abstract, and subjective, as it first appears. In the fitness model, there are hard facts that can contribute to perceptions of fit. Specifically, whether an artwork is fit for a particular person, or group of persons, is an objective matter: the fitness model allows the respondent to decide

which context is the most relevant to any evaluative judgement. Furthermore, the fitness model assumes that aesthetic factors function in combination with non-aesthetic factors. With this in mind, artwork can be evaluated in terms of a range of possibilities, such as the unity, complexity and intensity, but also in terms of how the art functions as a social vehicle, and whether it provides satisfaction and/or enjoyment.

The difficulty from an art evaluation perspective is that marketing research is predominantly reliant on a rational, explicit, conscious, commodity-based means of measurement – i.e., art can be judged in terms of easily measured metrics, such as audience attendance and satisfaction, and how that satisfaction contributes to the market behaviour of the consumer, such as loyalty and future attendance. The alternative means of evaluation – i.e., the generalist or particularist approach – does not easily merge with commodity-based measures, predominantly because one approach is particularly rational, while the other is particularly abstract.

The fitness model is perhaps the most useful means of approaching art evaluation in a market environment because it recognizes that evaluation varies in accordance with the needs, desires, preferences and tastes of those who experience the artwork. However, the fitness model, as defined by Richards (2004), was not intended to be used to evaluate art from a purely rational perspective.

Managerial means of evaluation that are informed by instrumental rationality, do not take into account the long-term, broader benefits, such as an overall interest in art in general, or the community bonding that comes from participation in art activity. If government funding is about sustaining art, rather than sustaining art institutions *per se*, then the rational perspective, which is premised on short-term, predominantly functional and utilitarian gain, must take into account broader conceptualizations of outcomes, as well as the symbolic messages that come from this support, and we must consider alternative ways to evaluate art from a marketing perspective. This is not to say that other bodies already do this, through peer review, etc., but marketing has not been able to elaborate a means to evaluate abstract ideas as yet, beyond rationalizing them as having a value that is measurable from a financial or commodity-based perspective (Goulding 2000). It is the marketing researcher's responsibility to develop better methods to express the value of art.

### **Finding the balance**

One means of balancing the abstract with the rational, then, is to evaluate art in terms of entertainment, enjoyment, satisfaction and value, and in terms of evaluations that consider the skill of the performers (Garbarino and Johnson 1999) and the perceptions of whether the presentation was stimulating, discomfiting and challenging (Hirschman 1983). It is important here not to revisit the romantic notion of the simple free expression of emotion. Rather, the balance may be found by means of incorporating emotion in some evaluative framework. In addition, it is important that art is also evaluated for its ability to create social fabric, bond communities, and generate reflection and, perhaps, optimism. While not ideal, this approach takes into account that art is not purely a commodity for consumption, or a means of passive distraction (Saul 1999), but is also concerned with more internal psychological and sociological responses, such as stimulation and a recognition of the intensity of the artwork or experience (Arnould and Price 1993; Hirschman 1983).

Ultimately, however, the marketer is interested in audience response insofar as to how those evaluations translate into market behaviours, such as return attendance and

memberships. Further, the typical marketing view of the aesthetic product is often couched in terms of quality (Garbarino and Johnson 1999), when in fact the experience will contain aspects of sensory, affective and cognitive interest, which will be evaluated in a range of ways, dependent on the individual, the actual product and the consumption situation (Charters 2006). However, little research has ventured beyond measuring how attitudinal factors, such as entertainment value, perception of quality and satisfaction with the service experience (Hume, Winzar, and Sullivan-Mort 2004) might influence future market behaviours.

There is scope, therefore, for marketers to embrace a broader interpretation of how consumers, or arts audiences, might evaluate an artistic experience. This might be possible by combining an evaluation of aesthetic elements of the artistic experience, whether a performance, exhibition or some other form, with the more pragmatic (and measurable) elements required by funders, related predominantly to some form of outcome. Further, it is also important to consider the needs of audiences, who under some circumstances may seek some form of “escape” or pure entertainment, but under other situations be more stimulated by being challenged, or made to feel uncomfortable about material contained within a performance or exhibition.

Marketing research, particularly in the field of consumer and social psychology may have a role to play. Through a combination of attitudinal measures that takes into account aesthetic factors, stimulation, satisfaction and perceptions of service quality, and examines them in relation to behavioural outcomes such as future usage, loyalty, emotional involvement, advocacy and a desire to participate in creative activities or to volunteer to assist the organization or artist, a balance may be found between the competing demands of corporatism and aesthetic experience.

As such, a challenge is extended to marketers and marketing researchers to consider and develop ways to empirically examine:

- (1) The most appropriate means of combining aesthetic and business outcomes in the measurement of artistic performances and exhibitions.
- (2) The influence of attitudes towards factors such as aesthetics, entertainment, satisfaction and service quality on a broader set of outcomes, such as future involvement with the artist or organization, advocacy, and social bonding – as well as identifying factors that are not always considered under the managerial model.

It is acknowledged that the act of creating a method of measurement implies that we are accepting that the nature of evaluation is one of outcomes; however, in an environment where consumption, utility and satisfaction are the foundation of a culture (Saul 1999), a balance of competing perspectives needs to be considered.

It is important that artists are not “forced” to comply with a corporatist model when developing their works. It is suggested that in many instances audiences already trust artists to provide an artistic experience and that dedicated audiences do not wish to be involved in the development of the artistic performance, nor should artists be required to adapt to audience needs (Garbarino and Johnson 1999). To some extent, this complicates contemporary marketing practice related to focusing on and responding to customer needs. Although it can be argued that allowing the artists to develop the work is, indeed, focusing on customer needs, this makes the process of articulating those needs more of a product focus or orientation, rather than customer focus. When this is placed within a functional or rational framework, to some degree,

it makes the artist predominantly responsible for organizational success. However, recent research into memberships of sporting clubs (McDonald and Shaw 2005) suggests that the risks involved in supporting the “specialists,” i.e., sporting players, or in this context the artist, are traded off for other, ancillary and marketing benefits, such as member support – although it is suggested that there is a fine balance as to what degree supporters are willing to continue to support in the face of ongoing disappointments.

In this vein, funding bodies, sponsors and audiences should be willing to risk an investment, perhaps based on an assessment of the artists’ previous works, or their broad desires in creating art, rather than making a judgment of how “sound” or “innovative” their business plan, or proposed project, may be. As Meyer (1974) argued, an artist’s knowledge is based on practice and experience, which may be tacit. The artist uses this knowledge and skill by employing his or her skills to efficiently and effectively communicate to an audience, rather than being able to formulate them as propositional statements.

This paper is not in any way suggesting that funded artists and arts organizations should not comply with the rules and regulations of good “business”; however, it is the responsibility of the scientific marketing community to develop more considered, and creative, approaches to the evaluation of the worth of art (as well as other abstract endeavours), beyond measures related solely to consumption and economics.

## The challenge

It is imperative that we do not fall into the trap of applying ready-made theories to the creative industries. (Kavanagh, O’Brien, and Linnane 2002)

The purpose of this paper was not to provide a conclusive instrument or measure for arts marketers. Indeed, this paper is a challenge to arts marketers to develop a measure, or measures, that consider the breadth of factors that form the aesthetic experience. Indeed, an instrument or format that challenges, or contributes to, commonly used self-report measures based on managerial frameworks is perhaps warranted. This challenge mirrors similar challenges to the academy to develop alternative theory for the creative industries (Kavanagh, O’Brien, and Linnane 2002). If it is accepted that the role of the academy is to release us from the excessive admiration of particular ideologies or doctrines (Armstrong 2006), it is arguable that the ideology of instrumental rationalism, and managerialism, needs to be tempered with a broader understanding of other potential factors that might contribute to the evaluation of art.

Perhaps one approach to a more sophisticated means of evaluation is that suggested, in part, by Woodside (2006). Woodside lays down a challenge to marketers to overcome a simplistic and naïve approach to evaluation that relies upon self-report measures and an assumption that individuals have introspective access to their attitudes, and are able to place their motives in a propositional format. Any mixed-methods, rather than multi-item, approach to evaluation would provide stakeholders with a deeper understanding of the merits of an artistic activity. Recent research in the areas of implicit and explicit attitudes, and their influence on behaviour, is also a useful means to evaluate complex reactions to the aesthetic experience (Bargh and Chartrand 1999). The Implicit Association Task (IAT) – the most common measure of implicit attitudes – is a computerized task in which volunteers have to use the same

computer key to categorize either emotionally or emotionally “incongruent” categories, which may offer some insight into emotional responses to the aesthetic experience (Greenwald and Krieger 2006).

Clearly recent discourse around service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004), the concept of value in use, “prosumers” and experiential marketing (Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006) recognizes the need for marketers to reconsider their approach to evaluation in general, and the evaluation of experiences in particular. However, this paper presents a further challenge – recognizing that, for many, the art experience goes beyond predominantly explicitly functional and psychological (and marketing) concepts of value and satisfaction, and has deeper and more meaningful outcomes, including, but not limited to, appreciation of beauty, pleasure, and, conceivably, social bonding and community building. Further, the influence of the art, rather than the immediate response to the art, needs to be taken into consideration. As Charters (2006, 251) argues: “Despite the traditional subjectivist marketing view of quality, there may be both objective and subjective elements to the appraisal of aesthetic products.” Clearly, there is scope for marketers to develop measures that balance both subjective and objective elements, as well as the sensory, affective and cognitive stimulation that forms the aesthetic experience.

Similarly, one cannot discount the social elements contained within an aesthetic product. Consumption does not exist within a social and cultural vacuum. Consumers seek meaning through their consumption activities and through communion with those who consume the same products as them (McCracken 1988). Similarly, relationships exist within the context of other relationships. Douglas and Isherwood (1979, 4) argued that consumption had “to be recognised as an integral part of the same social system that accounts for the need to relate to other people and to have mediating materials for relating to them.” Indeed, as vom Lehn (2006) suggests, the experience of consuming a cultural product is a social one, and involves a constant re-evaluation of interpreting both the social context and the physical surrounds. Again, an evaluation of the aesthetic product, must take into account this social context (Harrison and Hartley 2007).

In conclusion, this paper did not seek to provide a summary or review of material related to the scope and origins of the aesthetic concept, as thorough examinations have been provided elsewhere. Similarly, this paper did not seek to romanticize the nature of art – it is acknowledged that art creation has often been at the behest of patrons, and to some degree, a product of an approach that sees art as a commodity. However, it did seek to contextualize the place of aesthetic evaluation in a managerial and rationalist framework, particularly in relation to the means by which marketers might approach the evaluation of art, and the means by which managers, funders and government bodies can make assessments about the value of an artist’s work. This article has offered a challenge to marketers, psychologists, sociologists and philosophers to develop a more integrated and sympathetic approach to the evaluation (and value) of art in a commodity-focused world.

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## Note

1. In referring to arts organizations, I am predominantly focusing on non-profit, government-funded arts and cultural organizations. However, many of the arguments presented in this paper could be translated to the commercial arts arena, as well as the individual artist.

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