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How to (re) value Indigenous performing arts

Commentary by Louise Johnson
on “Excellence and access: Indigenous performing arts”
By Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson

Keywords
Indigenous, performing arts, value, Australia, cultural policy

Abstract
In their paper on “Excellence and access: Indigenous performing arts” the problem that Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson describe is discursive, one that also has a discursive solution. An alternative can come from thinking through the process by which “value” is created, supported and circulated in the art world. Strategies to re-value Indigenous performance can thereby be directed to the various sites of institutional value which have long characterized Australian cultural policy – its importance to national identity, in the connection between culture and economics as well as to the debate over access and excellence – and come from artists as well as the communities they serve.

Biography
Louise Johnson is Associate Professor of Australian Studies at Deakin University. A human geographer, she has published on Australian cities and suburbs, on the gendering of houses, workplaces and shopping centres as well as on cultural capital. New projects focus on locational disadvantage, waterfront regeneration and post-colonial planning.
Introduction

In developing a commentary on this paper I am aware of the dual purposes of this forum – to bring together business, practitioners and arts managers in a critical dialogue – but also to generate new ideas of relevance to policy makers. It is in the spirit of offering ideas stimulated by the paper on “Excellence and access: Indigenous performing arts” which might be of some use to both policy makers and practitioners that I offer the following observations. I will begin by briefly retelling the story contained within the paper and from this draw out my three main points:

1. The problem that Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson describe is a discursive one that also has a discursive solution;
2. A solution can come from thinking through the process by which “value” is created, supported and circulated in the art world;
3. Strategies can thereby be directed to the various sites which have long characterized Australian cultural policy – its importance to national identity, in the connection between culture and economics as well as to the debate over access and excellence – and come from artists as well as the communities they serve.

A new argument and political intervention on the value of Indigenous performance can thereby emerge from this critical dialogue.

Overview of the paper

In their paper on “Excellence and access: Indigenous performing arts” Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson present a somewhat depressing picture of funding support being withdrawn from long standing and worthy indigenous performing arts companies. They correctly question not only the wisdom but also the rationale for such decisions; locating them into longer term histories of Australian cultural policy and its tension between excellence and access. In probing why such decisions have been made, they ask whether they signal a failure of the arts themselves – in terms of their quality and audiences – or of the funding agencies and their criteria. Discussing the reasoning of the funding agencies, they problematise the very notion of “excellence” and ask who makes this judgment. Who and what are the criteria used to appraise artistic quality over other dimensions of value – such as access, community development, skill acquisition or the importance of representing minority groups and their stories? Further, why is artistic excellence – or a vague notion of innovation - currently the main criteria so that others are rendered marginal to such decisions?

Their interrogation of these vital questions highlight the absence of a clearly defined and widely accepted sense of purpose for Indigenous performing art. For me, the fundamental question deserving of further exploration is how to (re-)value Indigenous performance in such a way that is valid to its practitioners but also to audiences and to those who offer financial support. The answer to such a quest is provided in part by the theoretical and policy frameworks offered in work by Jennifer Craik and David Throsby. To these I will add my own theorization of artistic value to offer a strategic way forward for the questions raised in Glow and Johanson’s paper.

Discursive problems have discursive solutions

Glow and Johanson locate their appraisal of policy towards Indigenous performing arts companies within four “themes”, identified by Jennifer Craik (2007) as characterizing Australian arts policy. They suggest that the de-funding of Indigenous performance companies can best be seen in relation to Craik’s fourth theme – in the tension that has long existed between access and excellence. But I also believe it is useful to reaffirm the other themes – or discursive domains – in which arts policy can and should be located:

- Art as something closely related to Australia’s international standing and sense of cultural identity
The relationship between economic and cultural policy agendas

The politics associated with having a cultural policy in a democracy and, of course,

Access vs excellence

In addition, Glow and Johanson cite the recent work of the cultural economist David Throsby in his argument for a bottom up – rather than top down – cultural policy, one that emerges from and values community, diversity and debate.

My argument in response is that to address the concerns raised by Glow and Johansen, Indigenous performance arts can and should be re-valued in the terms isolated by Craik. Once value is conceptualized as a process (Harvey 1999) and, further, it is to recognized that value arises not only from embodied and objective cultural capital but from the critical institutional contexts in which such value is ascribed, recognized, circulated and supported (Johnson 2000, 2006, 2009), then a pathway becomes clear for a political project to mobilize this discourse in the interest of Indigenous performers. This can and should occur in ways that follows the suggestions made by Throsby – as clearly the value of Aboriginal arts is diverse and different amongst Indigenous communities - but also address each of the themes identified by Craig. In short, the problem that Glow and Johanson identify is a discursive one and it has a discursive solution. Indigenous performance can and should be valued in terms of its contribution to Australia's national identity, as an economic but also artistic resource which can be effectively argued within a democratic society in a way that affirms access and community value, without compromising excellence. I will firstly briefly outline the theoretical framework in which such an argument is positioned before sketching how it might be applied to the re-valuation of Indigenous performance art.

The process of creating value

The following set of propositions are drawn form a recent book and article on Cultural Capitals: Revaluing the arts and Remaking urban spaces (to be published by Ashgate, London (Johnson 2006, 2009). Of necessity it is schematic. My argument begins with a very early theorist of value in capitalist societies – Karl Marx.

Marx's notion of value was inextricably linked to human powers and needs registered in the labour process, but also in systems of production and circulation all located in historically specific social situations (Marx 1954). His concept of value – like all others in his schema – was relational; in that the meaning and activity of creating value emerges from a complex set of interconnected social relations. Any study of value therefore has to focus on the social and political process by which value is created and ascribed. It is an approach similar to that offered by David Throsby when he was delimiting an economic view of cultural capital (Throsby 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003). Such a system of creating value is both social and economic, discursive and material. What is valuable is profoundly cultural but also emerges from and constitutes social and material relations. How to move beyond such an abstract approach to the actual study of value systems in the art world is assisted by the work of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and his formulation of cultural capital.

Bourdieu developed the notion of cultural capital to describe the possession of knowledge, accomplishments, formal and informal qualifications embodied by individuals and used by them to negotiate their social position. Bourdieu subsequently used his formulation to analyse and explain the high failure rate of working class children in the French school system as well as to detail and socially situate the tastes of the bourgeoisie. From this he argued that the notion of “culture” had the effect of reinforcing and legitimizing middle class power (Bourdieu 1984, 1994).
If cultural capital is held (or embodied) by individuals as a consequence of their family background, education and placement in the class system creating a form of class distinction, the cultural object – or objectified cultural capital - intersects with the schema to attain its value through its position in a field of cultural production. Within each field for Bourdieu, there are objective qualities which govern and indicate success, and these include price, awards or grants. For Throsby, such a field also includes aesthetic, symbolic and historical value as well as values ascribed by the market place and policy makers. Each field is the consequence of forces and struggles between key arbiters of taste, institutionalised interests, those who gaze upon, value and purchase the artistic products and the political context in which such transactions occur. As a result, changes in literary or artistic possibilities result from alterations in the power relations which constitute the positions and dispositions of those involved in defining art and its value – bureaucrats, patrons, critics, producers, arts managers, viewers, tourists and consumers (Bourdieu 1994). It is the intersection of embodied and objectified output with artistic institutions which thereby give any art object or activity its value.

Such an analysis by Bourdieu relativises taste, artistic production and valuing within specific social and spatial orders while also recognising that such systems obtain a real potency in their operation which reinforces particular class orders. For Bourdieu such a framework allowed the delimitation of cultural matrices on axes of autonomy - where art is produced for its own sake for a limited and highly specialised audience (high art) - and heteronomy - where art is highly commercial and favoured by those who dominate the field politically and economically (popular culture) (Bourdieu 1984). The value of the artistic objects or events and the status of those who produce and consume them varies as a result. In his detailed analysis of particular art forms, Bourdieu thereby links artistic objects and activity to class, power, politics and taste. How any art form acquires value is therefore a profoundly social and political as well as discursive process. It is a process that can be empirically understood and of course altered through deliberate action.

Re-valuing Indigenous performance art

Where such a framework takes the issue of cultural policy and Indigenous performance art involves isolating the processes by which its value is currently ascribed – in embodied, objective and importantly institutional terms – and then intervening in that process to alter its terms. A model of such an analysis exists already in the work of Gay Hawkins in her analysis of the Community Development fund within the Australia Council (Hawkins 1993). In From Nimbin to Mardi Gras, Hawkins traces how the discourse of “community arts” was constructed – by activists from the ground up, thence through a series of objective and embodied artifacts to the point where the category was defined and implemented at the policy level to in turn ascribe certain value and support to particular community art forms and activities. In the process, what constituted art was re-defined as was what was considered “valuable” in artistic terms. For the definition and legitimation of community art shifted as the parameters of quality altered to include a set of community development objectives, access, equity as well as artistic quality and innovation.

My suggestion is that a comparable process can occur in relation to Indigenous performance art as it is re-valued. It is a process that can be guided by the useful thematics Craik (2007) has isolated as variously dominant in Australian cultural policy. Thus Indigenous performance arts are clearly created by and for Aboriginal communities. But to become more than localized events, to actually enter a wider public domain and therefore to qualify for tax-payer support, there needs to be a broader engagement with the four themes isolated by Craik, though it should be noted that not all need to be addressed at any one time. These four sites offer possible avenues for discursive intervention, political pathways that can be utilized to ensure that Indigenous performance art is re-valued in terms currently relevant to institutional supporters. The intervention into the field of cultural production would therefore be discursive but also
material and would fundamentally alter the social and political context in which such work is produced and therefore valued.

Thus Indigenous performance art can – but need not necessarily – engage in the process of affirming, representing but also questioning, Australian national identity. As Johanson has written elsewhere (2008), Indigenous arts are already one of the nation’s most important exports, offering to the world a unique set of images that have been accepted and celebrated in the major centres of artistic value. It is clearly in this discursive domain that a case can be powerfully made as to the value of such work, to be work-shopped in Australia and then taken off shore.

The economic value of the creative arts is something that has become a policy mantra since at least the mid-1980s, assuming real impetus with the Creative Nation statement (1994) and the shift towards the cultural and creative industries. There is no doubt that any art form has to justify its existence in economic terms, even if it is still to be treated as a “welfare good”, but especially if it is unlikely to be financially viable. In a democracy, accountability for the expenditure of funds is appropriate but also opens the recipient to accusations of “special interests”. Such arguments have to be met and they can be. For if Indigenous performance art is any good, it should have audiences! Such audiences may well be local but they could well be and should be national and even international. It is not an unreasonable demand that this be the case. But such success need not be tied to some abstract notion of “excellence”. For as I have argued above, such designations are profoundly discursive and tied to particular class and value positions. Cases can and should be made for the artistic, community as well as the economic value of Indigenous performance art. They can and should be related. As my research in places like Glasgow has confirmed (Johnson 2009), seeing artistic work as part of a process of community development ultimately translates into improved social, health and therefore economic outcomes. Again it is an argument to be made in the terms required by those ascribing institutional value.

As to whether such performance art is “excellent” and “accessible” also of course depends on the terms of debate. My overall point and the strategy should be clear by now – such judgments are made after discursive positions have been developed and put, after embodied and objective cultural capital have been variously located in institutional terms. And if the terms are not ones that support these forms, they need to be challenged but primarily altered through strategic discursive interventions in the terms that register the new value that is being argued for. It is in this way that I suggest that Indigenous performance arts can be re-valued in Australia.
References


