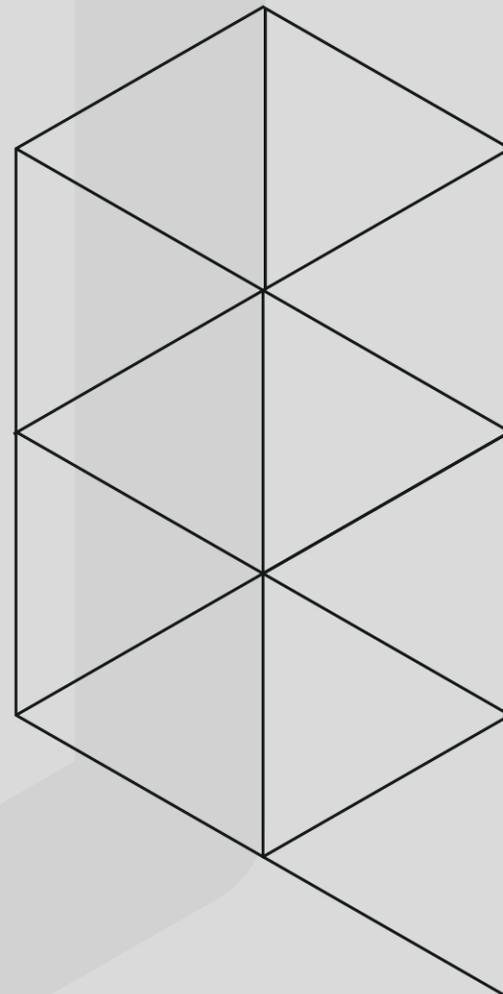# Stop measuring, start understanding! An arts policy and management researcher's autobiographic account of the urgency of an ethnographic turn in research on the values of art

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SPACEX Work Package 4: Archives
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Stop measuring, start understanding! An arts policy and management researcher's autobiographic account of the urgency of an ethnographic turn in research on the values of art[1]

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Abstract

In this article I argue for a shift of focus from measurement to understanding in research on the values of art. Based on my research experience with publicly funded opera companies and inspired by ethnography, I suggest a bottom-up, contextual and patient approach to research on the values of art in society. Bottom-up means that it focuses on the valorization of practice versus theory; contextual means that it focuses on the valorization of the specific contexts versus the generalizability of results; patient means that it focuses on the valorization of the process of understanding versus the urgency to apply. Three of my research projects illustrate how this approach can contribute to finding a voice for all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values that arts organizations create for their communities.

KEYWORDS: performance evaluation, cultural values, accountability, opera, qualitative research, arts policy and management, audience and visitors research, ethnography

The rise of performance measurement as a means of legitimation of publicly funded arts organizations

Many European governments do not consider the 'edifying' role of art as a main criterion for subsidies anymore. On the contrary, there is a growing claim that art may contribute to an exclusive instead of an inclusive society (Alexander et al. 2014). This translates into dramatic cuts to subsidies for art and into a growing pressure for more accountability. Arts organizations and individual artists are asked for an explicit account of the values they create for society as legitimation for subsidies (Larsen 2014). What are these values, and how can artists, arts organizations and cultural policy-makers account for them?

The first, theoretical question – 'what are the values of art?' – is not new. Who gets to 'use' which kind of art and what art does to its 'users' and 'nonusers' under what circumstances and conditions have been central questions since the beginning of civilization (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). However, the second applied question – 'how can artists, arts organizations and cultural policy-makers account for the values of the created or supported art?' – is a relatively young one, emerging from the growing pressure on individual artists, arts organizations and, eventually, policy-makers to legitimize their activities towards the public (Zan 2000; Zan et al. 2000; Belfiore 2004). As Andrew Thompson, chief executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council in England (AHRC), states in the foreword of the final report of 'The AHRC Cultural Value Project',

> Now more than ever, we need rigorous ways of understanding and measuring that elusive thing we call 'cultural value'. In an 'age of austerity', making convincing arguments for public investments becomes all the more challenging. […] we are looking at a coming decade of growing demand for research that generates historical, linguistic, intercultural and religious insight – the kind of insight that feeds a thriving […] cultural sector.

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(Crossick and Kaszynska 2016: 4)

The fundamental purpose of understanding the values of art is thus linked to the applied objective of finding a language by which artists, arts organizations and policy-makers are able to account for the values they create for, or support in, the communities in which they operate and to maintain a content-based dialogue with their multiple users.

This is an endeavour that challenges researchers, but also practitioners. An intensive collaboration between research and practice bears a promising contribution in order to effectively face these challenges (Chiaravalloti and Piber 2011). The common endeavour for scholars and practitioners is, indeed, to voice all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values that arts organizations create for their communities.

Traditionally, European arts organizations have belonged to the public sector or have been substantially funded with public money (Zan 2006). The diffusion of 'new public management' (NPM)-oriented practices (Hood 1991), in which measurable performance indicators are government's favourite form of control on public expenditures, has also reached the cultural sector (Belfiore 2004). Numbers have consequently become governments' favourite form of information to voice all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values created by publicly funded arts organizations for their communities (Lindqvist 2012). Although quantity is not their main business (Chong 2000; Boorsma and Chiaravalloti 2010), arts organizations have been forced to ask, and to try to answer, such questions as 'how do we measure quality?'

Performance measurement as an obstacle to understanding the values of art

In September 2018, I met Nicholas Payne, the director of Opera Europa, for the first time. He told me that he had just closed the last Opera Europa conference, 'Measuring the Arts', in Zürich, by asking exactly that sort of question: 'It is perfectly possible to measure

quantity. But, how do we measure quality?' The growing pressure for legitimation and accountability that I have just mentioned, together with the growing dominance of an economic logic in contemporary western societies (Caust 2003), has given such questions a central role in the cultural policy debate of the last twenty years. However, is this the question that we need to ask in order to get a better understanding of the values of art in society and in order to find a language that supports dialogue with the multiple users and non-users of art?

Instead of giving a theoretical explanation of why a different question might be more adequate to move further with the ambitious endeavour to voice the values of art, I prefer to tell you how the contact with the practice of arts organizations and, specifically, the opera world helped me to reformulate that question. Eventually, it is that experience that also convinced me of the urgency of an ethnographic turn in research on the values of art. In order to understand the values of art in society and to find a language to express those values, we have to leave aside for a while the many, meta-level theoretical explanations developed in the past centuries, above all in the field of humanities and, more recently, in the field of sociology. Instead, we have to adopt a bottom-up approach, in which the values emerge from a deep immersion in the varied practices of the cultural sector – what I call an ethnographic approach to the values of art, as you will read in the next section of this article.

Nicholas Payne's question, 'how do we measure quality?', was exactly the question that brought me into the academic field of arts policy and management, around 2005. Until that time I had been working at the Department of Corporate Management at a Fraunhofer institute in Berlin, an institute for applied research in the area of production systems and design technology. How could the question of measuring quality of art relate to that institute, whose applied research was mainly devoted to organizations in the manufacturing and in the information and communication technology (ICT) industries? Performance measurement and management was the topic of my department. Eventually, we used to do applied research and consulting not only for manufacturing and ICT companies but also for the service industry and for research and development institutions. The question of measuring and managing intangible aspects of performance was thus central.

Stimulated by a lively discussion in Berlin at that time about whether so many opera companies – five, if I remember well – were really necessary for a city and which performance criteria should be used to decide which ones were most worthy of public funding, I realized how, in the case of the performance of publicly funded organizations, the managerial concern for measuring performance had automatically a social and political dimension. It was at that point that performance measurement and management in opera became the topic of my research – a topic that provided me with an opportunity to make a contribution to a sector that I care for – the cultural sector – by unifying and capitalizing on my double education and experience as a business engineer and as a piano performer. Influenced by my work experience and environment until then, I began my research adventure in the field of arts policy and management with the same question as Nicholas Payne's in my mind: 'how do we measure quality?' (Chiaravalloti 2005), although more from a managerial perspective of measuring and managing performance than from a sociopolitical perspective of asking and discharging accountability for the values created for the community

Research questions are an instrument to discover the unknown, and they are by definition subject to change. As soon as we discover a little bit of the unknown we are researching, we may notice that a new instrument, in that case a new research question, is more effective to continue with our discovery. The difficulty of grasping value creation and performance in the opera world by using the question 'how do we measure quality?' as a compass emerged early into my research. On the one hand, I was appalled by reading articles written by management professors treating artistic quality as a standard criterion, as it might be the case with commodities, and assuming that a management expert might suddenly make a statement about what artistic quality is – because, if you claim that you can measure something, this implies that you have a definition for that something (Chiaravalloti and Piber 2011). On the other hand, opera managers would shiver just by hearing the words 'performance measurement and management' pronounced by me while asking them to cooperate for a case study. For them, these words, 'performance measurement and management', were automatically associated with processes of legitimation and de-legitimation – in other words, with an additional attempt by governments and funders to control their own activities. How could I blame them for this?

My meetings with opera managers brought my research closer to the actual practice of the opera world. One of the first, fundamental lessons learned from those meetings was that I absolutely needed to reformulate my research question. The focus should not be on measurement but, more broadly and inclusively, on evaluation (Chiaravalloti and van der Meer 2012).

In general, to evaluate means 'to form an opinion of the amount, value or quality of something after thinking about it carefully' (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2015). Governments' current fixation with numbers as a favourite form of information to voice all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values created by publicly funded organizations for their communities would lead to a replacement of the process of thinking carefully with the process of measuring carefully. Numerical information has been considered essential in order to form opinions about the value and quality of something, not only about the amount. The focus of policy-makers – and researchers, too – has been on finding the 'best' measures of value and quality, and not on understanding the different forms of information used to form opinions about value and quality (Chiaravalloti and Piber 2011; Chiaravalloti 2014).

Is the latter – understanding the process of forming opinions about value and quality – not a precondition for any attempts to measure those values and qualities, if measurement is possible and meaningful at all? Is understanding the process of forming opinions about value and quality not also a precondition for a content-based dialogue between arts organizations and their communities, a dialogue in which numbers may also play a role, but not necessarily a dominant one? Is this dialogue not the applied objective of trying to understand the values of art in society?

In the cultural sector, value and quality have a different nature than in business (Casut 2003). Do we agree that thinking in numbers would limit our scope of understanding and, possibly, even offend the nature of art? (Zan 2002).

In an article co-written with Miranda Boorsma, we define the primary dimension of performance of arts organizations as the creation of artistic value for three main stakeholders: audiences, community and professional field (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti 2010). We also suggest criteria to assess the created values:

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The value for the audiences can be evaluated based on the 'nature and intensity of artistic experiences per artwork per audience segment, and the influence of supportive services';
The value for the communities can be evaluated based on the 'total number of artistic experiences, spread amongst social groups, and the dissemination within general culture';
The value for the professional field can be evaluated based on the 'nature and number of artworks and role within the professional art field' (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti 2010: 308).

The number of productions presented as well as the amount and size of the reached audience segments can be expressed numerically. However, the remaining criteria – nature and intensity of experiences with artworks, their dissemination within general culture and their role within the artistic field – are (inter-)subjective, intangible and dynamic in nature, and thus hardly operationalizable (Zan 1998; Boorsma and Chiaravalloti 2010). Consequently, the creation of artistic value can hardly be measured (Chiaravalloti 2008).

This is why, during my first meeting with Nicholas Payne, I suggested that he reformulates his original question, 'how do we measure quality?', as follows: 'what is quality according to the different participants in the artistic processes – from the artists to the audiences – and how do they evaluate quality?'

These kinds of questions are, in my opinion, the right ones to formulate if we pursue the fundamental objective of understanding the values of art in society and the more applied version of it – that is, once again, to voice all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values that arts organizations create for their communities.
In the next section, I will show how the formulation of such understanding-driven questions is one of the characteristics of what I call an ethnographic turn in research on the values of art in society.

An ethnographic turn in researching the valu
My approach to the investigation of the values of art in society is bottom-up, contextual and patient (Chiaravalloti and Piber 2011).

Bottom-up means that it focuses on the valorization of practice versus theory. Values emerge from the actual practice more than

from existing theories and are grasped through an intensive immersion in the field and the use of in-depth, mainly qualitative research techniques. Current theories do not succeed anymore in convincing contemporary society of the values of art (Belfiore et al. 2010). We should begin again from scratch, aiming at developing new theories that are anchored in the varied artistic practices characterizing a sector in continuous transformation.

Contextual means that it focuses on the valorization of the specific contexts versus the generalizability of results, both in terms of the specific art forms studied and the organizational and institutional settings in which the specific art forms are produced and used. Artists, arts organizations and cultural policy-makers need to legitimize the value of the specific forms of art that they make and, respectively, subsidize to the specific communities in which they operate. They do not need general criteria; they need their own specific criteria.

Finally, patient means that it focuses on the valorization of the process of understanding versus the urgency to apply. It can take a lot of time also for individual organizations to have a full overview of the values they create for their own communities, but as soon as they understand some of those values, they will also be able to communicate about them, since the values will be formulated in the language of the users and not of the researcher. Incremental application of deeply understood specific values is eventually more useful than the application of overall models of 'cultural values' based on empty buzzwords.

This approach fits well under the umbrella of ethnography: Ethnography is about understanding the mysteries of the lived world of those under study, how they make sense of their life at hand and what difference it makes in a broader sense. Fundamentally, it is about searching for, finding and creating surprises when studying everyday life in its complexity, writing up these surprises in stories, and speaking out on (and to) larger issues.
(Costas and Kärreman 2017, emphasis added)

I will illustrate this approach with three of my research projects. The first project is the one I mentioned before – the one I entered with the question 'how do we measure quality?' (Chiaravalloti 2005; Chiaravalloti and van der Meer-Kooistra 2007), which has later

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become 'how do the managers of publicly funded opera companies evaluate the artistic performance of their organizations?' (Chiaravalloti and van der Meer-Kooistra 2012; Chiaravalloti 2015). The applied question about the measurement of artistic quality has become a fundamental question aiming at an understanding of how evaluation, and especially artistic evaluation, happens in the daily work of artistic, administrative and technical managers and of their organizations. It is the interviewed managers who told me their stories of artistic performance, that is, what artistic performance means for them and to what extent this is intertwined (or not) with social, organizational and financial performance. It is the interviewed managers who told me their stories of artistic evaluation, that is, based on which kind of information and activities they make sense of artistic performance. It is, finally, the interviewed managers who told me their stories of accountability, that is, not only to whom they are formally accountable but also, above all, to whom they feel accountable for their work – their social role, we might argue (Chiaravalloti 2016).

Forty hours of interviews for each opera company, a large amount of internal and external documents read and months of personal contact and presence in the organizations delivered some surprise, to stay with the definition of ethnography given previously. At first, of the three sub-dimensions of artistic performance emerging from the interviews – programming, production, reception – the one with the most important role in influencing the managers' judgment about artistic performance is reception. While the sub-dimension production includes, more or less, technical and professional skills, the sub-dimension reception relates to the impact on different kinds of audiences, including the opera staff themselves. The meaningfulness and worthwhileness of the performance, its transformational and educative power, its ability to challenge and surprise the audience, its expressiveness, the magic and breathless aura it creates and its ability to connect performers and audience are the aspects that most influenced the managers' judgment about artistic performance. However, no procedures of evaluation grasp this kind of value. Most information is qualitative, largely unwritten and often tacit. By analysing only formal procedures, we would never fully understand what is artistic value in opera according to the opera staff, even according to those members of the staff that have a more institutional role, such as the management staff. What is needed is a full immersion in their practice. Only with a thorough understanding of

the actual practice of evaluation in opera will it be possible to come with new, more or less standardized systems of evaluation that are useful to all organizational stakeholders, including the organizations themselves and the policy-makers who dream of something like that. In this respect, the findings of my in-depth contextual approach to the study of the individual organizations offer enough insights to develop one specific system for each specific organization. In particular, there are enough 'values' emerging from the interviews, which could be used in the most practical functions of the organizations, from marketing and communication to accountability.

The second project is one I have been busy with for a couple of years now (Chiaravalloti 2019). The first question, coming directly from the opera company that is the partner of this project, was applied: 'how can we develop new audiences' appreciation of opera?' Also in that case, it has been necessary to open up this question and reformulate it in a more fundamental way: 'Under which circumstances does a process of appreciation of a form of art that has been newly discovered by a previous non-audience member begin and continue, and how does a first live encounter with that form of art influence that process?'

Together with colleagues from the investigated opera company, we have decided to focus on a specific sub-group of the so-called young digitals (Experian 2012) as one segment amongst the new audiences – students of art history and students of social and natural science and technology, thus young people who (will) have a high level of education and who – definitely in the case of students of art history – are expected to be committed to art. The first surprise came during the search for respondents: many students of art history have never attended an opera performance in their life, which contradicts the findings of participation studies based on large amounts of data collected through quantitative surveys and informed by largely adopted sociological theories according to which objective demographic variables, like higher education in art-related disciplines, are considered predictors of participation in all traditional forms of art (see, for instance, the cultural statistics published in 2011 by Eurostat). The analysis of interviews shows some interesting surprises, too. For instance, while most efforts in making opera relevant to contemporary society seems to be reserved to a continuous renewal of directorship – think of the German Regietheater,2 for example (Reuband 2018) – it seems that opera

non-audiences, after their first encounter with a Mozart opera in a modern dress, find the modern dress a 'non-value'. They would have preferred to see the opera as it was supposed to be at the time of its first representation – let us say in its classical dress. While it is likely that the opera field might not like the idea of becoming a museum for opera, we might be surprised by discovering that exactly that museum function is the 'value' that new audiences – or at least a part of them – might see in the very existence of opera, if not as an art form, at least as a publicly funded institution. On the contrary, some of the factors that we generally consider barriers for non-audiences actually turn to be motifs for some new audience members; for instance, the infamous elitist image of opera turns into a motif to attend opera again, because it implies doing something special. The chicness of the environment seems suddenly to be a 'value' of opera for non-audiences

Again, the twenty hours of interviews within this small project are definitely not enough to say what is the value of opera for new audiences in general; however, they offer much detailed and specific information about the attended production and theatre – information that the theatre could immediately use in its communication and marketing efforts, but also in the programming process.

Finally, the third example is a project that I have initiated and that is being developed further in cooperation with other academic and practitioner partners. The acronym of the project is, not by chance, VOICE: The Value of Opera for Inclusive Communities in Europe. The fact that this acronym has been first suggested by Nicholas Payne, director of Opera Europa and main practitioner partner of the project, already shows how fruitful a bottom-up approach to research on the values of art is. The language of the practice is able to inform the development of new theories of the values of art in society. In my case, the acronym VOICE suggested by Nicholas Payne allowed immediately for a far more concrete reformulation of the very objective of current attempts to grasp the values of art in society – a formulation that makes this objective more 'tangible' and, consequently, more reachable: to voice all facets, both quantifiable and unquantifiable ones, of the values that artists, arts organizations and the cultural infrastructure co-create with their communities. Rich material about multiple and potentially unknown forms and modes of engagement with opera by different population segments (two focus groups with ten participants each plus a fine-grained qualitative

survey among 2000 respondents), and about the individual and collective impact of engagement with specific projects (200 post-performance in-depth interviews plus 200 pre- and post-performance psychological measurements), will be collected and analysed. This material, consisting of the stories of engagement as told directly by those who engage with art in general and with the selected projects specifically, will provide a genuine language to voice the values – and, possibly, the non-values – of those specific forms of art in society.

Eventually, VOICE has also an applied objective: it aims to contribute to the development of cultural policies and artistic projects that effectively support social, cultural and civic inclusion. However, before meaningful recommendations for inclusive cultural policies and artistic projects can be formulated, a broader and deeper understanding of new forms and modes of engagement with art, of the meaning of inclusion and exclusion, and of whether, how and why engagement with art contributes to inclusion or exclusion is necessary. This requires the development and validation of fine-grained survey approaches to mapping engagement with art, and of new approaches to capturing the individual and collective impact of the different forms and modes of engagement with art – a step back from applied to fundamental research, indeed.

To do this, in line with the valorization of the specific context versus the generalizability of results, VOICE focuses on a specific artistic form – opera. The existing forms of artistic expression are too many, too broad and too diverse to be studied together, especially with respect to the challenging endeavour of gaining a deep and factual understanding of the values they have for the communities that engage with them. Opera has been chosen for this project because it generally has the image of being an 'elitist' art form (Benzecry 2009), with an audience predominantly White, on average older than in other art forms, on average better off financially and better educated than in other art forms (Rössel and Hoelscher 2018). However, there are many recent developments such as animated opera, opera for children, contemporary crossover productions, free online presentations and many other outreach projects that aim to position opera as a less exclusive art form, explicitly target non-traditional opera audiences and sometimes establish participatory practices too (see, for instance, Hering 2018). Consequently, the selection of operatic cases in VOICE is purposive: it includes cases that position

themselves explicitly as 'inclusive' and try to get rid of perceived barriers and to enable access for younger people, population segments with only basic education, local or rural population and people with a migration background. An in-depth investigation of these cases will make us better understand what inclusion and exclusion means, and whether, how and why the specific form of art opera, in her different manifestations, contribute to inclusion and exclusion – in other words, to voice a specific facet of the value, or non-value, of this specific form of art, opera, in society.

By choosing one specific artistic form, VOICE is also patient. The results of the project will not be immediately applicable to other artistic forms in their whole. They will be valid and usable, at first, only with respect to opera; they will not solve the general problem of legitimation that many other traditional art forms have in the current sociopolitical context. For instance, the developed methodologies for the mapping of different forms and modes of engagements with opera as an art form and as an institution (think also of singing in the shower), and for the understanding of the impact of the engagement both at individual and collective levels, can be used to analyse and, if possible, develop opera projects that aim to establish this form of art as a more inclusive one than how it is currently considered. VOICE tries to understand whether and how we can claim relevance for opera in society in the future, and thus contributes primarily to the legitimation of opera in society. Consequently, the results are not automatically valid for other forms of art. However, the multiple artistic expressions encapsulated in opera as an object of scrutiny, together with the grounded validity of the project results for the opera practice, can provide policy-makers, cultural institutions and artists with a solid base for the further development and adaptation of individual methodologies to a variety of artistic forms and cultural expressions. In addition, opera is not the only art form that is perceived as elitist and that is consequently in need of renewal in order to regain relevance in society. The main problems and challenges in developing inclusive artistic projects and cultural policies that emerge from the operatic cases are potentially similar to those faced by other traditional forms of art in Europe. Eventually, the practical recommendations for the development of inclusive cultural policies and artistic projects and the new methods to evaluate their effectiveness – which form together the tangible results of VOICE and which will be formulated and developed in close cooperation with policy-makers, arts administrators and other stakeholders of cultural

organizations – will offer a first, specific but solid platform to build upon for a further development and adaptation to other sub-fields of the cultural sector.

Understanding the values of art in society as a never-ending endeavour

To conclude, although, with the illustrated approach employed, I could not give an answer to the question 'how do we measure quality?, I could give some specific answers to questions such as 'what is valuable in opera according to opera managers?', 'what is valuable, but also non-valuable, in opera according to well-educated young generations who do not attend opera performances regularly?' In the near future, we will be able to answer similar questions for other 'users' and 'non-users' of opera.

Imagine that other groups of colleagues would do the same with other forms of art and cultural expressions in our societies. This is the case, for instance, with the SPACEX project – Spatial Practices in Art and ArChitecture for Empathetic Exchange – whose main objective is understanding the contribution that spatial practices in art, architecture and design can make to empathy and social cohesion in urban spaces (https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/872561). Then maybe one day we might come with answers to the meta-level theoretical question 'what are the values of art in society?' But probably, even if that day will arrive, new forms of art will have emerged in the meantime or will just begin to emerge, and the dream of definitively answering that question after centuries of debate will ask for new research and new understanding. However, we will be conscious that, through a bottom-up, modest and patient approach to research on the values of art, as the one presented in this article and inspired by a focus on understanding that characterizes ethnography, we will be further able to make limited but valid contributions to this fundamental question and to help artists and arts organizations to dialogue more effectively with their communities and, by doing so, to (re-)legitimize their role in society.

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