CultureCase

Provoking debate through community arts

This research was conducted by **Margaret Kelaher, and five others** at the **University of Mebourne (and elsewhere), Australia.**

Summary

The arts play a central role in civic dialogue, providing space for audience members and performers to reflect on personal experiences, learn about community issues, and pursue social change. Yet, for community arts organisations facing pressure to justify their social worth, evaluating the effect of civically-minded programming has proved to be a considerable challenge. The paper shows how three community performing arts organisations in Australia effectively spur individuals to engage in conversations addressing challenges (such as socially marginalised youth or sexual abuse) that are particularly salient to their communities.

The researchers used a three-step methodology

They collected 1,473 survey responses from audience members to gauge their reaction to a variety of performances. The authors also surveyed partner organisations as well as performers and crew members from each arts organisation.

The three organisations demonstrably provoked community members to engage in civic dialogue about the social challenges addressed in performances

73 per cent of survey respondents said that their understanding of the issues had been affected (with 35 per cent of respondents claiming that the creative

nature of the performance was the key driver of their changed perceptions). This factor was twice as important as their pre-existing motivation to address the issue. As long as the issues addressed in their performances are relevant to the community, the authors argue that local arts organisations can act to spur social change through their programming.

Adapted from a summary by Matt Nelsen that first appeared in Issue 7 of *The Digest* from the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago

Keywords

survey **performing arts** **Australia** **community**

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