CultureCase

Cultural value is best understood through conversations with audiences

This research was conducted by **Ben Walmsley** at the **University of Leeds, UK**

Summary

This article presents findings from an in-depth project carried out with five audience-participants at cultural events during Leeds' annual LoveArts festival. The researchers asked participants to explain what the arts meant to them. They discovered that people found cultural value difficult to articulate. They concluded that instead of striving to rationalise the value of the arts, we should try to feel and experience it.

The researchers used a method of 'deep hanging out'

This is a qualitative form of ethnographic research, in which researchers co-investigate a subject alongside participants. Specifically, they immersed themselves in the events of the festival in an informal way, taking part in a series of cultural activities alongside five selected audience-participants. In addition to this, they held a series of post-event conversations with the same participants outside of the festival context.

The aim of the research was to produce a rich account of cultural value by co-investigating and discussing experiences of arts engagement with audience-participants. Conversations with participants revealed the limitations of language in capturing the value of the arts, but confirmed perceptions of the arts as a vehicle for developing self-identity and expression, and for improving quality of life. Researchers concluded that we know, and yet don't seem able to express, the value and impact of the arts.

There is a need for a conversation with audiences

For the cultural sector, this implies a re-thinking of the relationships between artists, arts organisations and their publics, towards a more relational form of engagement in which organisations are in direct conversation with audiences at all levels.

This summary is by **Paula Serafini, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

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