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## Deep hanging out in the arts: an anthropological approach to capturing cultural value

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This article presents the findings of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project carried out from September 2013 to March 2014 by five researchers at the University of Leeds (UK), who paired off with five audience-participants and engaged in a process of ‘deep hanging out’ at events curated as part of Leeds’ annual LoveArts festival. As part of AHRC’s Cultural Value project, the overarching aim of the research was to produce a rich, polyvocal, evocative and complex account of cultural value by co-investigating arts engagement with audience-participants. Findings suggested that both the methods and purpose of knowing about cultural value impact significantly on any exploration of cultural experience. Fieldwork culminated in the apparent paradox that we know, and yet still don’t *seem* to know, the value and impact of the arts. Protracted discussions with the participants suggested that this paradox stemmed from a misplaced focus on *knowledge*; that instead of striving to *understand* and *rationalize* the value of the arts, we should instead aim to *feel* and *experience* it. During a process of deep hanging out, our participants revealed the limitations of language in capturing the value of the arts, yet confirmed perceptions of the arts as a vehicle for developing self-identity and -expression and for living a better life. These findings suggest that the Cultural Value debate needs to be reframed from what is currently an interminable epistemological obsession (that seeks to *prove and evidence* the value of culture) into a more complex phenomenological question, which asks *how* people *experience* the arts and culture and *why* people want to understand its value. This in turn implies a re-conceptualization of the relationships between artists or arts organisations and their publics, based on a more relational form of engagement and on a more anthropological approach to capturing and co-creating cultural value.

**Keywords:** cultural value; deep hanging out; audience engagement; relational aesthetics; anthropology

### Introduction

This article presents and problematizes the process and findings of a cultural value project carried out from September 2013 to March 2014 by five researchers at the University of Leeds (UK). Entitled *Approaching Cultural Value as a Complex System*, the project took Leeds’ annual LoveArts festival<sup>1</sup> as its anthropological site and aimed to explore different ways of articulating cultural value by establishing a

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collaborative participatory action research network comprising researchers, audience participants (who acted as co-researchers) and arts organisations.

The article will critically review the aims and objectives of the recent Cultural Value project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It will situate this project within the wider academic and political context of traditional and current debates on cultural value, and draw on this review to justify the research questions that informed the empirical work centred on the LoveArts festival. However, the core aim of this article is to reframe the seemingly intractable debate on cultural value by proposing an alternative, anthropological approach, exemplified by the scantily articulated method of 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998). Following a detailed articulation of the methodology, and a presentation and discussion of the empirical work, the article will highlight both managerial and policy implications for the arts and cultural sector, and propose a series of recommendations for how the Cultural Value debate might fruitfully be taken forward.

### **The cultural value debate**

At the heart of the academic debate into Cultural Value lies the age-old tension between intrinsic and instrumental value (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). At the heart of the political debate lies a seemingly intractable hierarchy of knowledge, where qualitative insights are generally subordinated to quantitative data, which are widely deemed to constitute the only suitable and sufficient 'evidence' to measure the policy impact (or cost benefit) of arts and cultural activity (EPPI Centre 2010). Myriad academic studies have challenged the premise of trying to *quantify* the impact of the arts (e.g. Matarasso 1996, Vuyk 2010, Walmsley 2012), while others have noted the dominant rationalist and successionist models of causation on which many cultural policy analyses are predicated (e.g. Sanderson 2000, Galloway 2009). The benefits of a more qualitative approach to exploring the value and impact of the arts are elucidated by Carol Scott, who warns that when public funding decisions rely on measurable results rather than valuable outcomes, cultural policy risks falling back into 'the bind of instrumentality' (2010, p. 2).

Mindful of this debate, and fully cognisant of the fact that none of the recent attempts to capture cultural value 'commanded widespread confidence', the AHRC put out a call in 2013 to fund 'ambitious research projects' that might cumulatively 'establish a framework that will advance the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate that value' (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2013). The call particularly targeted projects that aimed to explicate the phenomenology of cultural experiences and encounters. It thus represented an open challenge to the Green and Magenta Book approaches<sup>2</sup> that had been championed and/or adopted in recent UK studies on cultural value (e.g. EPPI Centre 2010, O'Brien 2010). Indeed by calling for proposals that would consider the 'actual experience' of culture and the arts rather than their 'ancillary effects', the project seemed to cast aspersions on Government-backed research such as the Culture and Sport Evidence programme and question its reliance on instrumental public policy methods such as cost-benefit analysis and subjective wellbeing, which are apparently used to great effect in transport and even health (O'Brien 2010).

Recent studies into the impact of the arts on audiences (e.g. Brown and Novak 2007, New Economics Foundation 2008, White and Hede 2008, Radbourne *et al.*

2009; Radbourne *et al.* 2010, Walmsley 2013) have provided fresh insights into audiences' perceptions of cultural value. Based on diverse methods of audience enquiry, these empirical studies have articulated cultural value in the following terms: emotional impact, stimulation and flight; engagement, escapism and captivation; knowledge and risk; authenticity and collective engagement; learning and challenge; energy and tension; shared experience and atmosphere; personal resonance and inspiration; empowerment and renewal; aesthetic growth and self-actualization; improved social skills, better relationships and family cohesion. So there is a significant (and ever-growing) body of qualitative and quantitative 'evidence' regarding the value (both intrinsic and instrumental) that audiences place on their arts experiences, and the terms in which they conceive of and articulate this value.

However, we are in danger here of replacing the bind of instrumentality with the equally limiting bind of utilitarianism. Qualitative research in the arts has certainly succeeded in elucidating the audience experience, but it still struggles to address pernicious questions of reliability and to close the epistemological gap between *perceived* and *actual* cultural experiences. One reason for this is that 'the *how* of the cognitive processes that occur while audiences are watching a performance is largely out of reach to audience research that by definition takes place after the event. In some sense, therefore, the primary experience is available only through the refraction of conscious reflection' (Reason and Reynolds 2010, p. 71). So the challenge for cultural value scholars is perhaps not to investigate what value *is*, but rather how it might be reliably *expressed*, reflexively and inter-subjectively. What else is lacking, it seems, is a deeper understanding of the *processes* (rather than the *outcomes*) of arts engagement (cf. Hewison 2014). It was perhaps with this methodological vacuum in mind that the AHRC's Cultural Value project aimed to 'articulate a set of evaluative approaches and methodologies suitable to assessing the different ways in which cultural value is manifested' (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2013).

### A complex approach

Theories of complexity are becoming ever more popular as ways of conceptualising the impact and/or effects of policy initiatives (Burns 2007). This shift has been gradually effected as researchers have accepted the severe limitations of identifying any simple, linear causality within complex systems and contexts. For centuries, the arts have been regarded by philosophers as a particularly complex and ambiguous pursuit, perhaps because 'the impact of art is a complex and multilayered concept that is experienced and understood in a variety of ways contingent on each individual's experience and perspective' (White and Hede 2008, p. 32). This focus on the contingent nature of cultural experience reinforces the epistemological challenges described earlier and strengthens the case for a more phenomenological approach.

The subjective nature of arts engagement is also foregrounded by Belfiore and Bennett (2008), who highlight the complex range of artistic, personal and circumstantial determinants that comprise the aesthetic experience and dictate the social impact of the arts. In a similar vein, Bourriaud's theories on relational aesthetics highlight the paramount importance of the interpretive role played by the audience: his vision of 'relational art' stresses the need 'to establish intersubjective encounters [...] in which meaning is elaborated *collectively*' (Bishop 2004, p. 54, original italics). This relational approach to art-making, he argues, has the potential to locate

contemporary practice within culture at large and even to build communities (ibid.)<sup>3</sup>

Relational aesthetics thus represents a useful theoretical framework in which to situate this study. However, even cultural economists such as Throsby (2006) contend that certain expressions of cultural value transcend valuation as they are rooted in shared social experiences, while Holden (2012) rightly notes that the intrinsic impacts of the arts belong to the immeasurable realms of emotion and even spirituality. This acknowledgement of the emotional and spiritual nature of hedonic goods (Holbrook 1999) shifts the epistemological terrain away from its more comfortable environment of *knowledge* and towards the more subjective context of *belief*.

Further evidence of the complexity involved in exploring the value of the arts can be found in the increasingly prevalent reference to the arts sector as an 'ecology' (e.g. Giannachi and Stewart 2005). There is something primal and inherently relational about this metaphor, which reflects not only the key social role that the arts have always played in human lives, whether for mimetic or liminal purposes (Turner 1969, Schechner 2003), but also their inherent fragility and inter-dependence. Like Turner, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that in much of the Western world human beings have forgotten how to perform and listen together, and she illustrates the supreme ability of the arts to generate 'the ritually induced passion or ecstasy that cements social bonds' (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 2, 3).

Sharpe (2010) also draws on the ecology metaphor to illustrate his claims that art is 'the currency of the economy of experience' and that 'an economy is properly understood within an ecological context' (p. 32, 33). Sharpe's thesis is highly significant in this context, not only because it contributes to the Cultural Value debate by reasserting the primacy of artistic over economic impact, but more importantly because it shifts the very terms of the debate away from the utilitarian obsession with individual benefit and towards an 'enactive' focus on the collective:

since our cultural systems are inherently social and historical, individual experience always arises in the extended interaction of the members of a community amongst themselves and within their wider context. (Sharpe 2010, p. 31)

Responding to this socio-historical, relational and experiential interpretation of cultural systems, and to the seemingly intractable and politically motivated debates surrounding cultural value, the overarching aim of this study was to produce a rich, evocative, polyvocal and complex account of the value of the arts and culture to people's everyday lives. This aim was driven partly by a reaction against the prevailing policy preference for quantitative approaches to evidencing cultural value, which have been widely discredited and acknowledged to be reductive.

## Methodology

Following a preliminary literature review and a creative workshop conducted with nine regional arts organisations, the core research questions were articulated as follows:

- (1) Why are the arts important to people and how can we know?
- (2) What are the implications of this for arts and cultural organisations?
- (3) What is the purpose of asking questions about cultural value? (i.e. Who wants to know? Why and how do they want to know?).

In order to achieve this aim and provide some meaningful answers to these deeply phenomenological questions, the research methodology needed to be qualitative and empirical. Phenomenology has been defined as ‘the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view’ (Smith 2013, p. 1), so the core purpose of our methodology was to engage directly with arts participants/audiences and discuss their personal cultural experiences. Seminal phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Sartre explored two key aspects of individual existence: being-in-the-world; and being-for-others. Existential questions of this nature can be effectively explored via the ‘nomothetic science’ of anthropology,<sup>4</sup> whereby researchers observe and work with people to reach general propositions about human behaviour. As this study aimed to capture and elucidate the phenomenology of lived cultural experiences, to explore the role that the arts and culture might play in enabling people to live out their identities in the world and coexist with other people, an anthropological approach seemed to be the most appropriate. As Tim Ingold clarifies, anthropologists function most effectively when they work and study *with* people:

Immersed with them in an environment of joint activity, they learn to see things (or hear them, or touch them) in the ways their teachers and companions do. [...] anthropology, therefore, does more than furnish us with knowledge about the *world* [...]. It rather educates our perception of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being. The questions we address are philosophical ones; of what it means to be a human being [...] and the balance of freedom or constraint in people’s relations with others [...], of the connections between language and thought, between words and things [...]. (Ingold 2007, p. 82, 83, original italics)

Our methods reflected Ingold’s definition of anthropology as ‘a practice of observation grounded in participatory dialogue’ (2007, p. 87). The LoveArts festival was selected as the research site because it takes place in a diverse range of indoor and outdoor, professional and amateur spaces all over Leeds, and the research team felt it might therefore facilitate phenomenological insights into the cultural life and tapestry of the city, as well as elucidate the method of deep hanging out itself. The festival is predominantly curated for and targeted towards people with mental health issues and is the only large-scale arts festival in England to receive NHS funding.

Although the questions and consensuses to be found in the rich literature on cultural value were not used to determine any set hypotheses, a collective awareness and recognition of the complex, phenomenological and liminal aspects of arts engagement did shape the tenor of the discussions with both participants and arts organisations in a methodological approach most closely aligned to a Charmazian conception of grounded theory (Hood 2007). The Charmazian school considers grounded theory as a flexible and reflexive process of introspection, intuition and rumination (Orona 2002); it reconceptualizes grounded theory as ‘a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions [...] methodological rules, recipes and requirements’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 9). This approach thus enabled the researchers to draw reflexively on the cultural value literature and acknowledged the inevitability of bringing existing knowledge into empirical research (Charmaz 2006).

Within the overall framework of this grounded theory approach, the project followed a collaborative, anthropological methodology, inspired by the established (if poorly explicated) method of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998). There is very little

literature available on deep hanging out, despite the fact it has been described as 'the future of localized, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research' (Wogan 2004, p. 130). The term was coined (albeit disparagingly) by James Clifford in 1997 and rehabilitated by Geertz (1998) in the title of a book review he authored for *The New York Review of Books* to describe the fieldwork method of immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level. In order to address the scholarly deficiency in defining, practising, refining and critiquing deep hanging out, the academic researchers drew on the more established qualitative methods of 'guided introspection' (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), 'interactive introspection' (Ellis 1991) and participatory action research (Burns 2007), which they felt complemented the core method in a useful and appropriate way.

Wallendorf and Brucks define guided introspection quite simply as a method whereby 'people other than the researcher are asked to introspect or think aloud about themselves and their actions' (1993, p. 341). By contrast in interactive introspection, although the researcher helps others to introspect, the ultimate focus becomes 'the emergent experiences of both parties' (Ellis 1991, p. 30). According to Yu (2004), participatory action research can liberate 'subjugated knowledge' and 'multiple realities'. By combining these three complementary techniques under the umbrella method of deep hanging out, the academic researchers hoped to provide some fresh insights into cultural value by thinking-with the five participants, i.e. by studying the value of arts participation via the perspectives and practices of a group of collaborators, making their experiences and ideas the primary material through which knowledge was generated *in situ*.

To this end, the participants were treated as 'co-researchers', reflecting Ingold's call for anthropologists to engage in 'participatory dialogue' (op cit.) and following Moustakas's (1990) model of 'heuristic research'. Hartley and Benington argue that co-research 'establishes a dialectical process of enquiry by drawing on the complementary perspectives, interests, skills, and knowledge bases of academics and practitioners' (2000, p. 463). In our case, these practitioners were arts audiences and participants, and our grounded theory approach meant that the dialectical enquiry began with our co-researchers' backgrounds, interests and habits regarding arts engagement, which fed into and complemented the academic researchers' extant knowledge bases and experiences.

Our co-researchers were recruited through an open call to the festival's marketing database, which fortuitously generated interest from five suitable volunteers,<sup>5</sup> who were then paired up randomly with the five academic researchers. The five pairs then engaged in a period of deep hanging out over the two-week period of the festival to discuss and co-interpret the co-researchers' lived experiences of the festival. In order to hone the research questions, and then co-analyse and contextualise the preliminary findings, the research team hosted three participatory workshops: one at the beginning of the project, comprising the academic researchers and senior representatives from nine regional arts organisations; one at the end of the festival, comprising the five pairs of researchers; and a final workshop towards the end of the project, combining all the researchers and arts organisations. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of the participating arts organisations.

The first workshop consisted of a short presentation by the academic researchers followed by a round-table discussion. The aim of this event was to sketch out the research context; present and refine the research questions; and ensure that the arts

organisations were on board. In the second workshop, the academic researchers hosted the co-researchers for a two-hour drop-in session. The session began as an informal hang-out, where the ten researchers chatted about the festival and the ensuing discussions over light refreshments. In the second half of the session, the academic researchers spontaneously decided to facilitate a participatory creative workshop, which produced a thematic map of recurring ideas (developed by collectively reorganising post-it notes) together with sketches, poems, and creative and reflective prose. The aim here was to stay true to the overall method of deep hanging out, while introducing some alternative methods to observation and post-event conversation. The final workshop comprised small group discussions, based on a presentation of preliminary findings from the academic researchers complemented by a reflective statement from one of the co-researchers (which reduced many participants to tears).

The research design was arguably limited by its reliance on individual co-researchers as competent commentators on their own experiences, but the diverse range of methods used to capture these experiences (including drawing and creative writing) sought to overcome the limitations of a uniquely cognitive or linguistic approach. As Reason (2010) argues, the act of drawing can create a dialogue between an audience member and his or her own artistic experience: drawing can be disruptive, creative and intuitive; but Reason insists that these benefits can also be realised through appropriately facilitated conversation and that the post hoc recollection of experience, while perhaps not strictly ‘reliable’, is valuable in and of itself.

Reflective consciousness in and of the moment [...] is impossible because it radically transforms that moment into something other. However, within a phenomenological perspective that other has value and meaning in its own right, as it is through conscious reflection that individuals make sense and invest meaning in their experiences. (Reason 2010, p. 21)

Within the overarching method of deep hanging out, the post-event conversations that took place between the academic researchers and the co-researchers during and after the LoveArts festival played a significant role and enabled the former group to qualify deep hanging out and situate it within the context of the arts. Some of our key observations and findings emerged organically from these conversations, many of which were inspired by the participants’ creative accounts and illustrations of their arts engagement practices. Others emerged through the complex co-analysis of the conversations that took place during the creative workshops discussed above.

At times the participants’ discussions developed into auto-biographical accounts, which often involved soul-searching reflections on their lives that ultimately went beyond the level of intimate emotional engagement anticipated in the initial ethical review. The following section, which by necessity summarises (and thus irrevocably reduces) the co-researchers’ experiences, provides an overview of the meaning and value of the arts to our co-researchers. There are two slightly conflicting aims behind this summary: one is to ensure that each of the five co-researchers is represented by an authentic individual voice (and hence foreground *subjectivity*); the other is to tease out commonalities amongst all five co-researchers (and therefore attempt to sketch a more *inter-subjective* perception of cultural value).



## Personal narratives of cultural value

### *Kim*<sup>6</sup>

Kim describes himself as a painter and a writer. He studied Art at A-Level and then took arts and writing classes at Swarthmore College in Leeds when he stopped working. He was encouraged to paint by his aunt, with whom he used to sketch as a child. Kim is not a regular arts attender: he is put off by the high ticket prices, by the notion of ‘high-brow’ art and by the ‘them vs. us attitude’. Kim doesn’t ‘go looking for art’ – he generally prefers to ‘do it himself rather than go along’. But when he does attend arts events, he prefers to engage with amateur work and feels more comfortable in small, intimate, alternative venues, which enable him to connect with other people: for Kim, the venue is as important as the event itself. Kim sometimes visits Leeds Arts Gallery and can often be found outside the gallery playing on the giant public chess board, which he campaigned to save from closure by Leeds City Council as he felt it had ‘a deep social value’.

Some of the events Kim attended during the festival demonstrably provided a stimulus for deep and meaningful, if sometimes painful, reflections and conversations. When reflecting on The Word Emporium – a participatory open mic night of spoken word and music – Kim noted that the arts can provide ‘detachment’ and ‘release’, a platform for people to re-tell or re-conceive their stories and ‘move on’. People have mental health problems, he believes, because ‘they tell themselves the same story time and again. If you realise you can change the story, it’s empowering [...] you can lessen the emotion and learn to forgive’.

Kim feels strongly that ‘the arts are about communicating what we’ve all got in common [...]. People are sometimes reluctant to communicate on a deeper level, and [...] I found it heart-warming, the spirit of people: they [participants in Love-Arts events] were prepared to take risks and be vulnerable’. Kim believes that the arts can ‘take people out of their shells’; get them out of the house and into their cities and the wider world: ‘I’d like to see the arts as being able to get people back into communities’. Reflecting Ehrenreich’s call for collective participation in the arts, he also feels that the arts can act as an antidote and alternative to the individualised way of living prevalent in many Western societies. Kim also holds strong views on the role of public art: ‘A city needs to be full of public art and activity. I feel more comfortable going round public spaces. I’m all for Banksy: he seems to be challenging the fact that art should be locked away in galleries’.

### *Barry*

Barry is 76 and has lived in and around Leeds all his life. In his late forties, Barry began to receive support for a lifelong stammer. Alongside his speech therapy, Barry began to participate in a range of painting, creative writing and discussion groups. The change effected through these activities was so significant that Barry encapsulates its impact as follows: ‘I didn’t start living until I was 48’. Barry feels that his painting and writing activities enabled him to develop new ‘techniques of coping’ and self-expression; to ‘recognise’ who he was as a person; and to interact more meaningfully with others. They also provide an important structure and scaffolding to his week and help him to overcome his daily challenges: ‘In the past I easily gave up if things seemed insurmountable. But with all the groups I’ve been going to, and facing up to issues, I’ve been able to say [...] “I can do this – there can be a Plan B”’.

Barry really enjoys going to the opera with his wife and laments the fact that he can't do this more often because of the high ticket prices. He feels that what arts participation facilitates is participants' belief in change. Barry says that the LoveArts festival provided him with a 'focus and direction' for his creative energies and explains how particular venues and spaces in the city offer him a creative refuge. Barry contrasts his unsatisfying jobs earlier in his life with the meaningful arts activities he has enjoyed in recent years: 'I'm retired from all that shitty stuff. Now I'm free. [...] I wanted to be an artist, and now I am'.

### ***Gillian***

Gillian has a longstanding interest in the arts, especially in creative writing. She regularly attends creative workshops, has sung in a choir, and has participated in and/or volunteered at three successive LoveArts Festivals. Gillian's participation in the arts connects many aspects of her life, and having worked in several unfulfilling jobs in the past, she is now keen to focus her future employment prospects on the arts. Being involved in this research encouraged Gillian to reflect on the value that the arts bring to her life:

I'd never really thought about why the arts are important to me until I was involved in this research. Being asked the question made me realise how much of my life has an arts or cultural link [...] and I've been inspired by people and institutions [...]. I've realised that this is where I'm happiest – being creative, being inspired by the arts and culture of the city and region.

### ***Milan Buddha Ghosh***<sup>7</sup>

Like Gillian, Milan made explicit reference to how his very participation in the research project had helped him to appreciate the value of the arts in his life. We asked each of our co-researchers how they wanted us to summarise the time we had spent together, and Milan decided that he'd like to use the original statement he submitted to apply to participate in the project, as he felt this captured the essence of the conversations he had had and the activities he had taken part in. Here are two short sections from Milan's statement:

Culture is so important to Leeds ... because by 2030 Leeds will have a million souls/citizens; 10 years ago it had 600,000. Thus we need arts of any kind: poetry, dance, music, painting, old and modern art to continue to unite and delight, and change people's hearts from being tired mums and dads, we need fun, liveliness, the undulation of dance – for it is the river of life. It brings out the best in people, the best in humans. It is a universal heart-wish for everyone to be happy. We need safety, rules and equal opportunities to ensure access for all to culture, literature and all of the arts. People need relief from stress and the chance, perhaps, if they are lucky, to meet someone special. We all need nourishment, joy, nurturing, creativity, friendly chats with friends or those friends we have just met: strangers. As the Dalai Lama says, we cannot live without pleasure ...

I was an un-nurtured child who had experienced 17 years of domestic violence, who was timid and bullied, and dance, and culture in general, has soothed and healed my soul. I feel eternal gratitude for life, despite the violence of mind games, and physical

beatings. [...] So we need dance, poetry and the arts for ‘community’ in the best sense, for we all want to be happy, we all need contemplation of arts, to enable the good and bring out the best in humans, in this cynical, greedy world.

### *Nicola*

Nicola feels strongly that the arts should be accessible to all and that public-facing arts festivals such as LoveArts need to be as inclusive as possible. Free admission to arts and cultural events is important to Nicola and she is sensitive to barriers to engagement. Like Barry and Gillian, Nicola had held down a number of unfulfilling jobs before she decided to pursue an alternative, ‘creative’ career that had ‘meaning’. Although Nicola’s participation as a volunteer in the LoveArts festival allowed her to take risks and experience new art forms, it also caused her to fear that she might become ‘submerged’, which in turn she felt could ‘cancel out’ the progress she has made with her mental health. Nicola derives particular pleasure from attending art exhibited or performed by her friends, but is unsure ‘how to approach an artwork as spectator’ and questions how meaning can be derived from spectatorship.

### **Discussion**

The most recurrent theme in the co-researchers’ accounts of their arts engagement emerged to be their need to feel a sense of ‘belonging’ in their arts activities alongside a sense of ‘permission’ or entitlement to enjoy them to their full potential. A positive arts experience transpired to be largely dependent on how ‘welcoming’ a particular arts venue or space was perceived to be. One of the few negative associations that the co-researchers forwarded regarding their arts engagement constituted Nicola’s anxiety surrounding the potentially damaging associations of reconnecting with the arts in the context of mental health, which she feared could set her back. Alongside the common fear of feeling unwelcome in an arts venue, another pernicious barrier to arts attendance transpired to be the high cost associated with professional arts activities. This reticence to engage in the subsidised arts was most apparent in Kim’s reflections, which were characterised by a recurrent tension between a desire to shun establishment venues and do-it-himself on the one hand and a profound belief in the socialisation benefits of public engagement in the arts on the other.

Confirming existing findings in the academic literature, there was consensus amongst the co-researchers that participation in artistic activities can build confidence; develop self-identity; facilitate social relationships and networks; develop meaningful employability skills; help participants to communicate and self-express; and provide solace from anxiety and alternative spaces in which to ‘practise wellbeing’ (Clift *et al.* 2009, p. 20). Several of the co-researchers indicated that they enjoyed ‘being with’ an artwork or event and stressed the importance of enjoying being in-the-moment, rather than attempting to intellectualise or capture the value of an arts experience in words. At times, some of them seemed to almost pity their academic research partners for complying with a utilitarian research paradigm, which challenged the very premise of our ‘complex’ approach. Accordingly, our co-researchers urged us to focus on their *modes of being* with the arts, rather than the specific *benefits or meaning* they derived from them. Indeed the ‘meaning’

seemed to reside in the act of engagement itself rather than through any subsequent process of decoding or interpretation. This was a particularly interesting finding, as it reinforced the need for a phenomenological, as opposed to epistemological, approach to capturing cultural value.

This focus on ‘being-with’ the arts reflects Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of Flow, which he describes as an ‘optimal experience’ that is ‘rewarding in and of itself’ (1988, p. 8). Csikszentmihalyi qualifies Flow in terms of escapism and timelessness and links it with the self’s pursuit of self-harmony and wellbeing. Belfiore and Bennett go so far as to suggest that Flow represents the visible manifestation of cultural value: ‘the value of the arts resides in our complete commitment and absorption when creating or enjoying a work of art’ (2008, p. 97). This pursuit of absorption and wellbeing was clearly observed amongst and openly discussed by our co-researchers.

All of the participants told *stories* at some point about the value they had derived from the arts in their lives. Kim was highly reflexive about the role of stories in helping people to deal with and heal from emotional traumas and move on with their lives. Observation of some of the festival’s events, especially the performance poetry events, also confirmed the prevalence of metaphor and symbolism as powerful tools for mimesis and self-identification. At The Word Emporium, for example, a transsexual poet represented her inner gender conflict symbolically by depicting a man and woman being observed at a café table; and many of the poets used feet as a metaphor for the life journeys they had been on. The arts seemed to provide an ideal vehicle for both participants and audiences to conceive of their anxieties in alternative ways and forms, and to explore them through different modes and lenses in order to effect change and heal. As the convenor pointed out, ‘people remember stories for the rest of their lives [...] creative writing is a craft of empowerment’.

One of the most common modes of engagement emerged to be spiritual. It was noteworthy in our study that both Milan and Kim discussed their mindfulness of the limits of thoughts, words and reason in the context of their Buddhist beliefs and highlighted the need to contemplate the arts rather than consume or dissect them. Kim described Buddhism as a path from ignorance to truth and argued that:

spirituality and creativity are very connected: if we were less attached to things, we’d be happier. Writing and painting can take you out of the box, out of the habitual ways of seeing. Really good artists can see in a different way and reflect the world in a different way. In Buddhism, there’s always been a link with creativity: if you’re creative you’re enlightened.

This explicit connection of the arts to spirituality confirmed previous findings regarding spiritual drivers behind arts attendance. For example, a recent study found that 15% of gallery visitors were motivated by spiritual goals such as escapism, contemplation, awe and wonder, and identified spirituality as the deepest form of engagement (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2007). This evidence of spiritual motivation also supports Slater’s (2007) work on ‘reverential motivation’, which concluded that museum and gallery visitors seek an escape from their everyday lives in places of fantasy and peace. It also echoes Victor Turner’s (1982) work on *sacred* space and ‘communitas’.

Both Gillian and Milan referred to the significant role that their deep hanging out with their research partner played in helping them appreciate the value that the arts brings to their lives. This suggests that this type of method or process can be valuable in and of itself, and confirms Matthew Reason's contention that: 'The post-performance conversation [...] is more than just a memory process but also an integral part of the experience for many people. In some sense it seems that we do not just want the experience but also want peers with whom we can explore and extend that experience' (2010, p. 27). This finding also confirms the central role played by audiences in decoding and making sense of a work of art: as Miranda Boorsma contends, arts audiences 'co-produce' arts experiences by giving meaning to them through their 'imaginative powers' (Boorsma 2006, p. 85).

Ultimately, cultural value emerged less as an epistemological question (the value and impact of the arts have, after all, been copiously documented) and more as a phenomenological (in this context, anthropological and political) concern: our findings suggested that both the methods and purpose of knowing are vital to any authentic exploration of cultural experience.

### **Reflections on the ethics, limitations and benefits of deep hanging out**

In conversations with co-researchers, arts organisations and fellow academics, questions relating to the ethics and power dynamics involved in deep hanging out have arisen on numerous occasions. This type of co-research inevitably generates some significant ethical considerations and is certainly not without its limitations. The overriding consideration is perhaps to what extent deep hanging out constitutes a genuinely bi-directional process. This in turn raises questions of power and control between academic researchers and so-called co-researchers. My personal reflection on this is that deep hanging out generated the most equal power dynamic of any research process I have ever taken part in, as it genuinely realised Ingold's call for anthropologists to 'immerse' themselves with participants 'in an environment of joint activity' (2007, p. 82) following a process perhaps akin to what Ledwith (2007) has labelled 'emancipatory action research' and 'critical praxis'. Despite the inescapable fact that the academic researchers put out the call for volunteers, initiated the bi-partite engagement, facilitated the creative workshops and wrote up the vast majority of the fieldwork and associated findings, during the fieldwork itself, there arose a culture of genuine collaborative enquiry, of 'participatory dialogue', 'interactive introspection' and reflection. So perhaps it is fair to conclude that some are always more equal than others in co-research (as in collaborative academic research); that although *power* can be more or less evenly distributed, *control*, at least in academic research, (and copyright) generally remains with the scholar.

Alongside the personal perspectives summarised above, in the spirit of co-research it is perhaps worth noting briefly how the academic researchers felt about and responded to the method they employed. Personally, as an experienced qualitative researcher who had previously relied predominantly on depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation to explore audience experience, I initially felt vulnerable and exposed by the unstructured, grounded-theory approach. In my first meeting with Kim, he asked me what I was hoping to get from our discussions and I struggled to provide a coherent response. But on reflection, I realised that this was in fact the very point of deep hanging out: namely, that the research agenda was set by *being-with* Kim, by the dynamic that emerged between us, albeit it

within the framework of an existing body of knowledge and contestable considerations regarding cultural value. This realisation further supported the location of our methodology within the Charmazian school of grounded theory.

The fact that most of our co-researchers had been actively encouraged to engage in the arts as therapy was also significant in that it had visibly trained them to reflect on their artistic engagement and to consider this as a vehicle for wellness. Although this sampling limitation potentially increased the risk of confirmation bias, it also generated some insightful discussions with practised reflectors about the particular role that arts activities can play in improving mental health. There are potentially significant sampling implications here for future researchers engaging in deep hanging out, and it is worth noting that the method may not be appropriate for everyone. However, it would be both assumptive and reductive to assert that confirmation bias in audience research is limited to aspects of arts therapy. As Johanson and Glow (2015) point out, qualitative audience research is plagued by a whole host of ethical and methodological challenges, including: vested interests of evaluators and commissioners of evaluation; a defensive tendency towards advocacy rather than objective evaluation; the lack of sufficiently affective language to describe artistic experiences; audiences' sense of responsibility for their own cultural experiences; their tendency to empathise with audience researchers; and their conflation of cultural value with other socio-political values.

Although these considerations are significant, they neither reduce the impact nor question the authenticity of the personal narratives presented and analysed in this and similar audience research. Indeed one of the advantages of deep hanging out over shorter-term qualitative methods such as depth interviews and focus groups is that it allows for a multiplicity of modes and moments of communication, and encourages the development of a longer-term, more honest relationship between co-researchers, which is likely to reduce any confirmation bias. In this case, the method drew on techniques associated with participatory action research and performance and reception theory, which enabled the fieldwork to be more situated and relational than the more prevalent qualitative methods.

As discussed earlier, the impact of art is inherently subjective, and at least partially shaped by audiences' existing cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). This was manifest in our co-researchers' narrative accounts of their arts engagement; and as Johanson and Glow acknowledge in regards to audience research more broadly, this subjectivity and positive bias can sometimes cast cultural value as a virtuous circle that generates a self-perpetuating hyper-inflation of the benefits of arts engagement. This does not, however, negate the growing scholarly consensus regarding the universal benefits of engaging with the arts. But it does highlight the need for methodological rigour in audience research of this nature.

### **Reframing the debate**

In light of this discussion, we might justifiably conclude that the question of cultural value needs to be reframed from an essentially epistemological concern to a predominantly phenomenological enquiry: the underlying question is no longer, it seems, 'What is the value of culture?' but rather: 'How is cultural value manifested'? From a cultural policy (i.e. political) perspective, we might also include the following questions in the cultural value debate: 'Who needs to know?'; 'Why do they need to know?'; and 'How do they want to know?'. These questions arose

from the disparate foci of the various stakeholders involved in this study. For example, while arts organisations conveyed their collective frustration that their evaluation methods and processes are largely determined by the seemingly whimsical and disparate preoccupations of their funders, our co-researchers made it clear that trying to *know* about cultural value is a futile distraction, which can actually prevent people from *feeling* the power of the arts and *being-in-the-moment*. So when an anthropological approach is taken, cultural value emerges as a profoundly phenomenological question that explores how we engage with the world and what our role is within it. In this sense, then, a phenomenological conception of cultural value encompasses both politics and anthropology: engaging with the world and being-with-others; and where cultural value relates to the public funding of the arts, the politics are never far away.

Our discussions with arts organisations revealed the apparent paradox that we know, and yet still don't *seem* to know (or *believe* we know), the value of the arts. Fieldwork with our co-researchers again suggested that this paradox originated from a misplaced prioritisation of knowledge and outcomes over feelings, beliefs, emotions, processes and experiences. This finding reaffirmed the study's initial embracing of complexity and suggested that the arts should be regarded as a vehicle through which to live life, rather than an end in themselves. Hanging out with our participants confirmed the positive role the arts can play in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, and reflected Schopenhauer's vision of the arts as a source of release and refuge from the anguish of everyday life. So the arts help people to *be*, rather than just think, reflect and rationalise. They can clearly facilitate a positive state of Flow, which in turn can 'detach' and 'enlighten' people, helping them to live in the moment and enjoy captivating, absorbing cultural experiences which take them out of the everyday. This perhaps explains the participants' focus on the importance of feeling *welcome* in arts spaces and venues. Like other social and leisure pursuits, the arts can connect people: both to other people, and to their communities and cities, via loose, informal networks or 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1983). But this study has demonstrated how artistic networks can sometimes be constraining as well as liberating.

Ultimately, hanging out with our participants simultaneously confirmed both Raymond Williams (1958) argument that culture is ordinary and to be found in everyday life (like Kim's giant chess board), and Arnold's (1869) perception of culture as the pursuit of perfection. Our co-researchers expressed this perfection in a number of ways. Kim argued that the arts help people communicate on a deeper level. The arts helped Barry to actually start living and be free. For Gillian, the arts are inspirational and are what makes her happiest. For Milan, they unite and delight people and bring out the best in them. And for Nicola, they have furnished her life with meaning. So in this study the arts and culture emerged as complex, if not even paradoxical, phenomena that resist any simplistic definition or reductive moulding into any strategic model or toolkit. This transpired to be a disappointment for some of our arts partners, who seemed hungry for an all-encompassing evaluation tool that might reflect not just hard data but also cultural value. It doesn't bode well either for AHRC's desire to establish an a priori 'framework' within which to evaluate cultural value.

### The arts ecology

Our observations of our participants negotiating the diverse and dispersed venues and activities that comprised the festival, alongside their drawings, poems and verbal accounts of their wider year-round arts activities in and around Leeds, recalled the now familiar metaphor of the arts as a social ecology. In our fieldwork, arts venues and organisations emerged as nodes in a cultural hub, which at their best can bring people together and allow them to practise their individual and collective wellbeing. But it was noteworthy that our participants tended to navigate through and amongst these spaces with limited loyalty or allegiance to any particular venue or organisation; and some of the participants felt much more comfortable and welcomed in alternative, ‘non-professional’ arts spaces. There was also a striking mismatch between the foci of the co-researchers and the arts organisations. It struck the academic researchers that this was possibly because the latter constituency doesn’t always regard itself as part of a wider ecology: perhaps as a result of the myriad operational and strategic pressures they face, arts organisations can sometimes forget that they are part of a complex value system and network. Findings starting to emerge from big data projects in the arts are indeed evidencing the fact that arts audiences are much less loyal than many organisations might like to believe.

All this suggests that arts organisations should be more mindful of the complex phenomenological role they play in their audiences’ and communities’ lives: they are rarely the be-all-and-end-all, or a one-stop destination, for a person’s engagement with the arts, but rather part of a complex and interconnected cultural ecology. As things stand (and often for valid reasons, such as pressures of time and resources), many arts organisations seem to struggle to collaborate effectively across a city or region, especially across entrenched art-form and professional/amateur divides. This study suggests that this ipseity is potentially damaging, both for arts organisations’ own sustainability in the ecology and for the long-term relationships they hope to engender with their communities. In his essays on relational aesthetics, Bourriaud (2002) asserts that contemporary art is entirely beholden to its environment and audience. By taking a more ecological perspective, arts organisations could assist their audiences to navigate their individual and collective arts ecologies more meaningfully. This more relational approach might in turn help them to eschew what Bourriaud derides as ‘privatized spaces of individual consumption’ (Bishop 2004, p. 54).

### Implications

This reframing of cultural value has significant implications for the myriad stakeholders engaged in the realm of the arts and culture, not least artists, audiences, arts organisations, academics, politicians, civil servants, educationalists, arts-and-health workers, public funders, trusts and foundations, philanthropists and corporate sponsors. These implications herald nothing less than a powerful cultural shift. For artists, arts organisations, arts educationalists and academics, this shift might involve renegotiating traditional relationships with audiences and participants, from capturing their data to actively *thinking-with* them (by hanging out more alongside them and getting to know them as people). It might involve a renewed focus on seeking out and capturing the everyday life of arts and cultural organisations; a shift in methods from marketing and metrics to anthropology and discovery, with



academics and arts workers acting as facilitators and possibly even conduits of cultural value and meaning. It might also require arts organisations to create spaces that facilitate and set the optimal conditions for ‘deep hanging out’ to occur – welcoming, hospitable spaces in which participants and audiences will want to linger and exchange as they navigate their personal arts ecologies.

A common focus amongst our co-researchers was the positive role that the arts can play in the community, which again supports Bourriaud’s conception of relational aesthetics and existing calls for a more balanced arts ecology. Based on the findings of this study, arts and cultural organisations should therefore help their publics to live their lives *through* them, rather than exist self-referentially as an end in themselves. Tim Ingold contends that anthropology thrives on what he calls ‘the sideways glance’ (2007, p. 83); front-of-house staff in theatres, museums, opera houses and galleries might well benefit from acting more like anthropologists by observing and discussing with audiences rather than providing touch-points of effective customer service.<sup>8</sup> Our findings prove that tried and tested anthropological methods such as deep hanging out can yield rich insights into the value of engagement in the arts, which could form the basis for robust, effective, holistic and persuasive artistic evaluation. Beyond the arts, there are implications for other sectors that provide personal and cultural experiences, such as leisure, heritage, health, education, transport and tourism. There are perhaps even wider implications here regarding how public spaces are designed and how policy initiatives are generated and evaluated *with* rather than *for* potential beneficiaries. In an era of participatory decision-making, these considerations are becoming pressing.

## Conclusion

There are many ways to discuss and document the value of the arts and culture; but there are significant limits to ‘knowing’ or ‘measuring’ this value because the epistemology of cultural value is always and inevitably *framed*, whether socially, culturally, politically, ethically or even, as here, aesthetically. As one of our arts partners pointed out, we *already know* the generic value of culture and the arts: it has been evidenced time and again in myriad studies, many of which have been referenced in this paper. What we *don’t* fully know is how people use the arts as a vehicle to engage with each other and with the world, and to discover their role and identity within it. So what is maybe more important and interesting is to seek out the rich textures and depth of subjective accounts of people’s experiences with the arts and then try to capture how they *feel* about them.

Rather than attempting to reify cultural value itself (and reduce it to a series of outputs), a richer and more fruitful endeavour might be to capture the *processes* of arts and cultural engagement and explore the emotions and other phenomenological insights to which these processes give rise. Whilst this might well involve complex theories and methodologies, it is important to remember our co-researchers’ insistence on the simplicity of the act of being-with a work of art and to resist the constant temptation to rationalise or intellectualise it. This does not imply, however, that post-experiential reflection is in any way redundant: as this and extant studies have evidenced, the act of reflecting itself can significantly enhance the meaning and value of an arts experience.

To warrant their ongoing public investment in a time of apparent austerity, arts and cultural organisations need to create contexts in which conversations (and

therefore meaning) can emerge. They need to be mindful of their phenomenological role as sites of profound cultural engagement; as privileged places of artistic insight and exchange. To maximise their cultural value, arts organisations thus need to listen to their audiences' desires, perceptions and reflections; they need to learn how to co-create meaning and value collaboratively (Boorsma 2006); and they need to connect with their communities and with the outside world. In short, they need to follow Bourriaud's vision and become more 'relational'. Funders, civil servants and politicians could support them in this endeavour by acknowledging the value of the arts as a given and by co-ordinating and tailoring their evaluation criteria to capture the wealth of a city, region or nation's cultural stories and the power of its creativity, rather than focussing reductively on participation numbers and instrumental outputs. On a wider policy level, this might lead to a shift from the endless utilitarian pursuit of generic accounts and evidence of value to an acknowledgement of the power of personal experience and narrative. Indeed in an experiential economy of meaning (Pine and Gilmore 1999, Sharpe 2010), this is precisely the kind of evidence-based policy the sector needs to justify the continued public funding of the arts.

This study has reflexively applied, developed and refined the anthropological method of deep hanging out and revealed through a sustained piece of participatory action research how this type of co-research might enable artists, researchers, evaluators and arts organisations to develop more relational and collaborative relationships with their public stakeholders in order to capture and evaluate cultural value more effectively and in a more nuanced and meaningful way. Ultimately, it is hoped that this fresh approach to capturing artistic experience will reframe the terms of the Cultural Value debate and inspire new anthropological approaches to exploring it.

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## Notes

1. LoveArts is organised by the Arts and Minds Network, which is funded by the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Trust to promote the arts for mental health. The LoveArts festival was launched in 2011 and this third edition ran from 2 to 24 October 2013, presenting a diverse range of predominantly participatory performances, screenings, exhibitions and events.
2. The Green Book is produced for the UK Government by HM Treasury to provide guidance for public sector bodies on how to appraise proposals before committing funds to a policy, programme or project. The Magenta Book provides complementary guidance on the evaluation of ensuing policies, programmes and projects.
3. It is worth noting Bishop's (2004) critique of Bourriaud here. Bishop claims that relational aesthetics is flawed because it requires 'a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness'. Bishop proposes the alternative framework of 'relational antagonism' as 'a more concrete and polemical' means of 'rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other' (p. 79).
4. Interestingly, Husserl, the acknowledged father of phenomenology, criticised Heidegger for reverting to 'abstract anthropology', so the links between phenomenology and anthropology are established, albeit in a negative light.
5. Volunteers were requested to submit a short statement outlining their motivations for taking part in the project. Seven expressions of interest were received. The tone of one application was inappropriate and therefore rejected by the research team. Another application was from a university colleague, which the team decided might compromise the method, and so the colleague was requested (and willingly agreed) to withdraw.
6. Our co-researchers were keen for us to use their real names in writing up our research. Words and phrases placed in quotation marks or indented in this section represent direct quotes from the respective co-researcher.
7. Milan was insistent that his full name was used in the article as he regards anonymity as 'self-stigmatisation'.
8. There is emerging evidence that this shift is starting to occur, for example at Manchester's Contact, where front-of-house staff systematically engage audience members in meaningful discussions about their experiences and feed this back into show reports. However, at the time of writing, this evidence of best practice remains under-researched and marginal.

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