



Sociological Briefing

Advancing knowledge towards the social impact of participation in arts activities

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Since the Renaissance, scholars, philosophers, and artists have raised concerns about the impact that art generates on citizens. Throughout the history of art, artistic creations have been designed and developed to address relevant messages; messages to the divinities, to power, to people, to nature... However, the impact resulting from the transmission of these creations on people is still a topic at the core of some scientific contributions. In this vein, Paola Merli from the International Cultural Planning and Policy Unit (Montfort University, Leicester, UK) addressed this dimension in 2002, developing a contribution about the impact of participation in art by citizens.

How to measure the impact of arts in society?

The first study carried out on the social impact of art was conducted by Matarasso in 1997. The study involved 513 people who answered questions about the impact of art on diverse aspects, such as the personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health, and wellbeing. Merli points out that all these issues are abstract and intangible and as a result, it is very difficult to evaluate them.

This is one of the challenges that art has generated since its very beginning. Art creates feelings,

emotions, ways of understanding people's world and lives, conceptualizing abstract questions that become very difficult to measure and analyze. According to Merli, when we analyze these issues, we have to go beyond "yes" or "no". We need to understand the feelings and emotions in the background. For example, it is not enough to ask "have you been moved by this work of art? Yes/No", as we need to understand this shock in order to measure the impact it has had on each person. Or, for example, if we ask, "has participating in this artistic activity improved the way you understand life?", we do not know what its way of understanding life was previously like. Only with these simple questions, according to the author, we do not know what has been the effect generated by the art to the people.

Many artists, from our days and past times, have understood art as a way of promoting social cohesion, strengthening the links between people, generating shared feelings and common values. These artistic wills in an intangible way have been passed down from generation to generation, maintaining the feelings and emotions that art provokes. We have one of the biggest challenges here. Knowing how this impact has been transferred throughout history and how art continues to create these social bonds today.

Art as civilizing

The author points out that this kind of participatory arts activity in any kind of community and culture would have an emotional social impact, understanding the art as a civilizing element, creator of neighborhood and cohesion, and linking people. Art has united civilizations throughout history. For this reason, the author highlights the need to study art from an interdisciplinary perspective between sociology and psychology, to understand the perception of art in individuals. According to this, Merli proposes a double way to measure the impact of artistic creations on people; while it is important to have immediate data of the public, of the people attending an artistic exhibition or a show and then are surveyed, it is also crucial not to lose the meaning of art itself. For this reason, the author highlights the importance of lifelong artistic training, attendance, and participation in art from an early age. Through training programs in musical, plastic, scenic arts etc. we will be able to define this civilizing power of artistic creations with longitudinal studies on people's lives.

References

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