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Toltz, Joseph

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THE VALUE OF AUSTRALIAN ARTISTIC RESEARCH: HOW WORKS ARE ASSESSED, THE PLACE OF PEER EVALUATION, AND THE ANXIETY OF FUTURE METRIC MEASUREMENT

JOSEPH TOLTZ

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How has the issue of value been used to question peer review as a process for recognising quality and excellence in humanities and creative arts research? This paper will address issues of value in data collection, presentation, and evaluation at the national level in Australia.

In the introductory call for the Artistic Research Africa Conference, the convenors wrote the following:

> Internationally, there now exists a reasonable body of research outputs in the field of Artistic Research, generated mainly by artists and researchers active in Europe, Australia and Great Britain. However, Artistic Research has not secured a significant position within most African university systems.[1]

While this is quantifiably true in the case of my home country, Australia, my purpose at this conference is to present the precarious position that artistic research occupies in the Australian academy. This adjective, "precarious," also describes the state of my country as I present this paper today. The day I arrived in Johannesburg, the fires that raged on the eastern and southern seaboards of Australia had reportedly burned 16 million hectares of land, destroying 5,600 buildings, including 2,500 homes. At that point, 29 people were known to have died, with tens of thousands of livestock killed, and at least one billion native animals incinerated.[2] Many of our endangered species are now believed to be on the brink of extinction, including the Kangaroo Island glossy black cockatoo, and the world's last surviving population of Ligurian bees. The air quality in my hometown, Sydney, rose to the worst in the world on a number of occasions in late December 2019 and early January this year. Walking outside without a mask on the worst day was deemed equivalent to smoking 37 cigarettes. This season's Australian bush fires have contributed 2% to the increased global carbon load, and 99% of scientists acknowledge that the most likely contributor to our apocalyptic situation is climate change. The horrific drought endured by friends and loved ones in rural New South Wales (NSW) is into its seventh year now, and this combined with the hottest winter period we experienced on record, to prevent controlled burning efforts that would usually take place in July and August. In southern Queensland, fires have claimed temperate-climate wet rainforests, places that had never experienced fire before in human memory. Throughout this disaster, a campaign of misinformation from conservative politicians and the Rupert Murdoch-controlled media was waged—a blame game that pointed the finger absurdly at green policies of forest preservation and fire-bugs, with no substantive evidence that more than 1% of fires were deliberately lit.

As a response to the unfolding crisis, artists generated millions of dollars in aid and relief to communities most hard hit by the fires. Local celebrities such as Celeste Barber raised in excess of $50 million via a Facebook campaign, with global stars, Australian and otherwise, contributing significant amounts (P!nk, Elton John, Russell Crowe, Kylie Minogue, Nicole Kidman, Metallica, and others). On a local, personal level, trans-activist artist friends of mine worked on the ground with Aboriginal regional communities in the NSW South Coast to bring direct relief. And, although some would argue that it is a stretch to claim that colonisation is directly to blame for the situation in which we find ourselves, it is a fact that 230 years of colonial exploitation of our fragile, water-scarce continent has done irreparable damage to our environment.

The pattern of denying scientific evidence of climate change and its effects on the Australian environment resonates with another significant case of denial: the denial of past and continuing atrocities to the traditional owners of the Australian continent: the Aboriginal nations who, for thousands of years, built and maintained knowledge systems of how to live one country, in harmony with seasons very different to the four European constructs. The denial of dispossession,

dismissal of continuing custodianship culminated in the wholesale rejection from then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of the most recent olive branch offered from our Indigenous elders, the 2017 "Uluru Statement from the Heart."[3] This document, a "national Indigenous consensus position on Indigenous constitutional recognition" was formulated in central Australia,[4] on the land of the Anangu people and if successful, would have enshrined agreement and truth-telling processes between Australian governments (on all levels) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Denial, refusal to action, and rejection of uncomfortable truths (scientific and historical): these are features of Australian polity, and they play their own part in the way that artistic work, artistic research, and research (in general) is recognised and funded. On 6 December 2019, the Morrison Government removed the word "Arts" from the Federal Department of Communication and the Arts, a powerful symbolic gesture. For 35 years, the arts has been a named ministry, appropriate for an industry that generates over $111 billion in revenue (a figure far in excess than the sacred cow of Australian culture—sport). Arts now sits under the newly named mega-Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, and Communications.[5] During the recent bushfire emergency, the value of the arts came under specific attack. On 15 January 2020, an artist's mural on a public fire station in Western Australia was roundly criticised as being "non-essential." State government policy for the past thirty years requires a 1% investment in public art for any public building constructed that costs over $2 million, with the money coming from the government—and not being taken from emergency services equipment. Disregarding this inconvenient truth, the (conservative) shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Steve Thomas, critiqued the investment made into an emergency services building, saying "it is more important to put that money into the equipment they require rather than artwork to decorate the building."[6] Opinions from the United Fire-workers Union and the Bushfire Volunteers Organisation supported this stance. Perhaps the most famous attack on the value of arts in our everyday lives was the suggestion that Australia should sell Jackson Pollock's painting *Blue Poles* (1952), which was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia for $1.3 million in a controversial decision in 1973. Senator James Paterson argued that with its worth at the time (estimated at $350 million), the work should be sold off to help pay the national debt.[7] The attendant contempt for this monetised view of aesthetic beauty was most aptly summed up in a cartoon by Jon Kudelka, entitled "Artonomics," which ran in *The Australian* on 8 October 2016. The image became the front cover for Julian Meyrick, Robert Phiddian, and Tully Barnett's excellent 2018 study about value in Australian culture,[8] which has inspired much of this paper.

This is how the arts fare in Australian polity. The disastrous funding cuts ($104 million) to the Australia Council for the Arts in 2014 by the Minister, Senator George Brandis, saw many small and medium practitioners leave the sector because of lack of funding. Brandis attempted to create an independent patronage entity in parallel with the Australia Council, the "National Program for Excellence in the Arts", later known as "Catalyst." From the onset, it was widely derided as a slush fund with the final say landing on the Minister's desk, rather than going through the arms-length peer-review process that has been at the centre of the Australia Council's funding model for over 30 years. The attack on this process should be noted here as part of a more concerted conservative campaign of attack on peer review in the context of aesthetic judgement.

2018 was also not a good year for peer review in the academy. The introduction of a "National Interest Test" to assess the value of research projects funded by the Australian Research Council not only shaped and restricted the scope of academic inquiry, but also provided a basis for 11 rejections later that year at the desk of the Minister.[9] The funding grants in question had undergone a highly rigorous peer evaluation by the Australian Research Council's College of Experts and were almost entirely based in the Humanities and Creative Arts. Rejections were explained on the basis of value and, in most instances, value to the "Australian community." Peer review is again diminished in the cause of "value."

Given such multi-pronged attacks on arts, outside and inside the academy, it is not unsurprising to see doubts raised about the value of artistic research. In a casual conversation last August that I had with another administrator, the question was raised about the intrinsic nature of artistic research. My interlocutor, having just returned from an international conference, raised the question of quality: did creative research (known in Australian research parlance as "Non-Traditional Research Outputs" or NTROs) need to be good art as well as good research? In conversations at the conference, a general consensus was that good research often made for tedious art. This prompted a quick examination through the British and Australian research survey criteria, where no references to aesthetic quality are stipulated in guidelines. This conversation seemed to be leading down a somewhat dangerous path, intimating that the measure of good artistic research should not rest on current protocols, but should also have some sort of value-based judgement introduced. But *whose* values? In a landscape dominated by conservative attacks on arts, research, and the essential contribution that aesthetic expression makes to our lives, I felt (and continue to feel) somewhat nervous about the direction of this discussion.

Artistic research goes through a rigorous process of verification and assessment before it is accepted and recognised in the academy. It is subject to internal university reviews with peer colleagues, after which claims are verified administratively, and in the case of the University of Sydney, an anonymous external peer assessor is employed to give a final ruling before a work enters the collection. This process repeats in preparation for the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) assessment, our equivalent to the British Research Excellence Framework (REF). In the ERA process, the output collection is reviewed internally, assessed (anonymously), filtered, and then sent to the Australian Research Council who put the outputs through yet another three-tier review process. Many subjective eyes have glanced witheringly down on artistic offerings before they make it to the final ERA collection.

Speaking now from a specific discipline (music), until the last ERA round, there has never been a music faculty or conservatorium who has achieved the golden Level 5: "well-above world standard." In 2018, for reasons still not apparent, the University of NSW (UNSW) was successful in obtaining the golden Level 5 in the Australian and New Zealand Research Code 1904, "Performing Arts and Creative Writing." The major Conservatory-style music departments around the country (WAAPA at Edith Cowan University, the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne, Queensland Conservatorium at Griffith University and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music at The University of Sydney) all sit at a number 4 ranking, pipped at the post by a traditional University music department.

And, while the explanation of UNSW's submission remains opaque at the time of presenting this paper, there are some important factors that are influencing the status of artistic research in music in Australia:

- there are few ARC-College members with practice-based research as their discipline, mostly because of the low success rate of grant applications
- Very few researchers have sat on the Humanities and Creative Arts Research Evaluation Committee for ERA assessment, and there is currently no music researcher on the ARC College of Experts
- From reliable sources, it is known that the presentation of creative work in the online platform is cumbersome and confusing to navigate. Presentations of portfolios are almost impossible to access.

So, is it peer review that is the cause of our research woes in the creative arts (and music in particular)? I did a quick analysis of ARC funding results for the 2018 ERA round (encompassing research submitted from 2011–2016), focusing on funding in six two-digit codes, which were only in the peer review disciplines: Code 12 (Built Environment and Design), Code 18 (Law and Legal Studies), Code 19 (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing), Code 20 (Language, Communication and Culture), Code 21 (History and Archaeology), and Code 22 (Philosophy and Religious Studies). In my analysis, I calculated that Code 19 received only 7% of the funding to peer-reviewed Humanities disciplines listed, with the bulk of funding awarded to 20: "Language, Communication and Culture," and 21: "History and Archaeology." These codes produce tangible written research, which allows ease of measurement, and more importantly, the application of metrics in a meaningful way to understand how the rest of the academy and the wider world is engaged with this research. Peer review is working in tandem with this metric evaluation.

But, to summarise Meyrick, Phiddion, and Barnett's study in a most unfair manner, metrics simply do not work when it comes to the performing arts.[10] Metrics is where we are in administrative conversations, especially with the introduction of engagement and impact narratives as part of our next ERA exercise. Metrics have entered the land of arts management and cultural programming. As they eloquently put it, "quantitative measures have achieved dominant power over the least quantifiable area of human endeavour—culture."[11]

How meaningful is it to measure the number of plays on Spotify? How truthful will people be in an immediate online survey after a concert or cultural event? Will they feel it an invasion of privacy? Is it a disruption between the unspoken relationship that exists between audience and performer? A certain amount of engagement statistics will be captured by metric measurement but, as far as impact is concerned, a *very long game* needs to be played to understand what ramifications a cultural object or moment plays. It could be years, decades, or even longer.

There is a reason we should be even more anxious about metrics. If we proceed from Shoshana Zuboff's important work on the rise of surveillance capitalism,[12] we need to ask the question: how will metric analysis shape our future aesthetic tastes and offerings? If metric analysis follows the mercantile pattern of predictive mass psychology utilised in the data scraping and mining by Google, Facebook, Twitter, et al., then we are at risk of erasing the essential process of rumination, consideration, and thought that lie at the fundamental heart of the relationship between ourselves and artistic works. We must exercise a great deal of caution in proceeding down this path.

There are other ways to improve the recognition of artistic research. Ian Pace profiles Darla Crispin's paper at the 2019 Royal Music Association on his blog.[13] Crispin raises the idea of expert subjectivity being reintroduced into assessment, in order for artistic research to develop a broader, more trenchant model of self-criticism. This needs to be extended throughout the peer review process in the creative arts in order to convince the rest of the academy of the place and value of the work of artistic research.

We also need to turn around the anti-intellectualism of artists outside the academy. We must fight against the devaluation of artistic research—against the "auditory cheesecake" argument that the Steven Pinkers of the world wish to feed us.

When Zanele Madiba asked me to respond to the question: How does artistic research decolonise knowledge and practice *in Africa*?, I asked whether I could respond to the question without the geographic qualifier, being unqualified to speak on behalf of Africa. My response was as follows:

> Embodied practices and recognition of subjectivity lie at the heart of artistic research. These core values directly challenge positivist tendencies that are embedded in the colonial understanding of the aesthetic encounter—tendencies towards appropriation, subjugation, and assimilation.

Of course, artistic research can go beyond the remit of decolonising. In a country that does not acknowledge its own colonising imperatives, where art as research is under constant attack, we need strong leadership to argue for intrinsic value without qualification. Such value must be built on recognition and consensus from a significant body of practitioners and researchers committed to valuing art qua art.

Joseph is Research Services Manager, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, Australia; joseph.toltz@sydney.edu.au

Notes

1 Arts Research Africa, 'Call for Contributions: Conference on Artistic Research in Africa: 22–24 January 2020, Johannesburg, South Africa'.

2 Resnick, Irfan, and Samuel, '8 Things Everyone Should Know about Australia's Wildfire Disaster'.

3 Melbourne Law School, 'Uluru Statement from the Heart: Information Booklet'.

4 Melbourne Law School, 'Uluru Statement from the Heart: Information Booklet', 3.

5 'Australia Cuts Federal Arts Department'.

6 Shine, 'WA Emergency Services Levy Funding Used to Pay for $100,000 Worth of Artwork at Fire Stations'.

7 Doran, 'Painting Blue Poles, Worth $350m, Should Be Sold to Reduce National Debt: Senator James Paterson'.

8 Meyrick, Phiddian, and Barnett, *What Matters*?

9 The text of the test is as follows: "Outline the extent to which the research contributes to Australia's national interest through its potential to have economic, commercial, environmental, social or cultural benefits to the Australian community. Write the description of the national interest simply, clearly and in plain English between approximately 100 and 150 words."

10 Meyrick, Phiddian, and Barnett, *What Matters?*

11 Meyrick, Phiddian, and Barnett, *What Matters?*, 284.

12 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

13 Pace, 'Rethinking Contemporary Musicology'.

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