Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Jun 23, 2017 by Robert Albro

The Arts of International Affairs: Time for a New Conversation about Culture [1]

Once again the debate about the arts and their relationship to the economy has been enjoined, this time in the UK. The terms are by now entirely familiar, and certainly loom in any discussion of the "value" of the arts in the U.S. as well. This is particularly true for the U.S. during recessions and periods of fiscal austerity. The NEA, as we know, is frequently obliged to make the case for the arts as a contributor to national economic growth. And it has been a virtual cottage industry among a succession of arts advocacy groups also desperate to do the same.

On one side of this broken record are found often highly instrumental and entrepreneurial accounts of the surplus value of investment in the arts: efforts to relate the creative sector to the overall performance of the economy, new models for understanding artistic creativity as a catalyst for economic innovation or cultural hubs as keys to urban renewal, and new tools to measure the economic contributions of the arts. These pitches appear most often designed for skeptical legislators and business leaders, city mayors and urban developers, who apparently feel the arts to be either an engine of capital or frivolous.

Inevitably, on the other side are artists and arts advocates whose first impulse is to defend the sanctity of "art for art's sake" – still – often against the perceived cynical motives behind any effort to "quantify creativity" and undermine artistic integrity, which, in this, our post-" age of mechanical reproduction," threatens to turn works of art into monochromatic commodities or economic goods. In passionate defense of their calling, artists tend to represent the value of art as universal, defended, alternatively, as an essentially spiritual, expressive, or creative exercise in what it means to be human. Given this, artists are often disinclined to justify or explore the various uses or value of art. Art just is.

If apparently a debate without end, the terms of this debate are also notably parochial. It is no coincidence that this public policy argument about the arts is especially characteristic of the U.S. and the UK, and countries with similarly relatively scant public funding for the arts, significantly privatized arts economies, where artistic products are a major export, and most notably, where the public meaning of "art" is a legacy of Enlightenment-derived aesthetic and moral concepts.

In other words, the tendency to separate "art" (as a universalizing aesthetic aspiration) from "culture" (as a localized expression of a particular people), to treat art as the unique product of individual creation, to prioritize and formally evaluate aesthetic significance, and the perceived clash between aesthetic and utilitarian goals (or art and money), are, together, a fairly specific conception of things. These several commitments participate – as basic cultural underpinnings – in constituting the overlapping art worlds of the U.S. and UK. But these art worlds

are not at the same time the world's.

A brief international comparison makes the point. In the U.S. we often identify graffiti as not art, as anonymous, popular, and criminal. In Mexico City graffiti has been described as a marginal genre, syncretically bridging artisanal with mass production, text and image, and manifesting urban disorder in the battle for control of public space. In pursuit of the "creative city" concept, Barcelona, Spain, has designated specific zones for graffiti artists to legally express themselves, as part of the promotion of a "context of freedom." While in China, in contrast, graffiti has only recently appeared, as largely non-confrontational, expressing little political content, leaning more "towards fashion" in ways blurring the distinction with advertisements. As art or not art, criminal, insurgent, or fashionable, graffiti is not self-evident internationally, but a doorway into the cultural diversity of geopolitical arrangements of public and private globally.

There promises to be no resolution to the recurring debate between philistines and free spirits over whether to give art over to the "language of business" to secure its financial future on the one hand, or to strip it of all utilitarian conceits , on the other, in "the exploration of truth and beauty." This is the case, even as successive "arts in/for the economy" paradigms underwhelm while puritanical defenders of artistic integrity talk largely among themselves.

A cursory survey of corporate and foundation funding for "the arts and culture" reveals modest spending to support arts groups, concert series, shows, exhibitions and performances in the U.S., that is, artists directly enriching the civic life of communities. But, in international terms, all of this misses the point. The slot allotted to art in U.S. public life is alarmingly narrow in scope and so self-referential as to be problematic, if we hope to engage the many cultural worlds of art globally.

With few exceptions, neither side spends much time: seriously working to bridge this agonistic divide, putting art and cultural production back into their different social contexts, considering the several ways art is meaningful for distinct local and global publics, or working to provide more grounded data to better understand art's many effects. Some of these exceptions can be found here and here. But to understand the multifarious role of art in the international arena, and the ways it participates in such projects as cultural diplomacy, we should jettison the terms of our domestic discussion, since they actively undermine such inquiry.

A first step is to resist the convention to distinguish "art" from "culture," which has served to cut off domestic arts policy in the U.S. and elsewhere from broader appreciation of the cultural challenges that cross cut international affairs. Especially for applied arts NGOs working with international counterparts. A second step is to recognize and interrogate our own assumptions about the purpose and value of "art." A third is to re-inscribe "art" back into its encompassing local and transnational settings of social engagement and meaning. A fourth is to take more seriously others' conceptions of art, as a complex cultural expression.

Finally, we should be much more attentive to the diverse ways in which cultural expression – including artistic production – is entangled in international affairs at present. The list is getting longer, but most obviously includes culture conceived as: rights, property, digital information content, heritage, security, local and national identity, as well as goods and services. It further includes the ways culture is mobilized and accounted for in: diplomacy, humanitarian response, international development, democratizing movements, and exclusionary politics. These are big challenges. "Art" is one mode through which international affairs are culturally

configured. Let’s start treating it that way.
