

Opinion

Bromides and Sugar-Pills: Cleaning Out the Artworld Medicine Chest



Arlene Goldbard

Have you ever listened to an impassioned speech on “supporting the arts” and wondered what your next-door neighbor or bus driver would make of it? The arts advocacy lexicon is clogged with feel-good platitudes and undigested orthodoxies, what political consultants call “dog-whistle” speech: phrases with coded meanings for initiates that sail past everyone else. Sometimes I feel I’ll explode if I have to listen to more bromides from earnest advocates who have never bothered to interrogate their own assumptions.

Let’s consider two examples: language that obscures reality instead of illuminating it, and fixed ideas that persist despite their evident failure.

Arts-funding advocates make claims for “the arts” as opposed to “entertainment” or “popular culture”; then they get into arguments about how to define each term. In truth, virtually everyone partakes of both subsidized and commercial culture (not to mention informal arts practice, such as singing in a choir or making videos for YouTube). And any of us is as likely to have a life-changing experience with Bob Dylan as with Beethoven.

So who cares about categories? Why does this distinction matter so much? Advocates cling to it because they believe their survival hangs in the balance. The most egregious such

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usage I've heard was from a symphony board president describing school-based programs where musicians brought their instruments into the classroom: "Some of these children," she said with a straight face, "have never heard music before." It was an art-world audience, so almost nobody laughed! The dog-whistle message was that symphonic music is superior, and that's why it should be subsidized.

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This is narrow-minded to the point of brain damage, and it's been happening for centuries. Raising money for Boston's first symphony orchestra in the nineteenth century, Henry Higginson told potential donors that they should "Educate, and save ourselves and our families and our money from the mobs!" That hoary sentiment lurks behind most advocacy-speak today.

Dropping "the arts," "serious music," and similar rubrics would be a good start. To be precise, we should refer to "the subsidized arts." Better still, why not abandon these distinctions, which are merely a form of economic self-protection manifested as snobbery, and simply talk instead about music, dance, film, painting, and so on? Why not wade into the great stream of culture instead of damming up little tributaries and claiming that civilization's fate depends on the dams holding?

It isn't just language; something about subsidized arts advocacy fosters unexamined beliefs. Consider how many arts advocates live in the grip of a persistent obsession: to persuade funders and policymakers, they labor to convey art's value through "hard evidence" such as numbers, graphs, and charts.

I speak at a lot of conferences, so I often see this phenomenon in action. For example, I saw the research director of a national arts group trot out pie charts illustrating the economic multiplier effect of arts participation (i.e., people who buy theater tickets generally also spend money on transportation, food, and drink). Then he graphed arts-related economic activity, showing that billions are spent producing films, recordings, theater, dance, visual art, literature, and so on. "Legislators love these charts," he said. "Gotta speak their language."

He was followed by an arts lobbyist who detailed tireless efforts to convince legislators that art benefits education and helps the economy. She cited a study purporting to show that higher test scores and lower dropout rates are achieved by kids who participate in "the arts." (Like virtually all such studies, this one was biased toward elite arts. Include garage-band players, spray-can artists, and hip-hop dancers, and the results aren't necessarily the same.)

During the Q&A, I asked the research director whether, considering that his approach had been tried ever since Reagan's election triggered a spate of secondary arguments for arts support to stave off budget cuts, the "hard evidence"—a steep drop in the real value of federal arts budgets and a major decline in arts support as a percentage of private giving—might indicate the strategy had failed. He dissembled. Then I asked the lobbyist about her results. She admitted that her state arts agency's budget had been cut. Since their approach hasn't succeeded in attracting new funds—indeed, the best-case scenario is that it might have cut losses a little—I asked them why they were so convinced of its value. Neither had an answer.

I've heard presentations like theirs for decades. This passionate belief in the persuasive power of charts and graphs seems increasingly bizarre and disconnected from reality, like some modern-day cargo cult. (In the classic example, Melanesians built airstrips from coconuts and straw, staging hopeful drills in the belief that supernatural forces would deliver the richly stocked cargo planes that Europeans seemed to attract to their own airstrips.) Today's

cargo cultists don't mistake straw for tarmac. Instead, they fall into the classic scientific error, believing that methods used in the physical sciences to weigh, measure, and evaluate substances can somehow be transferred to the fluid and complex realm of human culture, with comparable results.

Blinded by scientism, devotees of this contemporary cargo cult have failed to notice the obvious: After more than three decades, there is not a shred of evidence that their strategy works.

Funders' and gatekeepers' demand for hard evidence is always applied differentially. Claiming insufficient evidence is an easy way to frame a rejection you want to make anyway. In contrast, ready money is wonderfully effective at papering over the need for evidence of any type. When someone offers to endow a new school of international business, for instance, you can be sure the answer will be, "Thank you very much; what name would you like over the door?" Neither were the mega-billions spent for our blunders in Iraq subjected to evidence tests, or they would never have been appropriated in the first place. But for piddling arts dollars, elaborate proofs are demanded.

What's more, decades of effort to muster this hard evidence has produced little. Some studies may appear sturdy at first glance, but their centers are soft. Theater patrons put money into local economies, as economic multiplier studies claim, but so do sports fans and every category of admission-payer, so arts participation has no unique value here. Similarly, if kids who take violin lessons do better in school, are music lessons cause or effect? Arguably, household income or parental educational attainment are better indicators of performance, because they link kids to better schools. Solid research isolates the factors it studies, as with control groups; definitively proving a link between art and grades would entail finding a group of kids who truly *have never* heard music before! Yet millions have been spent on flawed studies that prove absolutely nothing.

Some advocates have given up on arts funding, redirecting their pie charts and test scores to health care or community development grant-makers: now you have to show that crime or drug use drops with arts involvement. But trying a different airstrip hasn't changed the results. While some have gotten grants this way, very few legislators or funders have become committed advocates for health promotion or community development through arts activity. Instead, every attempt to sell creativity by the numbers triggers a new demand for even harder evidence, like Rumpelstiltskin commanding the miller's daughter to spin straw into gold. Instead of abandoning a failed strategy, arts advocates, in defensive terror, scurry to fulfill ever more meaningless demands.

Absurdly, advocates of this cargo cult see themselves as forward thinkers, using the dominant market vocabulary to sell practices situated in a very different way of understanding the world. But the opposite is true: they are performing rituals of obeisance to a failed order, jumping through hoops that by now barely hold together, blindly believing that if they do it one more time, the cargo planes will come.

Does it really require "hard evidence" to justify the importance of culture and creativity? How can anyone survey our image-saturated, story-filled, perpetually musical society and need numbers to make that point? Even under extreme conditions of deprivation people sustain body and soul by writing poetry, scratching drawings onto cell walls, singing, dancing, shaping mud into figures. Clandestine orchestras were started in concentration camps. I have never heard of concentration camp inmates risking their lives to gather clandestinely and create a balance sheet. Have you?

The demand for “hard evidence” of secondary benefits to justify cultural support is as pointless as scientific studies proving mother’s milk is good for babies—and just as much an artifact of the old paradigm, which privileges quantifiable ways of knowing above all others.

The emergent paradigm acknowledges many coexisting truths, including the observable fact that being human, we make meaning through stories and songs, movement, images, and objects that resonate with our experience. It is our collective responsibility to support the means by which successive generations receive and remake culture. The market takes care of some of it; the public trust ought to support work of cultural value that doesn’t turn a buck.

All the rest is cargo cult: polishing the old paradigm’s idols, the pie chart, and cost–benefit analysis; dusting off the bromides; carrying them to the airstrip; and waiting in utter futility for false gods to deliver the goods. Meanwhile, the next-door neighbors and bus drivers who could be allies are increasingly distanced by rampant elitism and dog-whistle politics. Enough!

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