CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Re-evaluating Evaluation

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In September 2023, the editors of this volume convened the 'Precarity, Creative Arts, and Wellbeing Symposium' at Massey University in Auckland. The two-day hui (gathering) brought together scholars and arts practitioners mainly from Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ) and Australia to share approaches to working in precarious settings as well as innovative methods for researching and evaluating the impact of participatory arts[1] on the wellbeing of precarious communities. The symposium

[1] We acknowledge that 'participatory arts' is broad term that can often be associated with performance that engages audiences as participants. In this book, we draw on Francois Matarasso's useful definition of participatory arts simply as the creation of an artwork by professional artists and non-professional artists (2019, 48).

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was the culmination of a series of attempts to bring together the wider discourse about the role and value of the arts, and concerns with what seemed to be increasing precarity and instability in the social and cultural contexts of both Aotearoa NZ and Australia. It felt important to us that rethinking the role and value of the arts in relation to these contextual changes would involve rethinking why and how the arts were evaluated. Little did we know that this would lead to us producing this book.

Our symposium was, of course, part of a bigger picture. It aimed to contribute in creative and scholarly ways to ongoing arts, health, and wellbeing work in Aotearoa NZ and Australia. This includes the advocacy, research, and other sector-level action being led by the likes of Te Ora Auaha: Creative Wellbeing Alliance Aotearoa, the Arts and Wellbeing Research and Evaluation Network (Aotearoa NZ and Australia), Arts Access Aotearoa, VicHealth (Australia), and Creative Australia. It also includes the work of individual organisations, artists, and practitioners who keep developing, discussing, and sharing ways of working, because they can sense what they are doing is making a difference. And there are researchers, often working alongside, through or in partnership with creative practice. Together, this work has succeeded in raising the prominence of the relationship between the arts, health, and wellbeing broadly, as well as developing and promoting locally distinct practice approaches and frameworks.

What do we see, then, as the distinguishing features or strengths of arts, health, and wellbeing work in Australia and Aotearoa NZ, which have informed our decision to focus this book on this part of the world? First, there is the dynamic, strong tradition of **Indigenous-led research and practice**, as well as the examples of, and frameworks for, equitable, generative **Indigenous–non-Indigenous collaboration**. Another notable feature is the prevalence of successful **cross-disciplinary and cross-sector solidarity**, and examples of initiatives that have led to meaningful connections and conversations between what can be deeply divided domains: research, policy, and practice. And, finally, we suggest, it is now the norm, rather than the exception, to understand **health and wellbeing as holistic and as contingent on equity and justice**.

These features were clear at the 'Precarity, Creative Arts, and Wellbeing Symposium'. For example, Fran Kewene gave a keynote presenting her kaupapa Māori theatre research praxis. Grounded in Māori hauora frameworks and drawing on both Māori and Western theatre traditions, Kewene challenges health inequities and promotes changes within health and

social care to better foster Māori vitality. Hobson Street Theatre Company's verbatim drama, *Un-Welfare State*, performed at the conference, presented research drawn from the three-year research project 'Wellbeing and the Precariat', which was funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand. The interdisciplinary research team included seven principal researchers and eight postgraduate students from three Aotearoa New Zealand universities. These researchers, from Psychology, Kaupapa Māori, and Theatre backgrounds, interviewed low-income households about their experiences of health and wellbeing. These interviews became the basis of a verbatim drama exploring experiences of the welfare system in Aotearoa NZ and highlighting the apparent deficit of care within an increasingly punitive welfare system. Dr Ying Wang, meanwhile, shared how her work to support the wellbeing of Asian communities in Aotearoa NZ involves working across the arts, health, and creative arts therapies, drawing from Eastern and Western philosophies and therapeutic practices. All these examples share a focus on equity and a **prominent concern with collective or community wellbeing**, which we identify as another feature of the arts, health, and wellbeing ecosystem in Australia and Aotearoa NZ.

Another keynote presentation at the symposium was given by Adrian Jackson, founder and former director of Cardboard Citizens, a UK-based Theatre Company that produces work particularly by, with, and for those who have experienced homelessness, inequity, or poverty. A specialist in the Theatre of the Oppressed, Jackson has translated five books by the Brazilian theatre pioneer Augusto Boal and specialises in the use of participatory arts as an inclusive practice to engage marginalised communities. As part of his keynote, Jackson shared an anecdote about the Peckham Experiment. Led by two doctors, George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse—who established the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, London, in the 1930s—the Peckham Experiment involved the study of factors that promoted and enhanced health. As part of his keynote, Jackson shared an anecdote about how the doctors leading the Peckham Experiment were interested in measuring 'the spring in a person's step' or the 'gleam in a person's eye', as potential indicators that people are living healthy lives.

The Pioneer Health Centre was closed in 1950 and much of the data on the Peckham Experiment was lost in the Second World War (Feedland 2007). This might explain the difficulty in trying to verify the anecdote shared by Jackson. Despite our inability to confirm the provenance of this story, the account is nevertheless intriguing. It is a story that conveys what seems to be an ongoing challenge for Western health practices, to

recognise and 'account for' the more elusive qualities and conditions that comprise health and wellbeing, to give them greater value. The story resonated with many attendees of the symposium. It pointed to the often intangible but still observable, or otherwise discernible, value that participating in the arts can have for those involved. Ask any artist, arts educator, facilitator, or community participant who has been moved by an art project to describe its 'effect', and they may well resort to adjectives with bodily and affective dimensions. For example, they might report that the atmosphere of the art project has become lighter, that they felt a 'quickening of the spirit' or became 'more alive'. An artist running an arts project might notice a sense of pride emerging, registered in a shift in comportment, heads held higher, or a new willingness to make eye contact. Participants may feel more attuned to each other, their bodies more 'open' or relaxed, a renewed willingness and capacity to listen. Adrian Jackson's story made us reflect on how such things often remain elusive to standard evaluation methods; things which we, as artists, arts educators, and participants, think/feel/know are important in arts practice.

In keeping with the features and strengths of our regional context, this book presents practice-based and practice-led[2] research from Aotearoa NZ and Australia, which critically explores the contribution that participation in the arts makes to wellbeing and health. By 'critically', we mean research that explicitly addresses the social, political, cultural and economic factors that underlie (a) people's ill health and poor wellbeing, (b) the kinds of practices, methodologies, and knowledge that are privileged, and (c) issues of power and positionality. By 'participation in the arts' we mean the active involvement of people in a creative process. We acknowledge that other forms of participation in the arts (e.g. as an audience member) also contribute to health and wellbeing. But, perhaps because of our common background in applied theatre,[3] we are particularly interested in the value of people taking part in creative arts processes

[2] Here we distinguish between practice-based research which prioritises research as coming out of the practice, whereas practice-led research prioritises the practice as the main mode of inquiry (See Nelson 2013).

[3] Applied Theatre is theatre that usually happens outside of conventional theatre spaces, in social and community contexts, with diverse groups of people, in order to bring about social change.

that have a meaningful connection to their everyday lives and experiences. This book also presents ideas, examples, and models for evaluating the contribution of the arts to health and wellbeing in ways that take experiential, embodied, and artistic ways of knowing seriously, as well as methods of evaluation that are sensitive and relevant to the complex cultural, creative, and ecological contexts within which practice unfolds.

The Shifting Landscape of Arts, Health, and Wellbeing

Of course, the conversations and concerns that emerged at the 'Precarity, Creative Arts, and Wellbeing Symposium' happened in dialogue with the wider issues and debates unfolding in Australia, Aotearoa NZ, and internationally at that time. It's not possible to give a comprehensive overview of this sometimes drastically shifting landscape of policy, practice, and research, but we think it is useful to highlight some key points.

In Aotearoa NZ, a policy 'turn to wellbeing' was prompted by the sixth Aotearoa New Zealand Labour government, who, under the leadership of Prime Minister Jacinda Adern, launched the world's first Wellbeing Budget in 2019, making Aotearoa NZ the first country to measure success by its people's wellbeing (Roy 2019). The Wellbeing Budget signalled a shift to a more holistic consideration of the factors that contribute to citizens living good lives. It also marked a shift in how the government would measure policy and funding outcomes and their contribution to Aotearoa NZ's living standards.[4] Jacinda Ardern also took on the ministerial portfolio for Arts, Culture and Heritage, and her early speeches in this role emphasised the importance of the arts to public wellbeing, people's sense of identity, and social change (Ardern 2018). Her statements generated more interest in and recognition of the relationship between arts and wellbeing. They did not, however, lead to the re-conceptualisation of the role and value of the arts or, importantly, how they should be funded.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the further embedding of wellbeing as the Ardern government's policy driver. The pandemic and its global reverberations also contributed to a sense of increased urgency in

[4] "The LSF is a flexible framework that prompts our thinking about policy impacts across the different dimensions of wellbeing, as well as the long-term and distributional issues and implications of policy". https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/higher-living-standards/our-living-standards-framework.

Aotearoa NZ, Australia, and internationally to consider the importance of the arts to the health of communities as well as the precarious situation of arts workers within our societies. Some of the initiatives that were put in place to support artists and arts organisations through the pandemic and in its immediate aftermath indicated that change was possible. For example, a new three-year fund in Aotearoa NZ for organisations providing access to the arts for marginalised communities enabled both growth and sustainability.[5] In Australia, the conservative government provided 200 million AUD in support through the 'RISE' Fund, but this was criticised by many for its focus on large commercial entertainment companies over independent artists and small-to-medium organisations. Meanwhile, more and more evidence stacked up showing multiple health, wellbeing, economic (and more) benefits from participating in the arts, and increasingly how such benefits were achieved (Arts Access Aotearoa 2024; Carter et al. 2024; Creative Australia 2023; Creative New Zealand 2023). But, as any temporary COVID-19-related boosts to funding and support for the arts and artists came to an end, the situation seemed just as, if not more, precarious than before the pandemic (Morrow 2022; Mullen and Lythberg 2021). And, beyond the arts, the post-pandemic years have brought recessions, political polarisation, climate change impacts, and international conflicts. Across many countries, social and individual stability and other important pre-conditions—or determinants—of health and wellbeing seem to be in decline (World Health Organisation 2025).

In the face of these crises, there have been moves towards strengthening 'arts and health' as a field, and a significant area of policy and practice. In Australia, arts and health began to emerge through community arts and health promotion work through the 1970s and 1980s, followed by hospital arts programmes in the 1990s. The field then started to gain prominence through the work of Margaret Meagher, who established Arts and Health Australia, and the first international conference in 2009. Since then, policy attention has grown, with the establishment in 2014 of the National Arts and Health Framework[6]; state-level leadership from bodies like VicHealth; and Creative Australia's *Creating*

[5] https://artsaccess.org.nz/Investment-in-creative-spaces-pays-dividends-in-health-and-social-outcomes.

[6] https://www.arts.qld.gov.au/images/documents/artsqld/Research/National-Arts-and-Health-Framework-May-2014.pdf.

Wellbeing report (Creative Australia 2023), which identifies the challenges and opportunities of arts approaches to wellbeing and informs their 2024 request for tender supporting the development of creative health practice.[7] There has also been a growth in state-wide arts and health networks to connect practitioners and scholars across the sector. While the Australian Government's most recent cultural policy, *Revive*, does not promote a standalone arts and health programme, it encourages cross-sector collaboration and integration of the arts into various social settings, including healthcare (Australian Government 2023). At the time of writing, Creative Australia announced a two-year arts and health initiative whose goal is to 'strengthen the role of the arts in health and community care' (Creative Australia 2025). These initiatives have been informed by advances in university-level arts and health education, research and leadership, including through organisations like the Big Anxiety Research Centre (University of New South Wales) and the Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative (University of Melbourne). Some universities are driving an interest in social prescribing (Forbes et al. 2025) and public health initiatives that promote the arts (see, for example, Good Arts Good Mental Health in Western Australia).[8] In Australia, these recent developments are being driven by a renewed sense of urgency post-pandemic, including a national mental health crisis and the rapidly escalating wellbeing impacts brought about by climate change. In Aotearoa NZ, the field remains less explicitly defined, being characterised more by informal alliances and networks (like Te Ora Auaha: Creative Wellbeing Alliance), sustained advocacy and practice innovation,[9] but a lack of direct policy on arts and health or wellbeing (Walls 2023).

Rather than radical shifts in the scholarly discourse of arts, health, and wellbeing, what we want to highlight are perhaps better described as

[7] https://creative.gov.au/sites/creative-Australia/files/documents/2025-05/Supporting%20Creative%20Health%20Practice%20in%20Australia%20-%20Request%20for%20Tender.pdf.

[8] https://goodartsgoodmentalhealth.com.au/.

[9] See, for example, Creative Waikato Standing Up for the Arts https://creativewaikato.co.nz/advocacy/standing-up-for-the-arts, and Creative NZ: Arts Council New Zealand Toi Aotearoa advocacy campaigns https://creativenz.govt.nz/advocating-for-the-arts/our-advocacy-work.

growing trends. One trend we observe is towards increasing critical scholarship. Acknowledging that critical perspectives have been an important and continuous feature of arts and health scholarship (Parr 2017), there seems to be growing recognition that when the discourse on arts, health, and wellbeing centres uncritically on decontextualised individual or environmental factors, structural determinants and systemic failings can be ignored. This recognition is perhaps leading to more research addressing whether and how the arts contribute to health equity (Sunderland et al. 2018) and community or ecological wellbeing (Gattenhof et al. 2021). Indigenous research and practice are also increasingly prominent (Van Styvendale et al. 2021; Bartleet, Sunderland and Lakhani 2018), as is research highlighting the cultural specificity of conceptions of health and wellbeing, and decolonial approaches, which we explore in more detail below. Taken together, these trends present a substantial move to challenge and displace some of the paradigms and conceptions of value that have dominated the field, a movement this book seeks to contribute to.

Rethinking how Value is Theorised, Measured, and Communicated

This book engages with international conversations about cultural value, which call into question traditional approaches and assumptions about what the arts are and why they matter (Belfiore 2020; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Meyrick et al. 2018). This book, then, is not an evaluation toolkit. Instead, it presents examples and case studies where evaluating arts participation has involved interrogating notions of value. This is, we argue, an important step towards aligning what is *of value* to the participants and artists involved in arts, health, and wellbeing practices, with the methods used to evaluate those practices. It is about putting the values back in evaluation. Some research and evaluation approaches, largely in the positivist tradition, claim to produce value-neutral findings (House and Howe 1999). Research in the positivist tradition requires the researcher to be objective, to ensure their values do not influence the study in any way. Feminist, Queer, Indigenous, and other critical scholarship has responded to these claims by showing that all methodologies and methods used in research and evaluation are shaped by values (Bhavnani 1993; Smith 2012). Nicola Bright and Sally Boyd (2024) explain this problem as a feature of the health sector more broadly, where "Western approaches often appear to position measurement tools

as 'culture free' and appropriate for everyone, when, in reality, they are founded on the culture and values of a dominant culture" (p. 4). Feminist science scholars, meanwhile, show how the 'instruments' used in research (from equipment used for science experiments to research questionnaires) are not neutral tools for measuring something. Rather, they are complex social *and* material practices that play a part in producing what is 'found' or not (Bhavnani 1993). James Vincent (2022) makes a similar point in his social history of measurement, suggesting that "measurement is a mirror to society itself; it is a form of attention that reveals what we value in the world" (5). In this book, then, scholars, artists, and allied practitioners are asking what counts, and what is not counted by the tools and frameworks that we work with.

It seems important to end this section with a caveat. While we think anyone involved in evaluating the contributions participatory arts might make to health and wellbeing must think carefully and critically before adopting some of the dominant approaches, we are in no way calling for the outright rejection of methodologies premised on objectivity or of quantitative methods. Instead, we draw attention to examples where scholars, artists, and other practitioners are rethinking these concepts. For example, Indigenous scholars are developing Indigenous and decolonial quantitative methods,[10] and feminist scholars reconceive objectivity as situated knowledges (Bhavnani 1993). Collaborative, transdisciplinary research in the US has resulted in 'Data Theatre', using theatre as a means for communities to 'translate' quantitative research data, sparking reflection and debate and informing public policy (Snyder-Young et al. 2024). Our concern, outlined further below, is that particular sets of values, or conceptions of value, can become so ubiquitous in evaluation that they are left unscrutinised. This, then, delimits our priorities when working with communities through artistic practice, while appearing to serve our practice by generating evidence.

What Counts? The Impact of Impact Evaluation

We are as susceptible as anyone to believing that if we can produce enough of the right kind of evidence through our research, we can inform policy change, or other kinds of change, in a way that will lead to better

[10] For example, the Civic Laboratory, https://civiclaboratory.nl/methodological-projects/indigenous-quantitive-methods/#project-background.

outcomes for communities and perhaps better support and resourcing for the arts. The fact that government agencies sometimes even commission this research makes us feel like, if we just get it right, it could really make a difference. But, as we outline above, even though the evidence piles up, policy changes based on that evidence feel as far off as ever.

Writing about the UK, Eleonora Belfiore (2022, 294) puts our experience into the context of the evidence-based policy trend, which originated in the 1990s in health, and has subsequently 'gone global':

> Despite the move towards a supposedly "evidence-based" policy, "evidence" rarely underpins decision-making, especially in policies surrounding the perceived social impacts of the arts. Rather than enhancing accountability and transparency in policy making, the pressures placed on English publicly funded cultural institutions to produce evaluations of their performance, and to subject themselves to the constant attempt to measure their efficiency and impact, has been pivotal in the escalation of very dubious 'evidence'. (Belfiore 2022, 294)

Belfiore argues that evidence-based policymaking privileges objective, standardised, quantified, linear ways of knowing over the rich, subjective, experiential ways of knowing that come from the arts and humanities and, we would add, from an Australian and Aotearoa NZ perspective, over Indigenous ways of knowing. The image depicted in the above quote is familiar to us, of the immense pressure experienced by arts and cultural organisations to prove their worth, to justify their receiving public or philanthropic funds, by providing evidence of their impact. Indeed, in Aotearoa NZ and Australia, understandings of the value of *participatory arts*, of arts that bring together social and artistic aims and processes, have been almost completely captured by the social impact paradigm. It is almost impossible to articulate the way the arts might lead to change, make a difference, in any other way.

The social impact paradigm emerged in the 1990s as public policymaking became tied to the imperative for governments to demonstrate that their policies were delivering value for money (Patton 2023). Applied to the arts, the social impact paradigm creates the requirement "to deliver economic or other public benefits…in return for societal support through dedicated institutions and funding" (Belfiore 2015, 95–6). Beyond government, philanthropists and charitable trusts now describe their giving as a form of social impact investment, requiring

measurable evidence of social returns (impacts). Taken at face value, of course, governments and charities need to be held accountable for how they spend people's taxes or donations, and, of course, this means they have to require anyone using those funds to provide evidence that the money has been well spent. And, perhaps it is a good way to get institutions that can be perceived to be too insular or elitist, like academia and the arts, to be more concerned about being of use to society. However, as Gedutis et al. (2023) argue, the social impact paradigm is less concerned with ensuring that research benefits society, and "more a specific form of evaluation linked to an economic theory of society based on accountability and a mechanistic a-political (or anti-democratic) evaluation" (32). Gedutis et al. describe social impact evaluation as anti-democratic because decisions about what is of value and how it will be judged are rarely subject to public discussion; rarely are they determined either by the people running an art or research project, let alone the people such projects are intended to benefit.

Our hope is that producing this book might help displace the social impact paradigm as the dominant way of understanding value, and, in doing so, contribute to widening the space of possibility for evaluating participatory arts. Debates about what counts as evidence and what evidence counts have been ongoing in the field and literature of arts and health. For example, Anni Raw et al. (2012) propose that the somewhat obsessive, narrow focus on generating quantitative evidence of the impact of arts on health and wellbeing has detracted from the much-needed theorisation of that practice. Meanwhile, leading arts and health scholars Stephen Clift et al. (2021) argue that concerns about the conceptualisation of impact in arts and health research and evaluation, which were raised as early as the 1990s, have still not been addressed in the 2020s. They highlight, for example, the "danger in the arts and health literature of 'psychologising' social and health issues and failing to see the larger public health picture with the central role played by underlying economic and social structural causes of inequalities" (454). They also note the ways in which issues of "aesthetics and quality of arts engagement" are given no attention in key reports that claim to present evidence for the health impacts of the arts (454). What we take from these debates is a call for a richer range of methodologies, and for theorisation and forms of evidence that will genuinely deepen and enrich the knowledge and practice of our field.

Beyond Impact: Emerging Methodologies

As discussed above, the social impact paradigm's dominance, along with the pressing demands of neoliberal funding and accountability structures, has led to prioritising the instrumental over intrinsic value of the arts in health and social sectors. This has often led to a reliance on evaluation measures that reduce the rich and complex experience of participating in the arts to a digestible package of positively spun statistics, impact stories, images, and soundbites. While this kind of evaluation in arts and health/wellbeing seems to persist, several trends in academic or scholarly research have informed a shift in how we might approach the ethical, aesthetic, and economic values underpinning such practices; and the ways in which we might conceive, measure, and articulate value (evaluate). We briefly outline these trends below, focusing on the development and legitimisation of **artistic practice in scholarly research**; a proliferation of **practice-led participant-centred or participant-led methods** in health and social research; a growing call for **transdisciplinary knowledge creation** in addressing complex real-world problems; and the rise of **Indigenous knowledges** and culturally grounded methodologies to address the needs of First Nations communities.

Artistic Practice in Scholarly Research

Concurrently with the emergence of the social impact paradigm in the arts sectors in the 1990s—at least in Western universities—there also emerged a movement towards the arts in qualitative research. Arts-informed research (Cole and Knowles 2008), arts-based research (ABR) (Leavy 2020), and arts-based health research (ABHR) (Boydell et al. 2016) incorporate artistic practices and creative processes into research methodologies. These approaches highlight the affective, sensory, and embodied aspects of data collection and analysis. Creative practice as research (or practice-led research) also developed in the academy as the arts disciplines rapidly expanded in higher education and scholars sought to legitimise creative practice as a rigorous form of inquiry (Nelson 2013). This centring of artistic or arts-led research methods in the generation of knowledge was applied to the development of artistic practices and disciplines themselves, as well as to the wider social, political, and philosophical questions underpinning our experiences of the world. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of creative and artistic research methods such as

autoethnography (Ellis et al. 2011), photovoice (Catalani and Minkler 2010), digital storytelling (Hardy and Sumner 2017), poetic inquiry (Prendergast et al. 2009), ethnodrama or ethnotheatre (Saldaña 2011), research-based theatre (Beck et al. 2011), and applied theatre as research (Anderson and O'Connor 2014). These methods centre the creative exploration of one's own and others' lived experiences through different artistic disciplines. While the social impact paradigm may have led to a narrowing of what counts, the flourishing of creative arts in research has broadened considerations of what is of value and how we might capture it.

Practice-Led and Participant-Led Methods

A rise in practice-based qualitative methods, such as action research in education, health, and social care settings, placed an emphasis on evaluating existing practices with a view to improving and refining them. As these applied research approaches developed, concern for redressing the power imbalances inherent in the researcher/researched or 'professional'/'client' relationship began to emerge, resulting in participatory qualitative research methods such as participatory action research (PAR), which seeks to centre the lived experiences of professionals and end-users in evaluating the efficacy of programmes (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Similarly, 'developmental evaluation', as conceptualised by Michael Quinn Patton (2011), offers a flexible and adaptive approach to evaluating complex, innovative initiatives in dynamic environments. This approach emphasises real-time feedback, learning, and adaptation, evolving in response to participants' needs and emerging insights (Gamble 2008). Such participatory methods are flexible and responsive, empowering traditionally marginalised voices (nurses, patients, teachers, students, and more) with the authority to contribute new knowledge that will influence policy and practice. This, in turn, has evolved into the co-design movement in research and public policy, where (at its best) the beneficiaries and stakeholders in health and social care work alongside researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop programmes; establish shared articulations of value/s and success indicators for those programmes; collaborate in developing methods for evaluating programme efficacy in meeting those indicators; and work together to interpret the findings (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou 2018). Nevertheless, 'co-design' has replaced 'community

consultation' as a buzz word in health and social programme development, sometimes leading to tokenistic efforts to engage participants in such processes. Our book foregrounds ethical participant-centred evaluative practices that promote genuine collaboration and co-design, with a recognition that such approaches involve nurturing meaningful and trusting relationships over time.

Transdisciplinary Knowledges

In applied theatre, we have seen a consistent theme of collaboration across disciplines in practice-led explorations of how the arts might enhance professional practice in health, education, and other sectors; or how they might serve to articulate the lived experiences, needs, and priorities of stakeholders. Collaborations between theatre makers/scholars and, for example, scholars and practitioners in social work, nursing, medicine, environmental sciences, and many more emphasise the power of the arts in accessing embodied modes of learning and knowing that reach beyond traditional didactic pedagogies ('chalk and talk') or research methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups (Prendergast et al. 2024). And emerging art/science collaborations are giving rise to innovative technologies and transdisciplinary knowledges that push beyond the scope of what one discipline might achieve alone in understanding, for example, the potential uses of virtual reality in healing Indigenous intergenerational trauma (Menezes 2024), or the use of sound in measuring the impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems (Barclay 2019). In response to increasingly complex social relations and geopolitical upheavals, we recognise the need to continue working collaboratively, co-creating knowledges and innovations across disciplines.

Indigenous Knowledges

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of community-driven, arts-based programmes in health and wellbeing promotion and education among First Nations communities in Australia and Aotearoa NZ, particularly in response to existing health inequities (Carr et al. 2025; Durie 2004; Hickey et al. 2021; McEwan et al. 2013; Sunderland et al. 2023; Verbunt et al. 2021; Woodland and Bell-Wykes 2024). These approaches recognise the unique strengths and perspectives of First

Nations communities in addressing their own health challenges. Indigenous frameworks, such as centring Country and relational accountability, challenge the ontological hegemony of Western science (Harriden 2023). By prioritising relationality and reciprocity, these frameworks offer a more holistic understanding of wellbeing, the natural world, and the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human experiences. With an emphasis on cultural determinants of health (Sunderland et al. 2023), much of this work has embraced and adapted arts-led and participatory methods such as poetic enquiry (Cooms and Saunders 2024), 'Aboriginal participatory action research' (APAR) (Dudgeon et al. 2020), developmental evaluation (McKegg et al. 2016), and applied theatre as research (Woodland et al. 2024). While not the sole focus of this volume, we acknowledge the growing calls for programme evaluations in First Nations communities to engage with Indigenous methodologies that respect and honour these culturally grounded knowledge systems; and we draw inspiration from the collaborations we have undertaken with our First Nations colleagues and mentors in this space.

We argue that the trends described above have inspired and informed the arts-led evaluative practices discussed in this book, providing a roadmap for how we and others have arrived at the idea of 'artful evaluation'.

Arriving at 'Artful Evaluation'

We have called this book *Artful Evaluation*, embracing the multiple connotations of the word artful: to be creative, skilful, and wise, but also crafty and strategic. It encompasses critical and creative approaches to framing, exploring, uncovering, and articulating the 'measures' or indicators of value in creative wellbeing projects. Artful evaluation implies a certain agility in working with communities and participants, enabling the evaluation process itself to enhance wellbeing through genuine collaborative processes that are inclusive and empowering. It also involves artfully integrating evaluation processes with art-making, collapsing traditional distinctions between process and outcome, art-making and meaning-making, or knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. It may also imply the nuanced skill, articulated in some of this book's chapters, of evaluating in ways that serve both the extrinsic requirements of funders and the goals and values determined by the artists and participants.

An emphasis on the 'art' in artful evaluation moves us towards considering the aesthetic, affective, embodied, and imaginative qualities inherent in artistic practices. These qualities can enhance evaluation processes to generate deeper, more nuanced accounts of complex experiences. Many of the contributions to this volume emphasise holism in conceiving artful evaluation, resisting the reductive tendency to categorise or silo that is present in much traditional evaluation. This holistic approach reflects the formal quality of an artwork that often generates an integrated whole while conveying a variety of different meanings to different audiences. We now turn to the contributions to this volume, highlighting how they advance this idea of 'artful evaluation' through a range of practices and approaches.

Chapter Summaries

Section 1: What is of Value?

The two chapters in this section ask challenging questions about the value systems that are built into policy, funding, and evaluation. The first chapter is a personal account written by **Tony McCaffrey,** exploring the work Different Light Theatre, a mixed ability theatre company based in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa NZ. The chapter considers the 'value' of disabled theatre and explores the tension between the difficulties of physical and cognitive impairment, and the benefits afforded to disabled people in theatrical performance. McCaffrey questions the evaluation of the aesthetic and political efficacy of disability performance according to mechanistic models of input and output and of profit and loss. In contrast, he notes the importance of the gift economy, which sustains the labour of Different Light Theatre and the bonds of love, obligation, commitment, and mutual care that continue to inform their work.

Tongan mother, educator, and theatre maker, **Michelle Johansson**, meticulously unpacks the policy and funding context in Aotearoa NZ, exposing just how and why it continues to fail Pacific artists and young people in South Auckland. This chapter shows how even progressive policies that pertain to Pacific Peoples and Pacific arts perpetuate colonial value systems. With reference to Johansson's work with the Black Friars theatre company, and the Southside Rise project, this chapter challenges policymakers to take up Indigenous concepts, methods, and scholarship

if they really want to recognise and value the strengths and knowledge of Pacific Peoples and their arts.

Section 2: Justice-Oriented Evaluation

The next three chapters all present examples of deeply critical and equity orientated approaches to evaluation. The contribution from **Peta Murray, Marnie Badham, Tristan Meecham, and Bec Reid** proposes a 'queevaluation' framework for understanding the value and significance of socially engaged arts projects like those created by the Australian company, All The Queens Men. Rather than imposing narrow impact measurement approaches, queevaluation embraces queer theory, participatory methodologies, and creative practices grounded in ethics, care, and self-determination. Their approach illuminates unexpected dimensions like enhanced social connection, intergenerational knowledge sharing, identity affirmation, and revealed advocacy needs.

Jacqui Moyes and Fran Kewene's chapter offers a critical but heartfelt reflection on the evaluative practices developed by Home Ground, who run arts-informed programmes with wāhine (women) in Aotearoa NZ's criminal justice system. They describe their evaluation as happening in the liminal, transitional spaces between prison and community, and as always trying to balance imperatives from their practice, from the lived experiences of all involved, and from funders. The creative approach to evaluation developed by Home Ground is orientated towards clearly articulated values and guiding principles, and an understanding of the contribution made by participatory arts to health and wellbeing that is firmly located in the context of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the founding settlement document of Aotearoa NZ).

Poppy de Souza and Bec Moran propose a justice-oriented framework for valuing lived experience expertise and co-creative practices attuned to the politics of voice within the evidence of experience in health and wellbeing. The chapter focuses on the authors' respective projects: de Souza's Holding Breath, which used voice-note exchanges co-created with Long COVID-19 patients, and Moran's video installation Big Grief, Big Horror about experiencing family trauma. Through these two case studies, the chapter positions listening, witnessing, and creative repair as central principles. They prioritise the value of 'slow attention, mutual witnessing, and creative reparation' in the wake of structural harm, stigma,

and grief to propose 'creative reparation' through practices that do not reproduce harm and hold transformative potential.

Section 3: Community Wellbeing, Participation and Self-Determination

This section shares four examples of evaluative processes where conceptions of wellbeing and frameworks for evaluation have been developed through participatory and collaborative processes.

Kelly Dombroski reflects on her experience developing and applying an approach to evaluating the work of a non-governmental, place-making, and arts-enabling organisation, Life in Vacant Spaces. This chapter provides an example of how the notions of 'investments' and 'returns' might be taken back from the impact paradigm and repurposed so as to account holistically for the value that creative initiatives bring to community wellbeing.

The chapter by **Rand Hazou and members of the Hobson Street Theatre Company** (HSTC) details how the company developed their own evaluation model focusing on aspects of wellbeing which will help them evaluate the success of workshops, rehearsals, and creative projects over time. A key feature of HSTC's work is its engagement with the 'street' and with the community accessing services from the Auckland City Mission. As such, they are often facilitating theatre workshops and projects with a community impacted by multiple forms of precarity and health impacts. The chapter details how these considerations not only impact on the company's ability to evaluate aspects of its work as well as how 'data' is collected, but also how a focus on wellbeing informed the development of their evaluation model.

The chapter by **Amber Walls** and **Borni Te Rongopai Tukiwaho** shares insights about an evaluation framework that was developed for Project X—a creative programme for young people experiencing mental health challenges in Aotearoa NZ. The framework unpacks the participatory research methods used to develop a framework for evaluating Project X, which could articulate 'impacts' in ways that were evidence-informed, aligned with participants' aspirations, and reflective of the unique contribution of arts-based approaches. The process involved in-depth discussions, not only with partner organisations, but also with young people, leading to a 'principle-based practice framework' grounded

in lived experience, practitioner expertise, Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), research, and evidence.

Gillian Howell's chapter examines participatory songwriting as an evaluative research method in humanitarian contexts, exploring its potential to centre adolescent voices and position young people as co-producers of knowledge. At the heart of the chapter is a step-by-step account of the development and implementation of the methodology for an international research and evaluation project, commissioned by Save the Children International's Middle East and Eastern Europe office. This account shows how the creative stages of participatory songwriting map onto the stages of a conventional research or evaluation process, but also how working with song can bring distinct benefits for the researchers/evaluators and participants. Ultimately, Howell argues that this approach provides a relational and non-extractive approach to learning about participants' perspectives.

Section 4: Arts as Evaluative Practices

Artistic and creative methods for evaluation are featured in chapters throughout this book. In this section, the chapters focus on the distinct features and affordances of arts-led or arts-based evaluation.

Linda Hassall and Natalie Lazaroo explore 'circus as method' to communicate migratory challenges faced by the endangered Far Eastern Curlew through the Climatescape project. Rather than conventional science communication approaches, the project investigated how embodied circus practices could creatively select, organise, and disseminate critical information about industrial and human mobility impacts on the Curlew's feeding and nesting behaviours. Key evaluation questions centred on whether circus could effectively communicate avian experiences, authentically enact more-than-human perspectives, and convey escalating global emergencies' impacts on local ecologies. The authors highlight circus's unique ability to transcend communication barriers through physical/visual expression while uniting written scholarship with embodied practice.

Kelly Freebody, Molly Mullen, Kim Snider, and Elise Sterback argue that a neoliberal ethos and related assumptions about individuals, bodies, and health are too often inadvertently taken up as the value system against which arts programmes are evaluated. To counter this, they draw on the ethico-political idea of the social flesh, developed by Chris Beasley

and Carol Bacchi (2007), to explore how social embodiment might be taken more seriously in arts, health, and wellbeing evaluation. They share two examples of theatre and arts-based evaluative practices, which focused on concerns for collective wellbeing in particular contexts (a school and a local creative sector). Mobilising the concept of social flesh, the chapter considers how these examples open up possibilities for understanding and practising evaluation in ways that value embodied meaning-making and enact more equitable social relations.

Creating Conditions for Artful Evaluation

Our interest in artful, arts-based, and arts-led approaches to research and evaluation in the field of arts, health, and wellbeing reflects a shift in the scholarly discourse that draws together the different trends we discuss above. This shift is driven by a recognition of the limitations of traditional evaluation methods, which often struggle to capture the nuanced, subjective, and complex impacts of arts engagement on health and wellbeing. Scholars such as Veronica Baxter and Katharine Low (2017), Raw et al. (2012), and Tesch and Hansen (2013) argue that conventional quantitative and experimental research methods can be reductive and fail to fully represent the essence of the arts experience. In response, there is an increasing emphasis on embracing the aesthetic and affective dimensions of arts engagement, acknowledging the intrinsic value of the arts beyond their instrumental benefits for health (Baxter and Low 2017; Brodzinski 2010; Lafrenière et al. 2013; Simons and McCormick 2007). However, challenges remain in establishing the legitimacy and credibility of arts-based and other 'alternative' methods, particularly in the eyes of funders and commissioners who prioritise quantitative evidence (Baxter and Low 2017; Daykin et al. 2016). To address these challenges, scholars emphasise the need for transdisciplinary dialogue and the development of shared frameworks that bridge the perspectives, languages, and priorities of the arts and health sectors (Brodzinski 2010). Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining artistic quality and integrity in arts-based practices, cautioning against an overly instrumental view of the arts in health and wellbeing contexts (Brodzinski 2010; Baxter and Low 2017). As the field continues to evolve, artful approaches offer promising avenues for capturing the multifaceted impacts of arts engagement on health and wellbeing, while also presenting opportunities for more inclusive and meaningful evaluation practices.

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