



Conclusion

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This book contributes new ideas about and practices for evaluation with the aim of shifting the discourse about the value of participatory arts, transforming the methods by which this value is measured and represented, and confidently asserting the values against which artists, practitioners, and participants want their work to be judged. Artful Evaluation, as conceived across the chapters in this book, challenges the ubiquity and dominance of the social impact paradigm, showing how it is possible to evaluate differently both within and beyond it. Each chapter contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the value of participatory arts, presenting evaluation approaches that consider the social,

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cultural, ecological, and political contexts in which arts initiatives operate, and take the arts seriously as knowledge practices.

As editors, our common backgrounds in applied theatre have informed the way this collection has come together. We share a commitment to theatre as an accessible and inclusive practice that can platform marginalised voices and experiences, provide a meeting place for embodied dialogue between diverse viewpoints, operate as a forum to inform public debate, offer a mechanism to enhance participation and belonging, and as an apparatus to foster creative agency and cultural citizenship. In bringing this collection together, we have made a concerted effort to present the knowledge and expertise of artists working in precarious settings, emerging scholars, and Indigenous researchers. In many chapters, participants in the programmes and projects are also key contributors. Our editorial efforts are also informed by the need to give back to the communities we work with, by ensuring the theatre groups whose staff and members contributed were funded for that work, and by ensuring this practice-based research knowledge is disseminated in a free, open-access format. As such, we hope that this book encapsulates the ideal of transformative praxis, by which meaningful community collaboration and involvement informs research that is conducted with the explicit expectation that it benefits the people with whom we engage. We hope that the knowledge shared in this book will benefit the artists and groups that engage in participatory arts to enhance the wellbeing of their various communities in which they work.

This book was produced at a pivotal moment: multiple strands of thought and practice appear to be converging to inform a more holistic approach to evaluating arts and health in wellbeing. The recognition of social and cultural determinants of health, the authority of lived experience, emphasis on participatory methods and co-design, the innovative potential of interdisciplinary knowledge collaborations, and the conceptualisation of art and creativity as epistemologies all contribute to this emerging paradigm. These approaches foreground the social framing of health, employing the arts to support critical and evaluative thinking about the factors impacting wellbeing. This shift moves health and wellbeing research away from a focus on individual outcomes towards a broader consideration of the types of change being pursued. Importantly, this perspective integrates evaluation into the process itself, building on the same principles and protocols that underpin the practice. Artful evaluation, therefore, draws on the ways of being, doing, and knowing in

the arts to shift the focus from evaluation *of* artistic practice to *evaluative artistic practice*. This approach emphasises the embodied value/s that creativity and culture enact, offering a more nuanced, holistic, and potentially transformative way of understanding and assessing the effects of arts-based interventions on health and wellbeing. Artful evaluation, then, suggests evaluation methodologies that are as rich, complex, and meaningful as the artistic practices they seek to understand.

By looking across the contributions in this collection, some principles and characteristics of artful evaluation in our region of the world become apparent:

- **Contextual awareness and contingency:** Artful evaluation proceeds from an informed and critical stance towards the conditions in which artists, practitioners, and participants live and in which they come together to create. Artful evaluation is **reflexively** aware of how it is shaped by, responds to and intervenes in those conditions.
- Many of these chapters show how the **values and principles** from which evaluation proceeds **are carefully and collectively decided upon**, and revisited as conditions and group members change.
- Evaluative practices tend to be **ongoing and/or embedded** within organisational and creative processes, rather than something that is done to them after the fact and from the outside.
- **Relationality:** Most examples in this volume describe communal, relational art-making, and artful evaluation practices, which move away from individualised responsibility for wellbeing and acknowledge the generative potential of making and meaning-making together.
- **Affective and aesthetic engagement** is vital to enhancing meaning and knowing.
- **Embodied knowing** is recognised and activated, in artful evaluation, creative methods can enable people to enact *embodied value/s*.
- **Imagination:** Artful evaluation embraces the idea that the arts as evaluative practices are powerful ways to critically examine the status quo, and to (re)imagine and (re)create other “possible worlds” beyond pre-existing paradigms. In doing so, value/s can be reconceived and the people involved can collectively determine “what matters” in their wellbeing projects and programmes.

- **Playfulness and emergence:** Artistic practice is inherently playful and spontaneous; artful evaluation embraces this and is flexible and responsive to participants' needs and interests, generating novel ideas and expressions that move beyond accepted paradigms and norms.

We acknowledge, however, that these principles and characteristics of artful evaluation are invariably enacted in the context of rapidly shifting global and local influences, challenging us to hold steady in the face of economic, political, and social upheaval. We now turn to the localised contexts of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand to highlight specific shifts that influence artful evaluation in health and wellbeing.

SHIFTING CONTEXTS

Since we began editing and collating this book, there have been important shifts in the wider social, cultural, and political context that signal we might be retreating rather than progressing collectively in a holistic valuing of the arts. In 2023, the election of a new conservative coalition government in Aotearoa New Zealand signalled a shift away from wellbeing policy settings, leading one political commentator to note that “the wellbeing budget is dead” (Walters 2024). In November 2024, the Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage Paul Goldsmith launched “Amplify”, New Zealand’s new creative and cultural strategy which sets out the government’s support for the creative sector through till 2030. Public submissions on the strategy noted the Amplify vision was suitable if applied to highly commercial arts or creative industries, but less relevant to those working in other areas such as cultural heritage and traditional Indigenous art forms. Other submissions raised concern that the new strategy seemed to “overlook wellbeing, social cohesion, cultural identity, community resilience and other outcomes, and alienates those whose work aligns with these areas” (Manatū Taonga 2025, 8). These shifts might signal an entrenchment of neoliberal value of the arts and a potentially reductive rather than holistic appreciation of their affordances.

In Australia, the return of the Labour government for a second term in 2025 provided some hope that there may be a reversal of the previous decade’s declining support for the arts (exacerbated by the pandemic). As discussed in the introduction, federal support for and interest in the health and wellbeing benefits of the arts in Australia have begun to emerge, albeit with still limited resourcing. The Labour government has so far

neglected to reverse the damaging conservative policy that saw fees for arts and humanities degrees increased by up to 50 per cent. While there are some indications that this policy has not significantly impacted enrolments (Cassidy 2024), it was an ideological blow that also resulted in job losses in higher education, and it will have serious economic impacts on graduates for years to come. In the current climate of Trump's second term, the government is preoccupied with managing the fallout from trade tariffs, attempting to salvage AUKUS (a major arms deal with the UK and the US), and walking a foreign policy tightrope between support for Israel and complicity in genocide. In Australia, the continuation of a Labour government therefore seems to signal a kind of positive attitude or "vibe" towards the arts, rather than any bold vision or meaningful support that might lead to lasting change.

RESISTING ARTLESS DISREGARD

Antonyms for "evaluate" are "disregard" or "ignore". "Evaluate" implies a careful assessment, so its opposite might be seen as a care-less lack of assessment or consideration. Other possible antonyms include neglect, underestimate, or disparage. We argue that we must continue to resist the various forces that seek to undermine artful approaches to health and wellbeing and instrumentalise their evaluation for economic and individualistic ends. It could be argued that the very practices and ethics explored here will become increasingly vital to nurturing our sense of embodied care, communality, and creativity in the face of metacrisis and systems collapse. The contributions in this book give us hope that this resistance is occurring at ground level. In Aotearoa New Zealand, despite the change of government, we have seen a strengthening of cross-sector advocacy around the arts and a continued articulation from within the sector about the holistic value of the arts. In Australia, grassroots practices and sectoral networks continue to be forged and strengthened in response to rapidly increasing and complex needs across a range of communities and social contexts. The more we enact and advocate for these approaches, the more hope we have of shifting the entrenched paradigms for arts evaluation that seem to persist regardless of the shifting contexts in which we operate.

Beyond instrumentalising creativity for a "brave new world" dominated by technology and AI, the arts can return us to our embodied, interconnected place in the vital network of life and liveness. The arts will always remain a measure of society in a broader sense—holding up

society to be looked at. They are an expression of social values and a place where those values can be scrutinised and reimagined. Returning to the ideas that opened this book—how we might “measure” a glimmer in the eye, or a spring in the step, or bubbling laughter, playful banter, a friendly glance, or the gradual loosening of fears and inhibitions—if any “method” can begin to approach such intangible affects (and effects) it must surely be artistic—and artful.

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