



What is cultural wellbeing?

I was commissioned by The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council to devise a provocation to consider the question "What is cultural wellbeing?" As an artist, who's practice for many years has involved engagement with people in a number of different environments from local streets, hospital wards and schools and colleges, my work has been labelled many things including participatory, collaborative and socially engaged. These terms are slippery and often uncomfortable to me as I came to this way of working from a strategic perspective, in that after my fine art degree I did not see many people from my background (black female, working class) represented in galleries and I wanted to find a way to address this by being very present in my work, having engagements with people and inviting people to discuss and become part of the work.

Since beginning to work in this way I have been involved in a number of debates around the role of the artist in working within communities and social situations and whether there is a role for the arts in areas of life such as education, place making and regeneration, public health, the environment, activism and community building. In one such discussion someone made the point that "... so when I do social work it's called social work and when you do it it's called art!" This is a very important point and something that is extremely relevant as we embark on these discussions as the as yet undefined territory of cultural wellbeing could have significant impact on how we define cultural and creative work within a social context.

Every discussion is enlightening and sometimes very difficult, this one was no exception. And to explore the question we programmed two conversation events with a number of invited guests from across the arts and public health sectors, in September and November 2013. Approximately 25 people were involved in both events, sharing their knowledge and experience and attempting to envisage what this term might mean and the ways in which, we might develop our work, future collaborations and partnerships.

This document is a working document bringing together some of the ideas and possible conclusions from our conversations. It is by no means a definitive document as the process of unpicking what the term could potentially mean brought up many issues. If anything this document is a collection of some of the thoughts and ideas that came up during our discussions and although we have defined some guiding principles to go forward with, we offer this document to you and the format of a conversation as an opportunity to open up a dialogue on the topic.

We hope that you will find our musings interesting and that the questions & conclusions that have come up in our discussions inform your own discussions and hopefully lead to a better understanding of what cultural wellbeing might be.

Barby Asante

who defines?
wellbeing?





The response

The aim of this provocation was to attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of what the term cultural wellbeing could mean for arts and cultural work in the public sector and how one could effectively advocate for, deliver and assess the value of such work in an ever changing environment at this financially precarious time.

The key objectives of this where to consider;

What is meant by cultural wellbeing in Wandsworth and further afield?

How can a clear understanding of cultural wellbeing inform work across a broad range of areas including: Public Health, public realm and environmental design, place making, regeneration and participatory arts practice?

How can we most effectively measure and evaluate the impact of cultural wellbeing initiatives?

We began with a conversation lunch, where three provocations were given to elicit ideas from invited guests. To set the context of the discussion, I presented the first, asking what is cultural wellbeing by thinking about what the definitions of culture and wellbeing are and how they might complement or contradict each other. The second was given by artist Bobby Lloyd from the drawing shed who presented a case study of some of their work with communities on two housing estates in Walthamstow. She challenged us to consider why the term cultural wellbeing might be entering the discourse at this particular time. John Holden, associate at the think tank Demos, delivered our final provocation and asked what does the adoption of the term mean for arts organisations.

At the end of the lunch it was difficult to come up with a single definition of what cultural wellbeing could be, culture being something that is a fluid and pluralistic experience for every individual and because of this inherent nature of culture it is not something that we can easily fix. Also we all want some kind of wellness, but again what this means to each individual also has as many variations as there are people. To be able to capture this and come out with a cultural wellbeing definition or strategy that encompasses these many variants is near on impossible. But our challenge was to come up with a working definition of cultural wellbeing that will inform the way we might move forward as arts leaders and how what we have learnt through these discussions and explorations might inform our practices and project delivery.

Taking on the challenge laid bare by John Holden at the end of the lunch we went into a more focused dinner conversation in November thinking about his provocation to consider what the term meant for arts organisations to understand how it connects, with what we are already doing, and whether it can be useful when advocating for the work and results that we try to achieve. The intention was to seek a definition that could define a dialogue between the processes and practices of production and the people that the work will effect and impact.

In John Holden's provocation he mentioned that cultural wellbeing was going to be a pre-requisite of every planning document and defining what this would be would be the role of each local authority. The dinner began with a provocation from the The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council laying out their reasons for wishing to interrogate the term. I thought this was important because the lunch conversation was very open and incredibly vibrant but in order to hone the discussion it felt like there needed to be an anchor that would ground the discussion in a real life context and make it more focused around the potential ways of working an arts organisation might adopt when thinking about working in the realm of cultural wellbeing and in particular for this team working within a local authority context. The motivation for the The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council was to understand how this term connected with what they are already doing and the results they were trying to achieve.

There are already a number of terms that are being used to describe the work being done, arts development, cultural planning, wellbeing and they are constantly trying to translate the intangibles, the qualitatives, the smiles, the achievements, the comments book notes, into a language which the funders and policy makers can understand. Was "cultural wellbeing" going to be something that would be more clearly understood? And how did this intersect with planning, public health or regeneration?

We discussed the relationship of wellbeing and the idea of a return on social investment as potentially one of the reasons this is being considered at the moment as GDP is perhaps not the best measure or only measure that we should be aspiring to and perhaps as suggested by many recent studies and surveys, we could also be aspiring to the happiness or wellbeing of people. Also this term is becoming prominent at a time when resources and funding from the state are diminishing so we really have to be careful about what roles people are having to fulfill when those roles are being diminished and sometimes cut entirely. We must ask if it is really realistic for culture to fulfill a wellbeing agenda, if there aren't the other services backing that up. If our aim is to improve cultural wellbeing how useful then does it become to apply financial value to how much you're improving the wellbeing of people in our communities? It was thought that there was something quite threatening about the idea that you will be "culturally well" and we need to critically integrate what cultural wellbeing is as it could be delivered from the top, down and feel like an imposition rather than something that was really good for people. There was also a worry that with services being threatened by cuts in funding that emphasis was being put on artists, community workers and volunteers to be used to address community issues and to deliver services a publically funded officer would usually do with much bigger budgets and much longer periods of time to deliver what's expected.

* widening ideas

Creating opportunities (SPACE) for creative & social encounters that enable risk in their own cultural context.

Feeling able to freely experience, expand and share ones own culture (and others?)

In localities, places have to be animated through participation, making connections, people having a role in local community!

Could be too broad a definition?

all local authorities will have to take in to account cultural wellbeing

Can you impose wellbeing?

Culture should be allowed to grow, change and die!

Nothing worse than protectionism

Culture does not exist alone!
It needs a response!!

Arts organisations are one seed in creating cultural well-being, seeing what people want and offering opportunities

Is this justifying a spend on public art?

Homemade culture - there is an explosion of cultural activity and its sharing

MUST be collective trusting of community understands & appreciates

everyone should have access to art + culture! It's a human right!!!

What should an arts organisation be doing?
Is this about widening participation??

Are artists go between?

Should we trust the state to look after culture or just allow people to look after it themselves??

Why are we talking about this now?

Lack of public money - to justify improvement in what?
Jargonese!

Opps for cross disciplinary practices, health and arts/culture to share knowledge

Culture/arts expected to justify itself in terms of soft social engineering

Happy!

Wellbeing
↓
does this have to mean altruistic

↓
don't think so





could it facilitate communication?

It proved very difficult to find the 5 guiding principles we set out to attempt to define and instead we came up with a number of possibilities and thoughts that may guide a way of working should the term cultural wellbeing become part of the language that defines a framework for working in the public sector. You can't be culturally well alone it needs or demands a community or connection. Cultural wellbeing could encourage difference and being able to hold the complexity of difference. It requires a willingness to engage, trust, a bottom up understanding and find the commonalities between people.

- Could cultural wellbeing reveal the stickiness of situations and places and allowing people to be heard? We acknowledge that the implementation of this may reveal undesirable outcomes for some people as part of that whole. For a place to be "culturally well", individuals might not be culturally well as a part of that process.
- Question what cultural wellbeing should and will be. Think about the duration of projects. Allow for reflection and reflective moments. Reflect on the social, on the political, on histories, how has our culture been formed, what ideas, what institutions have been created to causally effect culture.
- Delivering cultural wellbeing requires an interdisciplinary collaboration. Projects need to work towards collective outcomes. This is not to say that one does not have their own particular bit of the outcome, but that those outcomes are part of a coherent whole. All project partners need to be involved in the evaluation of projects. Use evaluation as a learning tool and not merely a measuring tool.
- There is a danger in attempting to fix what cultural wellbeing is as difficult to quantify and we have to be careful not to define what culture is for others, otherwise we could be resting on numbers, the spectacle, being able to measure impact and the passing on of joy.
- There needs to be shared responsibilities, ethics, and boundaries. Cultural wellbeing can't be a salve for all societies problems and should somehow allow space for criticality and provocation on what the role of culture and wellbeing is in society.
- Cultural wellbeing should also be able to deliver magic. One off extraordinary occasions of collective joy, connection wonder and coming together, irreverence and an embracing of disruption, around creative engagements

The general conclusion to our discussion was that as Professor Stuart Hall has stated about our histories; culture is an "unfinished conversation" and should continue to be a developing one. It is a conversation within a context of historical, socio-political and economic factors, cultural wellbeing cannot be examined on it's own without considering the constant fluctuation of these intervening factors that inform the direction in which culture and the wellbeing of people develop. However this being the case it is those same intervening factors that determine the ways in which we may have to develop our work in the future and although we did not come to any hard and fast conclusions as to what cultural wellbeing might mean as a singular definition, I think that what we perhaps all agreed on was to perhaps push for an open exploration rather than placing a stake in the ground from which to begin from, a way of working that I promote in my own practice and could be a simplification of what we have laid out above and that is to be **open, responsive and receptive**.

With thanks to

Presented by Barby Asante

Commissioned by The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council



Contributors

Tim Balogan - Director Community Focus/ Goldust
Eleanor Barret - Creative Director, Brick Box
Sarah Carrington - Futurecity
Jocelyn Cunningham - Arts and Society
Bridget Floyer - Emergency Exit Arts
Paul Goodwin - Independent Curator
Susie Gray - The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council
Richard Ings - Arts Council of England
John Holden - Freelance Writer & Cultural Commentator
Evelyn Kendall - Former Curating Student, UAL
Justine Kenyon - The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council
Sally Labern - Artist, the drawing shed

Jane Leighton - Vision Redbridge
Bobby Lloyd - Artist the drawing shed
Seema Manchanda - Wandsworth Borough Council
Paul McCue - Wandsworth Borough Council
Arti Prashar - Spare Tyre Theatre Company
Helen Renwick - The Arts Team, Wandsworth Council
Charles Seaford - New Economics Foundation
Giles Semper - Vauxhall One
Helen Shearn - Arts Development Manager, South London and Maudsley
Ieuan Solanki - Fine Art Student, UAL
Rebecca Willians - Wandsworth Borough Council

Photographs courtesy of Nicola Dracoulis, the drawing shed, Ieuan Solanki, Evelyn Kendall & Barby Asante