Democratic Practices in Arts Organizations

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ABSTRACT. This article uses democratic political theory to compare three types of arts management practices. When art is treated as an elite status good, it is likely to have antidemocratic effects that largely reproduce status hierarchies. When art is treated as an exclusive group identity good, as in the case of identity politics, it is likely to contribute to democracy by giving voice to marginalized groups. Finally, when art is treated as an inclusive social good, it is likely to contribute to democracy by producing solidarity and encouraging commonality. The article concludes by encouraging an ecological approach that fosters multiple voices and multiple goals.

This article presents a theoretical framework for thinking about artistic practices from the perspective of their contributions to democracy. This framework may serve as a guide for arts managers, who often include democratic aims among their organizational goals, and offers a socio-theoretical approach to the arts that goes beyond the focus on social reproduction established by Pierre Bourdieu (1983). Specifically, I am taking as my starting point the literature on democracy and association, generally credited to the work of Robert Putnam (1993, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti; 2000). Putnam's work shows that democratic political institutions operate

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most successfully and efficiently when their participant-citizens are highly integrated into civic associations, especially when those associations have a long-standing tradition of such participation. Putnam's work suggests the conclusion that associational life makes positive contributions to democracy. I present a framework for specifying the many positive and negative contributions to democracy that particular artistic practices—an oft-overlooked form of associational life—can engender.

DEMOCRACY AND ASSOCIATION

It was Alexis de Tocqueville who first commented on the extraordinarily robust character of American associational life. As Tocqueville explains, "A single Englishman will often carry through some great undertaking, whereas Americans form associations for no matter how small a matter. Clearly the former regard association as a powerful means of action, but the latter seem to think of it as the only one" (1848, 514). Comparing America to France and England, Tocqueville finds Americans extreme in their reliance on associations as a mechanism for addressing concerns. He explains this heavy associational participation through what he calls "the doctrine of self-interest properly understood" (526). According to Tocqueville, Americans recognize that their best interest is inseparable from the common good, whereas the average person might shy away from associations, preferring to act in his own interest rather than for a larger interest.

For Tocqueville, associational life is a necessity of democracy because of the disbursement of power. In a democracy, he claims, "all the citizens are independent and weak" (514) and thus find their power through civic association. Associations stand in place of rich and powerful leaders and use the combination of voices and resources to fulfill social needs and achieve shared goals.

More recently, Putnam's work has brought associational life back to the fore of democratic theory. Putnam's (1993) study of the formation of new regional governments in Italy beginning in the 1970s reveals that democratic institutions work best in regions with a strong tradition of civic association. The new governments thrived in the north but proved ineffective in the south. Studying the history of these regions, Putnam found that, prior to unification, the autocrats who ruled the south made political decisions without the input or participation of local citizens. In contrast, the north had a history of city-states ruled under collective authorities and strong traditions of civic participation in political and social matters. These traditions, he concludes, make citizens more inclined to participate in governing institutions and to address social problems through collective action. Other scholars have taken up this issue and begun to develop more refined theories about the relationship between democracy and association (Sandel 1996; Rosenblum 1998).

Applying this notion to contemporary American social life, Putnam finds in *Bowling Alone* (2000) that American civic life has significantly declined and that this decline threatens democracy. When Putnam speaks of democracy, he invokes such descriptions as egalitarian, participatory, nonbiased, and forthright. He closes the book with an agenda for how Americans might renew democracy by fostering a more robust civil society, including a section on the role of culture and the arts. However, Putnam addresses only electronic entertainment—calling for the media to help Americans spend less time passively consuming entertainment—and has no specific recommendations for the arts. Given that many surveys indicate high levels of support for the arts, we must think beyond the media as we consider how culture might promote democracy.

Putnam's work conveys the overall message that associational life improves democracy. However, his critics have suggested that this formula is too simplistic and that we must specify when and how associational life may benefit democracy. In his book *Democracy and Association* (2001), political scientist Mark Warren creates a matrix of distinctions that allow greater precision. Based on these distinctions, he provides a complex framework for mapping out the democratic potential of any form of association. I focus specifically on Warren's set of distinctions regarding the *constitutive goods of association*—the end products that ultimately justify the association's existence.

Warren analyzes four important dimensions, summarized in table 1, to make distinctions regarding constitutive goods. First, he distinguishes between associational goods located at the individual level and those located at the social level. Food, for instance, is an individual good. Although we often eat in social situations, only one person can enjoy any particular bite. In contrast, sports are enjoyed primarily at the social level. Teammates benefit from the actions of others, and fans benefit from the skill of the players. Social goods are not reducible to individual units.

Second, Warren distinguishes associational goods in terms of excludability. All citizens can enjoy nonexcludable goods in roughly the same way. In contrast, excludable goods may be accessible to only a small group within society, or only a small group can enjoy them fully, whereas others are allowed only limited enjoyment. Warren gives the example of roads to illustrate nonexcludable goods. Anyone with a car is able to drive on a road, provided it requires no toll, and all drivers can arrive at the same destination. However, shopping clubs, such as Sam's Club, which require memberships and often limit membership based on specific qualifications, produce excludable goods. Arts organizations exist on a spectrum of exclusivity and inclusivity, and it can be difficult to judge precisely where any one organization falls on that spectrum. Many elite art institutions have an exclusive feel, for example, even though they are technically open to all.

TABLE 1. Constitutive Goods of Association and Their Characteristics*

Type of Good	Individual/ Social	Symbolic/ Material	Scarce/ Nonscarce	Excludable/ Nonexcludable
Goods relevant to democracy, but without associational implications				
Eclectic and plentiful material goods	Individual	Material	Nonscarce	Excludable
Nonexcludable natural goods	Individual	Material	Nonscarce	Nonexcludable
Goods relevant to democracy, with associational implications				
Individual material goods	Individual	Material	Scarce	Excludable
Public material goods	Individual	Material	Scarce	Nonexcludable
Interpersonal identity goods	Individual	Symbolic	Nonscarce	Excludable
Goods relevant to democracy, with associational implications, and relevant to art				
Status goods	Social	Symbolic	Scarce	Excludable
Exclusive group identity goods	Social	Symbolic	Nonscarce	Excludable
Inclusive social goods	Social	Symbolic	Nonscarce	Nonexcludable

Source. Warren 2001, 127. This typology is adjusted here to better represent my specific interests in art and artistic practices.
*An additional eight types are possible, but according to Warren (2001, 126) these types are not relevant for democracy.

Warren's third distinction within the constitutive goods of association is the separation of material goods from symbolic or psychological goods. Food, clothing, and shelter are obvious examples of material goods. Symbolic or psychological goods include "recognition, self-identity, and symbolic resources such as language, culture, and lifestyle" (125). According to Warren, the value of symbolic goods for any individual depends on that individual's associational inclusions. The value is not inherent to the good. The value of steak, a material good, is determined by its freshness and its proportions of protein,

calories, and fat—qualities determined by the steak itself. However, the value of a college degree is not found in the paper on which it is printed. My college degree is valuable to me because I belong to a society that has accredited the college I attended—and that uses college degrees to determine occupational qualifications for some jobs. I am also a member of an occupational field that requires a college degree for career advancement. My college degree is therefore very valuable to me, but only because of my inclusion in specific social groups. This emphasis on inclusion gives symbolic and psychological goods civic importance. "[A]ssociations devoted to [symbolic and psychological goods] are more likely to induce some civic virtues (such as empathy) and provide public representations of commonality, since the value of symbolic goods very often depends upon inclusion" (125).

THREE IDEAL TYPES OF SYMBOLIC GOODS

Warren's discussion of the constitutive goods of association provides the language and tools to make fine distinctions about what associations produce, do, or work toward. As table 1 indicates, Warren's four-dimensional set of fine distinctions about these goods produces eight ideal types that are relevant to democracy. Of these eight, only six have associational implications. Three of the six are also relevant categories for art in a democratic society, specifically in the postwar United States: status goods, exclusive group identity goods, and inclusive social goods.

Art as an Elite Status Good

The first, most obvious category of goods relevant to art includes what Warren calls "status goods" and describes as social, symbolic, scarce, and excludable. Art is social in that many individuals can consume the same work of art, even at the same time, without dividing it between them. Further, art produces meaning and ideas derived from social experiences and shared by groups of consumers. For these meanings and ideas to reach an audience, that audience must share an aesthetic framework for interpreting the work of art. Aesthetic narratives are social constructions maintained by social practice. Although an individual work of art, such as a painting on a framed canvas, is material, its value is not reducible to the paint, canvas, and frame. Rather, the value comes from the ideas and symbols engendered by the composition. Art is symbolic because it functions at the level of meaning and ideas. Indeed, we may begin with the notion that all art is social and symbolic and proceed to tease out the effects of varying its scarcity and excludability.

Is art scarce? On one hand, there are plenty of artworks and artists. In the words of one art historian, "Never in human history have people, enjoying

so much leisure, partaken of so much art, whether music, television drama or the persuasive language and imagery of advertising" (Welch 1993, 140). However, such a statement misses an important character of how art works. Few say, "I have art." We say, rather, "I have a Monet." Art is not scarce, but Monet is. In that sense, our aesthetic frameworks can make valuable art a scarce commodity, even in periods when art is widely available. Many social-scientific studies have also emphasized the role of art as a tool for social exclusion. Sociologist Michèle Lamont demonstrates how the French upper-middle class uses the possession of art to demonstrate the legitimacy of its success (1992). The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated how knowledge and experience with art function as a tool for social reproduction of class structures (1983). This work clearly demonstrates that, in at least some circumstances in societies such as the United States and France, art is an exclusive good.

When art, always symbolic and social, is also scarce and exclusive, it serves as a status good. At such times, art is available only to those with large resources and is used as a symbol of the power that such resources carry. Warren warns of the corrosive effects of status goods in a democratic political system:

> Associations pursuing these goods are unlikely to contribute to the public sphere or to democratic processes of representation, and they are more likely to reinforce uncivic attitudes than civic virtues. Whatever trust and empathy they generate will typically be of a particularistic nature, limited to those of a similar status. (2001, 130)

In the case of twentieth-century art—especially in the earlier periods of the century—art that works as a status good has been used to legitimize class structure and exclude those of lower socioeconomic status from the major institutions of society. Even its exceptions demonstrate the impact of this rule. Paul DiMaggio (1982) found, for instance, that high school students from low-status backgrounds who seek out knowledge of high culture experience social mobility. They advance their status by gaining access to, experience with, and knowledge of goods typically used for exclusion. The knowledge and the experience they gain—their cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's term—then legitimize their continued participation in high-status groups.

No social scientist has done more to demonstrate the particularistic character of high culture than DiMaggio. His study of the formation of high-culture organizations illustrates the complex process by which economic elites constructed their exclusive status by creating such exclusive organizations as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the late nineteenth century. Prior to the existence of these organizations, elites and nonelites experienced culture together. They attended the same concerts and

enjoyed the same theater. In that sense, art was then a nonexcludable good. To make art exclusive, the Boston Brahmins formed organizations that classified certain art as "high culture," rather than entertainment, and framed this high culture as the most legitimate art of their society. Consumers of other forms of culture were thereby trained to think of their art as less legitimate, even when they found it meaningful (DiMaggio 1982).

The strongly bounded character of American high culture lasted through the end of World War II. Since that time, hierarchy in American culture has declined, as new categories of art have emerged and artistic authority has fragmented (DiMaggio 1991). America is now in a period of artistic expansion, in which the media and genres of art are constantly expanding, new narratives for the interpretation of art are constantly being developed, old narratives are being redeveloped, and elite power over artistic definition is slipping. Authority in the art world is divided between theorists of the academy, themselves divided into many camps; cultural policymakers; a variety of privately funded institutes; artists, who claim an ever-growing right to define interpretation of their own works; and other institutions of American society (e.g., churches, schools, corporations) that each bring their own set of needs, values, and assumptions to bear on the subject of art.

Formalism is the most relevant aesthetic framework for elite status goods because it obscures power and prestige behind merit. Formalism emphasizes technical skill for both the production and interpretation of art. These skills require expensive advanced training available mainly to elites. In the course of this training, the art that the elites prefer is emphasized as canonical—the best of its kind.

Warren's framework specifies the ways elite status goods detract from democracy. As a consequence of both Bourdieu's influence on the field and the important role of cultural capital in social reproduction, much of the sociology of art has focused on art as an elite status good. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that not all art, perhaps not even most art, acts as a mechanism of cultural capital. The art that does function as cultural capital is also framed as the most legitimate and presented to society as the standard against which all other art should be judged. *Canon*, after all, means *measuring stick*. However, the literature on cultural capital does not reflect all artistic practices.

We can conclude that when art is a status good it detracts from democracy by privileging one set of voices over others and functioning as a mechanism of social reproduction. What, then, can we say of art under the condition of nonscarcity, in which art may be produced and consumed at all levels of society, and all social levels participate in the production of aesthetics? Such nonscarce art would have exclusive and inclusive variations, each of which I will address in turn.

Art as an Exclusive Group Identity Good

In some cases, including with increasing frequency in contemporary America, art functions not as a status good, but as a mechanism for identity politics. On such occasions, art is both nonscarce and excludable. We can see its nonscarcity in the wide distribution of artistic production and consumption practices across society; art is not reserved for elites. We can find evidence of its excludability in the way particular practices for making or engaging art are reserved for specific identity groups—the sense that rap music is reserved for young black males, or that Nihonga painting may only be made by those of Japanese descent.

As these collective movements gain power, they often seek to redress hegemony by producing counternarratives, which often include approaches to art or aesthetics. Some even begin as artistic movements, as in the ACT UP movement's use of art to address concerns about the U.S. government's limited involvement in AIDS and HIV research and other issues.

We will treat these counternarratives as aesthetic frameworks when they are used to engage the arts. How do these frameworks compare to the elite aesthetic of formalism? Formalism is a set of artistic criteria managed by a group of educational and professional elites from the art world; for a time, these criteria were considered universally legitimate. However, formalism's hold on the American art world has faded, as art critic Arthur Danto notes in his defense of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography:

> By the formalist standards of critical appraisal that prevailed in museum and art-historical circles until the most recent times, Mapplethorpe's work ought by rights to qualify as art "of the highest level." But those standards had badly eroded by the 1990s, all at once exposing Mapplethorpe to criticism from an unanticipated direction. (1996, 18)

Historically, formalism lost its hold on the art world as non-status-based approaches to art arose and exclusive group identity narratives about art took their place beside status approaches to art. Compared to formalism, identity politics is less concerned with technique and skill and more concerned with content and the political uses of art.

Although Warren acknowledges many democratic aspects of exclusive group identity goods, he also warns of antidemocratic effects of associations organized around these goods:

> Such groups may undermine civic virtue, reminding their members to trust only those like themselves and to distrust outsiders—a logic that is manifest in hate groups, but also has a long and ignoble history among religious and ethnic groups as well as within small towns and some neighborhoods in the United States and elsewhere. (2001, 131)

The fractious tendencies of identity politics limit their democratic effects.

This identity politics approach to art is still more democratic than art as a symbol of elite status, however. As Warren points out, exclusive group identity goods play an important role in some democracies:

> When exclusive group identities are assumed in response to external domination, exploitation, or marginalization, they contribute to democracy something that no other kind of association can, namely, representation in public spheres for those who are subject to those injustices. For all of their troubling qualities, these kinds of exclusive identity-groups serve a critical function. They can serve as the conscience of a democracy, challenging public judgments and stretching the boundaries of public agendas. (Ibid.)

Certainly, in the case of twentieth-century America, exclusive group identities have formed in response to domination, exploitation, and marginalization: the domination of women by men and of poor by rich; the exploitation of blacks by whites; the marginalization of homosexuals by heterosexuals and of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus by mainline Protestants. The end result—art as identity politics—is more democratic than art as a status good. However, some distinctions about diversity should be made. Artistic and social diversity are not perfect parallels. The American art world contains diverse artistic media, and we could easily demonstrate diversity using only forms associated with elites (e.g., painting, sculpture, opera, orchestral music). Pursuing a diversity of media—while probably a good idea—will not achieve democratic effects for the American art world or American society. Take the relatively new artistic medium of performance art. Although performance art can easily be appropriated for elite purposes, feminist artists have particularly embraced this art form to address the cultural realities of gender and the possibilities for rupturing those realities. Investing in performance art can be a practical way of pursuing diversity in terms of ideological content, but only when we remember that it is the ideas that matter, not the medium. Kinds of diversity that truly help democratize the arts include geographic location, race, gender, religion, sexual identity, political or ideological beliefs, and age, among others. For each of these issues, we should consider the artist, the audience, and the content of the art itself. At this point, the pursuit of diversity will lead us to an investment in exclusive group identity goods and the associated democratic effects.

Art as an Inclusive Social Good

Art becomes more inclusive as the same works of art and interpretive frameworks become available to all. When art and aesthetics are produced and shared at the national level, they become symbols of national commonality that bridge individual identity differences. Although some art should serve the important purposes of racial or generational identity (to name but a few

identities), other art must serve the purposes of national identity if national democracy is to flourish and social cohesion is to last.

We can conceive a number of formulations of inclusive social goods. However, within the contexts of democracy and pluralism, it is important that inclusive social goods be deliberately directed toward democracy. An inclusive aesthetic would present an approach to art produced through a participative process that allows room for contestation. This aesthetic would also need to be fluid enough to adjust to changing demographics.

I cannot point to an example of this common culture, largely because I believe that it has yet to emerge in the United States, although I will later discuss a few glimmers. However, using Warren's ideas as a basis, we can speak about these symbolic goods in the abstract and identify positive and negative consequences for democracy. He says of these goods:

> Inclusive social goods bias associations away from political conflicts, representations of differences, and direct deliberative involvements. . . . But these goods serve as conditions of these other democratic effects: the commonalities of recognitions, language, and some knowledge are conditions of public deliberation, bargaining, and other political processes. (2001, 132)

Warren argues that inclusive social goods may detract from conflict and contestation, both integral dynamics of democracy. However, these goods also provide the common ground necessary for conflict to occur and find resolution. Scholars of cultural conflict have demonstrated that opponents in recent debates about abortion, arts funding, gay rights, or educational curricula differ not only in the ends that they seek, but even in the terms by which they fight for those ends (Luker 1984; Hunter 1991). This suggests a lack of social agreement upon which to base the debate. Inclusive social goods can engender that base-level agreement by providing a sense of shared identity and building social solidarity across identity differences (e.g., economic and racial differences) to provide a sense of commonality. In terms of Tocqueville's concept of "self-interest properly understood," inclusive social goods foster the idea that achieving the best interest of people different from me is also in my best interest. Take, for instance, the feminist assertion that achieving parity and autonomy for women is in men's best interest because it de-essentializes gender and lets men explore their own identities outside the bounds of masculinity. Symbolic goods (including artworks) that remind men of their commonality with women may help men arrive at such an insight. Art that represents inclusive social goods should bridge and de-essentialize difference without erasing it.

THE ECOLOGY OF PUBLIC CULTURE

The pursuit of democratic culture will need to involve a deliberate movement away from traditional elite arts and toward nurturing both diversity and symbols

of commonality. The ideal ecology of cultural goods for democratic public culture should consist of art as both identity politics and symbol of shared identity, art that expresses our differences and crystallizes our sameness.

One might ask, however, why this ideal ecology does not include just a modicum of elite status goods. According to Warren's framework, elite status goods do contribute to developmental effects, and our other two ideal types are not without problems. Perhaps our ecological approach should accommodate some elite culture to maximize its democratic effects. In response, I suggest that we must keep three points in mind. First, the negative effects of inclusive social goods are tempered by exclusive identity goods, and vice versa. Inclusive social goods tend to produce too much sameness and agreement in the course of democratic discourse. The results can include a sociological form of closing off the gene pool: creative stagnation, lack of fresh ideas, and inability to deal with change. Biodiversity is a healthy way of preserving a species. Likewise, social diversity, for all its fractious tendencies, is a healthy way of preserving a social system. Moreover, its fractious tendencies can be offset by inclusive social goods, which provide base-level agreement on the language and principles of the debate.

The negative consequences of elite status goods cannot be tempered, however. Elite status goods will always promote hierarchy—if not in terms of economic difference, then perhaps in terms of inequalities of power or legitimacy. The democratic ideal of equality cannot be achieved in the presence of elite symbols. Stepping outside of our ideal types for a moment, we should also recognize that we have little hope of eradicating these elite goods from our society, whereas we have long been in danger of failing both to cherish our diversity and to recognize our sameness. We fetishize racial difference, mythologizing our differences while also insisting that those in power should be just like ourselves. Meanwhile, economic disparity worsens, and elites' cultural symbols are legitimized across institutions. We are surrounded by the ill effects of elite status goods, and we are not likely to dispose of them quickly.

In keeping with our ecological approach, we also need to keep in mind that symbolic goods are not the only source of democratic effects. Our other two forms of artistic goods can contribute to these effects, as can several goods of association that are not relevant to artistic matters. Status goods engender two forms of developmental effects: efficacy, or information, and political skills. Efficacy can also result from interpersonal identity goods, individual material goods, exclusive group identity goods, inclusive social goods, and public material goods. Political skills can result from individual material goods, exclusive group identity goods, and public material goods. Democratic effects emanate from many forms of social association, but our concern is with the most democratic organization of the arts and the social structure that will maximize the democratic contributions of culture to our social system.

Do we then censor elite culture or the fine arts? Emphatically, we do not. First, such censorship is antidemocratic; it closes off deliberation, debate, and contestation. Second, censorship is based on the presumption that the antidemocratic characteristics of the fine arts are essential to their form. This is not the case. These cultural forms can be transformed—in terms of both how they are practiced and how they are socially framed—to function more like either inclusive social goods or exclusive group identity goods.

Democratic ends in the art world are best attained through counterhegemonic art forms that challenge our social practices and common cultural art forms that engender mutual trust and empathy across society. It would be a mistake, however, to treat these as wholly separate static categories. Rather, we should recognize the dynamic interplay of exclusive group identity goods and inclusive social goods. When exclusive group identity goods work, they change society and thereby alter the content of common culture. When common culture is most democratically oriented, it recognizes the value of diversity and seeks to include an array of identity goods. The concept of public culture brings these two categories together by valuing both diversity and commonality.

The Institutions of Public Culture

Nonprofit cultural organizations have the best chance of generating and sustaining public culture. These organizations produce culture with relative autonomy from the coercive effects of money and politics. Their members participate out of choice and interest, not because they are paid or forced to do so. Nonprofit organizations generally bring their artistic practices into the public sphere. They are subject to accountability from their members, and those that receive funds from the government are also accountable to the general public. The United States has a broad and robust nonprofit art world, some of which is already engaged with the concerns of public culture.

However, nonprofit organizations are not necessarily concerned with democracy. Many arts nonprofits focus solely on elite arts and have little interest in democratizing the art world. Public arts agencies, which play an important role in keeping the activities of nonprofits in the public sphere, can help facilitate democracy through their funding and regulatory practices. These agencies' awards function as both support and sanction for valued cultural activities. Further, government support has helped to stabilize and sustain the volatile nonprofit world, which, on its own, may not be financially viable.

Government arts agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) are also not strictly concerned with democracy. The NEA has given the majority of its funds to traditional elite arts. If the partnership between government agencies and the nonprofit world is going to successfully develop a democratic public culture in America, agencies like the NEA will need to

adopt missions that are more focused on democracy and that recognize the kinds of distinctions that we have made here.

CONCLUSION

Using political philosophy, I have constructed a theory for treating art as a product of association, which we can use to evaluate the success of arts initiatives from the perspective of their democratic effects. My theory emphasizes the importance of taking an ecological approach that pursues multiple associational goods, not simply one good that seems the best. Specifically, I have argued that a combination of exclusive group identity goods and inclusive social goods provides the greatest overall democratic effects by providing a framework for discussion and shared identity while also encouraging challenge, conflict, and representation.

This theory can guide the decisions of granting agencies—particularly public funders of the arts—as they operate with limited resources and an abundance of possible art projects. I contend that democracy is the most suitable pursuit of government support for the arts—both in the sense of making art more democratic and in the sense of improving American democracy through culture. However, although contemporary America enjoys an abundance of art used for identity politics, it suffers from too much elite art and too little art that serves as a symbol of common identity. Meanwhile, we undervalue the contestatory art of identity politics. Too often, art that is rooted in identity politics is assumed to only have significance for a specific community, not for the larger society. The framework offered here provides evaluative criteria that can tell us whether, why, and how the arts matter.

KEYWORDS

art, democracy, management, politics, theory

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