Introduction
Having spent twenty odd years of my life attending contemporary cultural openings, exhibitions, performances and happenings, I began to wonder what the attending audience got out of the experience and what motivated them to go. This query did not stem from boredom with my cultural habits but more from the need to understand why some individuals chose to experience art forms and cultural experiences, while others did not. If it was purely entertainment, a matter of leisure preferences, or escapism from the ravages of modern life, then heading to the local cinema, music concert or the local pub might just do the same trick.

But quite a number of us don’t, we choose to consume the arts in its multifarious forms. Why? A desire for knowledge, a desire for an aesthetic encounter or a predisposition for highbrow tastes? Or none of the above. Many considerations and studies of culture and arts attendance evaluate the impact of this engagement in terms of resolving economic, social or cultural tourism agendas. This has resulted in an increasingly defined position for the impact of the arts in terms of convertible use-values, efficiencies and profits of input/output mechanisms and considerations of cause and effect. Neo-liberal ideologies have entered the sphere of the arts. This has led to the consideration that today’s cultural producers are ‘the new missionaries’ who solve the multifarious ills of society with their cultural balm (O’Kelly 2007). This instrumentality of culture, however, falls short of considering the full totality of the arts experience as it does not address the intrinsic impacts of cultural engagement.

Assessing Elusive Culture
Assessing this elusive impact is widely noted as difficult due to the complex, intensely subjective and contextual nature of this experience. This profile also renders intrinsic impact assessment as unsuitable for the rigours of positivist quantifiable logic (Belfiore and Bennett 2007, Galloway 2009, Selwood 2010). But while proving ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ is inherently difficult, it is essential to surface the intrinsic value of culture, in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the totality of the cultural experience. If it is not surfaced, it will remain invisible and mute against the goliath of instrumentalism. As noted by Matarasso (1997) that which remains invisible is powerless and thus rendered impotent in a use-exchange value discourse. As such our values of culture will then settle on what art and culture are seen to ‘do’ for society and not what they ‘mean’ to individuals.

Art for art’s sake
And if we remove instrumentality from the cultural value equation and consider alternative evaluations of the intrinsic power of art, we are left with the Arnoldian view of ‘arts for arts sake’ or Kantian ‘disinterestedness’ of aesthetic appreciation. These alternative considerations of culture are also found wanting, possessing little consequence or meaning in the neo-liberal discourses of the twenty-first century. Cultural policy therefore, remains constrained by the language of a post-Fordist logic.
Distinct from commercial and more popular forms of culture, the arts do have a significant impact that goes beyond aesthetic pleasure and instrumentalized agendas. Yet we continue to have an incomplete and fragmented understanding of this value. While the intrinsic aspect of the cultural experience is ‘notoriously difficult to describe, let alone measure’, a need to find words to articulate this impact and value to individuals is increasingly recognised (Holden 2006, Ramsey White and Rentschler 2005). The much respected work of 20th century psychologist, Abraham Maslow, may be of some help in this regard. His well respected, and much referenced theory of human motivations can provide a framework against which to propose a value for the intrinsic cultural experience.

Maslow established that individuals are engaged in a drive for personal betterment and progression which begins with a need to establish and satisfy food, shelter and security needs. He articulated his concepts in a pyramidal form, entitled the ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ (1943). While lower level needs (1 and 2) are concerned with basic physiological needs such as food, water, shelter and security, his higher level needs (3, 4 & 5) suggest that individuals actively pursue self-development through the accumulation of experiences and resources (tangible and intangible). In this cumulative process an individual progresses incremental and intrinsic development through the levels of the Hierarchy of Needs. Thus once an individual has a certain degree of security of practical personal circumstance, they endeavour to establish relationships with others and in so doing, develop a sense of belonging and place within a community and/ or peer or social network. This third level of Love and Belonging provides a platform on which to develop Self esteem (fourth level) finally moving towards the fifth level of experiencing Self-actualization (Maslow 1943).

This self development Maslow suggests, results from establishing meaningful connections with external reality. And it is suggested that an individual’s engagement with arts and culture is potentially a search for a meaningful connection with society, people, and a mode for understanding the world we live in. These experiences occur within an aesthetic and intellectual environment which has been legitimized, often by institutionalized funding, and are where an individual can safely reflect, and negotiate, mental concepts in an aesthetic and creative form. As a paradigm within which to consider intrinsic cultural value, this provides a useful framework. Thus cultural experience, once ingested, becomes a resource which develops an individual intrinsically.

**Cultural Consumption and the Hierarchy of Needs**

This was considered as a valuable research proposition and was the basis of field research in 4 funded visual arts venues in Dublin, Ireland, in July 2010. 95 individuals, self completed a questionnaire constructed around Maslow’s higher order needs of Belonging (Level 3), Esteem (Level 4) and Self Actualization (Level 5). The findings demonstrated that individuals in consuming the experience of art, do accrue intangible resources which add to their sense of themselves and their place in this world. These intangible resources are accumulated as an individual receives fulfilment from establishing meaningful connections with his or her external reality through the visual art experience. This experience is, in a sense, transmogrified into an intrinsic impact, which enables an individual to progress an agenda of self development and fulfilment through extrinsic activities, as per Maslow’s pyramidal premise.

Individuals did demonstrate progression through the Hierarchy of Needs, with the sitiation of one layer, for example the third level of Love and Belonging, acting as a platform and context for the satiation and satisfaction, of the fourth level of Self Esteem. A high percentage of individuals acknowledged a sense of belonging and connectedness to a network through their attendance at visual art events and anecdotaly, individuals commentated that this experience ‘brings[them] more in touch with others,’ as well as giving a real reflection of peoples’ lives/thoughts/feelings and reactions to their existence.’ Individuals also noted that the experience helped them to ‘see things from the perspectives of others’ and to think outside the box.’ When feelings of belonging and connectedness were present so too were the conditions for opinion development. The exposure to the thoughts of others expressed through creative mediums sparked an intellectual engagement and reflection in attendees. These thoughts and opinions, research participants acknowledged, they shared with others which in turn enhanced the self-esteem of the interviewee and their sense of themselves. Research participants also made a direct correlation between the occurrence of the visual art experience and feeling more tolerant of the opinions of others.

Consuming the experience of contemporary culture therefore, was found to give individuals greater feelings of connectedness; belonging to society, and to their peer grouping; knowledge generation; stimulated and shared opinions; a greater sense of creativity as well as tolerance for others; and feelings of in-tuneness and harmony with the world, albeit temporary and transient, but none the less extant. Conversely, the fifth level of Self-actualization was attainable even when the lower levels were not satisfied and complete. It could therefore be suggested, that in the consumption of the visual art experience, feelings
of in-tuneness can be ‘fast tracked’. As a state of experience, this is perhaps a temporal possibility. The focussed and reflective conditions of the visual art environment perhaps offer a focussed and immersive as well as intellectual, and/or sensory environment which potentially blocks all other distractions and allows a moment of suspension from reality.

**Intangible resource accumulation**

This cultural engagement process accrues resources which impact intrinsically on the individual and intangible resources similar to those outlined by Bourdieu (1984) are garnered. These intangible resources are embodied as social and cultural capital and are subject to activation, use and maintenance by individuals. Intangible resource accumulation, Bourdieu (1984) notes is also used by individuals in symbolic displays of power as a useful tool for distinction and differentiation in an increasingly homogenized society. Class stratifications and distinctions are rapidly decreasing and are now almost defunct. And there is a concurrent rise in the consumption of culture as a tool of social differentiation (Veblen 1918/1965, Lizardo and Skiles 2008). Traditionally, cultural consumers tended to be drawn from the elite demographic of upper class, educated and financially secure ‘univores’ (Peterson and Kern 1996) who were mono-focused in their cultural digestive habits. But today’s cultural consumer displays a more ‘omnivore’ appetite through their breadth and quantity of cultural consumption across varying and diverse art-forms. These omnivores tend to be educated to third level, plus 35yrs and the majority are female. Di Maggio (1982) suggests that amongst the reasons for the use of culture by this particular demographic is that females mobilize the experience of cultural to further their identity differentiation amongst other females. Professionally, men are more able to do this through their work experience. Therefore, educated females potentially use the experiences of cultural engagement to progress an agenda of self development and identity differentiation, accumulating intrinsic resources through extrinsic activities.

**Cultural Competency**

Pinnock (2009) and Shockley (2005) both note that these resources are only available to those with the cultural competencies to access the fuller meaning of the experience. Cultural competency is achieved by exposure to, and time investment in cultural consumption, within and across art-forms. Thus an individual displays loyalty, and garners knowledge, in a preferred pursuit over others and will continue to invest time in this pursuit once a significant level of meaning for the individual has been secured through this engagement (Pinnock 2009). Therefore, *a priori* cultural competency needs to exist in order that the fuller meaning of the cultural experience results. This in turn encourages additional development of competencies which further reinforce repeat and frequent consumption of the cultural experience. Thus a circular process of stimulation and consumption, leading to further stimulation and consumption, aids individuals through a self development and fulfilment process.

Naturally, the nature of how these engagements are consumed, and the quality of this interaction are fundamental to the experience received. This intangible interchange of experience- what the work ‘gives’ and what the viewer ‘receives’- are inherently subjective and fundamentally context and time-specific. Where an individual ‘is’ metaphorically speaking, at any point in time in their intellectual and social development, can determine what they ‘receive’ from a cultural work. This is what makes the intangible nature of the cultural experience so difficult to determine- it is a matter of taste, of background, of where we are ‘in our lives at that moment’. It is a matter of what is available and accessible to us, geographically and intellectually, in terms of physically where we are located and mentally, what we know, have learnt and can understand or decipher. But none-the-less, the benefits and intrinsic impacts of these cultural experiences are only available to those who can access them physically as well as intellectually. If not psychological exclusion and non-engagement results.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs therefore, provides a useful paradigm within which to consider the intrinsic impacts garnered as a result of the consumption of the cultural experience. We can then reasonably conclude that these experiences have a personal ontological value that goes beyond instrumentalised social, economic and political gains. But the challenge remains to enter these intrinsic values into the discourses of policy makers in a meaningful, substantial and agreed way.

**References**


