AMANDA RAVETZ Validation – regulation?

Regulation isn't a term I associate with contemporary art, beyond recent rumblings about regulation of the financial aspects of the art market. Perhaps this is because vested interests tend to push the regulation of what (content) is considered fit for purpose in contemporary art out of the public eye. But having recently become more familiar with the notion of validation in art, I can see that regulation, if it occurs in ways that reach beyond finance, probably does so in ways closely related to validation.

A project I'm involved in (with Rebecca Senior and the charity Axisweb), called *Models of Validation*, sets out to understand the kinds of endorsement or illumination that might be fitting and acceptable to the different groups closely committed to what we are broadly (though perhaps problematically) calling social practice – socially engaged art practice, community art, participatory art, activist art, and agonism are some of the terms used to describe the kinds of art our research concerns. The research is artist-focused but takes account too of the views of audiences, participants, communities, funders and commissioners.

In the world of products and consumers validation refers to an evidence-based procedure done by bodies external to a production process that tests an object, product or service to endorse its fitness for purpose from the point of view of end users and stakeholders. An obvious link to regulation is in how regulatory bodies give advice about the kinds of validation needed for a product or service in order to meet its standards. On the face of it this concept is alien to art which has patrons, audiences, and in the case of social practice, communities. But it is used in contemporary art, albeit in a way predictably at odds with the supposed 'hands-off' testing, endorsement and regulation associated with products and services.

In an online article published in 2009 in the Economist, the validation of art and artists is described as "a complex filtering process" that artists and their oeuvres undergo "in the broader terrain of the art world." Tallying with Sarah Thornton's brief mention of validation in her book Seven Days in the Art World, the article lists the means by which artists gain the endorsements that tell the market that their work has value. These routes include the art school(s) where they trained, the dealers who run risk assessments on an artist who they consider taking on, a dealer's existing stable of artists whose reputations rub off on the new recruit, the art fairs that gallerists attend after being passed by 'rigorous selection committees', the reputations for independence dealers and gallerists develop through the range and quality of work they show, the pedigree that collectors of artwork are considered to have, the body of critical interpretation that accrues around the work, the auction process, and finally the perceived integrity of an artist's work, its 'truth.

The *Models of Validation* project that Axisweb and MMU are involved in is rooted in a previous pilot research project that suggested the varieties of social practice and artists working beyond the gallery have very different values from the kind enshrined in the form of validation laid out above. Social practice, community art etc. has long been considered second rate and second class in comparison to gallery-based contemporary art and the body of critical interpretation, the artists' reputations and the 'truth' of the work have all suffered. Our research which tries to change this treads a tricky path however in trying to grow an artist- and stakeholder-led ground-up system of validation. Does this kind of work need validating, and if so by whom? Can those producing 'the work' also help design a validation system that satisfies the majority of artists concerned? Is it a problem that there is no formal regulatory body to advise on the kinds validation required?

References

Models of Validation https://www.axisweb.org/models-of-validation/

"How to make art history: validation in the contemporary market" in *The Economist*, 2009
http://:www.economist.com/node/14941197+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk&client=firefox-b-ab

Sarah Thornton (2008) Seven Days in the Art World. London: Granta.