

## BOOK REVIEW

***Performing Policy: How Contemporary Politics and Cultural Programs Redefined U.S. Artists for the Twenty-First Century*** (London: Palgrave MacMillan)

**By Paul Bonin-Rodriguez**

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Current perspectives and approaches to cultural policy in the United States have overwhelmingly focused on the role of the intermediary – the public and private funders, the policymakers and governments, and the formalized cultural enterprises that all play a part in shaping policy in their own way. Very little has been written or studied about cultural policy from the perspective of the artists, those who are actually creating, performing, and producing the public goods and benefits that cultural policy seeks to shape.

In *Performing Policy*, author Paul Bonin-Rodriguez provides a much-needed perspective on the artist's role both in cultural policy and in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American society. Bonin-Rodriguez draws extensively from his own experiences as a performing artist, teacher, and scholar to elevate the role of artists in cultural policy and to document their importance in being at the "policy table." His book is timely and relevant, as expectations of artists' roles have been elevated. Artists are more frequently expected to participate in the creation of social, cultural, and economic capital, though effective policies and practices that collectively support this lofty role are yet to emerge. The author's frequent references to Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital provide grounding for the reader in understanding the overall impact of artists in our communities.

Bonin-Rodriguez begins by framing the somewhat broad term of "cultural policy" by adopting Steven Tepper's definition:

"Cultural policy represents the decisions (by both public and private entities) that either directly or indirectly shape the environment in which the arts get created, disseminated, and consumed." (2003)

The author uses the culture wars of the 1990s as a point of departure for his assessment of the emergence of a new cultural policy movement. He describes how several landmark reports, studies, and convenings helped to redefine the practice and role of the artist in a community, primarily in response to the polarized public perception of artists and the role of government funding to support artists' work.

*Performing Policy* builds on a historical foundation of the seminal research reports, whitepapers, "gray literature," and other studies that comprise a growing canon of cultural policy literature. Bonin-Rodriguez describes how the work of leading research and policy think tanks such as RAND (*The Performing Arts in a New Era*, *The Gifts of the Muse*, et al.), and the Urban Institute (*Arts and Culture in Communities*, *Investing in Creativity*, et al.), as well leading thinkers such as Kreidler (*Leverage Lost: Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era*), Markusen (*Crossover: How Artists Build Careers Across Commercial, Nonprofit and Community Work*) and others have helped the cultural sector and its workforce understand the internal and external forces that shaped the field's current state. An ancillary benefit of this text is that Bonin-Rodriguez has created a compendium of critical literature relating to artists, policy, and related concepts suitable for anyone wishing to study these topics more deeply.

Bonin-Rodriguez coins the term "artist-producer" to define how artists today must now "function as multidisciplinary professionals bridging the sectors of art, business, technology,

policy and education” (p. 3). These artist-producers are also expected to create public value and serve as a critical component in building their communities. The author views the artist-producer taking on the role of policy entrepreneur, which he describes as the means by which “artists, as well as other cultural practitioners, might advance the importance of artists’ work in communities” (p. 144).

The core of *Performing Policy* comprises six distinct chapters that combine historical developments in cultural policy with case analyses that demonstrate the role of artists in shaping, or attempting to shape, cultural policy. Each chapter relates to the author’s definition of the artist-producer and provides a critical assessment of the artists’ impact on policy. Bonin-Rodriguez has been peripherally or integrally involved in all the developments and cases he outlines in these chapters, which provides a level of detail and insight otherwise unattainable though at times can seem to be singularly focused on his own perspectives of his professional activities.

Beginning with an assessment of the American Assembly’s 1997 convening on “The Arts and the Public Purpose” and ending with today’s current approaches to creative placemaking, Bonin-Rodriguez deftly and deeply assesses the role that artists played, or in some cases did not play, in forming cultural policy and practice. His firsthand knowledge of these activities and convenings, which includes interviews with key participants and access to unpublished materials combined with a historical and theoretical background, provides the reader with an unparalleled perspective on the development of policy. Bonin-Rodriguez does not shy from sharing the challenges or failures of artists’ participation in cultural policy development, using these as examples for ongoing efforts and sharing the ancillary benefits that resulted. The cases highlight critical successes, but also acknowledge that the development of cultural policy is a non-linear process and is as varied as the artistic forms it seeks to support.

Bonin-Rodriguez cites the American Assembly’s 1997 gathering as one of the first formal responses to the significant cuts to funding for the National Endowment for the Arts that resulted from the ongoing culture wars of that decade. He describes how the Assembly’s final report and its nine recommendations kept artists at arm’s length, viewing them in the context of arts institutions and limiting their involvement in the creation of the report. Despite this, the final report, “The Arts and the Public Purpose,” became a rallying point that brought validity to the field at a critical time.

A more artist-centric case is evaluated in Bonin-Rodriguez’s assessment of the “Austin New Works Theatre Community,” a loose collective of Austin, Texas theatre artists collaborating “to make Austin a center for real [theatre] work” (p. 50). From his own interactions and communications with many of these artists, he describes how these artists, fueled by a planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and with the promise for potential future funding, engaged in the policy process. His insights into the challenges the artists faced and the benefits of their collaboration provide an intimate look into the inner workings of artists attempting to plan for their future and engage in the policy process. While the overall outcomes they sought may not have been fully achieved, their efforts were successful in the context of the lessons learned and the continued collaboration that still exists today.

Support models for practicing artists and career expectations of emerging artists are addressed in two cases that exemplify the author’s artist-producer approach while also building on the current definitions of the “artist entrepreneur.” Bonin-Rodriguez’s involvement with and study of the Creative Capital Foundation provides insights into how a market-driven approach to supporting artists both financially and through professional development builds sustainable artist

careers. Creative Capital's financial investment in an artist comes with the caveat that artists repay a portion of their grant funds based on the revenue their work generates (that is, *if* the work generates revenue), creating a potential cycle of new capital that sustains the Foundation as well as the next generation of artists. Bonin-Rodriguez then incorporates the perspective of emerging artists through a research survey on his own students, assessing their "Anticipated Career and Education Outcomes." Using the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project's findings on professional outcomes of fine arts graduates as a guide, he engages his own students in critical thinking about their future careers and expectations. He seeks to eliminate the narrow focus, or "curricular stenosis," that is occurring in arts higher education due to a lack of responsive curricula that provides artist graduates with the skills to work in a variety of creative fields. This inevitably brings up the case for entrepreneurial skills and training, which aligns with the author's artist-producer definition. He describes the resistance to arts entrepreneurship in some fine arts programs as an opportunity for a "critical cultural policy" approach that would ensure that artists are part of the policy community.

*Performing Policy's* final chapters delve into Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC) and the increasingly popular creative placemaking movement. LINC was a major 10-year initiative that recently concluded, which sought to "pursue innovative research-based practices to improve working conditions for the nation's artists" (p. 107) while creative placemaking is an activity in which "partners from the public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities" (p. 127). Bonin-Rodriguez identifies how LINC's research-driven approach provided important resources to artists but also sought to help artists serve as leaders in their communities, again exemplifying his artist-producer framework. In his analysis of creative placemaking, Bonin-Rodriguez sees the National Endowment for the Arts' return to setting a national arts policy agenda that ultimately grew into a broader national movement, bringing artists into a broader community context. He views this relatively new movement, built upon many of the other programs and initiatives outlined in his book, as a means by which artists "actively contribute to the cultural identity and practices of a community" (p. 138).

In *Performing Policy*, Bonin-Rodriguez has identified and thoroughly investigated the role of artists in shaping cultural policy. He adeptly weaves a common thread through three decades of policy and practice, demonstrating how cultural policies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have changed the role that artists must play in their communities. His first-hand experiences and knowledge combined with historical context has created a work that is content-rich and insightful. Part case study, part history lesson, and part collegial conversation, Bonin-Rodriguez has re-framed how we talk about the artist's role in cultural policy.

In some ways, *Performing Policy* is a call to action for artists to become producers in their communities, to be creative entrepreneurs, and to move from a space-based and individualistic perspective to a place-based, holistic approach to their work that puts them at the center of the arts ecosystem. It is also a call to action for arts organizers, philanthropies, and policymakers to remember that cultural policy efforts must bring to the table those who create our culture.

### References

Tepper, S. J., & Hinton, S. (2003). *The Measure of Meetings: Forums, Deliberation, and Cultural Policy*. Princeton university.