General

What Can't Be Counted Will Be Missed

Steven ten Thije

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Society seems to have slowly accepted the use of business-world measurement tools in other areas, but it remains profoundly unclear whether these statistical tools have actually contributed to the quality of our democracy, culture, or our actual lives.

It is a sad coincidence that both the Stedelijk Museum, which celebrated its reopening by saluting the word "open", and the magazine named simply *Open!* could only survive the recent Dutch government austerity measures by closing many of their doors. In both cases, the cuts imposed on these institutions seem to stem from a common misunderstanding that the intellectual resource that *Open!* makes public, and the cultural resource – the collection – that the Stedelijk makes accessible, need only limited funds to deliver their valuable content.

Today's thinking seems to be that all the intellectual has to do is write down what he has discovered and the curator can simply display what the museum has stored in its basement. If all of this is done by keeping an acute eye on "the public", then eventually this magical collective body will happily invest more of its sparse free time and means in culture, ultimately leading to a balanced budget once again. In both cases, the entire decision process shows the ruthless omnipresence of political and economic calculators in turn revealing, as Oscar Wilde once said, "the price of everything but the value of nothing". It may sound repetitive and overly negative to start a column that offers an outline for future research by commemorating the reason why I am writing this text for an online journal as opposed to an old print journal. However, my proposal for how to move forward still entails starting by reflecting on how we got here. The main pattern that needs to be investigated is the unconstructive, managerial pragmatism that has been sweeping through all layers of society be they economic, political, or cultural since the early 1990s. Society seems to have slowly accepted the use of business-world measurement tools in other areas, but it remains profoundly unclear whether these statistical tools have actually contributed to the quality of our democracy, culture, or our actual lives. This obsession with measuring is present most strongly within the realm of politics, where an obsessive focus on growth and the protection of wealth have become an end in themselves and overshadowed any substantial discussion on values. Moreover, the cultural sector seems unable to turn the tide. The manic celebrations of various successes – the opening of the Rijksmuseum or Stedelijk, the new "Blockbuster" fund, etc. – combined with the scary fluidity with which the majority of the cultural sector ideologically adjusts to the new, cold approach to culture, shows that this sector is stunned like a deer in the headlights of a neoliberal, conservative Humvee.

The type of research and discussion that would be useful in this cold and pragmatic environment should, however, not be a simple rejection of the current mentality by referring to solidarity or an ethical rigor that may have never actually existed. My suggestion would be to *not* reject counting or measuring as such, but to aspire to understanding both the possibilities and the limitations of data. I would like to propose an investigation of the current statistics-oriented mentality to try to better understand how it

affects the relationships between various social groups. My hypothesis is that the current use of data only leads to further fragmentation and disintegration of a common space where people – yes, we – can gather to discuss what is right or wrong. Instead of asking ourselves what is the value of art and how does it contribute to our society, it seems that we have haphazardly identified a few things we can measure – attendance figures and private donations data – and transformed them into an end in themselves. In response to this, my question would be: Do we measure what we care about, or do we care about what we can measure? My modest hope for *Open!* is that the flexibility that it gains by going online may offer it some room to experiment in response to the question above in an interesting manner. For instance, perhaps *Open!* can collaborate on a project with the Boekman Stichting to offer *Open!* 's extensive network of critical thinkers to the more policy-orientated world of this study center to research precisely how the act of assessing art has gone astray? Or maybe it can collaborate with more socially conscious corporate partners to investigate how statistics gradually eventually end up meaning nothing tangible at all and become a goal in and of themselves? These new kinds of collaborations may in the future lead to *Open!* being situated in various locations where it can use its resources to overcome the current tendency of categorising people and professions via the use of statistical data. Maybe *Open!,* in its new incarnation, can help us realise the obvious meaning of the title of this essay: that what can't be counted will be missed. But maybe it can also serve as a wake-up call where we demand new ways to figure out how we can count things to make sure that they will not be missed.

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Tags

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