

## THE DECEPTIVE LOVING POWER OF WORDS

**This article offers a series of reflections on some of the issues raised by the participants of the Focus Group: *Criticality and Evaluation within a Culture of Optimism*, organized in June 2012 by Hannah Hull for her initiative *ART vs REHAB*. The Focus Group offered an opportunity for artists and social workers engaged in rehabilitation contexts to meet, discuss and share ideas around the topics of criticality and the evaluation of funded art projects. For more information visit [www.artvsrehab.com](http://www.artvsrehab.com)**

I am going to look at the interpretation and use that funding institutions make of terms such as growth, wellbeing and rehabilitation; exploring the underlying semantic conflict with the meanings attributed to them by artists and social workers. What is problematic for most artists and social workers is in fact that institutions, embedded in a political apparatus that is highly informed by a capitalistic and consumerist system, fail to understand the complexity of the projects they fund.

The fact that political discourse is embedded within an economy that is capitalistic and consumerist dictates that its institutions employ models of interpretation that are rooted in a quantitative framework. For example, growth in these terms means an increase in the amount of goods and services that an economy is able to produce and consume in time. Therefore, following this logic, rehabilitation and wellbeing will be evaluated according to the capacity of individuals to contribute to production and consumption. A happy person will be understood as a person capable of producing and consuming in great quantities and in a short time. A rehabilitated person is an individual that, after a period of disengagement, comes back to this chain of production and consumption. Quantity in materialistic terms is the underlining narrative of this perspective.

On the contrary, for most of the participants, terms like growth, wellbeing and rehabilitation refer to organic, complex processes of development through which individuals find their place in the world. However, finding their place is not necessarily associated with the capacity of an individual to consume and produce in great quantities. Rather, wellbeing for example, also means a person capable of acting generously toward oneself and others; and rehabilitation can indicate an individual who has returned to act appropriately.

This is an interpretation that takes into consideration the biological, psychological, neurological, spiritual and emotional processes through which a person stops to view himself as part of a nourishing community. In order to readdress these processes, people

working in rehabilitation need to build trust through time, dedication, and overcoming momentary failures and crises. To evaluate such narratives requires a dialogical model of evaluation that is both quantitative and qualitative, and capable of assessing their complexity.

I was invited to attend a Focus Group: *Criticality and Evaluation within a Culture of Optimism*, organized and co-ordinated in June 2012 by Hannah Hull for her research project *ART vs REHAB*. What emerged from the meeting was a profound difference between institutions that want immediate results aimed at sustaining fast economic growth, and the people involved in publicly funded art projects that produce slow and often invisible results. Despite their invisibility, however, these results are the fundamental seeds that, in time, are capable of producing important and positive transformations. Therefore, the problem that clearly comes to light is that the models employed to evaluate these projects are inadequate for assessing the subjective, random, non-immediate, slow, non-measurable, invisible and subtle factors that are crucial to improving problematic social conditions.

Moreover, the problem identified reveals an increasingly profound dissatisfaction with the core belief system that structures our society. However, it is the system that is questioned that produces the means through which these projects can be carried out.

There are no clear paths ahead. Nonetheless, in order to positively transform this system we need to participate in the public discourse and generate platforms of dialogue capable of bringing forward innovative forms of public engagement.

I would like to conclude by offering the two possible ways forward that participants suggested during the meeting. The first is to act collectively in requesting a platform of dialogue with institutions, to claim a voice in the process of establishing the criteria of evaluation. The second is to develop the linguistic means to reclaim a plurality of evaluative perspectives that would take into consideration the complexity of the creative process in rehabilitative contexts.

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### **Short biography**

Silvia Battista is a visual and performance artist and a PhD candidate at the Drama and Theatre Department of the Royal Holloway University. Her research and practice focus on the notion of the numinous experience in contemporary live art practices and her methodological approach is rooted in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology.