

# **THE EXCELLENCE BARRIER**

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To Attract and Retain New Audiences Arts Organizations May Need to  
Stop Selling Excellence and Start Brokering Relationships between People and Art(ists)

by

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I want to express my sincere thanks to the Washington State Arts Alliance for the invitation and opportunity to speak today. It's an honor and a privilege to be here.

Before starting, I need to preface my remarks by saying two things: (1) a little disclaimer: my viewpoints are personal and should not be taken, necessarily, to be the viewpoints of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; and (2) I have extraordinary respect for the staffs and boards of cultural institutions. Prior to coming to the Foundation, I worked for 15 years in arts organizations; I know firsthand how difficult it can be to produce great art, sell admissions and memberships, and raise contributions even during a strong economy. I thank you all for your time and look forward to a question or two afterwards, if there's time.

## **INTRODUCTION**

So, I think we kid ourselves when we believe a primary reason people are not patronizing the arts is because they have no time, even if they tell us they have no time. Saying "no time" reminds me of the let-me-down-easy breakup line: "It's not you, it's me."

If you've heard this line, or used it, then you probably know it really means just the opposite.

*Is the barrier really time?*

About 14 years ago – long before Podcasting, blogging, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, and iPhones – I was teaching a general survey course, Intro to Theater, at a public university in Idaho and on the first day of class each term I would ask the 120 or so students to raise their hands if they had ever seen a professional theater production. About 10 hands would go up. I would then say, "Raise your hand if you would like to see a professional theater production." Fifteen hands, at most 20, would go up. And these were the students who had decided to take a theater class.

So, I would ask the remaining students, who had not raised their hands, "Why wouldn't you want to go to the theater?" The answer was generally something along the lines of, "I've gone this long without seeing a play, and I don't feel like I'm missing anything."

Economics is the science that studies how people and societies make choices about what to do with their limited resources. Economists theorize that an individual evaluates his or her choices, looks at constraints or tradeoffs between them, and then ultimately chooses the option that will maximize his or her well-being or happiness.

My students did not have direct, personal experience with "The Theater," and to the degree that it was in their worldview at all (and I'm not certain it was), evidently, their general sense—from talking to friends, growing up in their particular families, and listening to the people whose opinions mattered to them—was that the theater was not going to bring them much happiness.

They may not be alone in shrugging off the arts.

In 2009, the NEA released a report on arts participation trends in the US, which indicates double digit rates of decline for theater, ballet, opera, orchestras, jazz, and visual arts festivals since 1982; faring only slightly better, museum participation rates are basically on par with 1982, though they have been declining since 2002. Surprisingly, participation is declining most among 45-54 year olds. (So much for the theory that the boomers would show up once their kids were older.) Even those who are college educated (a demographic with historically high participation rates) are curbing their attendance. Finally, but not surprisingly (since we've been talking about

the graying of the audience for decades, it seems), the report indicates that performing arts attendees have continued to age and are now older than the average US adult (which is aged 45).

When reports such as these come out, there are inevitably those arts leaders and advocates that rush to characterize this as a symptom of a deteriorating society—“What’s wrong with people?” we ask. But perhaps we are to blame? If participation is declining, perhaps it’s because the arts sector (by-and-large) has failed to respond to a changing culture?

- Cities and towns have become more *diverse*, but the leadership, boards, and staffs of most arts organizations are still predominantly *white*.
- We are living in an increasingly free, time-shifting, DIY, multitasking culture, yet we’re hawking time-based, often fee-based, experiences that *demand* undivided, respectful, passive, and sustained attention.
- In the US, over the past few decades, arts classes have been all but eliminated at most public schools and the arts critic is becoming an endangered species at most newspapers—changes that make it very difficult for people to navigate the arts scene. At the same time substitutes have exploded around us. But the arts have by-and-large responded with a business-as-usual approach. Why pay higher ticket prices year-after-year to experience the live theater (which may be a risky or uninteresting proposition if you’ve never been to a play) when some truly talented writers, directors, and actors are now working for TV and Hollywood; and companies like HBO and AMC are producing bold, ambitious programs like *The Wire*, *In Treatment*, and *Mad Men*. “But,” you protest, “the live arts are intrinsically better than television. That’s why.”

Maybe. Or maybe not. Either way, the culture has changed; and, evidently, there is declining appreciation for the excellent work we may be doing and other, more attractive options for people looking for something to do tonight, or to experience some culture, get an art fix, impress the date/boss/next door neighbor, delight their senses or stir their souls, express their creativity

...

... get a little happiness.

The question is can anything be done about it? *Perhaps*.

## **PART 2 –SLOW FOOD VS THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRIES**

In 1986, McDonald’s opened a restaurant near the historic Spanish Steps in Rome. It was the inciting incident that launched a movement, a counter-revolution to the Fast Food industry, which had “revolutionized” dining beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Perhaps you know this movement—it’s called Slow Food—and it was founded in 1989 by the culinary writer Carlo Petrini, who was horrified by the spread of fast food chains across his country and the world.

Of course, Slow Food was not a new idea; it was what was in existence before Fast Food came into the picture, and it continued to be in existence as the Fast Food industry exploded and achieved global domination. The problem was not that there was an inadequate supply of slow food, per se. Farmers around the world were growing fresh, delicious produce.

However, the distribution chains that get food into restaurants and onto kitchen tables were increasingly oriented to the high profit strategy of providing quick, affordable solutions to time-

crunched and budget-crunched women and men who were working full time and trying to put meals into their stomachs and those of their kids three times a day.

In the *Innovator's Dilemma*, Clayton Christensen writes, "When the performance of two or more competing products has improved beyond what the market demands, customers can no longer base their choice upon which is the higher performing product." At that point, he says, "the basis of product choice often evolves from *functionality*, to *reliability*, then to *convenience*, and, ultimately, to *price*."<sup>1</sup>

Fast Food became king because there was declining appreciation for "fresh, local, seasonal produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; and leisurely dining with family and friends."<sup>2</sup> Fast Food became king because the McBreakfast Meal consumed in the car on the way to work was a tasty-enough, more reliable, convenient, possibly even cheaper alternative to the eggs, toast, coffee, and hash browns one could make for oneself at home. As a bonus for the Fast Food Industry—once people started eating processed foods they became habituated to them. And kids that grew up eating potatoes "baked" for eight minutes in the microwave, canned soup, cakes made from a box mix, and fried chicken from the drive-thru, didn't even realize what they were missing.

This was the difficult reality that Carlo Petrini faced when he wrote a manifesto, started a movement, and adopted the following three strategies for dealing with the culture change he was facing.<sup>3</sup>

### **Strategy #1: Defense of Biodiversity**

Slow Food believes the enjoyment of excellent food and drink should be combined with efforts to save the countless traditional grains, vegetables, fruits, animal breeds, and food products that are disappearing due to the prevalence of convenience food and industrial agribusiness.

### **Strategy #2: Taste Education**

By reawakening and training their senses, Slow Food helps people rediscover the joys of eating and understand the importance of caring where their food comes from, who makes it, and how it's made. They provide Taste Education classes and also teach kids and adults how to grow their own food.

### **Strategy #3: Linking Producers with Consumers**

Slow Food organizes fairs, markets, and events locally and internationally to showcase products of excellent gastronomic quality and offers consumers the opportunity to meet producers.

To fight the impact of the Fast Food Industry, you'll notice that what the Slow Food Movement did *not* do was set up expensive Slow Food restaurants next to the Fast Food chains and hang a sign in the window that said,

*"Welcome Cultured Person! Please come in. And for \$140 per person we'll serve you a four-course meal featuring olive oil-soaked ladotiri cheese from Greece, lentils from Abruzzi, sausages made from Sienese wild boar raised in Tuscany, and a dessert featuring Vesuvian apricots."*

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003): xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004): 59

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.slowfood.com>

One can imagine that the implicit message to the people passing over the Sieneese wild boar sausages in order to get a burger at the joint next door might be something like:

*“To Everyman Else: If you are the kind of person that is content to eat a \$6.89 McCrappy Fast Food Meal at that low-class food chain next door with tacky vinyl seats and neon lights, or if you can’t appreciate why lentils from Abruzzi are intrinsically better than that instant rice you are buying and cooking in two minutes in your microwave, then we consider you to be “disinclined” to participate in the Slow Food Movement and, to be honest, you probably wouldn’t appreciate the experience.”*

### **PART 3 – WHY SELLING EXCELLENCE ISN’T WORKING FOR US**

But, in essence, isn’t this the approach we’ve taken in the fine arts—if not explicitly, then implicitly? Selling the idea of excellence, and distributing marketing materials that, essentially, have been aimed at making insiders feel superior and embarrassing other people (who don’t really understand the marketing materials) into believing that if they want to prove they are cultured and have any taste at all, then they should be associating with our excellence instead of sitting on the couch in their underwear watching *House*; or patronizing venues where people wear flip flops and tank tops and talk and eat while the performance is going on; or (really, worst of all) deluding themselves that they have talent and creativity because they have made a “film” on their digital cameras and uploaded it to YouTube and a bunch of their “friends” watched it.

How’s this approach been working for us?

Not so well in the US, it would appear, if the figures from the NEA report are any indication. So much of what we do in the name of excellence creates barriers to participation.

- We get hung up on professionalism and defining the terms of participation;
- we cater to and value the opinions of our longtime patrons, the intelligentsia, and the critics over everyone else;
- through advertising and pricing, we give people the perception that the arts are intended for an elite group of culturally sophisticated people;
- we create large, intimidating uptown venues or dark, freaky downtown venues, and do very little, if anything, to make newcomers feel welcome, comfortable, and part of the tribe;
- we promote artistic hierarchies and (often inexplicably) value certain kinds of art over other kinds of art; and
- we privilege “liveness” over mediated art forms and resist allowing what we do to be recorded, distributed, and modified electronically, even though we know that this might help us reach more people.

In essence, we have too narrow a viewpoint on what a legitimate artistic experience is and whom we exist to serve.

When we do these things, we are keeping people from having a meaningful relationship with art.

Today, I’d like to argue that selling the *superiority* instead of the *diversity* of the arts; being *exclusive* and *mysterious* rather than *inclusive* and *open*; privileging the *professionally* performed and *passively* received experience over other forms of participation; and *competing* against one

another to get people to consume one's particular variety of exclusive and mysterious art rather than *collaboration* to develop arts participation, have not been particularly effective strategies.

It's time to try something else.

I'd like to propose seven ways that the arts could shift from *creating barriers* to *brokering relationships between people and art*, inspired, in part, by the Slow Food movement and its efforts to stimulate a real and much needed "cultural revolution" through food by changing the mentality of ordinary consumers and their relationship with food. Some of you may hear these points and think, "we're already doing this," or "that would never work for us" or "we don't need to do any of these things; we're doing just fine." And I'm sure you're correct in each case.

### **#1 - FREE THE ART**

First, in his 2009 book, *Arts, Inc.*, Bill Ivey suggests that it may be time for us to let go of the idea of artistic hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if we want more people to participate, first, we may need to stop hammering so hard on the idea that Bach is intrinsically better than Bjork, who is intrinsically better than my brother, Mickey, who plays Banjo (really well, I must add) in a pro-am Banjo club in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2009, I interviewed Bill Ivey, and he said that rather than seeing themselves as "the be-all and end-all" professional arts institutions need to see themselves as an important part of a spectrum of art making.<sup>5</sup> In other words, *it's all valuable*.

Next, the NEA report heralding the bad news about declining participation at live performance says there may be good news: 70 percent of US adults go online typically once per day; of those, nearly 40 percent use the Internet to view, listen to, download, or post artworks or performances. However, this is only good news for nonprofit arts organizations if they are able to capitalize on this trend.

Many musicians give their music away as a way of generating awareness, building a fan base, and developing an audience for their live performances. I'm not advocating that all content needs to be free; but it's important for arts organizations to recognize that mediated experiences can break down geographical, social, economic, and time barriers. Technology is not the enemy; indeed, it may be a way to reach more people more efficiently and to provide greater value to society. Arguably, for a growing number of people, if something doesn't exist online, it doesn't exist. Furthermore, an audio track, video clip, or image that can be downloaded, streamed, or in some way shared, enables devoted fans to spread their enthusiasm and potentially encourage participation by others.

American Repertory Theatre's new artistic director, Diane Paulus has renovated A.R.T.'s black box space, making it the first theater in the country to have a club venue as its second stage, where cell phones can be turned *on* and where people can participate as they would at a rock concert or a sports event. Audience members are allowed to take photos, make videos and recordings, and send creative content and messages through social networking sites, all while experiencing the live theatrical event.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Ivey, *Arts, Inc.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Diane Ragsdale, "A New Conversation about Culture," *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Vol. 20 No. 1, Spring 2009) : 10-12.

<sup>6</sup>"AT:25 Eye on the Future," *American Theatre Magazine*, April 2009

In January of this year, a *Boston Globe* article by Geoff Edgers read, “After struggling in recent years, the ART has created a splash on the cultural scene this season. Under new artistic director Diane Paulus, the company’s first two productions - both immersive, interactive, unconventional takes on Shakespeare - are selling out and attracting many who rarely go to the theater. Since the shows opened, hundreds of ticket-buyers have returned to them again and again, sometimes as many as two dozen times. You might see this kind of thing at “Shear Madness” or “Blue Man Group,” but for local theater companies, such a phenomenon may be unprecedented.”<sup>7</sup>

Notably, one show takes place in ART’s new club venue, the other is an interactive installation filling four floors of an old school.

This example raises a third issue: space. Your three-quarter thrust, exhibit space, or concert hall, long one of your greatest assets, may not be able to accommodate the ways that artists currently want to make work, or the ways that audiences want to experience it. To free the art, we need to ensure that content dictates form, and not the other way around. We need spaces (live and virtual) that support artists, support socializing, and that enable a more dynamic interaction between patrons and artists.

## **#2 - FREE THE PEOPLE**

The 50 or so chefs featured on The Food Network want to teach everyday people how to cook feasts and Slow Food wants everyone to have a garden; Target wants everyday people to be able to afford designer fashions; and professional baseball teams want every kid in the U.S. to play in the little leagues. Unlike the culinary, fashion, and sports industries which have actively worked to make their products “for everyone” and have given people the tools and guidance they need to “do” as much as they “view,” arts organizations more often than not seem to underscore the distinctions between the professional arts and the amateur arts, and as a result often leave people feeling mystified and unworthy, rather than curious and eager to join in.

Encourage them to clap when they feel like it; invite them to a rehearsal even if they haven’t donated money to the organization; encourage them to express their opinions about your work and your organization; and give them dance, acting, and music lessons.

In January of 2009, the Joffrey needed a way to generate new income so it decided to offer dance classes to the general public. As I understand it, within the first few months, the classes generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenues. Moreover, people taking the classes began purchasing tickets to Joffrey performances, because they wanted to see their teachers perform.<sup>8</sup>

Some professional companies are inviting amateurs to share the stage. Some are putting the power of programming in the hands of their patrons. In a six-week “People’s Opera” contest, Chicago Opera Theater lets its patrons (for one dollar per vote) select among three options and program one of the slots in its season.

Interestingly, when On the Boards launched a patron review blog several years ago, one of the first things we noticed was that the people we asked to blog started showing up to volunteer and donating money to us.

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<sup>7</sup> Geoff Edgers, “The Patrons Plunge In: Interactive ART Shows Draw Doves,” *The Boston Globe*: January 22, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Shelly Banjo, “Helping Themselves,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2009.

People like to be invested, to feel ownership.

The Slow Food movement prefers to call food consumers “co-producers.” Why? Because it believes that when consumers become informed about how food is produced and actively support the farmers and artisans who produce it, they become a part of and a partner in the production process.

### **#3 - DEMYSTIFY THE EXPERIENCE.**

The majority of Slow Food events are not about getting people to go to expensive restaurants for 6-hour meals that start at 11pm. The majority of Slow Food events are about Taste Education. They are aimed at reawakening and training the senses and learning about all aspects of food, and are geared to people of all ages, incomes, and ethnicities.<sup>9</sup>

It is not sufficient to create artistic experiences and sell or give them away without regard for the capacity of people to receive them and find meaning in them. In the arts, we don't often acknowledge that the experience of going to a live performance or museum can be unfamiliar and difficult for the uninitiated. In fact, sometimes it's difficult for the initiated. Like the gym, one needs to go on a regular basis before *going* feels better than *not going*.

In his book *Economics and Culture*, scholar David Throsby writes, “... taste for artistic services or goods is cumulative. It is apparent that a person's enjoyment of music, literature, drama, the visual arts, and so on, and hence her willingness to spend money on consuming them, are importantly related to her knowledge and understanding of these artforms.”<sup>10</sup>

Who better than nonprofit arts organizations with an educational mission (let's not forget) to help people gain the experiences, knowledge, and understanding they need to enjoy the arts?

Like the Slow Food movement, if we want people to be engaged, informed, passionate champions and co-producers for the arts then we need to provide them with the tools, guidance, and encouragement they may need to make connections, make decisions, and participate fully in the arts.

To start, we need to simplify the decision-making process. The value of a concierge at a hotel is that they ask you a few questions and then point you to 3 or 4 options that seem right for you; they don't simply hand you the brochure with the hundreds of restaurants, cultural attractions, and shops in town and wish you luck. You have to be a pretty dedicated cultural consumer just to make your way through the New Yorker listings, much less make a decision about what to see.

In his book, *The Tyranny of the Moment* Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes, “...information is no longer scarce. The point is no longer to attend as many lectures as possible, see as many films as one can, have as many books as possible on the shelves. On the contrary: the overarching aim for educated individuals in the world's rich countries must now be to make the filtering of information a main priority.”<sup>11</sup>

While many communities have developed arts and culture calendars, making it possible for the

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<sup>9</sup> [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)

<sup>10</sup> David Throsby, *Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 115.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001): 19.



curious to learn about the vast number of cultural events happening on any given day, most haven't gone the next step and helped people figure out which one, or two events might bring them the most happiness. It's the same for individual organizations. We tend to sell everyone the same package of performances. Brokering involves matchmaking – being a concierge.

Next, we need to provide whatever additional experiences or information people may want and need to derive everything they can from a piece. And this is not merely a call for K-12 arts education—though arts education is critically important. I'm thinking more about taste education for adults or entire families. And let's not forget, we're arts organizations, not universities; there's no reason for the experience to be pedantic. While the members of the tribe might appreciate the erudite program notes, many others find them off-putting. Slow Food doesn't send pamphlets to people with their manifesto written on it; they offer hands-on taste workshops where people taste, for instance, 16 varieties of honey and learn about honey production at local farms.

Jazz at Lincoln Center has a great program called Swing University, geared to adults, in which jazz masters spin records and tell stories and explain jazz, its development, and how to be an effective listener.

Four years ago, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater launched a program called First Look 101 in which they invite 101 regular theatergoers (not VIP patrons) to join them at key steps along the development process for a new play. They are able to attend a table reading, the first day of rehearsal, a rehearsal involving blocking and scene work, a technical rehearsal, and then a final performance.

Chicago Symphony Orchestra has developed a concert program called *Beyond the Score*® which is geared not only to aficionados, but also to newcomers. The first half of the concert features a multimedia examination of the selected score and after intermission, people return to the concert hall to hear the piece of music played. The programs are incredibly popular.

#### **#4 - CREATE AND FOSTER SOCIAL NETWORKS**

A recent survey of the national program Free Night of Theater found that the regularity with which one attends theater positively correlates with whether one's social group attends theater.<sup>12</sup>

Watching long-time patrons at opening night of a performance or exhibit, it seems that they are well acquainted and that seeing one another is as important as seeing the art on the stage or on the walls. But newcomers to the arts may feel like outsiders.

Very few arts organizations do much, if anything, to help foster social networks among their new or existing patrons, and yet arguably this could be as or more important than the quality of the art in determining whether or not people show up or return.

Last year, I heard about a theater company that began calling its lapsed subscribers to determine why they had left and discovered that quite a few were widows whose husbands had died and who had stopped attending because they had no one with whom to attend. Wisely, the theater organized an opportunity for these widows to attend a performance together. The arts organization even arranged for a bus to pick them up and bring them to the theater and provided

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<sup>12</sup> “2009 ‘Intrinsic Impact’ Study of Free Night of Theater Audiences,” WolfBrown, May 2009. [http://www.theatrebayarea.org/\\_docs/\\_data/IntrinsicImpact\\_FNOT\\_2008\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://www.theatrebayarea.org/_docs/_data/IntrinsicImpact_FNOT_2008_FinalReport.pdf)

a special time and space for socializing over cake and tea. It's been very well received.

And, of course, technology could be used to facilitate social networking. You know what application I would like someone to create? I want an email once per month notifying me of upcoming arts and culture activities that fit my preferences. I want to go through the list and sort them, "definitely," "maybe," and "no." I want the "definitely" and "maybe" events to sit in my shopping cart and then I want this system, which is linked to certain of my friends in Facebook, to alert them to the items in my shopping cart and ask if they would be interested to attend any of the events with me.

If they express an interest, I want the application to check our Outlook calendars against the performance dates and identify dates when it appears that we have blocks of time free when we could all attend. I want this system to send us each an email saying, "Hey—all four of you are interested in attending the new play, *Neighbors* at the Public Theater. We've identified three dates when you all appear to be available. To view them, log-in to the system. Let us know if any of the dates we've identified would not work, and whether it is OK for us to charge your credit cards (which we have on file). We'll book the tickets for the first available date that all of you can attend."

And then I want this system to recommend places near the theater where we could go for drinks or dinner beforehand or after the show, and offer to book a reservation for us. The day after the event, I want an email that nudges us to do it again sometime soon and perhaps even suggests that if we liked *Neighbors*, we might also want to check out *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, or *Clybourne Park*.

## #5 - IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO FACEBOOK THEM

When artistic director, Irene Lewis, arrived at Center Stage Theater in the early nineties the theater was producing works primarily by white playwrights, performed by white actors, for white audiences. Center Stage is based in Baltimore, where more than *two-thirds* of the population is African American. Irene Lewis astutely determined that Center Stage was not serving the larger community of Baltimore and made the commitment to change that by programming two or three out of six plays each season by African American playwrights or about the African American experience. Despite angry subscribers and financial consequences, the theater stayed the course. Today, the African American plays in the season generate the highest attendance and revenues. It took 15 years for Center Stage to cultivate a more diverse audience.

Similarly, under the baton of Esa Pekka Salonen, the Los Angeles Philharmonic gradually and successfully updated its programming, shifting to a focus on more modern works and new music. In a *New York Times* article by Alex Ross in 1994, Salonen was quoted saying, "If you want to reach a young person who has not learned classical music at home or in the schools, the best repertory is 20th-century repertory rather than Mozart or Haydn or Beethoven. Just because of the familiarity of the sound world, something like [Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*] gives you a sense of recognition, even if your only point of reference is rock music. It doesn't belong to the establishment; there is no political or class difference."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2006/10/esapekka\\_salone.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2006/10/esapekka_salone.html). "Becoming the Next Bernstein (Or Boulez)", by Alex Ross, *The New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1994.

This is not about commercialization of the arts or pandering to the audience or dumbing down the art; it's about arts organizations understanding the communities they exist to serve and doing programming that is culturally relevant.

No Podcast, YouTube video, Tweet, or other new media strategy is going to make 25-year-olds want to go to a performance that doesn't seem relevant to their lives in a venue in which they do not see other people their age. And a token, ethnically-specific play on a season is not enough to develop a relationship with an ethnically-specific community.

*Intellectual relevance cannot be relegated to the PR department.*

It's not about whether you're on Twitter before the other guy's on Twitter. Focus first on *seeing better*, then on selling better—See with a clear eye. See that your communities are changing, that art and artists are changing, and have the courage and humility to change your programming accordingly.

Arts organizations need to program consistently and authentically to the audiences they are trying to reach, and they may need to be prepared to break the shackles with current subscribers in order to gain new patrons. (Ask yourselves, honestly, whether your subscriber base is having a chilling effect on your programming and keeping you from serving the broader community.)

## **#6 – FOCUS ON IMPACT RATHER THAN GROWTH**

There is a real danger if we conflate growth of the budget, economic impact on the community, or even box office success with having intellectual relevance and creating meaningful impact on individuals and on society.

To say that there is an intrinsic value in art is not to say that there is an intrinsic value in arts organizations. Too many organizations behave as if the mission of the institution is to preserve the institution.

Susan Sontag once wrote, “Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future.”

I take particular note of the phrase, “precarious attainment of relevance.” No organization can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on the size of its endowment, the permanence of the building it occupies, the fact that it was the first or largest of its kind in its region or city, or its historic accomplishments. The institution exists to matter to people, in a particular community, *today*. That is the impact that must be assessed.

What does impact look like if not the metrics we're currently assessing? Alan Brown has done terrific work in this area, and I couldn't begin to summarize his research here—but I suggest you take a look at it. I would, however, describe what I consider to be one of the best examples in the US of an organization that is brokering relationships between people and art.

In 2003, choreographer Elizabeth Streb opened a performance space in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. called S.L.A.M. Instead of creating a church-like space that patrons visited once a week for a sacred experience, Streb opened the doors and let people come in anytime to watch rehearsal or use the restroom. She added popcorn and cotton candy machines and let people walk around and eat food during the performances. Streb noticed that her patrons wanted to join in on the action, so she installed a trapeze and began teaching people how to fly.

Performances largely feature the professional company, but Streb also features her students in the shows.

Not content to simply use the platform of S.L.A.M. to promote her own work, Streb began fostering the development of the next generation of artists, through an Emerging Artists Commissioning Program. Streb is constantly learning and innovating in response to the needs and interests of artists and the needs and interests of her community. And it's working.

Streb no longer needs to advertise her performances because she has created a robust social network that drives ticket sales. There is a palpable energy and familiarity in the room—people know each other and interact in the space as they would at a backyard barbecue. People come back to the performances time after time and the “initiated” (kids and adults alike) delight in showing newcomers the ropes, both literally and figuratively. The experience is participatory, not transactional.

Streb's success is measured not when the ticket gets sold at the box office, but thirty minutes after the show when everyone is still lingering, buzzing, and talking with one another and the artists. Streb is cultivating “true fans”—a diverse group of people who are deeply engaged, enthusiastic, and loyal. As Kevin Kelly, author of the article, “1,000 True Fans” would say, Streb's fans “buy the t-shirt, and the mug, and the hat.”<sup>14</sup>

Streb does not behave as if achieving artistic virtuosity and being relevant to the community are competing or mutually exclusive goals. She is pursuing excellence *and* equity. She has fostered the growth of a diverse range of artists and audiences, she has freed the art and the people, she has helped regular civilians develop a curiosity about bodies in space, she has been a hub where neighbors meet, and in the process of doing these things she has created a community cultural center that matters to Brooklyn.

Streb is not saying “Buy my excellent art.” She's *doing* excellent work but she is *saying*, “Come, let's explore movement, physics, space, and time together.”<sup>15</sup>

## #7 – BEWARE CREEPING NORMALCY

How did we end up in this place, with audiences declining and aging? Why did we fail to see and respond to the culture change? If you know the story of the boiling frog (and if you don't then Google “boiling frog” and read about it) then you may be familiar with the idea of “creeping normalcy.” Creeping normalcy refers to the way a major change can be accepted as normality if it happens slowly, in unnoticed increments, when it would be regarded as objectionable if it took place in a single step or short period. Some couples wake up years after being madly in love to find that the intimacy that was created in the early days has faded slowly and silently because they stopped noticing and nurturing each other.

Relationships require sustained attention. Perhaps like the husband and wife that wake up one day and realize, “We don't know each other anymore; we have nothing in common,” we failed to see that our communities were changing and that art and artists were changing, and we, *as institutions that exist to broker a relationship between the two* were not changing in response.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Kelly, “1,000 True Fans,” at [http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000\\_true\\_fans.php](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php).

<sup>15</sup> Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2008): 263. (See Shirky's “Buy Cheesy Poofs” vs “Join us, and we'll invent Cheesy Poofs together” idea.)

Why not? Perhaps because we were paying attention to the needs and preferences of longtime patrons, at the expense of others in the community? Perhaps we recognized the need to change but nonetheless held onto tried and true practices and cherished beliefs about art—who makes it, how it’s made, who it’s for, and how it’s delivered—out of some hope that we could turn back time?

If we are to be relevant, we must be able and willing to adapt in response to the artists and communities we exist to serve.

You may know that, from a biological standpoint, adaptation is fostered, in part, by allowing diversity into a system. In organizational systems, diversity comes from having leaders and staffs and boards that reflect the various communities (young, old, rich, poor, of different cultural backgrounds) you exist to serve and allowing them to influence the organization. Diversity also comes from working with new artists, new thinkers, and new partners.

This does not mean that all arts organizations must support emerging, midcareer, and established artists, across a range of aesthetics, or draw audiences of all ages and ethnicities. To the contrary, if anything this is a call for arts organizations to gain clarity and focus about the specific artists and audiences they exist to serve and to be able to make a case for why, in a community that ostensibly has other arts organizations, this is important. Strategy is about making choices. The less overlap there is between your mission and programming and another’s, the less likely it is that you will compete for resources and audiences.

At the sector level, diversity comes from allowing young leaders to be at the table and listening to them. Diversity means recognizing excellence outside of the historically leading institutions that are so often held up as the pinnacle of success. The fact is that there are many small or young or nontraditional arts entities whose audiences are growing and are diverse, and who are attracting people under 40. Arguably, they are leading the field as much as anyone right now.

### **CONCLUSION: SLOW ARTS MOVEMENT ANYONE?**

Finally, some concluding thoughts in light of the sustained economic downturn, which has made it even more important, I think, that we change some of our practices and behaviors. One of the core values of the Slow Food movement is sustainability. About a year ago, *The New York Times* ran the following articles on the front page of the theater section: Above the fold, “Drama, Live and on the Financial Edge” about theaters “fighting to keep the reaper” from their doors; below the fold, “Old Sets Live On As Broadway Embraces Recycling.”<sup>16</sup> As I read these articles, it occurred to me that when we talk about environmental sustainability we are quick to understand that sustainability requires that we use resources at a rate at which they can be replenished. But what is true for natural resources is also true of human resources. We cannot pay our artists poverty-level wages, burn out our staffs, ignore or underutilize our volunteers, fatigue our board members and donors, or continually push our subscribers and ticket buyers to buy more, more, more concerts on our season, at higher and higher prices, without consequences. This is not sustainable.

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Taylor, “Drama, Live and on the Financial Edge,” and Cara Joy David, “Old Sets Live On As Broadway Embraces Recycling,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2009.

There are organizations that simply do not have a broad enough, deep enough, or fanatical enough base of support to sustain their current operations. And they may need to downsize their operations to a level that is more sustainable.

I am convinced, however, that arts organizations cannot shrink or compete their way out of the declining participation problem identified in the most recent NEA report, about which we should be very concerned. Fighting over a shrinking PIE will leave arts organizations and society worse off tomorrow that we are today. But I fear that's what we've been doing.

When arts organizations use the term “audience development” it seems that what they really mean is “member development.” They are trying to entice people to become patrons of their particular organization. But creating a customer for one arts organization is not the same as developing the capacity of an individual to engage meaningfully with the arts. If the latter is the goal, then it's arguable that it takes a village to develop an “arts-enthusiast” or “arts-goer,” and it also takes time. There are arts organizations now pursuing this idea, including some engaged in a burgeoning effort funded by the Mellon Foundation called *Project Audience*.<sup>17</sup> The initiative is aimed at envisioning the next generation of technology and practices that would support collaboration among arts organizations to build arts participation within their communities.

Like the Slow Food movement, we may need to focus less on persuading people to come to our particular institutions (selling our particular brand of excellence), and more on working together to build demand and connect our diverse communities with a diverse range of artists and artistic experiences. We may need to shift away from conceiving of ourselves as powerful gatekeepers to humbly embracing our roles as enthusiastic brokers. Let the demise of record labels and newspapers be a lesson to all of us.

A 1965 Rockefeller Brothers Fund report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, states “The arts are not for the privileged few, but for the many. Their place is not on the periphery of daily life, but at its center. They should function not merely as another form of entertainment but rather should contribute significantly to our well being and happiness.” The US came a long way but didn't fulfill John D. Rockefeller III's vision in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But wouldn't it be great if we—all of us—could do it in the 21<sup>st</sup>? If we could actually put the arts at the center of daily life?

Who in this world couldn't use a little more happiness right now? Look at the countless people whose lives and well being are affected by the declining economy, or by war, or who are simply worn down by the daily grind. The arts have the potential to contribute to *anyone's* well being and happiness. Let's not buy into the idea that some people are simply “disinclined” to the arts and so we should not bother with them. And let's not declare mission accomplished just because we get people in the door. Attendance is cheap. We need to hold ourselves accountable for mattering to people, for making life better.

As I was putting this address together I began to think it's somewhat ironic that I have held up the Slow Food movement as a model as, along with cooking shows, it has begun to have such a powerful influence on our culture, it could be among the reasons that people now claim to have “less time” for the arts. Plenty of boomers who have no time for the ballet appear to be spending hours shopping at their farmers markets and chopping in their Viking-stove equipped kitchens so they can enjoy leisurely meals with family and friends. While this is mildly disconcerting, it

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<sup>17</sup> [www.projectaudience.org](http://www.projectaudience.org)

should give us hope. The Slow Food movement has given people a reason to make time for preparing, growing, and enjoying good food.

Yes, people perceive that they have less time because even the tiniest gaps in our lives seem to create vacuums that are instantly filled with activity—texts, emails, podcasts, Tweets, YouTube videos—what author Thomas Hylland Eriksen calls “information lint.”<sup>18</sup>

But *I know* the deep joy and happiness that can come from spending two or three hours letting a great performance or an afternoon at the museum pull me out of the *Tyranny of the Moment*, and help me find my humanity. I’m sure you do too. We wouldn’t be in this crazy business if it weren’t the case. We need to help people discover, or rediscover, why the arts matter. to help them There’s something worth preserving here.

Perhaps it’s time for a cultural revolution aimed changing the relationship between people and art.

Perhaps it’s time for a slow arts movement.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001): vii.

## RECOMMENDED READING/RELATED RESOURCES

### Books

- *Arts, Inc.* by Bill Ivey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008)
- *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 2006)
- *Culture and Economics* by David Throsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- *Deep Survival* by Laurence Gonzales (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004).
- *Engaging Art*, edited by Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008)
- *Entering Cultural Communities*, edited by Morris Fred and Betty Farrell. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008)
- *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* by Clay Shirky (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2008).
- *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* by Carl Honoré (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 2004).
- *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations* by James A. Phills, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- *The Innovator's Dilemma* by Clayton Christensen (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003).
- *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
- *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005)
- *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age* by Thomas Hylland Ericksen (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001).

### Articles

- "1,000 True Fans," by Kevin Kelly. [www.kk.thetechnium](http://www.kk.thetechnium)
- "Creating High Impact Nonprofits," Heather McLeod Grant and Leslie R. Crutchfield. *The Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Fall 2007). (Leslie R. Crutchfield has recently written a book *Creating High Impact Nonprofits*).
- "Let's Put the Word 'Nonprofit' Out of Business," by Claire Gaudiania. *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (July 26, 2007)
- "The Cellular Church," by Malcolm Gladwell. *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2005)
- "The Pro-Am Revolution," by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller. *Demos* (November 24, 2004). Available at <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy>.



## Reports

- “2009 ‘Intrinsic Impact’ Study of Free Night of Theater Audiences,” WolfBrown, May 2009. [http://www.theatrebayarea.org/\\_docs/\\_data/IntrinsicImpact\\_FNOT\\_2008\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://www.theatrebayarea.org/_docs/_data/IntrinsicImpact_FNOT_2008_FinalReport.pdf)
- “Arts Participation 2008: Highlights from a National Survey,” National Endowment for the Arts, June 2009. <http://arts.endow.gov/research/NEA-SPPA-brochure.pdf>
- “Cultural Organizations and Changing Leisure Trends, A National Convening, Online Discussion and White Paper” by Andrew Taylor from the National Arts Strategies and the Getty Leadership Institute, June 2007 [http://www.getty.edu/leisure\\_trends/tags/leisuretrends/](http://www.getty.edu/leisure_trends/tags/leisuretrends/).
- “How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups,” by Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus. *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). (Also available online as a separate article).