

Holding Up the Arts:  
Can we sustain what we've created? Should we?  
Version 2.0

by Diane Ragsdale

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*I am thrilled to have been invited by Steven Hadley and Audiences Northern Ireland to participate in this gathering. Thank you for making the time to be here.*

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

Existence is more than breathing.

It’s more than functioning.

It’s mattering.

The topic of this talk is sustainability in the arts. Not in the environmental sense. But in the sense of how do “the arts” continue to exist ... to matter.

*Introduction to Ideas from Previous Talks:*

I am not a sustainability expert. I have been an artist. I have worked in and led arts organizations. I have been an arts funder. And now I am an arts blogger and scholar. The last few years, alongside my jobs (working at the Mellon Foundation until 2010 and now lecturing and working towards a PhD at Erasmus University in Rotterdam) I have spent a good bit of time writing and giving talks about the role of arts organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Though I now live in Europe, admittedly, mine is a US perspective as I spent a majority of my career (20 years) living and working in the US arts and culture sector. I hope that hearing my reflections will prove to be valuable. More importantly, I look forward to hearing your perspectives. Where do we share challenges, opportunities, and circumstances? And where do they diverge? The US is arguably an overbuild theater sector; yours may not be, yet. Perhaps we can be a cautionary tale for you.

If I had to boil my writings down to a single idea I would say that I am eternally thinking about how the nonprofit arts (and in particular fine arts institutions) attain, maintain, or regain their intellectual and social relevance in a changing world.

Relevance is not unrelated to our topic today—sustaining the arts.

So, let’s talk about sustainability.

*What do we mean by sustainable?*

Sustainability comes from the Latin *sustinere* (*tenere*, to hold; *sus*, up). To hold up. Hence, the title of this talk—*Holding Up the Arts: Can We Sustain What We’ve Created? Should We?*

I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word sustainable I start to picture rain forests in Costa Rica, happy cows grazing in grass fields, automobile tires turned into cute little handbags, and windmill farms—all good stuff. Sustainable gets tossed around quite a bit in the nonprofit

arts world these days, along with words like ecosystem and ecology. But (as my smart friend in the UK, John Knell, has suggested) these terms seem to have become a bit of a panacea. We're not sure exactly what sustainability of the arts ecosystem means, or how to achieve it, but we somehow trust that if we invest in this idea our future environment will not be a cultural wasteland.

After reading a bit on the topic over the past few years I've begun to think that we have a rather romantic and, therefore, inaccurate, view of sustainability in the arts sector. This is perhaps unsurprising given that it is a political concept as much as a scientific one.

As I've given talks over the past few years, I have frequently used the following definition: *Sustainability is using resources at the rate at which they can be easily replenished.*

What sorts of resources? We need talented people motivated to do the artistic, production, and administrative work; critics and audiences to show up and give the work attention; and, yes, critically, we often need cash from donors or governments or sponsors to help cover the costs not covered by the box office.

Curiously, arts organizations and those that support them often have different, perhaps even contradictory, ideas about what is meant by sustainability. When arts organizations use the term "sustainable" what they often mean is, "How do we cultivate stable, reliable sources of support? How can we get our donors, our funders, our governments, and our corporate sponsors to commit to long term support?" "How long before we are no longer clawing our way to break even at the end of the fiscal year?"

However, when those that support arts organizations use the term sustainable with arts groups what they often mean is, "How long before you are no longer reliant upon me to help you pay for this?"

"The arts need to be more *self-sustaining*" or "*self-reliant*" is a common refrain, particularly in Europe, where there are increasing calls for organizations to become less reliant on public support and move towards the American model.

And in the US, one of the phrases that crops up over and over again on project funding applications (which is increasingly what is available to arts organizations there) is, "Please discuss how this program will be sustained once the grant period ends." The implication: We'll get you started, but you will need to find somebody else to keep this program going.<sup>1</sup> These days, even board members and individual donors are often more enthused to help get programs—and buildings—off the ground and less enthused to help sustain them.

Of course we understand why governments, funders, and donors want to believe that programs that are worthy will eventually find a way to run without significant subsidies. They have limited resources. They are seeking to ensure that they are not burdened with organizations that are dependent upon them for survival. They want to feel as though they can stop funding organizations and expect the growth or capacity that was developed (with their support and perhaps even at their encouragement) to be sustained ... somehow.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kreidler has written brilliantly about this in his essay, *Leverage Lost*. See <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/lost.html>

And of course, in recessions, when wealthy patrons and governments often have less money to give to the arts, and citizens have less money to spend on tickets, the arts find it quite difficult to secure the necessary resources at the rate required to keep their operations going.

We've had more than a few bankruptcies and reorganizations in the US arts and culture sector in the past few years; the same is true of previous recessions. However, we haven't had as many as one might have predicted. Curiously, there are organizations that manage to stay alive despite failing to achieve their goals for years on end. A topic we'll get to later.

The key take-away from my working definition of sustainable: Arts organizations are not self-sustaining. You require the investment of time, attention, and resources from others: don't spend more than you can reliably capture.

### Jane Jacobs' Definition of 'sustainable':

So, I thought mine was an adequate definition of sustainable, but several months ago I started thumbing through my copy of Jane Jacobs' book, *The Nature of Economies*, and found her definition. The book, if you don't know it, is written in the form of a Platonic dialogue and Jacobs' premise is that we should look to the processes of nature for models of economic planning. I came across the following description of the term sustainable in her book:

“Sustainable commonly applies to the practice of drawing on renewable resources at a rate no speedier or greedier than the rate at which the resources can renew themselves; the practice implies environmental morality.”

So, Jane Jacobs adds a speed bump, of sorts, into our conversation. Those words 'speedier', 'greedier', and 'morality' ring in the ear after the sentence has ended. The implication is that even if we are able (because of economic, social, or political power, let's say) to influence the environment and manipulate the system to our advantage and draw significant resources to our individual organizations, we have a moral obligation to look out for the system as a whole and not simply our own welfare.

### Winner-Take-All Sector?

When I first read this definition the first phrase to pop into my mind was 'Winner-Take-All'. While the term has been around for awhile, it was popularized by Robert H. Frank in his 1995 book *Winner-Take-All Society*, in which he discusses the contemporary trend toward concentration of wealth. Frank argues that more and more of society is moving toward a state in which a small number of winners take much, while the rest are left with little.

The Occupy Movement is a response to this trend.

A couple years ago as part of my research on the American Theater I pulled some figures from the National Center for Charitable Statistics on performing arts disciplines in the US. These are 2009 figures but the ratios appear to be pretty consistent year upon year.

- Approximately 1% of nonprofit theaters captured 48% of the revenues for the nonprofit theater sector.

- Approximately ½ of 1% of dance companies captured 60% of revenues for the dance sector.
- Approximately 1% of orchestras captured 60% of revenues for the orchestra sector.
- Approximately 2 ½% of opera companies captured 70% of revenues—but within that 70%, one company, The Metropolitan Opera, captured 26% of revenues for the opera sector.

This time last year there was an article in the *New York Times* announcing that, “While arts groups struggle to balance their budgets, the Metropolitan Opera, the largest U.S. opera company, ended with a \$41 million surplus in 2011. [A surplus] that reverses a \$25 million deficit the previous season. A surge of donations and revenue caused the surplus, according to the Met's 2010-11 tax returns.”<sup>2</sup>

Listening to Jane Jacobs we might ask whether we are growing the size of some companies at the expense of other parts of the system.

What do you think the percentages would look like if you analyzed the arts organizations in Belfast, or N. Ireland, or the UK?

### *Donor Fatigue & the Erosion of Goodwill*

A second phrase that came to mind as I pondered Jacobs’ words ‘speedier’, ‘greedier’ and ‘morality’ was “donor fatigue,” a term that has become rather commonplace in the US. It refers to that point when donors or board members have been over-tapped and become unresponsive to ongoing appeals—they pull back or walk away entirely.

I would suggest that this retreat is less about needing their bank accounts to be replenished and more about needing their wills-to-give to be replenished. Over the past few years, I noted that many donors used the recession as an opportunity to disengage from projects to which they did not have strong attachment. In other words, when they had less money to donate, they didn’t simply reduce contributions equally across all the causes in their life—many opted to funnel whatever amount they could afford to spend to those organizations to which they felt the most committed and stopped giving elsewhere. In the US, it seems that the arts have been losing out to other causes. Our share of donations is shrinking, and has been since before the current recession. What are we to make of this?

Bill Ivey, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has said that when the arts and culture sector faces resistance to the idea of support for the arts it’s often because its highest priorities are out of sync with those of everyday citizens. Too many people receive little or no tangible benefit from the current nonprofit arts system, he says; thus, whatever generalized good

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2012/06/metropolitan\\_opera\\_enjoys\\_a\\_wh.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2012/06/metropolitan_opera_enjoys_a_wh.html)

feelings citizens may have about the arts don't translate into sufficient “goodwill” when the arts must compete with causes like education or the environment—when advocacy really counts.<sup>3</sup>

We need to be concerned if public goodwill has been eroded. We cannot use up the resources of the public at a rate faster than the will-to-give, the will-to-patronize, can be renewed. You may know that in the Netherlands the government has instituted massive cuts to the arts budget. It has been surprising to arts organizations in the Netherlands, I think, that the general public has not protested more to these cuts.

And this fatigue sets in not only with contributions and subsidies but with other areas of arts organization as well. We cannot force our artists to endure tremendous precarity for years on end while administrators have steady paychecks and health insurance without consequences. We cannot overwork and undervalue our staffs and ignore or underutilize our volunteers for years on end, without consequences. And we cannot push our members and ticket buyers to buy more, more, more concerts on our season, at higher and higher prices, without consequences. These behaviors are greedy and they erode the goodwill that we require from artists, staff, board members, volunteers, patrons, and the general public to sustain our sector.

So, to reiterate, Jacobs suggests that we have a moral obligation to look out for the entire ecosystem by not using more than our fair share even if we have the power to control our environment and do so. Indeed, it is not only the right thing to do but the necessary thing to do if we want to see the arts survive.

What do I mean by that?

### *The Paradoxes of Sustainability:*

Well, this brings me to a third and final concept, the paradoxes of sustainability, which I came across in a paper of the same name by a scholar named Alexey A. Voinov from the Institute for Ecological Economics.<sup>4</sup>

So ... let's talk about the paradoxes of sustainability.

First, what's a paradox? To find love you have to stop looking for it. The same is often said of happiness. A paradox is a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory but in reality expresses a possible truth. Here are four key points from Voinov's paper:

1. After examining the definitions of sustainability of many scholars, Voinov determined that all of the definitions had one thing in common: an assumption about ‘keeping something at a certain level’ – that is, a resource, system, condition, or relationship. In other words, a goal of ‘avoiding decline.’
2. Voinov says, however, (and here's where the first paradox comes in), that this kind of behavior—the sustaining of something at a certain level or state—seems to belie the fact

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<sup>3</sup> Ragsdale (2009). “A new conversation about culture: Bill Ivey's big ideas for the arts” in the *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*. Vol. 20:1, available at <http://www.giarts.org/article/new-conversation-about-culture>

<sup>4</sup> Voinov, A. (1998). “Paradoxes of Sustainability” in *Journal of General Biology*, 59:1, pp. 209-218.

that *living systems tend to go through life cycles*: growth, followed by conservation (or inertia), followed by release (obscurity or death), followed by renewal and new growth.

3. Sustainability is, thus, an unnatural attempt to break this cycle and extend a certain stage of the life cycle and avoid decline. The term sustainable development contains this first paradox. Sustainability seeks to preserve the growth or conservation phase. But development requires the death and renewal phase.
4. Furthermore, there is a hierarchy of systems. And here's where the second paradox comes in. Sustainability of a certain level of the hierarchy may impede sustainability of systems at a higher level that are potentially more important. For any 'supersystem' to be sustained its sub-systems or components must be free to recombine.

A common example might be the best way to make this concept clear:

- (1) Low intensity forest fires naturally occur and burn down portions of the forest ecosystem. Without these fires the forest ecosystem as a whole could not persist as many ecosystems are dependent on fires to maintain diversity, and a number of species are dependent on fire to reproduce.
- (2) If we endeavor to suppress these naturally occurring low intensity fires, we end up creating conditions that lead to high intensity fires that have the capacity to damage entire forest ecosystems.

So what does this mean for the arts and culture sector?

It means we need to think about where we may be seeking the "unnatural perpetuation of what might otherwise die"?

And it means that we need to think very carefully about which level of our ecosystem we are seeking to sustain. Is it the highest? If not, we may be setting ourselves up for problems in the future.

Are the arts sustainable? It's a different question from "Is the nonprofit arts and culture sector sustainable?" Or "Are nonprofit arts institutions sustainable?" Or even "Is my arts organization sustainable?"

What shall we permit to be a legitimate and sufficient form for the perpetuation of "the arts"?

What's the best way, for instance, to sustain the theater?

Keeping alive all organizations currently in existence and any others that are created in the future?

Ensuring that one national theater company remains in place in every major city from now until the end of time?

Ensuring there is a constant churn of independent artist collectives that live and die with their members?

Or that training programs exist?

That kids learn how to appreciate Shakespeare?

Or are given the guidance and tools to create their own theater?

How do we pass along the theater *genus*?

Or the classical musical *genus*?

Does vinyl count? A CD? A digital download?

Or the Philadelphia Opera Company's *Hallelujah Chorus* Flash Mob performed at the department store Macy's, which has been downloaded more than 7.75 million times on YouTube?

What about a diehard opera lover who has an extensive collection of recordings, listens to opera broadcasts on the radio at every opportunity, and even sings it in the shower every morning? If he passes on his love of opera to his children, is that sufficient?

What about El Sistema, the Venezuelan social program that puts instruments in the hands of hundreds of thousands of children?

What about the Metropolitan Opera HD broadcasts in movie theaters which continue to expand in reach and numbers year after year?

What if we sustained the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, and expanded the reach of opera through them, but lost many professional regional opera companies, because they were no longer able to compete with the Met broadcasts.

Would that be an example of sustainable development, do you think? Creative destruction—killing the old in order to allow for something new and better to emerge? Or just plain old destruction? Cultural loss? Cannibalism: the extinction of one form of opera at the hands of another?

When we say we need to try to find a way to make things “more sustainable,” what are we talking about? Sustaining individual organizations? Sustaining the capacity for artistic risk-taking? Sustaining a pool of talented artists? Sustaining broad and deep community engagement with “the arts,” whatever that might mean today?

The “what” is really important.

One thing that troubles me is that there seems to be an assumption embedded in the logics of foundations, government agencies, boards, donors, service organizations, and leaders of the arts and culture sector that the ‘supersystem’ we are trying to sustain and grow is the infrastructure of



existing arts institutions, beginning with the oldest and largest organizations and perhaps working our way down from there.

But what if the ‘supersystem’ is the existence, the relevance, the matteringness of the arts as demonstrated by their ongoing practice and enjoyment by people in society? Or what if the ‘supersystem’ is the connection of people to each other, through the arts?

The implication would be that everything else (professional companies, amateur companies, training programs, the recording and publishing industries associated with various art forms, critics and art criticism, and on and on) is part of the sub-system and, thus, must not be prevented from going through the stages of renewal. It would mean that we must allow organizations to die physically or spiritually or both and be resurrected, if that will allow us to achieve the higher goal of a society in which every citizen is able to have what Bill Ivey calls “an expressive life”.

While we seem to recognize that some deaths are inevitable, history and good sense tell us that the renewal in the sector should happen in the ongoing churn of small organizations.

That’s natural.

As opposed to the collapse or 180-degree transformation of established, historically leading institutions, which we would find not only unnatural but probably truly alarming. Hence, one concludes, the strategy of the Dutch government and others. Sustain the large institutions and let the rest of the sector churn, which we presume leads to innovation (creative destruction), and not to a death valley and the loss of innovation from the sector.

Do you remember the origins of the word sustainability?

*Sustinere* (*tenere*, to hold; *sus*, up). To hold up. As I read this I smiled as I saw the paradox of sustainability embedded in the very roots of the word and the different meanings of the phrase “to hold up.”

To hold up can mean *to uphold* in the sense of to perpetuate, support, defend, carry forward. But to hold up can, of course, also mean to stop, to block, to keep in a specified state or relation. We are upholding our institutions; but as we do so I think we need to ask ourselves whether we may be holding up necessary renewal and adaptation in our sector that might lead to more meaningful engagement by the public in the arts.

We need to trust that we can let go.

A small tangent (but related I think to our topic): A few months ago I was in Vienna at a small gathering of leaders in the museum world and one of the speakers was man named, Georg Franck-Oberaspath, who gave a terrific talk about “the Economy of Attention.” One of the most interesting sections for me was one in which he discussed how a work of art becomes a classic. He has identified four stages:

- (1) The work or artist is “noted” (it captures the attention of those in the center of the art world—critics, curators, dealers, etc.).

- (2) The work or artist becomes “fashionable” (it is hyped and captures the attention of those that pay attention to those in the center of the art world). It accumulates attention capital.
- (3) The work or artist becomes inflated to the point of saturation. People tire of the work or artist and it falls out of favor.
- (4) The work or artist is rediscovered at a later time, resurrected, and valued because it once again has relevance.

In other words, a work becomes a classic through its death and resurrection. It is the fourth stage, he says, that is the measure of a classic. If the work never dies, it can never be resurrected. Of course there are works that make it through stage two and then three and stay there. Franck-Oberaspath would suggest they were not classics; they were novelties in their time but did not have the endurance of a classic.

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We cannot ensure the *matteringness* of the arts by extending—unnaturally. But this is what we have been trying to do in the US. We have been trying to sustain organizations that are not, in their current size and form, sustainable. And as a result driving them in a direction that ultimately erodes their *raison d'être*.

Over time they become what Meyer and Zucker call “permanently failing organizations.” This term does not refer to organizations that eternally run deficits, per se. (Though we have plenty of those in the US.) It refers to organizations that have reached a chronic state in which they are failing to achieve their proclaimed goals – but persist anyway.

*Away from Mission and Toward the Market, Exclusivity, or Mediocrity:*

What does this failure look like? What compromises are made when arts organizations and those that love them attempt to sustain that which is not sustainable in its current size or shape?

It seems to me they evolve in one of three directions.

**#1. Towards the market: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.**

First, in an effort to stay alive many arts groups have begun to shift towards short-term, often market-driven, metrics of success (box office success, growth of the budget, economic impact) and away from longer term and more meaningful cultural and social goals.

I would characterize this response as, “If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.”

The commercial turn is a problem. We are a sector that, arguably, exists to support the lifelong development of artists and people's long-term, lifetime even, relationship to the arts. We're supposed to be talking *back* to the market, including our board members who may prefer to speak in business terms. We need to be *in* the world, of course. But we don't need to be *of* it. There's nothing wrong with selling lots of tickets—reaching lots of people can be brilliant. But it's not a sufficient indicator of our impact and success. It's not a substitute for our critical

developmental role. It takes time for artists to mature, time to create great works of art, and time for the value of the arts to society to be realized.

Again, as leaders, if we lose sight of our progress toward these longer-term and more meaningful goals, we will eventually erode our *raison d'être*. So here is another paradox embedded in this discussion of sustainability: The things we do to survive in the short term—conservative programming choices, for instance—may make us less distinctive and, thus, worthy of support in the long term.

## **#2. Towards exclusivity: A tactical retreat into the arms of the upper middle class**

The second shift is towards exclusivity. What I would characterize as a tactical retreat into the arms of the upper middle class. We fail to use our nonprofit form and direct or indirect subsidies to serve the general public and, instead, serve the interests of the few that fund us.

As an example, the Occupy movement has generated enormous discussion over the degree to which arts organizations in the US are dependent upon and, thus, cater to the financial elite at the expense of others.

Indeed, several months ago, one faction of the Occupy Movement wrote a letter calling for the end of the Whitney Biennial, saying that it objected to the Whitney in its current form because it “upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers.” The letter stated, “‘We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments.’ Art institutions have come to mirror that ethos.”

Regardless of whether you agree with this particular letter or effort, it is hard to deny the growing financial, artistic, and psychic gap between the ‘nonprofit fine arts world’ in the US and the ‘rest of the US’. And we’ve been trying to bridge this gap with duct tape (a/k/a - friends with money) for at least 30 years.

Awhile back I was asked to write a post for a debate hosted by artsjournal.com called Lead or Follow. The question? Do artists and arts organizations need to lead more or learn to follow their communities more? My thesis: You can’t lead if no one is paying attention to you.

If fine arts organizations have any hope of leading in the future, they will need to rip off the duct tape and respond to this psychic gap. Just because the arts in the US and many other parts of the world have been an elitist form of entertainment as long as most of us can remember is no excuse for that to continue to be our story in the future. It’s time for leaders to change the narrative.

## **#3. Towards mediocrity: “nonprofit arts zombies”**

The third shift is toward mediocrity. What another smart friend Brian Newman calls “nonprofit arts zombies.” Denial, head in the sand, and hoping no one will notice that you had your best artistic days 20 years ago.

We tend to think of a sustainable state for the arts and culture sector as being one in which existing arts organizations have achieved equilibrium and can crank along in perpetuity. This is

wrongheaded: even if we could achieve a state in which all existing organizations could secure adequate resources to keep running year-after-year, the lack of creative destruction in the sector would eventually lead to its stultification.

It already has. In his chapter in a book called *20Under40*, Newman writes:

“Unfortunately, it’s not a stretch to say the nonprofit arts sector looks like a field of zombies—undead, potentially harmful shells of their former selves, haunting the landscape, unable to live or to die. Quite simply, funders, board members, and leaders in the arts need to take a hard look at reality and make some painful decisions. Even those organizations that are healthy enough to survive will need to consider downsizing their costs and refocusing their energies as the dwindling support for the cultural sector is likely a permanent shift away from robust public, foundation, and individual financing of the arts.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, current leaders, by-and-large, did not make these tough decisions. Instead they hunkered down, waited out the storm, slashed programs, and they still persist—too many in a walking dead state. Future leaders will need to be prepared to make these painful decisions. Will you do whatever it takes to keep your organizations alive: sell out to the market; sell out to the wealthy; or simply retreat from your mission and hope that you can subsist for years on end while contributing little to society?

In other words, is your function to sustain an arts organization? Is that your purpose? Or is it something that transcends that goal?

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### Conclusion:

In outlining these shifts, I am suggesting that we may have spent the past few decades trying to sustain arts organizations at the expense of their social and intellectual relevance. We have increased the number and size of organizations and the amount of programming; but, a look at the NEA’s periodic reports on arts participation rates suggest that we are having less and less impact over time.

Shall we continue on this path or try something different?

Sustaining existing infrastructure will not ensure the future relevance of the arts. Am I suggesting that everyone should be preparing to close their doors? Not at all. However, I am asking you to consider the following questions:

- If governance largely means board members and leaders looking out for the future of their own institutions, then who is looking out for the interests of the community-at-large?

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<sup>5</sup> Newman, B. (2010). In E. Clapp (Ed.), *20Under40* (pp. 3-19). Bloomington: AuthorHouse. P. 5

- Who is able to recognize when we may be trying to sustain one arts institution at the expense of another, or many others?
- Or trying to sustain an arts sector at the expense of other amenities or social services?
- Or trying to sustain opera companies, orchestras, theaters, and dance companies at the expense of sustaining artists, creativity, culture, and broad and deep engagement with the arts?

We must all take responsibility for asking these questions and answering them.

*In conclusion, a final paradox:*

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor E. Frankl asserts that the path to self actualization is self transcendence. He says one cannot aim for self actualization any more than one can aim for happiness or success. Indeed, aiming for them may make them all the more elusive. Rather, they are side effects, not goals to be pursued directly.

Likewise, I would suggest that relevance (or meaningful existence) is not a goal that arts institutions can pursue directly; rather, it is a side effect of transcending the need to be appreciated, preserved, and sustained in perpetuity and focusing instead on serving society through the arts, today.

Please know, I understand the impulse to preserve our institutions. You are guardians of a social and artistic mission. But I urge you not to conflate being the guardians of a social purpose with being the guardians of an institution and your status and place within it.

I'm encouraging you to transcend your organizations and think bigger. Your purpose is not to hold up your individual institutions. Your purpose, I would humbly suggest, is to join forces in order to sustain the existence, the relevance, the *matteringsness* of the arts to society-at-large.

And the arts do matter.

We may be trading what some call *experience* goods, but we're not *Disneyland*—we're not here to simply give people a momentary diversion from the reality of their lives—network television can do that, Broadway revivals can do that, pop culture can do that very well. In the US on in three people live below the poverty level. The arts are here to say, “We see you. We see this community. We see that for every one person that's doing OK one person in this community is suffering. We do not exist exclusively for those that are doing OK. We exist for everyone. We exist for *you*.”

In his 1945 book, *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde writes, “The art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift is received.

Even if we have paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us which has nothing to do with the price.”<sup>6</sup> Hyde says that whereas “the commodity moves to turn a profit, the gift moves to the empty place. It turns toward him that has been empty-handed the longest, and if someone appears elsewhere whose need is greater it leaves its old channel and moves toward him.”<sup>7</sup>

“The art that matters to us is ... received by us as a gift is received.”

Beware economic impact arguments. The more we use them the more we commodify what we do. The more we use them the harder it becomes to make the case to policy makers that our value is not in directly spurring economic growth but in building the social cohesion and trust that underpin civil society and make (among other things) economic trading possible.

We are here to foster empathy, understanding of self, and understanding of other. We are here to gently, or not-so-gently, open people’s eyes to truths they cannot see or choose not to see: suffering and ugliness and their opposites love and beauty.

*These are not corny words.* (Though we perhaps feel silly using them because we have adopted the language of the market to explain what we do.) These words represent why you are here. They give you purpose, particularly *in these times*. Embrace them.

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

Existence is more than breathing. It’s more than functioning. It’s mattering. Go forth and *continue to matter* to the world.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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<sup>6</sup> Hyde, L. (1945). *The Gift—Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Random House, Inc., p. *xii*.

<sup>7</sup> Hyde, L. (1945). *The Gift—Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Random House, Inc., p. 23.