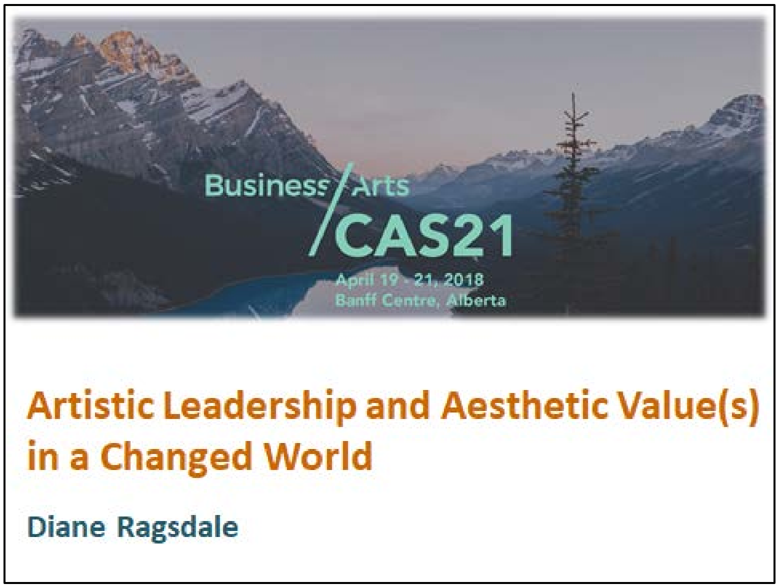


Business/Arts
/CAS21
April 19 - 21, 2018
Banff Centre, Alberta

Artistic Leadership and Aesthetic Value(s) in a Changed World

Diane Ragsdale

This talk was prepared for the Canadian Arts Summit, sponsored by Business for the Arts and held at Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity, April 19-21, 2018.

© Diane Ragsdale. For permissions, please email diane.ragsdale@gmail.com

Good Morning.

My sincere thanks to Shannon Litzenberger and others on the board and staff of Business for the Arts for the invitation to be here today. It is a privilege, a pleasure, and an honor to participate in the Canadian Arts Summit and to have the opportunity to share some reflections from a US perspective.

Before I begin, I want to do a little exercise with you.

I want you to close your eyes and bring to mind a peak aesthetic experience in which you were an audience member or viewer (as opposed to the maker or creator of the piece)—an exhibition, a performance, that sort of thing. OK, close your eyes and if you can try to relive this experience just a bit.

Now, open your eyes and turn to a person next to you and tell each other three adjectives that you would use to describe the piece; and then the name of the work and the artist or company.

Just curious – Did any two people have the same or a very similar experience?

You might ask yourself whether you and your partner in this exercise seem to share an "aesthetic," or not?

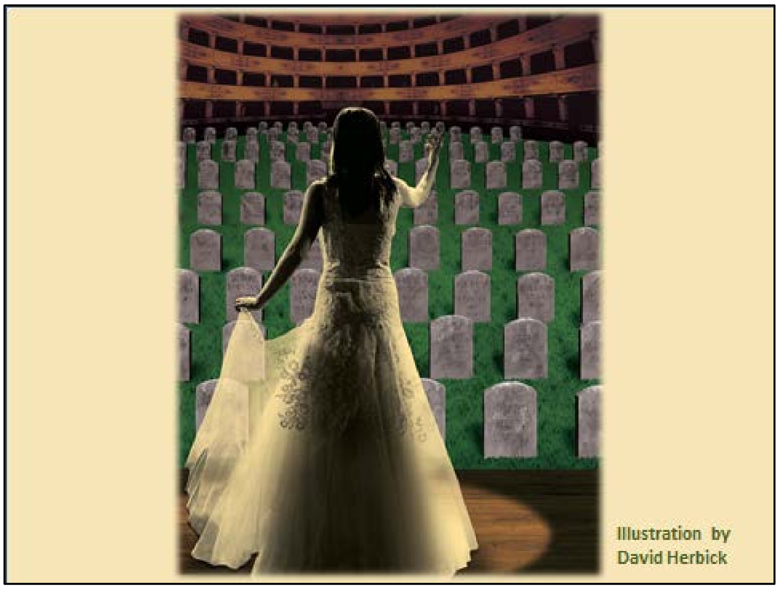
Great – thanks. We'll come back to this exercise later.

As I understand it this conference is, to a great extent, focused on the issue of **engagement**. This is a topic that I have approached from various angles and with various motives over the past decade plus.

Last year I gave a talk at a conference in New Zealand—on **transformative engagement**—in which I argued that, as institutions that exist, ostensibly, to foster such things as beauty, meaning-making, understanding, empathy, and social cohesion, we need to resist the economic rationalization of what we do and strive to uphold a different value system from the *market*.

And it was almost 10 years ago exactly that I wrote a talk called Surviving the Culture Change in which I outlined six ways I believed fine arts institutions would need to adapt their spaces (both virtual and bricks & mortar), their methods for reaching and engaging people, and their programming in response to changing demographics and changes in the ways people now create, consume, commune, and communicate.

The year after that first talk, in 2009, the *Stanford Social Innovation Revie*w published an article I wrote called Recreating Fine Arts Institutions and this was the image that they decided to publish with the article.



The image of the graveyard is intentionally provocative. It suggests that we've fallen prey to something akin to Peter Brook's concept of "Deadly Theater"—except across all the so-called "high arts" disciplines.

Deadly Theater if you don't know the reference is Brook's term for, essentially, boring theater, described in his 1968 treatise, *The Empty Space*. He calls "dwindling" audiences the "obvious" condition of Deadly Theater.

At the same time, he notes that while the "distinction between life and death is crystal clear in man," it is "somewhat veiled in other fields" and that we are less practiced in observing "how an idea, an attitude or a form can pass from the lively to the moribund."[1]

Of course, we could substitute other art forms, or even other areas of life, for the word *theater*. A few weeks back I found an online a blogger who had applied the notion to Christianity and the experience of church-going, for instance.

Brook's assertion is that when theater is deadly it is failing to fulfill its fundamental purpose. And this is something that interests me greatly. For the past decade, or longer perhaps, I have been carrying around a basket of questions.

---

[1] Brook, P. (1968), The Empty Space (New York: Touchstone), 8-10.

At the top of the list:

- Who are *nonprofit professional* arts organizations for?
- What is their distinctive role and value in society? That is,
- What can they do, what are they obliged to do, that their commercial or amateur counterparts do not do?

I found myself pondering these questions so much that after a 20-year career that spanned being a theatermaker, to running a music festival and contemporary arts center, to working in philanthropy, I decided to move to the Netherlands, pursue a doctorate in cultural economics, and try to answer them.

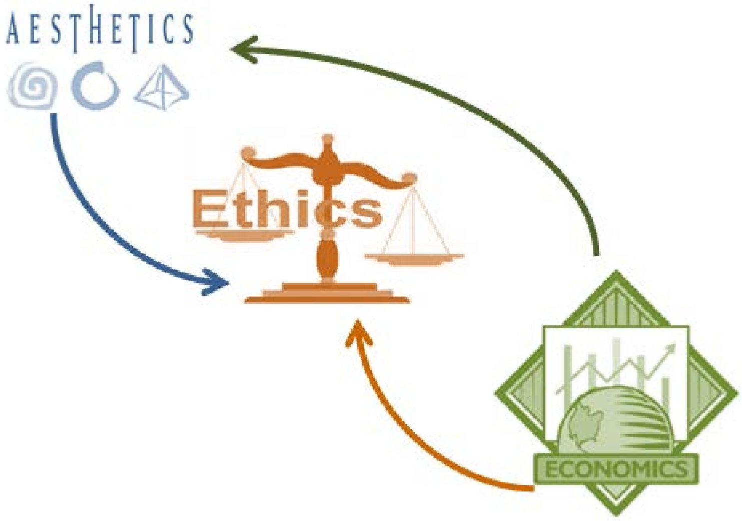
My dissertation, concerns the relationship between nonprofit professional regional theaters in the US and Broadway—and how that relationship has evolved over the past half century and why it matters. At the heart of it I am asking the question: *What is nonprofit professional theater for?*

While in the midst of working on this study of the regional theater in the US I ended up taking a detour and designing and teaching a course in aesthetics and beauty for business majors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At the heart of that class was another set of questions:

- What is the relationship between beauty and human development?
- Can developing the capacity to form aesthetic judgments help business leaders approach other kinds of decisions holistically and contextually?
- If so, how do you do it? What are the practices? In the classroom? In the cultural center? In life?

I give you this *rather lengthy* preamble to highlight a few things:

First, underpinning both of these lines of inquiry is an abiding interest in the relationship between **aesthetics, ethics, and economics**.



I'll say more about that later.

Second, I ask a lot of questions. Someone once referred to me as the "chief questioner" of the arts and culture sector in the US—which I'm afraid makes me sound a bit like the chief finger-wagger, or chief goody-two-shoes of the sector. Which may be more true than not, I'm embarrassed to admit.

My questions stem, however, from a longstanding belief that the subsidized arts not only can—but must—play a vital, humanizing role in any society and a belief that to play that role, in these times, we must regenerate not just individual arts organizations, but the logic of the sector as a whole. And that's what I want to talk about today:

What is your responsibility as executive, artistic, and board leaders—as those who produce and reproduce the values—most notably the aesthetic values—of your institutions, in light of a changed world—or, more specifically, the changed cultural context?

This talk is divided into 3 parts.

Part 1: Can we talk about our aesthetic values? (No, seriously, can we?)

So in the title of this talk I've introduced the concept of "aesthetic values" and some of you might be asking yourselves: *What exactly does she mean by this?* At the most basic level, I am referring to the "connection" between "aesthetic qualities" and "our values." Philosopher Elizabeth Burns Coleman gives an everyday example of this.

She says, suppose you have a job interview tomorrow. You would likely endeavor to communicate certain attributes, among them: you would want to appear clean, tidy, neat. On the flip side, if you were on the interview panel and a candidate showed up that was not clean, tidy, or neat, Coleman says, you would likely judge them in some way. She further explains:

Clothing and grooming place us within a hierarchy of values that we cannot escape, regardless of whether we consciously accept or reject those values. Grooming equates to status and respectability. … Turning up to a formal function, such as a funeral, wedding, or graduation, and even, according to some people, the opera, without appropriate attire is an affront, or act of disrespect.[2]

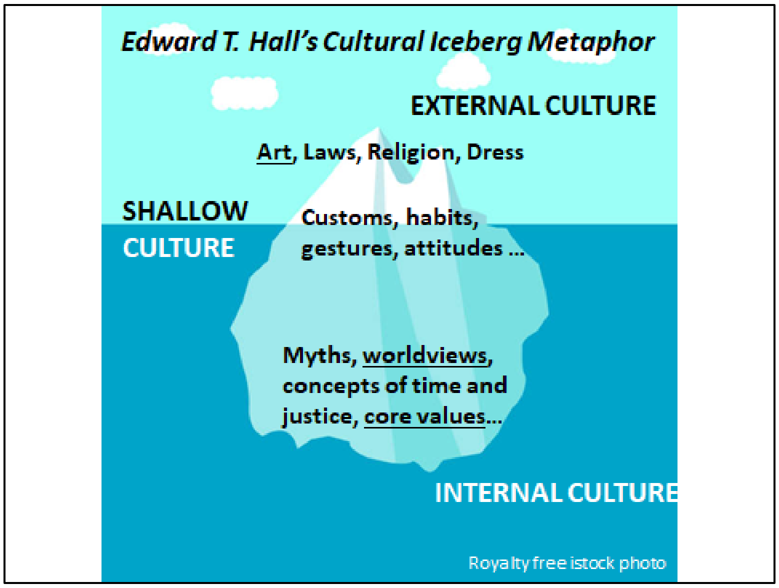
Aesthetic values are part of our deep culture, to use Edward T. Hall's cultural iceberg metaphor. As British artist Grayson Perry reflected in 2013, when commenting on the six tapestries he created to explore the relationship between taste and class in British society.

It's those default settings we all have, those unexamined "natural" and "normal" choices, which often say the most about us: where and when we eat, when and where we might expose a bit of flesh, the kind of curtains we buy, what television you watch, how you bring up your children.We often become aware of these unconscious choices only when we move between social classes.[3]

---

[2] Coleman, EB (2005). Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept, *Literature and aesthetics: the journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics* (SSLA). Vol 15, No 1.

[3] Perry, G. (2013). Op-ed: Grayson Perry: 'Taste is woven into our class system', *The Telegraph*. 15 June 2013.



Edward T. Hall's Cultural Iceberg Metaphor

EXTERNAL CULTURE

Art, Laws, Religion, Dress

SHALLOW CULTURE

Customs, habits, gestures, attitudes …

Myths, worldviews, concepts of time and justice, core values…

INTERNAL CULTURE

Royalty free istock photo

Referencing Bourdieu's *Distinction*, Carl Wilson puts it this way in his book *Let's Talk about Love: a Journey to the End of Taste* (another book you might know):

Aesthetics are social all the way down, just a set of euphemisms for a starker system of inequality and competition: if you flinch at seeing a copy of …The DaVinci Code on a friend's shelves, what you are trying to shake off is the stain of the déclassé, the threat of social inferiority. …[4]

And of course, it works the other way, as well.

Major arts participation surveys have captured working class people shrugging off the arts with the comment, "the arts are not for people like me."

***

Here's another version of this.

Over the past year, each time I have been invited to teach a class or a workshop with cultural leaders, I've tried to start the session by doing a version of the exercise I had you do a few moments ago as a little icebreaker; however, with a small addition. I ask people to bring from home an actual document or artifact that represents that peak aesthetic experience and to write down some number of adjectives describing the experience.

The first person in the group is asked to post his or her artifact on the wall and reads the associated adjectives. I then coach the next person to place her artifact and adjectives either close to the artifact already on the wall—or farther away—depending on whether she think that the aesthetic values represented are closely aligned or not. We do this until all of the experiences have been mapped on the wall in relationship to one another.

This is a photo of two cultural leaders doing this exercise at Banff Centre this past November:

---

[4] Wilson, C. (2007). *Let's Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Bloomsbury), 87-88.

Recently I did this at the top of a workshop for a small group of graduate students at an arts management program (not the one I run at The New School in NYC but another program).

It may or may not surprise you that six of the seven students brought in artifacts from live performances, exhibitions, and one film, that clustered around a “downtown” or “fringe” or “outsider” aesthetic and one brought in a program from the hit Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen* about a young man with social anxiety disorder.

PLAYBILL
SECOND STAGE THEATRE
TONY KISER THEATRE
DEAR EVAN HANSEN

The *Dear Evan Hansen* fan quite rightly, and rather sheepishly, placed her program at some distance from the other items on the wall and read off her adjectives:

- Modern
- Emotional
- Intergenerational
- Basic
- Relevant

I’ll let you make of those what you will.

I later asked this student how it felt to put her playbill up on the wall and she said (and I’m paraphrasing): *I would characterize the other works as more experimental. I’m aware that everyone else in the class appreciates that work. I just don’t respond to it. I have a more … ‘basic’ … aesthetic.*

There are perhaps many factors that could explain how we end up with 6 out of 7 students in an arts management program at an Ivy League school—who hail from across the US and China—all ending up, when asked to make a statement about this in front of their peers, deciding to talk about peak arts experiences that reflect a “downtown” (etc.) aesthetic and only one student deciding to talk about her rather “basic” uptown commercial aesthetic. But one of them could certainly be that we have *learned* aesthetic responses—cognitive responses, which include emotions like awe and disdain—that relate to values.

I do this icebreaker for a few reasons:

More than anything I find it interesting what people choose to bring in and how they talk about a peak aesthetic experience. The adjectives they use, how they make distinctions, and which distinctions seem meaningful, and whether any emotions arise.

I am curious the extent to which aesthetics tend to cluster or spread out with various groups of people. And I am curious what arts leaders make of this when it happens—is it a beneficial or problematic?

The exercise also helps me understand what is happening for people at the moment when I ask them to bring to mind and relive a “peak aesthetic experience.”

One think I found interesting with this group of students that I mentioned: the six with the “downtown” (etc.) aesthetic used words to describe their aesthetic experiences that could have been used to describe *Dear Evan Hansen*. Words like:

- Hopeful
- Spiritual
- Beautiful
- Human
- Personal
- Stirring
- Uplifting
- [Creating a sense of] Belonging

It tells us something about what people are looking for when they show up at the arts, no?

Can we talk about aesthetic values? You tell me (*afterwards in the Q&A*).

Do aesthetics get discussed at your own arts organization? If so, who is involved in the discussion?

- The artistic staff?
- All senior managers?
- Board members?
- Box Office Staff and FOH?
- The Janitorial Staff?

Generally my experience has been that it is actually quite difficult for arts leaders, staffs, boards, and external stakeholders to talk about aesthetic values, honestly, in this changed cultural context; but I think we must.

PART 2: Can we talk about how a season comes together? (No, seriously, can we?)

Before talking about seasons I want to talk about beauty because this is a word I have used already, and I tend to use it frequently, and I want to be clear about what I mean and don't mean.

First, I often reference Howard Gardner's framing—that beauty is the property of experiences and a beautiful experience is one that is "interesting enough to behold," has a "form that is memorable," "invites revisiting" and causes a physical sensation. Gardner reminds us that beauty is also subjective. Gone are notions of universal standards.[5]

I also tend to follow many of the ideas of the philosopher, Elaine Scarry, who tells us that beauty is sacred, life-saving, and unprecedented. That it incites deliberation—it inspires us to pursue truth and advance justice. And that it replicates—you see a beautiful garden and you go home and tend to your own garden; or take a photo and share it on Instagram. One notion of hers that I am particularly drawn to: she argues that the opposite of beauty is not "ugliness" but rather "injury." She arrives at this conclusion by tracing the etymology of both "beauty" and "justice" to the concept of "fairness."

In any event, Scarry, like Howard Gardner, has been arguing for some time now that the Art World threw the baby out with the bathwater when it rejected beauty. She believes we need to revisit this important concept and its role in society. This is a dense and gorgeous text and I cannot do it justice here but I would like to bring forward and apply one cornerstone idea.

Scarry asserts that our judgments about what is beautiful and what is *not* beautiful can be *wrong*. And these "problems of perception" trouble her.

She gives a personal example of this: Scarry admits that she had long "ruled out palm trees as objects of beauty and then one day"—after an experience with a particular palm tree— she "discovered [she] had made a mistake."[6]

Scarry reflects on this, writing:

When I used to say the sentence (softly and to myself) "I hate palms" or "Palms are not beautiful; possibly they are not even trees," it was a composite palm that I had somehow succeeded in making without even ever having seen, close up, many particular instances. Conversely, when I now say "Palms are beautiful," or "I love palms," it is really individual palms I have in mind.[7]

Scarry's conclusion:

Beauty *always* *takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down. In this sense cultural difference, by diminishing the number of times you are on the same ground with a particular vegetation or animal or artwork, gives rise to problems in perception, but problems in perception that also arrive by many other paths.*

---

[5] Gardner, H (2011). *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* (New York: Basic Books), xi-xii.

[6] Scarry, E. (2006). *On Beauty and Being Just* (Chippenham and Eastbourne: Duckworth Overlook), 12.

[7] *Ibid*, 15.

(We could, of course apply this same notion to particular *humans*.)

In any event, Scarry worries about what she calls the *error of under-crediting*—she frets: "How many other errors lie like broken plates or flowers on the floor of my mind?"[8]

As leaders of cultural institutions I would argue that it is also incumbent upon us to fret about such errors. Fortunately, some do.

I recently attended an event at the Public Theater in NYC—a book launch for the third edition of an anthology called *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*. At the celebration one of the individuals responsible for this extraordinary effort, Roberta Uno, described the efforts to compile the first edition 22 years earlier. I was struck by two comments she made:

Referencing women of color writers and other artists she said, "We are often called 'emerging,' we are often called 'new,' we are often miniature-ized. But we are not emerging. We are here. *And we have been here*."

She then told the story of putting the first edition of the anthology together and recounted that when she and her collaborator first started "looking for plays it was a very difficult process." She said they finally made a breakthrough, however, as a result of a "revelation" by a colleague at the time, Lucy Burns, who said, "You know there *is* an archive of women of color plays. Go to any theater and ask for the reject file."[9]

Uno did this and sure enough began to find many plays by women of color – many *beauties*, so to speak.

Under-crediting is only one type of two types of error Scarry discusses.

The other, as you might have already guessed, is *the error of over-crediting*—when something we once deemed beautiful suddenly seems the opposite.

A rather dramatic recent example: in the wake of Harvey Weinstein's downfall and the resurgence of #metoo, many are asking whether it is possible to continue to revere particular artworks once we discover the artists—Chuck Close and Nicholas Nixon, for instance—have abused their power and privilege.[10]

Put another way, some are asking whether it is not just possible, but proper, to keep ethics and aesthetics separate in our minds. We are being forced to acknowledge that notions of "genius," hierarchies, aesthetic values, patriarchal norms, and other conditions have created an environment in which widespread abuse has been able to thrive in the arts and culture sector.

Here's another, subtler example:

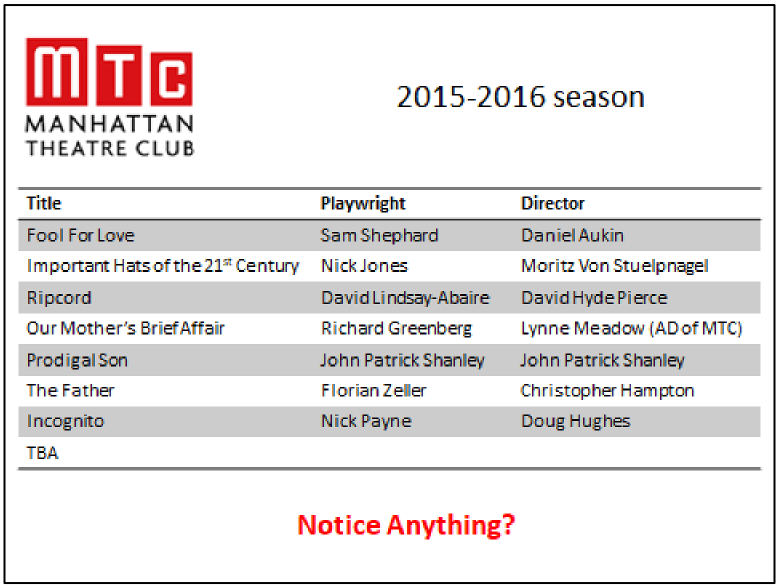
---

[8] *Ibid*, 17.

[9] See YouTube video embedded at the website: Arts in a Changing America: New York Book Launch! Contemporary Plays by Women of Color.

[10] Smee, S. Great art isn't always made by good people, but this is getting ridiculous, *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2018.

In August 2015 the Manhattan Theatre Club, a nonprofit theater in NYC that has venues both on Broadway and off, announced 7 of the 8 plays planned for its upcoming season. Here they are:



MTC
MANHATTAN
THEATRE CLUB

2015-2016 season

Title	Playwright	Director
Fool For Love	Sam Shephard	Daniel Aukin
Important Hats of the 21st Century	Nick Jones	Moritz Von Stuelpnagel
Ripcord	David Lindsay-Abaire	David Hyde Pierce
Our Mother's Brief Affair	Richard Greenberg	Lynne Meadow (AD of MTC)
Prodigal Son	John Patrick Shanley	John Patrick Shanley
The Father	Florian Zeller	Christopher Hampton
Incognito	Nick Payne	Doug Hughes
TBA		

Notice Anything?

You may or may not see it, but all 7 plays announced were written by white men and were all, save one, slated to be directed by men, as well.

It may or may not surprise you that there was a bit of backlash to this season announcement—initiated by some leading female playwrights and playwrights of color. In a *New York Times* article reporting on this adverse reaction—the female artistic director of Manhattan Theatre Club, Lynne Meadows, responded to critiques with the comment:

I don't deny the fact that this season is anomalous in in terms of the percentages of diversity on our stages … It's just how the season came together.[11]

I sincerely believe Lynne Meadows was not actively avoiding female playwrights or playwrights of color. We might still ask the question: How is it that no one at her organization—at least no one of power and influence—could *see* the "injury" if you will in this white and womanless selection of writers, in 2015, by an nonprofit theater company with a mission to "produce work as broad and diverse as NYC itself."

It took outside eyes to reveal that what evidently looked like an "excellent season"—from a financial standpoint, or from the standpoint of imagined critics (also often white and male), or from the standpoint of appealing to MTC's "normal audience" of well-heeled, educated, largely white subscribers—was actually *not* excellent, not beautiful, if you will, because of the voices that were left out, the audiences that were left out.

Importantly, MTC later announced its 8th play, the *Ruins of Civilization*, which was written by a woman and directed by a woman.

---

[11] Collins-Hughes, L. (2015). Internet Outcry Over Diversity Leads Manhattan Theater Club to Announce Season Details Early, *The New York Times*, 20 August 2015.

Nevertheless, Meadow's comment—*It's just how the season came together*—got under the skin of another artistic director, David Dower at ArtsEmerson, who felt it "deflect[ed] accountability … denie[d] agency … and paint[ed] the picture of an artistic director at the mercy of a confluence of forces that come together to dictate a season."[12]

Dower wrote a blog post called "How a Season Comes Together" in which he argued that "a season is a very public expression of the priorities of the institution and of the people accountable for those decisions." He then laid out the four priorities (or as I would call them, principles) guiding the programming decisions at his own organization.

These include: being international in scope; generating the new; filling gaps in the local cultural landscape; making long-term commitments to artists; and fostering race and class equity. Importantly, this Boston-based institution was formed in 2010, the year Boston became a minority-majority city.

I would characterize such principles as an attempt to apply an intentional, leader-driven, ethical disruption to the so-called "confluence of forces"— that might otherwise result in a 3Ws season. (White, Western & Womanless—a phrase I first heard referenced by Dr. Johnnetta Cole).[13]

BTW, I am not aware of another artistic director that has picked up the topic and reflected publicly upon "how a season comes together." If I'm being cynical I suspect it's because we don't have the courage or capacity to dissect, much less disrupt, the relationship between power, money, and art.

To that point, last week I read a news item on the new director of the Metropolitan Museum in NYC, Max Hollein—by the way the 10th white, male director in a row. In it, art critic Sebastian Smee noted that one of the tough decisions Hollein will face is how many resources to devote to modern and contemporary art, particularly given that so many museums in NYC already exist for that specific purpose. Smee comments:

… Hollein will need to balance the urge to show contemporary art with all of the Met's other core commitments. That may prove difficult when so many people on the board — many of them with collections of modern and contemporary art which they may one day want to give to the Met — are advocating for their own interests.

The Met's real interests are not the same as the interests of its wealthy donors. The Met has a broader and deeper mission. To any sane outside observer, spending $600 million on a wing for modern and contemporary art seems unnecessary when aspects of those core interests are in jeopardy.[14]

And in my own research I examine partnerships between commercial producers and nonprofit theaters—in part to try to discern whose interests and which values or goals are being served, and which are not.

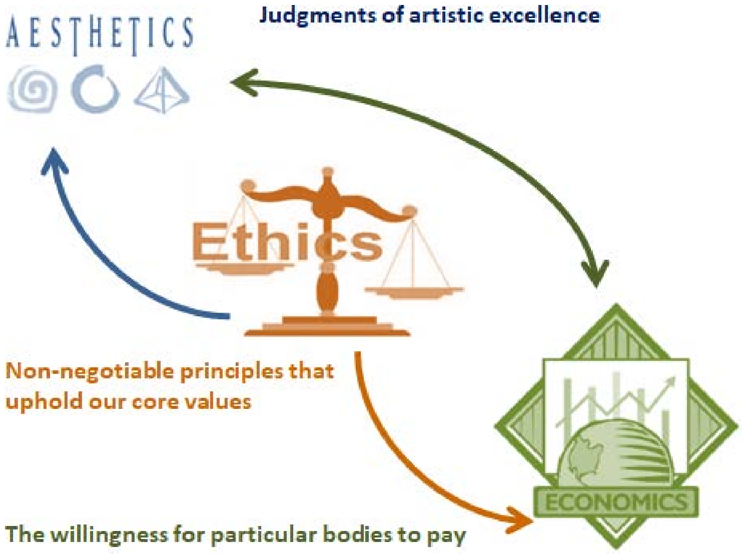
---

[12] Dower, D. (2015). How a Season Comes Together, *HowlRound*, 29 August 2015.

[13] The event was *The Arc of Philanthropy: The Humanities, the Arts and Our Compelling Interests*, sponsored by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Pratt House, Peterson Hall, New York, NY. 14 March, 2018.

[14] Smee, S. (2018). The first two issues the new director at The Met will face, *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2018.

How does a season, or a collection, come together? What's the relationship between the economics, ethics, and aesthetics of our organizations? What's the mutual dependence between judgments of artistic excellence; the non-negotiable principles (*if any!*) that uphold our core values; and the willingness for particular bodies to pay?


AESTHETICS
Judgments of artistic excellence
Ethics
Non-negotiable principles that uphold our core values
ECONOMICS
The willingness for particular bodies to pay

How have these created an organizing logic that is incredibly difficult to shift? And what holds everything together? Dare we ask?

Part III: What does responsible artistic leadership look like? (What's our *work* in 2018?)

I occasionally facilitate and document meetings with diverse groups of artistic leaders ranging from 12-25 people, who convene to discuss various issues. Two years ago, at one such meeting, a comment by a European participant essentially provoked a rhetorical question for the group:

As societies become more diverse and as our publicly supported arts institutions fail to reach representative audiences, are we becoming, in a sense, "illegal"?

In the US, some voices have been asserting that arts institutions in the US have been "illegal" for decades.

In late 2017, Dudley Cocke, the founder of Roadside Theater, a longstanding community-based, culturally specific company in Applachia was interviewed by *American Theater* magazine for a forthcoming article on theatrical resistance in the "age of Trump," in which he remarked.[15]

In the main, the American theater refuses to confront its collusion with racism, stark class division, and geographical bias. It refuses to look at the reality of who it serves—and as a songwriter once mentioned, everybody has to serve somebody. […]

---

[15] The comments cited in this talk were not printed in the American Theater article; however, a transcript of the entire interview can be found on Roadside's website embedded in an article, A Theater of Affirmation, by Donna Porterfield, 14 March 2018.

The nonprofit theater today is overwhelmingly the product of the wealthiest and most educated 15% of the urban population, and thus it has sealed itself off from the possibility of being a dramatic forum for the issues that concern the majority of Americans. The American theater has become its own gated community, unwilling to entertain the larger American story.

The American Theater is not alone in this.

When Republicans go after the National Endowment for the Arts they go after all of the fine arts disciplines and one of their primary critiques is that the NEA is welfare for cultural elitists.

Notably, in the past several years a number of private foundations and government agencies have made diversity a strategic priority. In NYC, for instance, Mayor DeBlasio has issued an ultimatum to NY's major cultural institutions to improve diversity or risk loss of funding.

Likewise, I note that the Canada Arts Council has determined to tie funding to a clear commitment to reflecting the diversity of your geographic community or region.

While I recognize the tremendous benefits that can come with sustained efforts at achieving diversity—indeed, the UK has made concerted efforts in this vein—I nevertheless worry a bit that we may be *masking* rather than *solving* the problem if we believe the end goal is by-the-numbers representation: 25% of the population is African American, therefore 25% of our staff, board, content, and audience members should be African American. Problem solved.

Is it?

Or is this potentially just a form of risk management—optics management at the top of the iceberg—rather than a genuine effort to grapple with such things as the *racial climate* of our institutions, *power dynamics*, and the hierarchical, highly stratified structure of the sector as a whole, which *segregates* and *sorts* both art forms and audiences and affords status and respect to some and not to others.

We can and should address the numbers; but we need to go deeper.

Recently a student at Johns Hopkins, Casey Haughin, wrote a powerful op-ed on the film *Black Panther* and a particular scene that takes place in an art museum, that (in her words) represents the museum "as an illegal mechanism of colonialism, and along with that, a space which does not even welcome those whose culture it displays."[16]

In her article she suggests that museum professionals are beholden to talk about the inclusion of this scene in the film and she encourages them to use the scene as an opportunity to engage their communities in a conversation about "the complicated relationship between the universal museum and colonialism."[17]

In a similar vein I read last month that—in light of allegations of sexual misconduct brought against the photographer Chuck Close. Rather than canceling its planned exhibition of Close's works, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts determined to supplement the exhibition with a show "addressing art and gender dynamics, power in the workplace, rights for all, equity for all, and life as an artist."[18]

---

[16] Haughin, C. (2018). Why museum professionals need to talk about Black Panther, *The Hopkins Exhibitionist*, 22 February 2018.

[17] *Ibid*.

Acknowledging our problematic histories and addressing longstanding inequities is the deeper, more difficult work.

***

Here's a different kind of example.

Last month a new play by the celebrated poet, Claudia Rankine, premiered in Boston, a coproduction between American Repertory Theatre and ArtsEmerson. It was called *The White Card* and the question motivating the work was: "Can American society progress if whiteness stays invisible?"

Importantly, following each performance of *The White Card*, audiences were invited to remain in the theater for a 20-minute facilitated conversation about the play. As part of that process, patrons were encouraged to write down their thoughts on notecards that were left behind.

I was told by someone associated with the production that the most common comment left behind by audience members was: "I want to know a black person."

UK based sculptor, arts leader, and writer Julia Rowntree said to me once: Arts organizations are one of the few places that have the capacity to bring people together across divides on equal terms.

I am hard pressed to think of more than a handful of occasions in my adult life when I experienced this, despite attending perhaps 1,500 performances/exhibitions over the past 15 years.

Producing works that grapple directly with racism, sexism, and other critical issues of our time might be the work, depending on your mission. Holding the space for connection and conversation between humans who would not otherwise interact—this is definitely the work.

***

I mentioned that I have for several years now facilitated meetings with artistic leaders. In recent years one particular conversation has focused on the efforts of artistic leaders to develop the capacity to "shift back and forth between different ways of seeing"—or as I might put it, between different sets of aesthetic values. Simultaneously, these leaders are increasingly acknowledging that they have blind spots. They therefore feel a necessity to share artistic leadership—with younger or more diverse staff, artists, and outside curators who bring a different basket of questions, different aesthetic values, and different networks—in order to help the institution authentically connect with other artistic voices and other publics.

---

[18] Voon, C. (2018). Museum Keeps Chuck Close Exhibition, Supplements It with Show About Power and Gender Dynamics, *Hyperallergic*, 30 January 2018.

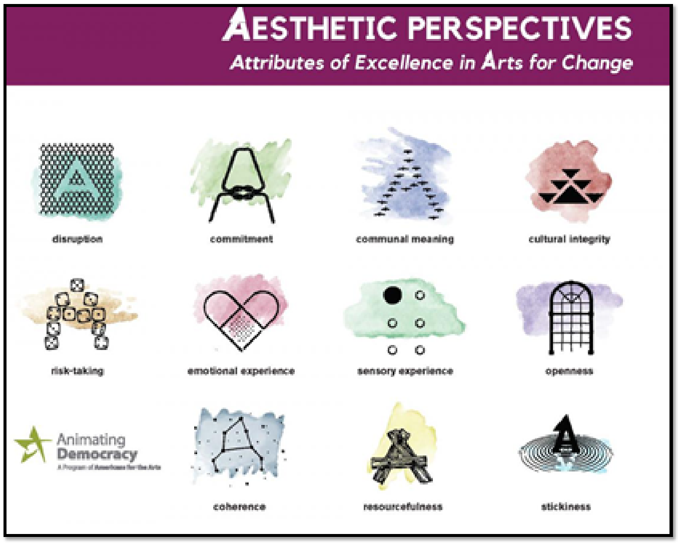
This is the work.

Some, though not all, are also actively grappling with what it might mean for their institutions to play more vital civic roles or to engage in creative placemaking—stepping up to be partners on the ground thinking alongside mayors and policy makers, bringing their assets to bear on the most critical issues affecting their cities—whether the refugee crisis, forgotten and blighted neighborhoods, lack of affordable healthcare, racial conflict, or other forms of discrimination—a couple are asking, for instance, how a festival can be a mechanism to help a city or neighborhood imagine and create a better future for itself.

Many are striving to be "activists in an aesthetic way," or to understand the "dramaturgy of social change"—to use their own words. They are actively interrogating their aesthetic values.

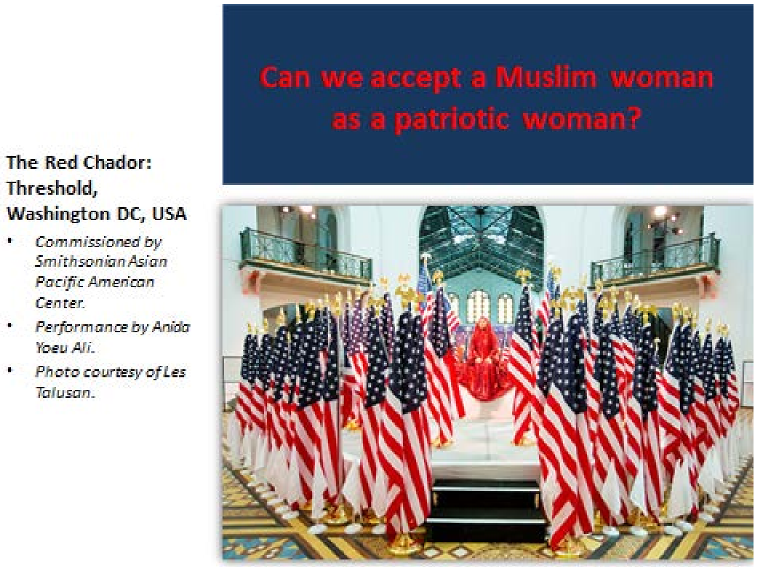
This is the work.

By the way, if you are not aware, Animating Democracy has published a framework "to enhance understanding and evaluation of creative work at the intersection of arts and civic engagement, community development, and justice," along with a report and many resources. I highly recommend it if you are interested in the intersection between art and social justice.


AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES
Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change
disruption
commitment
communal meaning
cultural integrity
risk-taking
emotional experience
sensory experience
openness
Animating Democracy
A Program of Americans for the Arts
coherence
resourcefulness
stickiness

To be clear: all of this is complex work. And it is easy to do injury while trying to do the beautiful thing. Here's an example.

In 2016 Anida Yoeu Ali, a first generation Muslim Khmer woman born in Cambodia and raised in Chicago, was commissioned to create a performance installation for a Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center event called *Crosslines: A Culture Lab on Intersectionality*. For the installation, Ali sat on stage, surrounded by American flags, in a red glittering chador. The work was intended to provoke in viewers the question: "Can we accept a Muslim woman as a patriotic woman?"



Can we accept a Muslim woman as a patriotic woman?

The Red Chador: Threshold, Washington DC, USA

- *Commissioned by Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.*
- *Performance by Anida Yoeu Ali.*
- *Photo courtesy of Les Talusan.*

On the surface—at the top of the iceberg—this project looks and feels like “the work”—a piece clearly intended to help viewers challenge their assumptions about things like Muslims, patriots, women, etc.

Discouragingly, Ali has recounted publicly that she faced censorship and restrictions in her proposals to the Smithsonian. That this particular installation represented her fourth proposal (the first three were deemed too controversial) and that the concept was finally approved on the “condition that she sign a contract stating she would do nothing more than sit or stand in silence, with the implication that any deviation would put jobs on the line.”[19]

In response to her question--“Can we accept a Muslim woman as a patriotic woman?”—the answer in the US would seem to be “Not yet.”

How we do this work is as important as *that* we do it.

But perhaps the larger point of this story is that as cultural institutions we have the power to influence the answer to that question so that five years from now it is: *Yes*.

As a post on the website of Roadside Theater, the Appalachian theater company I mentioned earlier, reads:

Culture is more powerful than politics, because who controls the culture, controls the stories the nation tells itself.[20]

***

In the mid-twentieth century there was a common recognition that the US had made huge scientific and technological progress as a result of World War II but that we were failing to make cultural progress. There was a push to spur such progress and the warp and weft of this thrust was tied to US nationalism and a desire to spread a certain set of democratic values.

---

[19] Waters, R. (2016). Crossing the Line: The Smithsonian’s Most Recent Censorship of Artists Hurts Us All, *Huffington Post*, 22 June 2016.

[20] Porterfield, D. (2018). A Theater of Affirmation, Roadside Theater website 14 March, 2018.

Once again we are living in an era in which cultural progress has not kept up with a reality in which social cohesion is declining and cultural divides are growing in large part because of the influence of technology, migration, the interdependencies of our global health, food, economic, and political systems, and a growing desire for autonomy.

At the same time, we are told people are looking for *connection* and a sense of *belonging*. If that's the case then it would seem we have our work cut out for us.

Fortunately, cultural institutions are definitely showing up—some quite heroically, even.

In 2015 when Lampedusa refugees were sent to Hamburg by the Italian government the German government would not officially recognize them and so they could not get homes.

In a symbolic and material gesture of solidarity, the arts institution Kampnagel, led by Amelie Deuflhard, launched a crowdfunding campaign to support an "interventional art project" for which they built a small house *cum* arts installation in the garden of their venue to host six refugees.

Out of that first small effort a community was created. Kampnagel eventually began to work with refugees from Syria and other African countries to produce their own projects, including a self-organized conference on the topic of International Refugees that drew more than 2,000 people from across Europe—more than Kampnagel could ever have drawn itself.

Kampnagel Theatre in Hamburg - Migrantpolitan
Photo: kampnagel.de

An extraordinary example of "the work"—and of transformative engagement.

***

Americans for the Arts posts the following statement on cultural equity on its website (the order of which I have modified just a bit):

Cultural equity embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people … are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.

The "all people" referenced in this definition include but are not limited to:

those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion.

This is a very good definition, but I actually prefer the spirit and moral imagination in the definition that Jamie Bennett, the visionary and brilliant head of ArtPlace America, uses:

Cultural equity is the right to see your own story told and the obligation to see other people's stories.

(We could, of course, substitute music, visual art, dance and other forms of art for "story".)

Art is the way we share with one another what it means to be human. Which art, where, by whom, serving whom—all matter greatly in these times. To a great extent, *you* determine who has cultural rights. *You* determine which forms of art and audiences are afforded status and respect. *You* determine "who belongs," and "who needs to be invited in." (Another phrase I first heard from the great Dr. Johnnetta Cole.)[21]

Problems of perception rest with us.

As executive, artistic, and board leaders of leading cultural institutions you *have* both the *agency* and *accountability* to respond to the changed cultural context. In 2018, *that's* the work.

Thank you for your kind attention.

WAYS TO CONNECT WITH ME:

- Diane.ragsdale@gmail.com
- www.artsjournal.com/jumper (AJ Blog: Jumper)
- @DERagsdale
- IRL: The New School in NYC (Manhattan)

---

[21] The event was *The Arc of Philanthropy: The Humanities, the Arts and Our Compelling Interests*, sponsored by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Pratt House, Peterson Hall, New York, NY. 14 March, 2018.