ArtsJournal Forum
Is there a better case to be made for the arts?
A collaborative weblog, hosted March 7–11, 2005
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This is the transcript of a collaborative online blog conversation about the arts hosted by the online arts news website ArtsJournal.com. We asked 11 American arts luminaries to discuss "Is there a better case to be made for the arts?" over the course of a week. Participants included:

Ben Cameron
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Adrian Ellis
Managing consultant, AEA Consulting

Bill Ivey
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Joli Jensen
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Jim Kelly
Director, 4Culture, Seattle, WA

Phil Kennicott
Culture critic, Washington Post

Glenn Lowry
Director, Museum of Modern Art

Robert L. Lynch
President, Americans for the Arts

Midori
Violinist

Andrew Taylor
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Russell Willis Taylor
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The blog was moderated by Douglas McLennan, editor of ArtsJournal.com. The following is a transcript of the 54 posts made to the blog by the participants. Also available at ArtsJournal is a transcript of the 102 posted contributions by readers of the blog. Special thanks to The Wallace Foundation for underwriting this project.

The Blog Question

Is there a better case to be made for the arts?

Ever since the Culture Wars of the late-80s, arts advocates have touted the economic, educational and social benefits of the arts in a flood of arts-impact studies designed to quantify and promote the arts' measurable benefits to society.

As a strategy, it seemed to work. Between 1993 and 2001, state public spending on the arts more than doubled in the US, from $211 million in 1993, to $447 million eight years later. The National Endowment for the Arts, which had been threatened with extinction, was stabilized. And the 90s saw an unprecedented boom in arts construction across America, with billions spent on new museums, concert halls and theatres.

But is it possible that the intrinsic benefits of the arts - those effects inherent in the arts experience itself - got lost in some of these arguments? A new RAND study, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, argues that basing so much of the case for the arts on their claimed external benefits - their utility in addressing public issues and concerns - has drawn us away from the true power and potential of the arts, and weakened the long-term position of the arts in the public mind.

Recently, the social good and economic impact arguments may have begun to wear thin, and government support has not recovered from sharp cuts made in the last few years. At the same time, much of the arts community is so focused on bottom lines that some argue that in some cases art and creativity have suffered in the struggle to grow and keep up. Indeed, some might argue that basing so much of the case for the arts on economic benefits has made it more difficult to make a compelling case for the arts.

Has the emphasis on practical benefits warped our arts infrastructure, and caused us to neglect the need to strengthen demand for the arts? Have we neglected what *Gifts of the Muse* terms the “missing link”: the individual, private experience of the arts that begins with early engagement and intense involvement, and that is the gateway to other, more public benefits? Is there a better case to be made for the arts?

Day One | **March 6, 2005**

Welcome
by Douglas McLennan

At the risk of attacking the question we’ve all come here to talk about, I have to confess that the intense attention arts people spend on trying to get the wider world to pay attention to the arts makes me a little uncomfortable.

In covering arts organizations over the years as a critic and journalist, I have developed a “McLennan’s Law” test. It goes: the effort an arts organization expends on trying to get butts in seats is often inversely proportional to its overall health. That is: You can always tell a theater or symphony orchestra is in trouble when it starts worrying more about getting people in the seats than it does about inspiring audiences; that’s the point it has become a follower rather than a leader. On the other end—a really successful company with a hot product doesn’t worry much about how it will attract an audience; it pours its efforts into a product it believes in.

Maybe it’s an instinctive distrust of those trying too hard to tell me they’re cool. But the more I’m subjected to earnest arguments about why the arts are good for me, the more I’m turned off. Why does proselytizing for the arts so often sound so evangelical? This particularly applies to arts impact studies, of which there are now so many, they seem like just so much noise.

So, to whom are we "making a case for the arts"? Obviously the case changes depending on the audience (whether it's kids or legislators or Jo Q. Public). But isn't some of this effort a bit counter-productive? You don't see Hollywood constantly trying to convince us that "movies are good for us." There, it's all about the product...

Music is the Best Advocate for Music
by Midori

To me, the beauty of the arts, including music, lies in its multitude of reactions, impacts, and benefits. As a result, it is not so much of a problem that there are various "findings" and "ways" being chanted to advocate for the arts. In the past, together with my students, I have examined "how" we can advocate for the arts, and music in particular. I have emphasizes this because I believe that anyone pursuing a career in music, has a responsibility to know about the business: its history, its trends, its outlook, its leaders, and its issues. Whether or not one agrees with certain ideas or opinions, it is important to know what they are. Our conclusion on this "how we can advocate for the arts" question was that we need to acquire the skill to communicate and the knowledge of data, so that after effective assessment of the situation, we can put forward the most persuasive arguments. Thus, there is no specific or single method towards supporting the arts; the best argument must be suited to the situation. But there is more. We present the argument (hopefully the right one) so that we can present an even better, convincing one.

We are not a generic mass of people. Each one of us has different histories, needs, values, priorities, tastes, desires, etc., which, over time, are all malleable, interacting with the environment. Why then, do we all have to agree all the time? Certainly, there are some shared experiences we all have or certain groups of people have, that may result in shared reactions. There are largely-shared experiences as well as selectively-shared ones. However, the less popular does not necessarily mean less valid, invalid, or worthless.

Advanced modernization seems to have taken a chip off individuality and emphasize on the rational objectivity. Technological advances have made communication more accessible and easier to use to influence others. Objective reasoning for an activity is a must. But the trend of believing in the best as the sole reason-solution to an issue simply will not do with the arts, and discovering a thousand facts to "prove" the benefits of the arts is really only sidestepping the subject.

For me, the more cases that can be presented to support the benefits of music, the better. It gives us a more diverse vocabulary and expression for the cause. And we should all learn what is being said, so that we can take advantage of it. But the real, core issue at stake is this: Why do we have to advocate for the arts in the first place? Why do we have to validate ourselves? Why do we continue to struggle to find a meaningful argument in support of the arts? How did we arrive at this slump?

Certainly, the delivery and the presentation of music must be re-examined. The case for music can be most effective when presented at the highest level (which is not quantifiable with numbers or adjectives) and granted maximum accessibility. Whatever it takes to make that possible, outreach or whatever we wish to call it, is an asset. Knowledge is power, and awareness is seductive. Different facts should support and enable us to spread the music in a way that has the strongest impact both on the community and on the individuals within it, because they may give us an opportunity to find or create the right situation (like securing funding so that we can deliver music in different places). However, ultimately, it is great music and its appropriate presentation that serve music best.

What we say / what we do
by Andrew Taylor

There seem to be two tracks for this conversation about the RAND study, about intrinsic/extrinsic benefits of creative experience, about the limits of instrumental arguments for the arts: one track follows what we say, the other follows what we do.

What we say revolves around persuasion...convincing decision-makers or gatekeepers that influence the richness, depth, and access to creative experience. This isn't just about bolstering direct state and

federal funding, but also engaging school districts looking for deep budget cuts (often in the arts), or convincing cities formulating 'smart growth' plans that arts activities have an integrated place in their decisions.

As we all know, persuasion isn't always about deep and nuanced truth, but about arguments that work.

On the other track is what arts organizations, arts managers, arts supporters do, that is, how we ensure deep and lasting connections between our creative efforts and the larger world. In this track, it's essential that we have deep and nuanced knowledge of how the world values what we offer, or what benefits or connections they seek.

The RAND effort, and other explorations of value or benefits, speak to both tracks...even though we tend to focus most on the first.

I'm pleased and honored to be among such a great group to discuss both tracks (and others as they're found). To me, this issue is not just about forming an argument, but it lies at the core of all things in policy, management, marketing, subsidy, outreach, education, and on and on.

A Matter of Relationships
by Ben Cameron

All of us who work in the professional not-for-profit arts arena probably wish that we didn't have to make the case for the arts. How much more delightful life would be if we could spend the time currently consumed in fundraising, government advocacy (including championing the NEA, for example), foundation meetings, etc., on the art itself. I know no manager who wouldn't rather be in the performance hall or the rehearsal room than in a meeting with a corporation, pleading for arts support.

Unfortunately, that's not the way life is, at least these days. And if those culture wars—aren't you amazed that it's an early posting and they've already come up?—taught us anything, it was the liability of taking public appreciation and understanding of the arts for granted.

The RAND report rightly, I think, distinguishes between those who have a deep relationship with the arts—for whom true intrinsic benefits like pleasure, captivation and the like—and those who infrequently attend the arts, if at all. For the former, Midori may be right: the music will be its own best argument (and what music lover could fail to be swayed by Midori any time she plays?); for the latter group, arguments need to be made—arguments that RAND again rightly characterizes as extrinsic benefits, e.g. educational achievement, economic benefit, etc.

The not for profit sector by definition relies on charitable support: on average $.47 of every $1 in a theatre budget came from a contribution last year, not from the box office. And in a world where the clamor for charitable contributions has increased—where the competition is now the fire department, the school system, the AIDS clinic and more—we must be articulate about why supporting the arts is important—articulate, as often as not, to people who are not necessarily arts patrons or arts aficionados.

The loudest voices I hear asking for arguments that will rally support often come from Board members—passionate supporters of the arts who are often frustrated by the own inability to convince their friends and business associates about the importance of the arts. And why do managers try to raise such record sums of money? Because, I think, they love the art—and want to provide optimal conditions and better lives for the artists who change our lives. Arguments about the importance of the arts ultimately serve that end.

On a closing note, I must take exception with our host about the worry of attendance as a harbinger of artistic failure. The not for profit was granted its status precisely because there was a visionary sense that there were worthy activities that the market could not support—hence the government's willingness to allow the charitable donation. With the erosion of those structures that created professional arts organizations—with the declines in state and local funding (when adjusted for inflation), corporate support, and with shifting patterns in socializing (see Robert Putnam), the pressure to meet expenses through earned revenue—the box office—becomes even greater—hence the worry about audiences.

I hope Doug does not truly mean to suggest that a "hot product" somehow is more worthy—do we value Alien vs. Predator more than Sideways because it was #1 at the box office for many weeks? Does he really mean that movies don't spend time telling us movies are good for us? While the message isn't quite

as overt, perhaps, the millions and millions spent on advertising media—probably the billions and billions—is exactly spent trying to persuade us that movies are good for our social life, for our entertainment and captivation, for our ability to be current—the Must See TV line in television, for example—in other words, reinforcing the very intrinsic values that the RAND report urges us to add to our own vocabulary in advocating the fullest range of the arts.

The danger lies, not in worrying about the audience, but in anticipating their desires as the rationale for the work we create: as not for profit arts groups, at least, we aspire to lead our audiences by being just ahead of them, rather than following our perceptions of their tastes slavishly and tailoring work accordingly. Thank God that Tony Kushner didn't listen when people told him no one would attend a six hour play on politics and gay issues, but went ahead and wrote ANGELS IN AMERICA; that Ibsen wasn't deterred when audiences stormed from the theatre and demanded his head; that Strindberg wasn't discouraged by the lack of audiences and more. Try to create a hot product and you're likely to end up with JOEY on NBC: the true artist follows the inner voice in a very different way—and the organization, deeply supportive of the artist, is right to want to give that work the broadest and most powerful exposure.

Creating Value
by Russell Willis Taylor

I was delighted to see that Kevin McCarthy and his co-authors have once again got all of us talking and sometimes arguing about what we care about the most—the meaning and value of the arts.

It is right to say that works of genius create their own audiences, but not without help in many cases. In an era when investment in long term benefits for the public good is unfashionable, such as research that may not commercially pay off for 20 years and so must be funded by government, or education programs that help children who will not be able to vote for some time, trying to push the intrinsic benefits of the arts is a tough job. And this is the reason that we should all be doing it.

The economic arguments alone simply do not hold up. If they are a useful starting point for conversation, by all means we should use them. But they should never be the reason that we give for doing the work that we do—as the report acknowledges, some of these benefits could be achieved by a more direct route. In addition, being prepared to discuss why the arts improve the quality of lives, why they create societal value, should not be a matter of whining or banging the drum. It should be part of the lexicon of every arts leader who wants to have a place at the civic table.

Whose Muse Blues
by Adrian Ellis

One of Editor Doug's pieces of advice to us novice bloggers was: keep it short! I am going to try.

The RAND report—which is truly worth the detour—is first and foremost a literature review. Its authors have painstakingly trawled through the vast and scattered sources that address why cultural activity is—or more accurately may possibly be—of value; classified that literature (economic, social, psychological, aesthetic etc.); and then sought to give a broad account of how robust are the conclusions of the various studies.

They conclude, as others have before them, but never with such crushing evidential force, that the recent literature is a bit flaky, and that the wilder claims for the social and economic impact of the arts are overblown. This is not surprising. Much of the literature was generated in the context of the ruthless pursuit of money rather than the fearless pursuit of truth. Its purpose is not to increase the sum of human understanding but to persuade particular constituencies (usually public sector funders) in particular contexts (a capital project, a fiscal crisis) to maintain or increase levels of financial support.

I doubt many of the authors cited thought they were carrying responsibility for the intellectual underpinning of the Enlightenment. Their job was to play on the sensibilities of a particular group of decision makers. The arts constituency has been extremely successful in raiding the budgets of adjacent and better funded policy areas – education, urban renewal, tourism etc...

Some of the instrumental arguments are obviously a bit of stretch. Others are obviously true. But the arcane and (pace RAND) flawed methodologies employed rarely generate conclusions that are not accessed more easily, convincingly and cheaply by the application of common sense.

The overall 'impact' of the instrumental enterprise has been to leave the sector over-hyped, over-extended and cowering as it waits to be found out. Hence the reaction within the sector to the RAND report—"So whose side are you guys on then?" I got the same reaction to the debate on the same issues that we got going in the UK in 2003 and referenced in the right-hand sidebar to this blog. My perspective, like Midori's, was that it's not 'either instrumental or intrinsic' but that there are a wide range of arguments that apply differentially to a wide range of cultural activities and seeking to fit the whole of cultural endeavor into a single straight-jacket is both uncomfortable and unhelpful.

The current preoccupation with re-grounding the arguments for the public support of cultural activity is a result of this gut-churning awareness by the arts policy community that the hard-won gains in arts funding have been, in large part, as a result of aggressive but shakily-grounded lobbying. The re-grounding, heralded by the RAND authors and others like John Holden, as and when it happens – incrementally, awkwardly, partially—will bring with it not only changes in the gross level of arts funding but changes in the type of organizations and activities funded. This is no bad thing and indeed rather exciting.

My gripe with the current preoccupation with this vast literature and its methodological shortcomings is that it is something of a side show. This is not primarily because, as the RAND report demonstrates, the re-grounding of economic and social arguments in more analytically defensible research methodologies would take a long time and cost a lot of money that could be better spent elsewhere—though this is undoubtedly the case. It is primarily because the cultural sector seems to feel the need to hold itself to higher (or maybe just odder) evidential standards than other sectors – for example, health, environment, or education. In these sectors, the academic preoccupation is not with, for example, what health can do for urban regeneration or tourism, but with the policies required to ensure a healthy community.

If we stopped looking so neurotically for epiphenomena—the impact of the arts on X, Y and Z—and diverted our attention to what constitutes—say—a vibrant cultural community: what distribution of what art forms, what forms of participation etc.—and if we could come up with well grounded answers to this question, I suspect that those answers would be significantly more compelling to the decision-makers we lobby than another damned economic impact study. We would spend less time waiting for the other shoe to drop as decision makers discover what we already knew and what the RAND report has spelled out in merciless detail. And we would address some of the patently daft misallocations of scarce resources that our shakily-grounded arguments for the arts have encouraged, such as the resource-draining building boom we are emerging from, which has left the sector over-expanded, under-capitalized and with a fundamentally and adversely altered ratio of fixed to variable costs.

Sorry Doug. Shorter next time….

Day Two | **March 7, 2005**

Making the Case...
by Bill Ivey

At the outset of our conversation about making the case for the arts, we need to remind ourselves that we're not talking about THE ARTS, as in the whole spectrum of art making, but rather about that part of the arts system that makes a moral claim on philanthropy and public largess. If one subtracts most art galleries, boutique literary presses, independent film makers, record companies, cable and broadcast television networks, Broadway theaters—all of which are for-profit and do not make much use of the kind of case making the RAND literature review is talking about—we end up with a conversation about the needs of non-profit cultural organizations and the kinds of arguments that might encourage foundations and government leaders to give money. Gathering evidence and argument to justify public and philanthropic support for non-profit cultural organizations has engaged many smart people over the years, and the task remains an ongoing challenge, but it's important to remember that gifts to cultural nonprofits

don't, in aggregate, possess the "oomph" required to really improve the character of our overall arts system. If we, as the subset of citizens most interested in culture, want to increase the vibrancy of the arts system in order to better serve the interests of artists and the public, we need to engage an entirely different set of issues than those that RAND is talking about. For example, we need to think about the FCC and media regulation, and about the way copyright extension does or doesn't work for artists and citizens, and why networks like HBO with "Angels in America" and other spectaculars are eating public television's lunch. Taking on these sorts of issues in order to insure the continuing vitality of the U.S. cultural scene requires plenty of case making, but these real issues, problems, and their solutions lie well outside the scope of what RAND is talking about. So, I guess I'm arguing that at some point we need a bigger conversation how we find ways to intervene in order to improve the arts landscape—in this day and age, gifts and grants to nonprofits just won't do the job.

But, now that that's off my chest, I'm always willing to think about the needs of the non-profit arts. A question: why is the RAND report surfacing just now? Why did Wallace want to commission such a study? My guess is that there exists a widespread feeling in the non-profit cultural community that revenue streams have about topped out given the persuasive power of arguments used to date. Get me new arguments; these old ones are worn out! Well, ok, but the non-profit cultural sector has expanded dramatically since the 1960s, when the big NGOs, philanthropy advocates, and then government agencies began to encourage growth through gifts and matching grants. Yes, we may just need new arguments, but we also may be pushing against the outer limits of aggregated public sympathy for the demands of the non-profit community. Institutions, agencies, and individuals have plenty of worthy destinations for empathy and charitable dollars. And, yes, we're a good destination, but not the only one and probably not even the most deserving when we think about tidal waves, HIV, and the like. So, maybe our problem is bigger and more basic than what can be addressed by the quality of our case making.

And, just to continue my early-morning, post-four-martini-weekend rant, I'm not all that thrilled by a return to advancing "intrinsic value," even as it's been dressed up in a new outfit by the very smart folks at RAND. To me case making is about language and ideas that make sense to other people, not just to us. I've been in plenty of meetings in which the secretary of the symphony board from some Midwestern city tried to convince a member of Congress that classical music "uplifts the soul." I prefer talking about economic impact and reading test scores, even if I cross my fingers and toes while I proudly "make the case."

And, by the way, do we think advocates who are trying to raise money for environmental protection or medical research only make completely documented claims? Give me a break! All's fair in love and war, and quite a bit is fair in fundraising...Bring it on!

It's not about the spinach
by Joli Jensen

Is there a better case to be made for the arts? The case we've been making—that the arts are good for us instrumentally and extrinsically—is one well worth challenging. The Wallace Foundation report is a wonderfully useful review of the literature, and a helpful critique of the more dubious claims of social science. And it offers arts advocates a clear "takeaway" message: we should move from extrinsic to intrinsic arts benefits, from instrumental arguments to something else.

But we need to be careful that we don't replicate the same instrumentalist problems, now made "intrinsic." If we argue that the arts are good for us personally, not just socially, we've just repackaged the same "cultural spinach." We'll end up arguing about personal and spiritual uplift, for individuals not communities. What I want us to do, instead, is to recognize and celebrate why the arts are good, not why they are good for us.

To do this, we need to let go of a social science dominated model of the arts. The alternative option the Wallace report offers is about the intrinsic "uses and gratifications" allegedly offered by the arts. We've been down this road in communication studies, and I find it wrongheaded. I prefer understanding varieties of culture as socially constructed and sustained, rather than trying to measure what art does for us personally and psychologically. The value of the arts isn't about how it allegedly satisfies various personal

needs, or fills in various psychological gaps. Instead, it's about how various forms of culture have meaning and value for various social groups. Their "message" is in their meaning. And what the "arts" mean to arts-engaged types is very different from what they mean to arts-disengaged types. That's what we need to understand, and work with.

So what happens if we adopt this more interpretive, ritual view of the arts? What happens if we define the arts as particular versions of socially constructed and sustained culture? What cases can we make if we understand the fine arts as arenas of meaning, not transmitters of experience? We can find out more about what the fine arts mean to people who mistrust or dislike them, and we can sort out how cultural experiences vary or stay the same across forms of culture like crafts, hobbies, and sports events, as well as the fine arts. We can consider the kinds of public sphere questions and cultivation arguments that the RAND report raised, in relation to the varieties of kinds of cultural forms people choose for, and against.

In the end, we are all fans, just of different forms of culture. For art fans, the task is to help people understand why we love the stuff we love. But it is also to become curious about, and respectful of, those who seem immune to the forms that give us such pleasure, and who instead find meaning and value in forms that give us the creeps. That's where I think we need to begin.

Separating ourselves
by Andrew Taylor

Great stuff here. Thanks to all for starting this conversation off with such challenge and vision. I'm particularly drawn to the specific challenges of talking about 'the arts' raised by Joli and Bill. Joli says:

> For art fans, the task is to help people understand why we love the stuff we love. But it is also to become curious about, and respectful of, those who seem immune to the forms that give us such pleasure, and who instead find meaning and value in forms that give us the creeps.

Bill raises the valuable perspective that the nonprofit arts are only a fraction of the total cultural ecology, and only weaken themselves by struggling to remain separate:

> I guess I'm arguing that at some point we need a bigger conversation how we find ways to intervene in order to improve the arts landscape—in this day and age, gifts and grants to nonprofits just won't do the job.

It also recalls the challenge of the RAND report against existing studies of 'benefit' or 'value,' that ignore all the other things in society or in life that might provide a similar benefit. It's as if we've been afraid to engage the larger world of experience that makes communities work, for fear of losing the fight for funding or relevance. In the process, we may well have separated ourselves from the larger conversation.

It's a compelling question, especially with Bill and Joli and the rest of the gang challenging us to reconsider the limited language we use to discuss it.

Reader Comments & A Note For Ben
by Douglas McLennan

Readers have been commenting on the discussion so far. You can read full comments on the web archive, or through the file available for download. A sampling:

> "We allowed our detractors to define us, and rather than looking at this challenge as an opportunity to re-invigorate support of the Arts as necessary to a healthy world, we attempted to justify our existence on our enemies terms. Namely, we attempted to justify the arts, which exist in an artistic currency, into an accountants' financial currency. Thus, we lost before we began to respond." —Peter Ellenstein

> "Until a person has been touched by the arts, you cannot convince them through argument that the experience will be good for them (implied: but unpleasant). Trying to convince the world of the benefits of the arts, educationally, financially, or even culturally, is a waste of time and resources, which could be better directed towards creating the art itself." —Chris Patton

> "As usual, we will discuss the public value of the arts by ignoring the public arts. Where are the arts of the daily public realm—graphic design, product design, fashion, architecture, urban

design, landscape design and even the official public art? All the arts discussed require someone to go inside a box—classroom, theater or museum and usually pay for the opportunity. Everyday in South Florida, I work with very sincere people in all walks of life. Directed by planners, elected officials and citizen volunteers, they strive to enhance the visual and pedestrian quality of their community. Every city has discussions of design guidelines, signage ordinances and streetscape programs, to name a few. These are active, passionate civic discussions about the value aesthetics in their communities." —Glenn Weiss

"Given that maximum accessibility is imperative, how can people who head arts non-profits say things like that or support them when they charge exorbitant admissions fees that price out many people, particularly young people?" —Tyler Green

"We spend a lot of time bemoaning the anti-intellectualism that seems to have taken hold in the US over the last few decades, but in my view, this issue is simply a red herring distracting us from the larger problem, which is that arts groups have been left in the dust by a finely honed science of marketing/branding which has been embraced by nearly every other profession. The good news is, this sorry condition ought to be completely reversible, if we can just get over our own profundity and start acting like the entertainers we are." —Sam Bergman

"It seems like there are two parts to this issue of making a case for the arts. On the one hand, any of us who are directly involved in creating the work need no justification for continuing to do so. We already get it. And the same goes for the core audience, those that really love painting or music or books, etc. They probably developed this connection on their own (or through their friends), and don't need to be convinced that the arts are good for them. Do we really need a larger audience, made up of a bunch of people that show up for the nutritional value? Is more really better? I'm not sure that it is."
—David

To Ben: I think we're essentially saying the same thing. You write:

"I hope Doug does not truly mean to suggest that a "hot product" somehow is more worthy—do we value Alien vs. Predator more than Sideways because it was #1 at the box office for many weeks? Does he really mean that movies don't spend time telling us movies are good for us?"

I hadn't meant my comment of "a hot product" in terms of box office, but in terms of an artistic product. My point was that in focusing so much on the box office and in trying to make a product designed for maximum sell, that the art itself often seems to be following and passionless rather than leading.

The Hollywood reference is a flawed one, to be sure. I meant merely to suggest that you don't see Fox campaigning for the value of movies—they're too busy trying to up the sizzle factor of whatever specific movie they're trying to promote. I think it might be an important distinction...

The public view
by Jim Kelly

I head a local arts agency, funded by county government, serving one of the largest counties in the country by population and land area. At its cultural center is Seattle, known for its high tech, biotech, aerospace, caffeine fueled, creative economy. Seattle is surrounded by sprawling suburban and rural communities. Those to the east are fairly prosperous; to the south, not. We are a Pacific rim community with a richly diverse population. In one small neighborhood is south Seattle, more than 40 distinct ethnic populations, with different languages and traditions, co-exist.

Our community is a microcosm of the national blue-red divide. The rural areas are anti-tax, anti-regulation, anti-government. The urban areas are much more tolerant and liberal. Seattleites tend to support school levies, parks levies, and transportation projects. The more conservative surrounding areas tend to question the wisdom of every tax-funded program. This is my world.

I agree with Bill Ivey that there's a whole host of policy issues that could positively benefit the arts that are not being addressed in our usual discussions, but, at the risk of being overly mundane, I must say

that the one issue that is of paramount importance to our cultural community is funding. Private and public support for the arts are in decline, and we need to make a better case for arts to reverse that trend.

To me this isn't an esoteric or intellectual discussion. My agency is currently mired in a battle in the state legislature regarding the future of arts funding in King County, Washington. Every day I have to respond to inquiries from legislators about the value of the arts. I have to be very pragmatic in my approach.

We have used all the familiar arguments: economic benefits, education benefits, life-long learning, improved test scores, providing creative opportunities to at-risk youth, enhancing sense of place, community building, exploring creativity as a path to personal fulfillment, the value of memorable experiences.

Whether we like it or not, in the public realm the instrumental arguments work best. Policy makers can be persuaded with good economic impact numbers. They respond well to the arguments about educational benefits. They like hearing about improved test scores; they understand that local festivals encourage people to interact with their neighbors. Since policy makers represent the public, they want to hear the public case. So we give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

I don't believe the "case for the arts" can be made to the general public. Our duty to the public is not to explain to them why they should enjoy the arts, not to tell them the many ways it will improve them as individuals. Our duty is to involve them in the arts on some level in the belief that they too will experience the benefits of the arts first-hand and will become new advocates for the cause. In other words, we have stop talking about the arts and start doing art.

We have limited public dollars at our disposal, but we're constantly asked to support another study, plan, research project, etc. Instead, my agency made a conscious decision to support art projects that increase audiences exposure to and participation in the arts. Most of us agree that you will never appreciate the intrinsic value of the arts if you've never experienced the arts. So let's dedicate ourselves to increasing people's exposure to the arts in all their permutations.

Several years ago, we began sending Seattle-based dance artists to rural and suburban communities to perform in high school auditoriums, community centers, and performance venues. We believed that the best way to recruit new audiences was simply to show them the work.

This fall we are launching a site-specific performance festival. A local playwright is creating a theater piece to be performed in department store furniture showroom. After all, you already have a living room set, bedroom, kitchen, dining room. The actors can easily move from "set to set." The departments store is crowded on weekends, an instant audience for new theatre work. If it's as brilliant and creative, as I suspect it will be, maybe, just maybe, some will say, "hey, that was fun; let's go to the theatre on Friday night!"

Sometimes the case has to be made one at a time.

The enemy?
by Phil Kennicott

I'm joining the conversation a bit late, from a hotel room in Boston—a city that should give comfort to anyone who despairs of maintaining a large and vibrant arts community. But already I'm reading language that I find striking. A reader, Peter Ellenstein, writes "we attempted to justify our existence on our enemies' terms..." And Jim Kelly reminds us of the difficulty of making and funding art in a community that reflects the current "red state, blue state" political and cultural divisions of the United States. I wonder if this is evidence for something big shifting in the way people who love art are thinking about people who don't, and vice versa. In the past, the "non art" population was generally considered to be a bit of a blank slate, a body of people who would most likely love art if only they had access to, and education in, the arts. It was a passive body of people who needed motivation, perhaps through arguments, or simply exposure.

But what if they're not passive in the face of the arts, but openly hostile? What if Mr. Ellenstein's word—enemy—is what we're dealing with? We try so hard to avoid condescension that we're all careful to avoid descriptions of the target audience that in any way belittle it. And though I ask this question, I'm hesitant

to openly embrace its implications. It's all too easy to demonize, all too easy to forego the effort at understanding. But maybe, just as an experiment, we should contemplate the possibility that some significant proportion of people in this country aren't just suffering from arts deprivation, but are rather hostile to the very kinds of things that others find so richly rewarding in art. If so, it really doesn't matter if you try to entice them with the intrinsic or instrumental values of art. And open hostility is something very different from the usual sense of the non art crowd as vaguely anti-intellectual. The problem is art, with its invitation to independence, ambiguity and vulnerability.

The Big Begged Question
by Bill Ivey

I think Glenn Weiss is right about not attending enough to the ways most Americans connect with the arts every day—fashion, graphic design, architecture, and so on. It's interesting that these activities have mostly not organized themselves on a non-profit basis at all...Hence, perhaps, the lack of attention from those of us caught up in the well being of cultural nonprofits.

A quick hand grenade to Ben: I think it's been many years since the non-profit sector has been able to claim any real across-the-board, categorical, artistic superiority when compared to for-profit arts companies. I think financial pressures are to blame, not the absence of artistic vision or lofty standards. For a minute just think about the number of Mozart festivals, the annual flood of Nutcracker productions, the search for yet another Impressionist blockbuster...and, even in theater, conservative seasons featuring one Sam Shepard and, of course, the requisite August Wilson in February. There are always sparklers that light up here and there, but it's pretty hard to characterize the non-profit sector as a bastion of experimentation and creativity these days. And the same challenges, with slightly different causes, are right in the face of for-profit arts managers. They're being forced by parent companies to chase shareholder value and quarterly earnings to the exclusion of long-term artist development and risk taking. Everybody working for record companies here in Nashville complains about it. Years ago, when Goddard Leiberson was President of Columbia Records, he had sufficient creative elbowroom to maintain a classical division even when it didn't help the bottom-line. There are only a few executives left in the entire global record business who possess that kind of freedom today. That's why the HBO model is so interesting to me: they've basically created a demand for a modern-day "subscription series" by creating a powerful image of their brand as hip, cool, cutting edge, creative, etc. They have moved beyond ratings (beyond "butts in seats"), and seem to have freed themselves up to take some pretty heady programming risks. Maybe we can learn something here.

But, it's hard to make the case for non-profit cultural organizations today by arguing that their non-profit status automatically positions them at the front line of American institutional artistry...

Hey, do you want to know what I think the most-significant future problem will be? Tax reform! How do we make certain that upcoming revenue-neutral tax reform doesn't eliminate deductions for cultural nonprofits on the basis that there's insufficient demonstration of public benefit? These policy conversations are beginning right now; how do we make certain our point of view is at the table early on?

To whom? For what purposes?
by Joli Jensen

Doug has asked us "Is there a better way to make a case for the arts?" and at this point we are risking talking at cross purposes because we're losing track of a basic question—to whom are we making the case? How are we imagining the audience(s) for our rhetoric?

If we are trying to make the case to "the public," then how do we think of that public? Are they unified or diverse? Organized by class or social status or education or taste culture? Are they predisposed for or against certain logics or arguments?

As Kennicott points out, we may imagine the public as a bunch of would-be art lovers who only need the experience of art to turn them into advocates. Or perhaps they are instead, as Ellenstein suggests, "the enemy," actively engaged in hostility to art and art advocates.

Or perhaps the imagined audience is not “the public” but philanthropists and other funders. Or perhaps policy makers and various lawmakers. If so, do these groups need or deserve a different rhetorical approach, as several posts have suggested?

Or maybe we should stop trying to make a case to any of these groups, and instead just do art, with passion and conviction and ability, as Kelly and Midori have clearly suggested.

So should we be making ANY case for the arts (rather than just doing art) and if so, to whom should we imagine making this case? And once we get THAT figured out—for what purposes would we be making our case—to get their money? To put their butts in our seats? To get their support for school curricula? To get them to leave us alone?

Copernicus vs. the Blues Brothers
by Russell Willis Taylor

And now it’s getting lively. If I can just insert a thought before Ben pulls the virtual pin out of the hand grenade Bill tossed to him . . .

The general theme of our commentary seems to be drifting in a familiar and revealing direction: we are hyper-critical of ourselves while attributing sinister motives to what may just be an impersonally changing environment. (I do think that there is hostility out there, I’m pretty certain that there is far more indifference.) I think that Adrian’s use of the word adjacent is a good one—we tend to see ourselves as adjacent to a lot of areas rather than part of a dynamic whole, an attitude which is no doubt the plight of the long term supplicant. Joli makes an excellent point when she asks us to consider the value of getting alongside the folks who don’t participate in anything we do—and also asks us to think about what we do as a social construct rather than, with apologies to the Blues Brothers, a mission from God.

I agree with Bill that we are looking at a tiny part of what the general public considers to be the arts. The 501 c3 model is not nimble, not preferred by a great many creative endeavors, and presents some pretty challenging inflexibilities insofar as it requires keeping a vast number of stakeholders happy all the time. If we look at it as one part of a much larger system we might begin to see more possibilities and broaden our definition of audience, and also gain a little perspective that is slightly more Copernican. Certainly we should keep looking at the horizon, as larger policy questions and tax reform that is ignored by our field will only make us feel more victimized in future.

From the few conversations I have had with the folks at HBO, I am confident that they didn’t get where they are by deciding to serve up a televised version of Gnostic cultural experiences. All of the creative focus is indeed on the work itself, on pushing back boundaries and making the work fresh. Perhaps we need, as one of NAS leading faculty members has commented with regard to strategy, to do less better?

Does milk do a body good?
by Andrew Taylor

Sorry for the sidebar, but I can’t resist the comparison. Just as we’re all wrestling with the RAND study (a literature review that questions the instrumental arguments for the arts), the dairy industry has been smacked with a literature review that questions the positive health benefits of milk. Says one news story:

> ’’Evidence linking bone health with dairy product consumption is weak,’’ said the researchers....’’Under scientific scrutiny, the support for the milk myth crumbles,’’ wrote lead researcher, nutritionist, Dr. Amy Joy Lanou.

So, we can move on from the fallacy that we’re the only industry struggling to prove broader public value for what we offer. Perhaps we should invite a few dairy advocates to compare notes.

Common Sense
by Glenn Lowry

I am always amused by arguments for or against the instrumental value of the arts. Arts organizations in this country have learned to survive by making their case to mostly private and occasionally public

sources of funding. They have used almost every argument imaginable and have been surprisingly effective at developing new strategies when necessary.

The RAND report's suggestion that arts organizations need to concentrate on articulating the intrinsic value of the arts misses the point—the funding organizations to whom these arguments are being made need to change their criteria, not the arts organizations. Like anyone involved in the arts, I believe fundamentally in their intrinsic value and would argue that any other value that can be attributed to them is secondary and, ultimately, not all that interesting.

Successful arts organizations know that their success depends on the daring and quality of their efforts, in their ability to differentiate themselves from similar organizations, and to galvanize their audience's belief in their importance. Common sense suggests that the instrumental value of the arts is in direct proportion to their intrinsic value and the greater the former the more significant the latter. But if arts organizations can and should work to be appreciated and understood for the quality of their programs and the value of their mission—it is naïve to assume that in a world that makes most of its decisions on instrumental values, funding organizations (either public or private) are suddenly going to make exceptions for arts organizations.

The culture wars for all of their divisiveness and destruction taught arts organizations how to compete in a hostile environment, to use the same tactics that other groups have deployed in order to convince those in power to support them, even when their activities seemed antithetical to prevailing times. This may have been a tough and unpleasant lesson but is has been well learned and we would do well not to forget it in an effort to be recognized for the values we believe in most.

More Reader Mail...
by Douglas McLennan

Comments from readers are piling up.

> "Gifts of the Muse" will either advance debates about the "benefits" of the arts, or (as some commentators suggest) leave readers a bit tired of it all. To me, artistic learning plays well on both sides of the argument. Learning to draw, play the violin, dramatizing Romeo, or dancing Juliet all promote cognitive and affective growth that is bound to impact the way children think, learn, and feel. —James Catterall
>
> The RAND study's "key policy implication is that policy should be geared toward spreading the benefits of the arts by introducing greater numbers of Americans to engaging arts experiences." It's this kind of solipsistic and circular thinking that brought us to where we are today. We need both kinds of arguments all the time. Art is inherently beneficial to individuals for it engages the imagination in particular ways with measurable physiological, psychological, cognitive, and social benefits. That's a good old-fashioned elitist (in the best sense) argument. One we ought to proselytize at every opportunity. But, when asking for money, it takes more than our own faith and goodwill. The nonprofit arts, in general, have some demonstrable impact as part of socioeconomics of the cultural and/or creative sector, the community, the country, business ... something. —Keith Donohue
>
> Until we stop assuming that our reasons for loving, attending and participating in the arts are the only valid reasons for loving, attending and participating in the arts, we will continue to miss great opportunities to show people what the arts can mean to them— on their terms. —Maureen
>
> Will we ever have levels of culture like Europe's without a similar system of public funding? Is our own cultural identity somehow less important than theirs? Will our arts ever really flourish and be secure with a system of funding based on donations from the wealthy? Why do we often avoid discussing the fundamental problem America has of an equitable regional distribution of the arts that public funding could help provide? We have used our private donor system for decades. Will we eventually admit that it often doesn't work very well and that the long term commitment to public funding used by the Europeans has shown far better results? —William Osborne
>
> Another more frustrating question is what we mean by making a case for "The Arts" in the first place. Art galleries, museums, dance companies, small to large theatres, and major symphonies

may have superficially the same problems of low and graying turnouts. But, do they necessarily have the same solutions? Their motivations, goals, methods of dissemination, and economics are not the same. —Ravi Narasimhan

Day Three | **March 8, 2005**

Let's Get Real...
by Bill Ivey

It's only possible to "make the case" for a moral claim on public support or philanthropy if there's general agreement that the sector making the claim serves the public purpose by enhancing quality of life. "Arts people" certainly agree that the arts serve the public interest, but most of the gatekeepers are unconvinced. For sectors like transportation, health care, environmental protection, or defense there exists a general understanding that each contributes to quality of life and that an investment of government or NGO funds will serve the public interest. Gatekeepers and policy leaders share no such understanding of the arts as a priority, so case-making arguments are often delivered into an unreceptive void. Five or six years ago I was talking to David Obey, a fire-breathing House Democrat and big supporter of the NEA. Obey said, "Now that we've got the deficit under control, we can appropriate funds for some of the 'grace notes' in life." I was happy to have his support, but I cringed, 'grace notes' are not the heart of the tune and can be readily passed over when the basic melody gets tough. But Obey's metaphor was on target; he would never have called Medicare a "grace note," but the arts don't have the stature of other areas of public policy that are assumed to be important to the public interest. If we want to modify this reality, our sector needs research that links citizen contact with a vibrant arts system to overall quality of life, so the health of our cultural, transportation, and health care systems are one day considered to be of equal value by policy leaders. This is a daunting task but I have come to see it as essential.

Second, it is problematic to be in the position of asserting a moral claim for art in relation to the public and philanthropic wallet when we're almost always only talking on behalf of the kind of art we happen to think is best. After all, Americans are deeply engaged in art, but it's North African hip-hop on satellite radio, vintage jazz on an I-Pod, a cool new suit, a CD from Starbucks, the hot new band at the local pub, some nice looking dishes from Pottery Barn, a Saturday afternoon rehearsal of an amateur bluegrass band, and an argument at the water cooler about the relative virtues of "Sideways" and "Million Dollar Baby." Sure, sometimes it's a night at the non-profit theater or a museum visit, but those engagements with our non-profit world are not where most Americans, most of the time, make or consume art. Too often, our case making suggest sternly that all these everyday creative connections are not real art, or real art engagement. We want money and attention directed at our sense of what is important in the spectrum of art making, and we often come off like missionaries trying to convert the unwashed even as we try to get them to help pay our bills. America's cultural mainstream is profoundly vernacular, so changing our approach means rethinking basic assumptions about value and artistic hierarchies—another daunting challenge, but if we are going to connect art and art making with quality of life in order establish sufficient agreement on value to support our case, we've got to derive meaning from the way citizens really engage art every day. That's where art connects with quality of life and the public interest.

So let's get real—continued...
by Adrian Ellis

I take all Bill's points about the partial view of cultural life that an overly narrow focus the nonprofit sector implies. Bill's insistence both on a more plural definition of cultural activity and a commensurately deeper understanding of its political and social context is salutary. But the nonprofit arts sector is still a big area of cultural life and of civic life and one we need to get right.

One of my fears is that the arguments developed and deployed to secure public funding for the nonprofit sector of the arts – and that have indeed channeled significant sums into the sector and often

against the odds – have left it expanded but weakened, with a feverish bloom on it rather than the deep glow of good health. Much of the funding that has gone into e.g. capital projects has increased the sector's fixed cost base faster than it has increased its access to earned or contributed income required to maintain that base; and the increasingly directive policy orientation of foundations and public funders (though not of individual philanthropists) has led to under-funded programmatic expansion in non-core areas.

The broadly 'instrumental' arguments cut more ice both because they are quantifiable and because they align the arts to policy goals such as economic development and education that resonate more deeply with policy makers and their stake-holders than does support for culture per se.

But they provide the rationale for forms of expenditure that may not actually encourage a vibrant cultural life but inadvertently weaken it. The net effect has been to leave the nonprofit part of the sector weakly capitalized and over-extended. Meanwhile, as the RAND report points out, the level of demand has not matched the expansion in supply, and the competition for audience not just within the nonprofit cultural sector but between the sector as a whole and other demands on leisure time and discretionary expenditure, grows ever fiercer.

Is not part of the preoccupation with re-grounding the arguments for public and philanthropic funding for culture driven by our awareness that, uncomfortable though it is to say, the nonprofit cultural sector will inevitably need to contract if there is to be some sustainable equilibrium; and that the current arguments in support of culture do not appear to give us very nuanced criteria for managing that contraction and managing the tough choices with which arts administrators and arts funders are being faced?

Packaging, Zeal and Varieties of Aesthetic Experiences
by Joli Jensen

In his wonderful essay, "The Loss of the Creature," Walker Percy raises the problem of symbolic packaging—he says we must learn how to wrest meaning from experiences that inevitably come to us prepackaged (and therefore lost to us) by our assumptions and expectations.

The smothering of artistic experience via symbolic packaging may be what we are up to when we seek ever-more persuasive arguments for the arts. Doug's starting question could be restated: "what is the best—most effective or convincing—packaging for arts experiences?" The emerging answer in this discussion is that it may be extrinsic economic and civic benefits for some audiences, and intrinsic cognitive or emotional effects for other audiences, but with problems if we choose one over the other.

What I want to suggest here is that we simply stop wrapping up the arts in any benefits packaging whatsoever. In other words, maybe the packaging is causing the problems. As Adrian argues, it has fostered cultural expansion that ultimately weakens the non-profit sector. As Bill points out, it always makes us come off as missionaries trying to convert the great unwashed. By extrinsic and intrinsic logic, various arts experiences are defined as "good for you"—and by implication "better for you" than other kinds of popular or commercial cultural experiences. This instrumental logic is always insulting to the vast numbers of people who usually choose and enjoy non-art forms.

I want us, instead, to focus on aesthetic experience itself, and to acknowledge how aesthetic experiences are available in all levels and kinds of culture. As John Dewey pointed out long ago, the fine arts aren't the only routes to aesthetic experiences. If what we want is to broaden and deepen the varieties of aesthetic experience for others, then our concerns should be with enhancing access across groups and styles and hierarchies.

I want us to become willing to call ourselves arts fans or arts enthusiasts, thereby recognizing that our zeal for our chosen forms is akin to the zeal other people have for their non-art forms of engagement. And then it becomes our job to demonstrate to non-arts types what is so delightful, engaging and wonderful about the stuff we love. It's up to us to share our enthusiasms, rather than to keep offering potential customers an ever-shifting package of imagined benefits.

If we let go of the "benefits packaging" we let go of our role as self-appointed missionaries, and we are out of the business of offering social, civic, cognitive or emotional medicine—or snake oil. Instead, we are

sharing our arts zeal with all the passion and energy we can muster. And that allows us to contribute much more honestly and directly to a rich, diverse and respectful cultural mix.

Other comparisons
by Jim Kelly

Bill Ivey makes an excellent point that those of us in the public arts arena, to our constant frustration, encounter almost daily: the implication that the arts are simply not as important or deserving of public support as other “essential” services. While we in the arts field believe the arts serve a public purpose, “most gatekeepers are unconvinced."

And it’s precisely because of this attitude that we are engaged in this blog. The gatekeepers are policy makers, like David Obey or my own county council members. They love the arts, ...as long as health and human service needs are addressed first. And of course, we hear, they have to deal with education, affordable housing, law, safety and justice, transportation, and water management. After those essential, more important services are taken care of, they’ll see what’s left for the arts.

I have a colleague, the director of a municipal arts agency, who made his agency’s annual budget pitch to his City Council immediately following a group that was working to reduce infant mortality rates in minority populations.

Do the arts have a moral claim for public support? And if, so, what is the basis of that claim?

I suggest we examine two other publicly funded activities: libraries and parks. The benefits of both are instrumental and intrinsic. Few would argue that libraries and parks are not important services of government. Democracy cannot flourish without an informed, discerning, educated citizenry. And everyone needs recreation, a place to play ball, picnic, gather, exercise. Reading and exercising primarily benefit the individual, but in subtle, intangible ways, each contributes to the collective health of a community.

I have never heard a public official suggest that we have too many libraries, or that libraries should raise significant portions of their budgets in the private sector. Libraries may have to absorb budget cuts when city budgets get tight, they may have to reduce hours of operation, or lay-off staff, but they are acknowledged to be important community assets. Last year, Seattle tried to eliminate its bookmobile to cut costs, and the public outcry was immediate and loud. The bookmobile was funded.

Three years ago, King County told its residents that it could no longer afford to operate its extensive parks system. Voter approved initiatives had stripped the county of much of its discretionary revenue and the county simply lacked the resources to keep the parks open. Once again the outcry was immediate. The county was accused of punishing voters for approving the tax reducing initiatives. Hours of operation were reduced, the ownership of some parks was transferred to suburban cities, but no parks actually closed.

Where was the outcry when California practically eliminated its state-wide arts council?

The arts should have the same claim to public support as libraries and parks. Maybe more so. Libraries open our minds, parks keep us physically healthy, and the arts fuel imagination. How can we possibly address the challenges of the future without the power of creativity. Who’s helping us exercise that muscle?

Nice Thoughts...
by Bill Ivey

Adrian is very smart and I agree with his point that the non-profit sector is important and big on its own, and also that it has perhaps grown bigger than its current justifications might allow, which has produced nervousness.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the non-profit model has truly dominated the U.S. cultural enterprise only among organizations that present or preserve the European refined art forms; it has had some application but is by no means the primary business model in theater, jazz, and folk arts. The vast mainstream of cultural work, including things that arts people love, like independent film, literary

publishing, and galleries in Lower Manhattan are organized for profit. Unfortunately, making the case for strengthening the cultural system by investing in nonprofits always seems to get tangled with arguments encouraging citizens to “move on up” by coming to their senses and embracing the superiority of our refined arts. The resulting mixed message is not helpful.

I think the key to refreshing our argument is to link up research in art participation with research on happiness and lifelong quality of life. To me, somewhere in that constellation is the magic bullet (mixed metaphor!)that will allow us to make the big case and confidently package intrinsic value as a component of public policy.

Just left the dentist and feel the need for a beer...More in the morning.

Since the hand grenade pin has been pulled...
by Ben Cameron

OK, I forget to log in one day and come back to see hand grenades thrown in my direction, as both Bill and Russell say....

Before I lob it back, I must say that I’m taken with the way in which much of what we say really is in agreement—that we’re frustrated with the general inability to move the arts forward more successfully on the public agenda, that we want more support for the arts, that we sense the traps inherent in pitting the arts against other pressing social demands, and we all want a healthier arts environment. From such common cause, great things will grow, I hope.

Two quick observations to earlier comments: pitting the arts against other causes IS a trap. For a healthy society, it should be a both/and and not an either/or. Many of the past questionnaires ask us to prioritize how we spend money—e.g. which is more important between infant mortality and the arts—rather than asking us to describe those characteristics that comprise a healthy society. If we could look at the latter, there would be room and a necessity of a creative approach to policy—one that seeks to promote a more holistic sense of national health in which the arts MUST be counted—rather than the traps of competing causes.

And to Bill’s point. In EVERY industry, growth implies greater reliance on more people—a relationship that implies a move to the middle and, quite possibly, a more mainstream aesthetic take. To fault large theatres for more conservative fare is both a fairly soft point (in many cases) and not really indicative of what is going on in the FIELD. Putting the large institutions aside for a moment, the VAST majority of theatres in this country operate on $1,000,000 or less these days—and it is often in these smaller groups that a different kind of work is seeded and blooms. ANGELS IN AMERICA started at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco who commissioned it, long before Broadway; it’s the not for profit who have given us Suzan Lori Parks, the Wooster Group, Mabou Mines, the whole explosion of exciting young work—Elevator Repair Service, Big Art Group, Richard Maxwell, Rude Mechanicals—the list goes on and on and permeates the country.

Judging a field by the behavior of 70 or so large groups—a fraction of the professional community but a fraction that thankfully provides deeply meaningful experiences and joyous encounters to those faithful audiences who have built them and attend in huge numbers—is not the same as saying that a field has abandoned innovation and experimentation. The national theatre community stands in stark rebuttal to that oversimplified, and unfair, assertion.

Returning “Results"
by Midori

One of the greatest challenges of advocating for the arts is in designing the programs to fulfill our fundraising promises. In order to receive grants and donations, we wine and dine potential grantors, we dance and sing the benefits that the funding would bring, and attempt to persuade funders of the potential worth of their donation. When the funding is secured (usually for a limited time only, as no funding source is ever a bottomless pit), it is only a beginning. The real challenge comes after the grant is received. It’s now time to execute the promised activity/project and to prove its worth. Sharp development

administrators must do even more. In order to be truly successful, they know they will require continued support so, in order to demonstrate the success of a given project, they must demonstrate the “results” in terms that funders understand and appreciate. Documents such as the RAND Study are very helpful for fundraising purposes, not only before the funding is secured but afterwards as well.

For example, most funders like statistics and proven facts, like numbers. They want an outcome that is expressed in business terms, like a scientific model. These are facts of life for those of us seeking funding and we have to live with them. In fairness, funders certainly deserve to know how their money is spent, but for an arts organization sometimes painful choices must be made between quantity and quality.

Numbers, seen concretely on paper, are easier to comprehend and more persuasive than descriptions and, for this reason, they have become extremely powerful in the non-profit world. In reality, only a few of the decision makers in the granting organizations actually have the opportunity to directly observe the programs which seek their funds or to get to know an organization first-hand. The rest of the decision-making body therefore must rely partly on the appraisal of a few who have observed a program, and mostly on the funding application, which is filled with hard facts and numbers. With individual donors, this can be less of a problem, but it remains difficult to grapple with the entire scope of an arts activity unless one has direct and ongoing involvement. As a result, numbers have taken on an even more powerful role.

The Executive Director of one of my non-profit organizations often talks to me about the dilemma of quantity vs. quality. When resources (in terms of finance and personnel) are limited, having both quantity and quality is impossible. It is also difficult to convey the concept of quality, or depth of effectiveness, within the narrow confines of a grant application. In short, quantity has become ever more powerful as a fundraising tool. Could this be caused in part by the mass culture that seeks massive solutions?

In my own experience and that of colleagues who also advocate for the arts, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make an argument to potential funders for an increase in the quality of a program versus the raw numbers of individuals the program will reach. If we want to increase the funding for a program in order, for example, to give 1,000 children the opportunity to paint in oils as well as watercolors, often the potential donor will require instead that 2,000 children be given watercolors. We find that donors and granting organizations feel the need to prove their effectiveness by citing the number of individuals served rather than the quality of the service provided.

For administrators (and artists), it’s a Catch-22. We have to supply the numbers to prove ourselves so that we can get our projects funded. Without the funding, we can’t deliver anything—including quality. But, in order to meet the huge quota demand, we risk having to spread ourselves thin, thereby reducing the quality of the programs we provide.

How can we begin to resolve this?

We need more artists actively involved in all aspects of advocacy and fundraising. We need artists, administrators, and funders to be partners. More artists and more involvement means, at least, more artists to supply the “quantity” but less of those artists having to spread themselves thin.

We need more opportunities to make ourselves (artists and organizations) more accessible, to cover larger geographical areas.

We need more concrete training possibilities to be made available to artists, so more artists can qualify to provide quality.

Needless to say, all these initiatives require money, and lots of it. More opportunities for fundraising! I’d like to see greater collaboration and dialogue among those of us who are involved in arts advocacy, and this blog is certainly a step in the right direction. It might also be very helpful to have a conference to discuss our shared challenges. Ultimately what we need are concrete actions, based on a realistic assessment of where we are and where we want to go.

More Reader Comments
by Douglas McLennan

To read all of the reader comments, please visit the web archive, or download the comment document.

Finding support for the arts might be impossible in a democratic society. Where individual self interest is the prime political motivation (social security reform) where the common good is replaced with a individual with wealth, makes it hard to form a consensus on what is of value. —Charles Hankin

In this discussion, there is too much focus on justifying something which doesn't need it. Someone mentioned the defensiveness of the arts community, trying to prove its worth to the general public. The greatest effort should be made with public school boards and civic leaders to make the arts mandatory (as it is, under the "No Child Left Behind Act), using people who are successful in business to advocate; businessmen/women who have had arts experiences in their schooling. —Margaret Koscielny

I have seen a few comments that prioritize the arts behind more essential social services like health care and transportation. I have lived in Europe for the last 25 years. I have noticed that the societies that spend the most on things like public health and transportation, are also the societies that spend the most on the arts. It is not a question of either/or, but a different philosophy about the use of wealth for the common good. Show me a country with excellent mass transit and national health insurance, and I will show you a country with adequate public funding for the arts.—William Osborne

Extended arguments about art and culture are only listened to by those who care about art and culture already. What we need to find is a way of reaching the average American and getting the message across in bite sized chunks. But knowing that the Iraq war could have funded the National Endowment for the Arts for 1500 YEARS, or helped resolve the Social Security "crises" might help get the point across to some. Many of the people at the grass roots level that we need to convince don't like polysyllables.—Peter Ellenstein

Implying that people who pay money to see a movie such as Alien vs. Predator do not appreciate art only creates a division and the sense that the self-proclaimed artistic community is truly elitist. No one learns to run before being shown how to walk. The practical arts advocate takes the positive and does not spend time bemoaning the artistically uneducated status of the populace. Introduce the visually-oriented Alien vs. Predator fan to the full body of Giger's work, segue that into other surrealists, show them the full collection of your local modern/contemporary museum, ask them to volunteer at the next function, become a member, then a donor, etc.—Jack Bradway

For good reason it is commonly understood that public sectors such as transportation contribute to the quality of our lives and serve everyone's interest. After all, a bus is a bus and a train is a train, and everyone knows perfectly well that both are modes of transportation that enhance our daily lives. But what of art? What is it, and what role does it play in our lives? Who can blame policy makers, not to mention ordinary citizens, for not fully appreciating that the arts are worthy of support when virtually any object or activity is considered art just because someone in the artworld declares it to be? —Louis Torres

I suppose this is a bit of a digression but it has long been my belief that the arts in general could benefit from the sort of national advertising campaign the United Way crafted with the NFL. Seeing an athlete better known for his blocking and tackling prowess interacting with small children not only humanizes the athlete, it puts a face on and brings health and human services into our consciousness. —Sally Everhardus

Many of us in the field of arts education and arts education research are growing weary of the arguments for or against the so-called secondary learning values of the arts when a wide range of learning outcomes is the inevitable outcome of any highly engaged arts experience. It is especially troubling to see that those who do testify or investigate arts learning outcomes that

draw attention to phenomena out of alignment with some arts organizations' notion of primary values of the arts ostensibly become "the enemy" of the best case for the arts. —Larry Scripp

Day Four | **March 9, 2005**

We shape our arguments, and they shape us
by Andrew Taylor

It's been interesting to watch the media and others frame the nature of the RAND study as against instrumental arguments, and for intrinsic arguments. This columnist in the South Florida Sun Sentinel was about as extreme as they come in this regard. And I've enjoyed the depth and context of this weblog conversation immensely. To me, it's the conversation, not the conclusion, that the RAND study is really about.

We've all agreed (as Ben and Glenn have noted) that we will use any reasonable argument to advance a cause in which we believe. You want economic impact? Sure, we've got that. You want educational benefit? That's us. You want pro-social behavior among at-risk youth? We're the folks that can deliver. And the RAND study doesn't say these arguments aren't true, just that they lack the depth, nuance, and evidence of causality that you'd like to find in a policy conversation (but honestly, seldom do).

In my work (training and fostering management professionals primarily for the nonprofit and public arts), the true blessing of the RAND effort is the way it helps us frame and understand the arguments we use.

Persuasive and resonant arguments are among the most essential 'soft tools' of cultural management. And as with any tool, if we are not the master of it, it will master us. Two of my favorite statements will help to make this point. The first is an old consultant's aphorism:

> If you only have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

The second is attributed to Winston Churchill (the font of all great quotes):

> We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.

Adrian has already spoken wonderfully of the ecological implications of our instrumental arguments (more and more fixed cost and infrastructure, without the operating support to truly maintain it). I'm speaking here, instead, of the individual organizational and management implications of using arguments without truly understanding their basis and their aftermath.

For example, when you promise economic impact for your facility, you are making a promise about volume...more heads equal more hotel beds equal more drinks, more babysitters, more dinners out. To the extent that that volume comprises more affluent people than not, more good news for economics. The rub is that volume and affluence often run contrary to the reasons you formed as a nonprofit in the first place.

The answer, of course, is to use these arguments, but use them with mastery, with insight, with elegance, and with care. All of those attributes are difficult to attain when your industry is closed and silent about how the arguments work (or don't work).

Which is why this report, and this conversation, is such a welcome breath of air.

The Nonprofit Dilemma
by Bill Ivey

Ben's response to my assertion that creativity and experimentation is being squeezed out of non-profit arts world encourages me to expand on those thoughts a bit (See, don't answer back, it'll only encourage him!).

I agree with Ben that there is creativity and risk taking in the theater, and, I guess, we could review the content of twenty or thirty subscription seasons presented by companies with varying budgets in order to make some judgment about the degree of experimentation that exists across the board. But, then our opinions would be burdened with fact and the conversation would be less fun.

I'd rather point out the three converging tendencies that, to me, make it very difficult for nonprofits to use creative freedom as a compass with which to steer programming. First, as I mentioned the other day, the entire non-profit cultural sector has probably grown to a point at which we're competing tooth-and-nail for every penny that gatekeepers are willing to assign to "culture;" popular programming becomes an essential survival strategy. I'm a card-carrying arts populist, so I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, but we need to acknowledge the fact that in many museums and performing arts organizations programming decisions are driven by the need to feel confident about audience or donor support. And, because nonprofits are perpetually undercapitalized, they have much less ability to tolerate failure than, say, a for-profit record company that operates knowing that only one in eleven CD releases will make money. No modern nonprofit could tolerate the failure rates accepted in movies, TV, or record business.

Midori's very strong point about the tyranny of "results" also highlights part of the problem. The entire field of cultural funding has become more outcome oriented in the past decade: corporate sponsors want exhibitions to actually sell products; foundations expect community transformation or youth development; everybody wants big audiences. As Midori indicates, the multitude of donor demands and expectations forces arts nonprofits to take their eyes off the creative ball. As we take money for projects targeting economic development projects or at-risk youth, we force ourselves away from core artistic values. Of course, we can walk away from promising big audiences, transformed communities, or smart, well-behaved kids, but we would do so knowing that our sector would instantly get shrink, because the pot of philanthropic and public money available for a "pure" artistic agenda is a lot smaller than what's out there for social transformation.

(Of course, this is just a version of the "art versus commerce" argument that cuts across the entire cultural system, not just the nonprofit world. Here in Nashville, songwriters, record producers, and recording artists complain bitterly that the demands of radio programmers (who have very specific needs around songs that prevent audiences from "tuning out"), hold too much sway in the entire creative process. The record industry can, of course, walk away from the demands of radio (and some boutique companies do avoid radio), but the post-radio record business would be a lot smaller than it is with broadcasting as a marketing arm. The same holds true for a film director who resents the presence of a studio "watchdog" executive on the set. So, these issues of balancing artistic vision against the demands of those who are paying the bills for their own reasons cut across the for-profit and non-profit sectors. However, because nonprofits lack the financial reserves necessary to encourage risk, and because we often have a hand-to-mouth relationship with funders, I would argue that right now our very large non-profit sector is more inclined to compromise art for commerce than for-profit arts companies. We could choose to be more creative, but I think we'd be choosing to get smaller at the same time.

Was there a third point...? Oh, I remember: one challenge unique to nonprofits is the fact that organizational mission is always bigger than available resources. That means, of course, that if we have good years we always use excess earnings to grow programming, not to create reserves that would free us to invest in future experimental work. Oh, I'm certain there are exceptions, but I know I'm right on the rule. From time to time the NEA and other entities have funded the creation of cash reserves, and we all quickly learned that, after a couple of years, the reserves somehow migrated into operations. I believe this is a perpetual management issue that is an inevitable result of the accurate perception that a cultural nonprofit can always be doing "more." This is, of course, a noble aspect of non-profit character, but one that keeps us in a fiscal backwater that forces too much emphasis on attracting big numbers and pleasing donors.

Some of these problems are the result of the way we are forced to "make the case" in a scramble for limited resources. Employ instrumental arguments, and your organization starts to serve somebody else's agenda; fall back on "intrinsic value," and your company might end up performing for quarters on the stairway leading down to the Flatbush Avenue Express.

Artistic Risk
by Adrian Ellis

Bill and Ben's riff on the relation between all this stuff and artistic risk is perhaps THE issue...

Many of the newer, more instrumental responsibilities that arts organizations have embraced are often inimical to the protection of informed artistic risk-taking, which I for one regard as a central responsibility of anything that deserves the name of a cultural organization. (How one defines 'artistic risk' would require several more blogs but anyway I'll assume we all have an least heavily overlapping if not identical ideas of what it is.

There is, I think, an innately problematic relationship between the transgressive modus operandi of artistic expression and the agendas of community builders. They may well coincide on a given issue, and the coincidence can be a source of strength to both art and community, but an arts organization needs to be able to choose the terms of its engagement with power. Organizations that are weighed down by wider civic responsibilities and the financial obligations that are required to exercise them risk losing that ability to make choices—especially when financial survival is dependent upon the ability to demonstrate effectiveness as an instrument of someone else's policy.

This dilemma has grown more acute as the criteria that funders expect to be met have become more explicit and the methodologies of evaluation more exacting, which in turn has led to a greater interest in those areas that can be measured and a neglect of interest in many of the ineffable qualities that are the raison d'etre of artistic expression.

Whether the source of funds is the public sector, foundations or corporations (but as Glenn pointed out way back when—Monday I think—less so individuals), they are all increasingly strategic in their purposes, increasingly willing to call the organizations they fund to account, and less and less willing to fund general operating costs as opposed to the variable costs of specific programs that further their strategic agendas.

In seeking at least a partial escape from this dilemma, many organizations look increasingly to new sources of earned income—expanded retail and catering, licensing, partnerships with for-profit organizations etc. etc. These can absorb considerable time and effort from senior management and board members that displaces attention paid to core functions and pushes organizations into new and unfamiliar areas of risk—and that as often as not tempt organizations down the path of imagined cross-subsidy that subsequently fails to materialize.

Many of the organizational and physical means required to dispatch the newer, more instrumental ends that arts organizations pursue are themselves often inimical to risk-taking. The inclusive, often cumbersome, structures of governance; the generally consensual and process-heavy nature of the managerial paradigm that has become received wisdom for non-profit management in the United States; and the rapacious demands of planning, constructing, occupying and maintaining high profile civic buildings (a.k.a. the edifice complex) all militate against the maneuverability and entrepreneurial opportunism that is the breeding ground of artistic innovation—and indeed of commercial success.

One additional thought..
by Ben Cameron

Just one quick additional observation. Before we get too enamored with the notion of experimentation and innovation as the raison d'etre of the not for profit, let me just add that it is one—but not the only—reason that justifies our existence. The notion that we make a social/ educational/ cultural contribution may or may not translate into innovative aesthetics.

Many theatres work to give voice to communities who have been historically denied a larger public platform. Theatres of color, gay and lesbian theatres, theatres working to capture rural traditions, theatres for the deaf—these and many more—are a critical part of the not for profit landscape and are vital to our larger social health, even if they choose to operate within relatively conventional dramaturgical structures and patterns (as many, but by no means all, of them do). I worry that in our emerging focus on innovation/experimentation, we're inadvertently distorting the shape and value of the sector as a whole.

Expressive logic, and the garage band sensibility
by Joli Jensen

I'm thrilled we're all talking about instrumental arts-support logic. I've tracked this instrumental logic back to Walt Whitman and up through the culture wars (in my book Is Art Good For Us?) and I really believe it is ultimately harmful to our cause. It's a dream come true for me to have so many smart, arts-dedicated people exploring the implicit and explicit claims we've been making. As Andrew points out, understanding the consequences of the language we choose is important work….thanks so much to all of you. This is (alas!) my last post for the week—I'm away from the Internet for spring break starting tomorrow. So one final entry:

Assuming that our common cause is fostering and sharing the arts that we love, how do we best make our case? I want us to give up instrumental logic, and adopt a more expressive logic in support of the arts. Expressive logic is based not on extrinsic or intrinsic benefits, but on the value of aesthetic experience. If we adopt it, we'll have a much easier time getting non-arts types to try our favorite forms. But to adopt expressive perspectives, we'll have to let go of our self-serving assumptions about the powers of art to uplift, refine, transform, empower etc.

If we are to adopt expressive logic, and define the arts as public goods, like parks and libraries (nice connection, Jim) then we need to explore how and why the arts, natural spaces and information collections offer us valuable, worthwhile experiences. Historically, the presumed instrumental value of public parks and libraries was what got them funded—both were seen as ways to assimilate and uplift immigrants and the unwashed masses. Such hopes may have helped convince philanthropists in the late 19th century, but libraries and parks (at least here in the heartland) are too often dismissed as "frills," compared with other social services. I'm all for the arts, for parks and for libraries, but not because I think they will uplift, civilize or refine anyone. They are good things that I love, and I want to make them happen, and I will support them when they do, and I yearn to share them with my fellow citizens.

Which brings me to the garage band model of cultural performance. Sometimes you don't need to be widely popular or prosperous to exist and do well. All you have to do is keep things really cheap. My husband has a small theatre company here in Tulsa that has successfully staged four oddball plays a year for the past five years. He started it with $2000 and he still has $2000 in the bank, which he uses to stage mostly terrific shows that need no more than about 25 people per night (at $10 a person) to break even. Some shows lose money, some make it, but he has never assumed that he needed or deserved extra funding to put on the stuff that he likes, and that other local theatre companies can't or won't do. His is the garage band model for theatre, and it offers quirky but high quality cultural experiences to all participants.

The most frequent question he gets when people call for tickets is "what should I wear?" A subset of them ask about food, and most have clearly have never heard of a black box theater. But when they show up for Beckett or Havel, they find out that there's something other than musical dinner theater, or Our Town that can be called theatre. And they don't have to wear fancy clothes, and even weird sounding plays done by local actors can be worth going to.

Obviously symphonies and operas can't be garage bands (of course we shouldn't be lumping museums with orchestras with local theater groups, as has already been pointed out). But we need to remember that garage bands (and many forms of fine art) don't need a very big audience to exist and to continue. Maybe we shouldn't spend so much of our energies seeking revenue streams to help us grow bigger and more popular and more prosperous. Maybe we should just keep doing our oddball stuff in our own passionate ways, and do our best to help other people see why we're so dedicated to the cultural forms we call "the arts."

The RAND report mentions in passing the role that the arts play in the creation and maintenance of social identity. Instrumental logic too easily fosters an elitist and pedantic identity for the arts, an identity that rightly puts off all kinds of people. Expressive logic, and a garage band sensibility, fosters an arts identity that is more open, democratic, egalitarian and experimental. With it, the arts can become more welcoming and inclusive, without commercializing or pandering. And that can only help the arts—and all of us—from here on in.

Again, my thanks to everyone posting. It's been great to be able to think out loud in such good company.

From the "media" perspective
by Phil Kennicott

One element we haven't really addressed directly yet is the role of the professional argument makers in addressing the value of the arts. That would be journalists, arts journalists who regularly attend and review performances and exhibitions, and journalists who are engaged with improving civic life through editorializing and opinion columns. I've spent some time doing both kinds of work, reviewing music, and working for the editorial page of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, making arguments for maintaining architectural landmarks, supporting arts groups, and rebuilding the fabric of downtown life. As an editorial writer, I often fought a kind of blank despair. We would craft arguments (using every rhetorical resource we could muster, instrumental, intrinsic, etc.) that seemed crushingly convincing, we'd send them out into the world, and nothing would change. It was good training in the frustrations of a one-sided conversation, which I imagine is what many in the business of promoting the arts feel, day to day. As a music critic, I rarely engaged with anything so bluntly promotional as a direct argument about the merits, uses, values, of great music. It seemed to me that my role was to demonstrate the relevance of music, rather than argue for it. And that demonstration came in the form (I hoped) of lively, regular reviewing. Which leads me to the one real point I have to add to the previous entries about the experimental vitality of the non-profit arts sector. There are a lot of "arguments" with the public about art going on at every level, in all sorts of different media. Television advertisements that make an evening out at the theater a glamorous thing are a kind of argument. And reviewing is an argument as well. If you want to harness the demonstrative power of the critical "argument," you have to provide critics something interesting to talk about. There's a reason why critics rarely cover community choruses, dinner theater, and so forth. Not because we think the world would be better without them, but because they give us so little material with which to engage a thinking public.

At a turning point?
by Bill Ivey

I like Joli's "garage band" approach a lot, and I've always suspected there's a lot of that kind of thing going on, but, of course, it doesn't get tracked because it's not part of the "case-making/advocacy" system which is about making big and pretty big things even bigger.

After noodling about it for a couple of days I've decided what I like best about the Wallace/RAND report is the opportunity it affords to take a breath and at least bring up some of the overarching issues that face the arts in the U.S. I've been thinking a lot lately about what we should be doing now, early in a new century, to try to shape a more vibrant cultural system that serves the public interest. Here's why I'm convinced that the time is right for us to take a step back to try some really different ideas:

Scroll back forty or fifty years. If you were an arts-engaged policy leader living, say, in New York, Boston, or DC in 1955 or 1960, and you wanted to come up with a few interventions that would make the arts scene more vibrant, what might you have considered? Well, first of all, you might have looked at your big-city nonprofits and said, "Let's nurture more organizations like this in other parts of the country; that will improve the cultural landscape." In addition, it would have been logical to think that it would also be helpful to tour performing arts groups and exhibitions produced by these major, big-city institutions out into the hinterlands: "By George, let's give them a taste of the real thing!"

If you could influence an NGO, then grants to these new and established cultural non-profits might be just the ticket; if you were positioned to invent and lobby for a new state or federal government cultural agency, that agency could employ the same matching grant model to build up a sector that would provide an alternative to commercial culture and a healthier overall arts landscape.

And, what about TV, already, by the 1960s, declared a "vast wasteland?" Well, by mid-century citizens were spending their time watching one of three commercial networks, so..."Let's fund a public-

broadcasting alternative; by making solid news and cultural programming a one-in-four choice, we'll improve the overall quality of TV."

Now, all of those strategies were put in play and, in retrospect, they appear to have been both appropriate and remarkably effective. If we'd looked at the situation in, say, 1980 or even 1985, we would have made the correct assessment that these three or four interventions in the U.S. cultural system had been "dead on."

But let's fast-forward to today, and, as arts-concerned public intellectuals, ask ourselves the same question: how we might intervene to enhance the vitality of our 21st-century arts system? We could, of course, answer the question by saying, "Well, we need better arguments so we can keep building nonprofits and touring non-profits, and we need to keep improving the content of public TV." Fine, but such an answer ignores the obvious fact that the backdrop against which we're strategizing has been transformed: our local public TV station is not one of four or five, but, for the 75-80% of cable-wired homes, one of 150 or 200. We're not starting our effort to advance classical music with 30 or 40 orchestras in place, but with 350 or more. And, at the same time, the expanded reach of copyright, mergers in art and broadcasting industries, and the loss of independent book and record retailers have narrowed the gates through which most artists build careers and through which most citizens consume culture. A whole new approach to nurturing and gatekeeping may be what's required.

So, maybe we need to really reprise the process that was initiated in the early '60s, when the NEA, Dance in America, and state arts agencies were just various glimmers in various eyes. If we take on that task and take it seriously, I don't think we'll end up placing the highest priority on intervention through arguments and case making that are grounded in decades-old intervention strategies.

The RAND study has given us an "emperor's-new-clothes" moment, exposing the truth that our non-profit cultural community may be like Wile E. Coyote when he first runs off the edge of a mesa, standing secure in midair for the brief second before he looks down, realizes he's got nothing under him, glances toward the audience for a moment of sympathy, and then comes crashing down.

Know Your Audience
by Robert L. Lynch

Sorry to be late to the blog. First I think it really important to differentiate among 1) personal love/passion for the arts and 2) methods for exciting and involving new participants in the arts and 3) what it takes to convince a decision maker to financially support the arts. They are three entirely different situations.

According to NEA statistics some 40% of the American public participate in the arts on an annual basis. That figure includes folks who attended just one event so the percentage of involved truly passionate folks is much smaller. I assume that all of us and all arts advocates are in my first category above. However, I assume that we have a lot of cultivation work still to do to get most of America's adults and children to become even marginally interested in what we love.

That comes first from there being an opportunity for these people to be engaged in some way and secondly once an opportunity (theater, dance, music, literature, an arts center, a close to home visual or performing arts venue, a decent art program in the local schools) is available there needs to be some way to involve and excite these prospects in an art form of their choice. This necessitates engagement and passion and people to help and guide others along that journey. But is that new? That is what some 50,000 nonprofit arts organizations in America try to do every day (up from 7,700 nonprofit arts organizations in America in 1965). This is always all done by getting people to experience intrinsic benefits.

No one comes to an arts event or gets excited about an arts course in school because someone has told them that they will be contributing to the community's economic impact or that a child's SAT scores will become higher (even though both could be true). And anyone who works in the arts knows this already.

So this brings me to my third area which is convincing decision makers—whether public or private; whether national, state or local—that they should do something to support the arts or arts education like allocate money or pass a policy. For now I am just focusing on the nonprofit sector (sorry Bill).

So just like all of America we can expect that the backgrounds and arts interests of these decision makers is a mix with a small percentage being really passionate about the arts, a bigger number being somewhat interested, and an even bigger number not really getting it because they have not really known the full wonder of the arts in their lives. The first rule of advocacy is: “to whom are you advocating” and the second rule is “what do they care about” not “what do you care about”.

Next week Americans for the Arts along with some 70 of our national arts organization colleagues will host 400 cultural advocates from around the country for National Arts Advocacy day to advocate for more federal arts dollars for the arts and arts education. These 400 advocates in tandem with thousands of email advocates from every state will reach 435 congressional offices and 100 senate offices and they will find a mix of receptiveness but every congressperson’s and every senator’s vote counts.

Some, the lucky ones, will meet a decision maker who already loves the arts and usually that is a vote we can count on but that is probably in my experience about 40%. Some, the very unlucky ones, will meet a decision maker who mostly on philosophical grounds will never support funding for the arts. These are libertarians and strict constitutionalist or fiscal or ideological arch conservatives.

In my experience at the federal level these days that is also about 40%. So to win a majority for the arts the middle 20% are key. And they will prove to be quite a mixed bag to those who visit them. Some care about the economy, some about jobs, some the federal deficit, some about kids after school, some about how kids grades in school compare to other communities, some pretty much only about getting more money to their districts, and all about getting reelected.

These leaders can and are tipped to support our issue only by what is referred to here as instrumental arguments, a term I don’t like. (I don’t like it because art is neither intrinsic nor instrumental but always both as all indigenous cultures know.

Every year Americans for Arts consults the National League of Cities for their annual survey of elected officials, which highlights the top issues concerning their 1,600 city members. This year, like all years, among the top ten are (only the order changing from time to time) city economic conditions, health and housing, unemployment & jobs, racial & economic inequalities. The arts are never in this list but the arts make a contribution to each of these areas and we need more research to even more effectively draw these connections.

Anyone making a case for the arts to a public decision maker who ignores the full spectrum arguments necessary to reach the full spectrum of decision makers in today’s environment of miniscule vote margins will lose. And the private sector decision makers are no less tough. There is no evidence that social good and economic arguments have begun to wear thin. To research this all anyone needs to do is look at the congressional record, state legislature and local city council and county commission voting records. It will be an eye opener.

Finally here are a few random thoughts. We need not decrease or de-emphasize any arguments we have but new arguments are very much welcome and needed. The landscape varies. The rise and fall of state government funding has risen and fallen in direct relationship to local state economies. The rise and fall of federal monies has been more ideological and political, and the pretty steady rise of local government funding has been directly linked to issues of community development. So there is no one size fits all. As Tip O’Neill said “all politics (insert arts politics) is local”.

There are suggestions that economic, educational, and social benefits of arts arguments are new since the late 80s and 90s. Not true. The United States evolved from very practical roots. Practicality and self reliance are still core values. Think of the John Adams quote we all know about the number of generations of practical endeavors it would take before the arts and letters could be a key part of peoples lives. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr in the first Nancy Hanks lecture produced by Americans for the Arts reminds us that the WPA Arts Projects in 1935 were for jobs creation.

The NEA itself came out of the House Committee on Education and Labor (note education and labor) and I myself was sitting across from Governor King of Massachusetts as early as the late 70s arguing to

keep him from eliminating the Massachusetts State Arts Council budget of then $2.3 million when he instead chose to actually increase the budget based pretty exclusively on new economic impact data that we brought fresh from a young Tom Wolf at the New England Foundation for the Arts.

The reason that public money, private money, and earned income for the arts have all been challenged over the last four years has very little to do with the arguments and a whole lot to do with Sept.11th, the stock market decline, and the earlier erosion of the dot com industries.

It is important to recall that the 1995 slashing of the NEA by 40% for the FY1996 budget was part of a three year phase out plan voted by the Newt Gingrich Congress that most people pretty much thought was a done deal. Elimination of the NEA was turned around by enormous national advocacy efforts focusing on instrumental arguments that could allow moderates to find reasons to support federal cultural funding that were compatible with party policies which compelled the Senate to keep the NEA alive.

Then in 2000 we won for FY 2001 the first increase for the NEA in 9 years because of continuing enormous national advocacy efforts and the fact that some 20 moderate republicans crossed party lines and voted for the arts based almost entirely upon economic impact arguments because they could defend this rationale to their own constituents.. The Endowment's increase was by three votes but signaled a major policy shift.

I have gone on too long. Supposed to keep this short. Too late.

A Couple of Links...
by Douglas McLennan

I wanted to jump in here with links to a couple of stories posted on ArtsJournal last night: The first a story quoting Tony Hall (who runs the Royal Opera House in London), arguing that major new investments in the arts are an obvious benefit: "They are part of something fundamental and big, which is the creative economy, which is now what we live off. And when you look at it like that then arts funding becomes a no brainer—our future depends on creativity."

The second is amusing. A mayor in a town in Mexico has "ordered all 1,100 members of the municipal police to read at least one book a month or forfeit their chance of promotion. 'We believe reading will improve their vocabulary and their writing skills, help them express themselves, order their ideas and communicate with the public. Reading will make them better police officers and better people'."

Supply and demand
by Phil Kennicott

New voices joining (welcome Robert Lynch) and others leaving (wish I had a chance to ask Joli to give a more tangible, practical definition of what "expressive logic" sounds like). Robert's first post lays out a good, workable three-part division of much of what has been said here. At various places, in different contexts, we have been talking about the deeply felt personal passion for the arts, strategies for getting new audiences to share that passion, and the ongoing work of convincing public officials to use public resources to make the arts accessible to everyone. Americans for the Arts does the unglamorous business of lobbying, and it's all too easy for people who are already deeply in love with art to find this sort of business a bit vulgar and dull, even anti-art in its practicality and compromise. I'm glad that this work is being done, but as someone who responds to art in an essentially erotic, sensual way, it seems a zillion miles away from anything that I know or care about music, theater, painting, dance. I need art in the same way that other people need bookies and dealers, so I've read many of the posts in this web conversation with a sense of alienation, as if they're happening on a strange planet where all the usual laws of nature are reversed. Of course, if I can't get my fix, I'll be the first one on the barricades.

I confess I found the RAND study a crushing bore. I respect its logic, and ultimately, I agree with the basic conclusion that if we can't communicate to new audiences the essential, intrinsic pleasures of art, we're not going to have new audiences. And yes, the problem is not supply, it's demand. But I'm skeptical of the idea that we can create demand through new programs, new educational efforts, new sources of support for arts groups. All of those are worthy efforts, and I officially support them (because they keep

artists busy, and put food on their tables). But a deep, ongoing, sustaining passion for art requires a personal need for it that is (from my experience) generated internally, as a reaction against ugliness in the world. Our politicians are already doing admirable work in creating that need. They deluge us with lies and hypocrisy, clichés and euphemisms. They insult our intelligence and betray our trust. From this fertile ground arises the need for art. Needless to say, popular culture is also doing admirable work on this front as well.

More Readers...
by Douglas McLennan

See all reader on the web archive, or through the available document download:

I agree with Midori's suggestion that more artists need to get involved with advocacy and fundraising efforts. As a musician who is deeply involved in aesthetic education, I witness the affect on children when they are introduced to, in this case, classical music, by a living, breathing, composer. I believe that a long term solution in garnering support for the arts would be to make sure that every child is exposed to arts education in the schools. Current marketing practices in this country target children because they know they are building relationships that can last a lifetime. Nostalgia plays an important role in consumers' loyalty to certain brands. Children who have had creative, hands-on artistic experiences in the school will more likely become advocates as an adult. —Beata Moon

We need to hone this discussion to find some new jumping-off places that will explain our evangelical fervor about the arts. Then, maybe, we can craft (yes, craft or create...but, not necessarily document or validate)a compelling message that can be adapted to various audiences. We're all on different pages. As Jim Kelly says, parks as a public benefit are rarely questioned. What's the message that will give the arts this kind of acceptance? Maybe what we are seeking is not a definitive case for the arts, not THE case for the arts, but some new suggestions for presenting multiple cases for the arts. Some audiences need a brief-case, others a train-case, and a few a makeup-case. What do these look like? —Bitsy Bidwell

Art may still be significant to people, "the arts" are increasingly less so. This raises a key evaluation factor: for how many people do the arts have to be important, for art to be important? Why, as is reflexively raised by those from the arts, do the arts have to be uniquely important? (If so, can you demonstrate it: if not re-formulating the arts in society with other partners would seem the logical consequence.) My personal belief is it is not bums in seats but brains in motion that matter, and these do not have to be all brains in motion, let alone the spurious indicator of value of lots of bums in seats.
—Terry Cheney

Perhaps the entree for answering this need for potential audiences is the garage band approach rather than the massive performing arts center. Maybe organizations should be putting their money into storefront theatres and stand alone black boxes where insecurities about dress code and etiquette aren't as big an issue because everyone is wearing jeans. (We tell people they don't necessarily have to dress up, but then they arrive at the venue and the veteran attendees are looking snazzy which gives a contradictory message.) Once people feel comfortable and good about themselves, then you point out that if they enjoyed this, maybe they want to try the mainstage over on 6th Street—or just keep coming back. —Joe Patti

It is interesting how we refer to arts groups as "non-profits," as if the arts can only be described for what they are not. In Europe, most orchestras, opera companies, theater troupes, and ballet companies are owned and operated by governments. I've seldom heard Europeans refer to arts groups as "non-profits." It's a curiously American way of thinking. We view the arts as if they were something inherently crippled, like one-winged birds. Most of our arts administrators rise in the profession because they are especially adept at working with these crippled, one-winged birds. Under the American system, which will always be ineffective and under-funded, it is inevitable that capital funds will have to be used for operating expenses. It is inevitable that "periods of contraction" will be recurrent, because the arts will always be starved. —William Osborne

Why is it that a case must be made? If the arts on which this discussion is focusing were a vital part of the lives of the majority of our population there would be no need for this weblog. To me, the question is not about the “case” to be made for the arts. Rather, it is what are the arts *doing* to make themselves vital to their communities. Good answers to the latter question make the former superfluous. —Doug Borwick

Day Five | **March 10, 2005**

Looking For Solid Ground
by Douglas McLennan

Many good strands here. Bob lays out a clear map of the constituencies to which one must make a case for the arts and frames the languages they speak. Bill pulls the current situation into perspective by taking us back to the cultural landscape of 40 years ago, enumerating the challenges, and pointing to the solutions created then to address them.

And Adrian touches on the perhaps skewed balances between supply and demand after a heady decade of arts building and four decades of attempting to “spread culture across the land."

Creative industries of all types—whether commercial or non-profit—are currently seeing the ground under them shift and their business models needing to be reinvented. Mass culture is dissolving before our eyes, and aggregated audiences seem to be declining across the board for TV, music, movies, books, sports... Some ventures, like the recording industry, cling desperately to their traditional model, evolving only when forced. Others are trying to grow new models, sensing opportunity in change. It’s not that there are fewer people consuming culture, it’s that their access to more things has expanded exponentially. In this context, the arts seem to be doing very well indeed at holding their own when compared to popular culture.

Are there any such opportunities in change for “the arts"? Much of this conversation has been about the language we use to “make a case". I guess I’m wondering if (moving beyond the language) anyone has practical ideas or strategies? Something solid to take away from this at the end?

We seem to be agreed that instrumental arguments aren’t convincing for the potential arts audience (though they may be for the politicians and business leaders). We seem to be agreed that the supply of arts is ample (if not overly so). So is the problem in building demand? (that seems a hard case to make on a busy day at the Met or MoMA). Do we need more outreach? Earlier exposure to the arts so as to build better arts consumers? Are we simply looking for more bodies, or should we care more about the kinds of bodies that come through the door?

And finally—what, exactly is our definition of success? Is it to get more people through the doors each year? To keep on building more museums, theatres and concert halls? I gotta say—there are plenty of times when I wish there were fewer people in the museum or theatre while I’m there.

And if things are so bad, where are the wide-scale failures? Where are the orchestras and theatre and museums going out of business? Oh, there have been a few, and stories about clinging to the edge of the raft abound, but as I look around I see a lot more companies that seem to have lost their artistic reason for being and get by year after year than I do actual going-out-of-business signs. Maybe that’s the real sign of distress—that we’d rather allow persistent artistic declines than some honorable deaths.

Reminded of the NEA
by Bill Ivey

Bob, as usual and as is to be expected (given his line of work), has made a solid argument for an inclusive approach to advocacy. As I said in my first posting, there is no obligation to be absolutely truthful when you’re trying to make a case. Yes, our instrumental arguments might leak here and there, but they also contain some solid truths and they work.

Bob's mention of the turnaround at the NEA leads me to ruminate, for a moment, on the things that we changed within the agency that put the brakes on the three-year phase-out and got the Endowment's budget growing again.

A quick anecdote: after attending a management seminar for new political appointees hosted by VP Al Gore in the summer of 1998, I came back to the Old Post Office and said, "I thought I was Chairman of the NEA; I didn't know until this morning I was the head of a federal agency!" I was kind of kidding, of course, but my underlying point was that, inside the Endowment and outside the NEA, there existed a highly-evolved sense of entitlement and exceptionalism—a strong feeling that the agency was above or exempt from the political rules that might affect, say, the Department of Transportation. "We're the arts; we're very, very special." In the non-profit arts world, this notion of exceptionalism and entitlement means, among other things, that the cultural sector feels free to make claims for support even when it's not possible to demonstrate demand for services. "Citizens want and need what we're offering even though they don't know it and aren't asking for it." That's a tough line to sell in any political environment and, even if you get by with it now and then and get some money, you're skating on thin ice in comparison to other petitioners who can argue citizen demand. (Responding parenthetically to Doug, I think the notion of arts exceptionalism makes it hard to let arts organizations pass away gracefully—death of the entitled reeks of moral failure.) Also, back in the late '90s I also got the feeling that arts people in and out of government held the concerns of members of Congress in what I would describe as "minimal high regard," and I'm convinced that many members "got the message" that they and their ideas were not worthy of serious consideration. Personally, I found mostly smart and dedicated people on the Hill, and, above all, they were CONGRESS, and therefore were to be taken seriously.

The staff I inherited at the Endowment insisted that I didn't have time to learn the job but had to do something right away (They were correct; your time is always shorter than you think in those political positions.). So, in the summer of 1998 we gathered up much of the staff and developed a new strategic plan for the NEA. Most notably in that document, we moved away from describing the agency as one that "served art and artists" toward language that said we "served the American people by partnering with artists and arts organization." At about the same time, the senior career and political staffs were encouraging (in fact, really pressing me) to come up with a "special initiative." That initiative turned out to be "Challenge America," a small grant program that grew out of Senior Deputy Scott Peterson's experience in South Carolina. We sketched it out and launched the program in a Chicago speech early in 1999; we convinced OMB and the White House to request $50 million in new money for CA, and I went, bird by bird, to every advocacy and service organization in the country to elicit their support. They bought in, and the Challenge America Initiative is what Bob's many advocates came together around and supported with such coherent enthusiasm in 1999, 2000, and 2001.

Hindsight is 20/20, and I'd like to say we (meaning Scott P., Dick Woodruff, Cherie Simon, Larry Baden, and many others in and out of government) had it all figured out with the CA Initiative, but partly we got lucky on a couple of points. We had come up with a program that was really about community arts, and was geared toward helping communities realize their dreams through the arts with small, fast-turnaround grants. To our surprise, this was a program that made sense to the Hill, because it was like other federal programs intended to improve quality of life in their states or districts, and it left key decisions to local leaders—we weren't telling communities what they had to do. We also (somewhat unconsciously) had come up with political language in naming the program, and members of Congress were quick to incorporate "Challenge America" into committee comments and floor speeches. But the Endowment was in a pretty deep hole, and even with a new program that clicked with members, and even with a strong advocacy effort that was really "on point," it still took two years of work to get the first budget increase.

I go on at such length because, to me, the lesson I took away from the success of Challenge America was how much arts advocates have to gain by casting ourselves as a regular, mainstream, citizen-oriented part of the public policy process. That means accommodating demand, holding in check those feelings of entitlement and exceptionalism, and really listening to policy leaders with contrary views. My message was "I'm the NEA Chairman from Nashville with a solid program that helps your communities

realize their dreams through the arts." It would not have helped me then, and probably wouldn't help now, to come in and talk about the intrinsic benefits of the arts.

While I was in Washington, I kept my little Piper Cub at an airport near Warrenton, Virginia. On my way home after flying I'd often stop off at the Wal-Mart to acquire those Wal-Mart items we all have to buy from time to time. I'd stand in the middle of the store, look at all the shoppers (I bet you didn't know that more than half of Wal-Mart shoppers don't even have checking accounts.), and ask myself "What is the NEA doing for these citizens?" I was never able to answer that question as directly as could, say, Janet Reno at Justice or even James Lee Witt at FEMA. However, I think there's an answer out there—not the old, "build it and they will come," or the even older "bring great art to the unwashed, and they will be grateful"—but something that really makes art and artists partners in improving quality of life for Americans.

Toward a more nuanced ecology
by Andrew Taylor

Thanks to Doug for calling us down a bit from our broader policy and persuasion discussion (which has been a blast) toward a focus on actual action steps. To me, this conversation and this report have reinforced two areas that are ripe for action and exploration 'on the ground.'

The first is to relax and expand our conceptions of where aesthetic experience is delivered. Bill and Joli have urged us to consider meaningful experiences that live outside the nonprofit model (John Dewey, as I recall, also spoke of things like fly fishing), and to allow that there's a massive ecology that's worth supporting and feeding—only part of which (perhaps just a tiny part) is in the formalized nonprofit arts.

Despite this nuanced ecology, our funding, policy, and support systems all drive artists to a Hobson's Choice: nonprofit or nothing. What range of options of support do we currently offer to creative endeavors that may live in neither the commercial or nonprofit world (what I've come to call 'unprofit' organizations)? Most contributed income is restricted to nonprofits, specifically 501c3 corporations, luring many artists to become much more structured and governed than they should be. Are there specific ways of loosening up this restrictive choice?

There is a vast middle ground between the symphony and the theme park, and it's ground we should more actively explore. I'm thinking here of 'fiscal sponsors' like Fractured Atlas, that allow artists and artistic projects to access contributed funds without forming as nonprofits themselves. I'm thinking here of microloans and co-ops and other support efforts currently focused on technology and biotech entrepreneurship. If there's powerful value in the fringes of our current system, let's send more energy to the fringes to see what happens.

I'll admit that this may not be the realm of public subsidy, but there's certainly opportunity for public policy to play a role (in zoning, in tax code, in corporate structure options, and such).

The second area of action/interest is clearly in this world of 'intrinsic' value (whatever we choose to call it). If the vitality of this individual and social connection is really the engine of all good things (including all the intrinsic outcomes), then arts managers and arts organizations should strive to understand it, to engage it, to build their business and their buildings around its possibility. I suggest that many organizations, funders, and managers have so readily accepted the trappings of the corporate metaphor, that they've lost part of the pipeline to the most powerful resources at their disposal—meaning, message, discovery, purpose.

Ironically, such a management style is strikingly similar to our recommendations here for effective advocacy: not just talking but listening, connecting to why audiences really are drawn to what we do...not what we believe should draw them. This doesn't mean, necessarily, that we alter our art to suit the consumer...but more that we honor and recognize the many ways people can connect to the creative experience.

Some of this essential work has finally begun, in projects like The Values Study in Connecticut, which wasn't just a research study, but an effort to train a community of arts managers and leaders to truly listen. In part the goal was to lead organizations toward a conversation, rather than the traditional one-directional efforts of 'outreach,' 'presenting,' 'education,' and 'marketing.'

I'm percolating other specific action steps, but for now, that's enough of a rant.

Doug's Deliberations…
by Adrian Ellis

Doug asks two questions with respect to the 'oversupply' thesis (i.e. the argument that there are currently more nonprofit cultural organizations than can be satisfactorily supported through a combination of earned income, available public sector support and philanthropic contributions):

i) So how come places like the Met and MoMA are heaving with people?

ii) So how come there aren't more 501(c)(3) organizations keeling over and dying?

I am not sure whether attendance figures are the only indicator of success. Or rather I am sure they should not be, but anyway….I think the answer with respect to the first question is very similar to what happens in professional sports leagues – that of 'winner takes all.' There is an increasing divide between the 'top tier' (premier league) institutions that are in a virtuous circle of civic and philanthropic support, high profile product, extensive media attention, and that have the ability to attract and retain punters, and 'the rest', that are caught in a more vicious circle.

The dilemmas of the top tier museums, for example, that are competing globally now for media attention, visitors, product and, above all, individual donors, are the dilemmas of success – issues like crowd-control and the degraded aesthetic experience that jam-packed shows offer. One response has been to charge lots of money to those who can afford to come in when the museum is 'closed' to less affluent folk. Their salaries are competitive, people fight to join their boards and discreetly write-off their year-end deficits, and the media follow their every twitch.

Move one step away from this privileged international band and the challenges are wholly different – it is how to secure a sliver of the cumulative media attention, or how to access the exhibitions and acts that are increasingly cartelized, and in which a cash market has replaced traditional barter relations. You literally have to pay $millions to secure shows that were once part of a more genteel system of long term reciprocity. In short you cannot take the success of the top tier as indicative of the health of the overall sector.

This is incidentally an international phenomenon – the front page story of this month's Art Newspaper, which is on Japanese museums, contains the following, perfect, illustration:

"Despite the popularity of some shows [blockbusters that have got unprecedented visitor numbers], the total number of visitors in museums in Japan has actually been declining. Most institutions lack funds for acquisitions and long term exhibition planning. This has led to two extremes: at one end a small group of blockbusters, to which most of the money for planning and publicity is diverted, and a large number of small inexpensive shows that attract very little attention and few visitors."

I think that the answer to the second question – why aren't more arts organizations simply giving up the ghost – is, first, as Doug notes, that some are. But more important is that as the struggle for survival becomes more and more intense, the mission of the organization becomes subverted, so that energies are increasingly devoted to the act of survival rather than the informing purpose of the institution. This is not just the Guggenheim's problem. Look at the Princess Diana exhibitions and the Titanic exhibitions that Clear Channel, National Geographic and Anschutz Entertainment Group are selling to museums. Institutions also under-invest in anything they can get away with under-investing in: building maintenance, professional development, scholarship, R&D, commissioning, etc. The result is not the dead organizations that Doug is looking for but 'living dead' organizations, a bit like 'failed states' that still exist but that no longer dispatch their primary responsibilities effectively.

Doug also asks 'What is to be done?' A separate posting I think…

Of empathy, good citizens & general motors
by Greg Sandow (weblog author on ArtsJournal.com)

Editor's Note: While Greg Sandow was not one of the 11 official participants in the collaborative weblog, his comments are included here in full.

Here's the problem. We—the arts—are an industry that needs more support. We want the rest of the world to think that whatever's in our interest is also in their interest. Or as one of President Eisenhower's cabinet appointees once famously said, "What's good for General Motors is good for the country."

I can imagine howls of protest for that last quote. We're not General Motors. We don't make anything as crass as cars. We're not corporate profiteers. But we are making the same assumption that 1950's CEO made, except that we make it about our stuff, not his. We deeply believe that the arts are good for everybody, and even necessary for everybody (or at least necessary somewhere in our culture). and I'm highlighting this belief as crassly as I did because—and I can't stress this enough—we haven't proved this assumption!

That's where the study comes in, of course. It tries (among other things) to point us toward useful ways of making our argument. And for that it's very helpful. But still it's only taking baby steps, because the arguments it suggests aren't yet helpful at all. In its section on "intrinsic benefits," the study suggests that arts involvement can lead to four things, all of them good for society:

- expanded capacity for empathy
- cognitive growth
- creation of social bonds
- expression of communal meaning

But does it provide any proof? No. It's ironic, really, to read these claims, however tentative they might be, after seeing how the study attacks common arguments for "instrumental" benefits. These supposed intrinsic benefits have even less evidence to support them than the instrumental benefits do. And they're open to exactly the same objection that the study makes for the supposed instrumental benefits of the arts—that the same social goals (higher test scores, and so on) could very likely be reached more effectively by other means.

I want to look at each of these points. First, why should we believe that art gives people more empathy, or creates social bonds, or helps communal meaning? History, common sense, and my own experience would suggest exactly the reverse. First, look at the people most deeply involved in the arts—artists. Have they, in the past and now, shown much empathy, either individually or as a group? I don't think so. They vary all over the map, of course. Some are fabulous people, some are a mess. But very often they wear blinders, especially in the area that most concerns them, which is art. They understand the kind of art they make; they completely fail to understand art that isn't like theirs.

And then look at their personal quirks, if "quirks" is the right word for huge prejudices, ghastly political beliefs, and gigantic character flaws. It's fascinating, above all, to see how avant-garde artists, people who break new ground artistically, may with equal passion embrace conventional beliefs, even horrible ones, elsewhere in their lives. Since I'm a musician, I'll take my examples from music. Look at Wagner, one of the most unconventional, imaginative composers who ever lived, who also was a vicious anti-Semite. Or look at Webern, who couldn't write a note without breaking new ground, but was also warmly pro-Nazi.

History shows things like this over and over again. Major league baseball had its first black player in 1947; the Metropolitan Opera had its first black singer in 1955. Can we really believe that the arts teach empathy? (The Met was even in same city, New York, where the first black player played.)

Berlioz, one of the most advanced and open-minded musicians of the 19th century, heard Chinese music at an exposition in Paris. He derided it; the silly Chinese, he wrote, couldn't even play music in tune. There were limits, obviously—and highly conventional limits, given the automatic assumption of western superiority common in Europe in his time—`to the tolerance his art taught him.

When scholars first studied medieval music in any depth, in the early part of the last century, they routinely derided it, just as Berlioz derided Chinese music. The silly medieval composers, leading scholars wrote, wrote childish, ungrammatical music, full of ghastly and surely unintended dissonance. Evidently (the scholars even said) these medieval composers didn't have enough common sense to listen to their compositions (by playing them on an instrument), before deciding they were finished.

No tolerance there! Deep immersion in art, I'd argue, doesn't seem to teach tolerance. Instead, tolerance grows elsewhere in society, and very likely comes into the arts from outside. We (as a culture)

now understand Chinese and medieval music not because of our experience of art, but because we've learned tolerance and empathy elsewhere.

Does art create social bonds? Sometimes—and, just as often, it reveals huge cracks in our culture. Here it's useful (essential, in fact) to make a distinction between art and "the arts." The arts are diffuse, and, above all, institutional. They're the support structure for art. It's easy to gush about them. Clearly museums and theater companies and orchestras are good to have around. They show beautiful paintings, stage fascinating plays, play gorgeous music.

Art is a different story. Art is tough. It's often unpleasant—or strikes many people that way. It's often divisive. Do I even have to type the words "Robert Mapplethorpe"? The RAND study seems to forget this. It gushes endlessly about art. It talks about artworks that defined an ear. One of them is Jack Kerouac's On the Road—a perfect example, I'm afraid, of how art doesn't bring people together. The book divided America. It defined one important part of a culture—but defined it (as anyone who knows anything about the beats surely understands) in opposition to the mainstream, as a living attack on mainstream culture. I supported that completely (and still support it), but to say that the book defined an era is just silly. Or, anyway, at least greatly incomplete. It defined a persistent crack in our culture, between (to put this very, very loosely) the hip and the square. (Now turned into a cliché as blue states against red states, except that the beats had no more use for blue state people than for red.)

And there's another dimension worth mentioning here. Kerouac bitterly complained that his book was misunderstood. Women would approach him, he said, thinking he himself was his Dean Moriarty character. They wanted to go to bed with him. They didn't understand that he wasn't Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady, in real life), and that in fact his view of Dean Moriarty was greatly ambivalent.

So add this to the social problems of art—art is often misunderstood. And people disagree about it, artists most of all. One mark of most great artists (and also of great critics) is how much they hate some kinds of art, including most specifically art that the rest of the world considers "great."

So if the RAND study wanted to foster true understanding, not of "the arts," but of art, it would focus on strategies to get people to think for themselves. People (if they're going to think like artists, or like people who really understand art) have to learn to think for themselves, to be just as likely to hate a piece of art as to love it. The people who most succeeded in reaching this point might be lonely. Their friends wouldn't understand them. The whole world, even the world of the arts, would seem to disagree with them. They'd even have fierce fights with other people who thought more or less the same way they did.

Is this the fabled empathy the RAND people would like to teach? I doubt it. But it's the reality of art.

And there's another problem with this idea that art can make us better people. Are we saying that people with good artistic taste are also virtuous—and in fact more virtuous than other people? The argument would seem to point, at least potentially, in this direction. But this would be awful, a complete trash on many good people and, surely, factually incorrect. Do we dare interrogate Nelson Mandela, let's say, and find him wanting as a human being because he doesn't listen to the right music? What a horror! What about the woman I read about last month, who ran into a burning school bus on a street in Brooklyn to rescue the kids and the driver? Do we think less of her, if she doesn't go to museums much, or watches bad reality TV?

Or do we believe that exposure to art makes people more likely to rescue people from fires? I'd love to see the proof of that.

And finally, when the study talks as art as a communal force, isn't community just as strongly created—maybe more strongly created—in other ways? When the Red Sox and the Patriots won championships, didn't that do more for Boston than the Boston Symphony ever could?

Maybe—if our goal is a better communal life—we should foster communal gardens, or recycling, or better medical care, instead of art. And what's especially telling here is that popular art already fosters community, and does it effortlessly, without special funding or advocacy. Look at Titanic, a film many of us might feel wasn't art. Many people saw it twice, or several times. Pop radio stations learned to expect barrages of phone calls, requesting the hit song from the movie, after each showing of the film got out. People would call from their cars. They wanted to hear the song again, immediately.

Something similar is happening now with The Da Vinci Code, not exactly an artistic book. It touches some deep vein in our culture—people want to believe that there's some hidden force for good, and that women did and should play a greater part in orthodox religious life.

Is something wrong with this? Are the people who loved Titanic trivial, somehow, because they weren't brought together by an El Greco show, or a new Merce Cunningham dance?

And here, I think, we have the real problem with the arts. Art, as always, will take care of itself, against all obstacles. Artists will produce it, in whatever form seems right. But the arts, as traditionally defined, are reeling—at least in my view—not because they're not getting funding, but because, again as traditionally defined, they're no longer necessary. When I was growing up, in the '50s and '60s, everybody thought that the crucial work of culture—forging our uncreated communal conscience, to paraphrase Joyce—was being done by the traditional high arts, painting, novels, classical music, dance, theater.

But now that's no longer true. Now, for better or worse, a new generation (maybe, broadly speaking, everybody under 60) looks to graphic design, photography, film, pop music, TV, maybe comics (or, more formally, "graphic novels"). This is a huge shift, implied, of course, in my Titanic example. What are we in the arts going to do about that? This is the question the RAND report barely addresses, though it does touch on it with this naïve remark:

Another way to facilitate early arts involvement would be to tap into young people's involvement in the commercial arts. High schools, for example, might consider offering film classes that engage students in discussions of some of the best American and international films.

"Naïve," really is too kind a word for this, which first uncritically accepts a distinction—obsolete, and suspiciously self-serving for people in the old high arts—between real art and "commercial art," and them apparently lumps all films (even foreign films!) into the commercial category, as if Godard and Truffaut and Buñel and Antonioni and Orson Welles and Hitchcock and Jean Renoir and Fellini and Kurosawa and Almodovar (etc., etc., etc.) had never lived.

We're going to have to do a lot better than that if we want to save the arts. I'd suggest starting with complete acceptance, even an embrace, of art outside the formal, institutional (and by now quite tired) arts, but that's another story. Quite a long one.

Stuck in the middle
by Russell Willis Taylor

The image of arts managers as Wile E. Coyote suspended in mid-air is now a picture I'll keep in my head for a long time, thanks to Bill.

Yes, it's clearly past time to rethink the system. We have too many organizations in the middle range of size and resource, and if the cracks aren't showing yet it is only a matter of time, to echo Cassandra. This difficulty of the mid-size is by no means confined to the arts; with economists on our blog line I don't need to explain why in any system the middle is usually an untenable place to be—lots of heavy tomes have been written about this. There will no doubt be some culling, and as painful as it may be this is part of any dynamic system. Adrian notes the problem of the "drive to survive" subverting the purpose of organizations, and this leads to an even greater problem with their long term sustainability: insufficient differentiation. Everyone starts to look sort of the same to the consumer, in the same range of artistic risk and about the same price. This is the beginning of consumer indifference, and the points that Ben and Midori have made about the excellence of the product are ones that arts organizations ignore at their peril.

Enough doom and gloom from me. It is time for us to encourage and demand the funding of risk, for all aspects of programming. In the happy event of future surpluses, money should be retained to keep investing in pushing back the artistic boundaries, rather than doing the same thing faster and in a bigger hall. Bill points out that the expected failure rate in the commercial sector is much more realistic—it's time for us to stop trying to make part of the case for the arts that its leaders have an ability to land on a dime every single time. But we can't have misses to leaven our hits if those misses mean we go out of business. So perhaps one of the better cases to be made to the arts to funders, both foundations and individual donors, is that funding risk and accepting failure are the visionary end of philanthropy. It also

means we could take our conversations with them up a level, to actually talk about the art. I suspect they would enjoy it—as would we all.

Continental drift
by Adrian Ellis

For good or ill, the model that William Osborne describes with an affection I share is being dismantled in every major European country. All the issues addressed in this blog are pretty well global in their application and indeed as much thought is being given to them abroad as in the USA. Public funding in Germany, France and Italy is retrenching, and the stresses on the cultural sector readily apparent. Go further east and they are even more apparent. The UK has been through a lottery-funded building boom that has left in expanded but not necessarily strengthened. It is very unclear with what the traditional European funding model of arms-length publicly funded arts organizations is being replaced and I think that those who care are about the arts are as flummoxed in Europe as in America.

Specifically, the continents share rapidly accelerating demographic, technological and social changes, few of which serve to bolster the base for traditional art forms; and a distinctly un-patrician political class that is aware that spending on the arts is at least superficially regressive (taking from poorer and redistributing towards the richer), and therefore that there are few votes in it.

The result is that relations with audiences and funders are more hard-fought and more contingent everywhere; subscription (the traditional device by which innovative programming is put before more conservative audiences) is imploding; and funders more inclined to support politically fashionable programs than core operating costs etc. etc.

I say this because I think a superficial reading of William's postings could lead one to take them as a description of European funding in its current tattered state as opposed to its Platonic ideal.

Retail Advocacy
by Jim Kelly

Several years ago one of our local county council members, a conservative from a conservative district, decided to hold a meeting in his district to learn more about the arts and heritage organizations in his community, all of which receive support, although not nearly enough, from the county's cultural funding programs managed by my agency. His district is rural and relatively poor in comparison to other areas of the county, but it has an interesting mix of cultural groups: a professional symphony (Auburn Symphony), a classical dance school and company, founded by a former Pacific Northwest Ballet dancer (Evergreen City Ballet), a community chorus, community theatre, several excellent small history museums, a much-used high school performing arts center, and an after school poetry program for teens.

The councilmember opened the meeting with a preface about the county having no money, so "don't be asking for money, but let me at least get a better understanding of who you are." He asked everyone to introduce themselves and talk a little about what they did. He learned that most of the people in the room were volunteers, that only a few of these organizations generated enough income to have more than one or two paid staff positions, if that, but they all struggled to do what they did because they enjoyed it, were passionate about it and believe that they are helping to build a better, more connected community. These people are the "doers," those in any community who get involved with Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce, and the local schools. And they are voters, not just eligible to vote, but likely to vote and volunteer to help get the vote out. This was not lost on our councilmember.

After about an hour and despite the earlier disclaimer, the conversation inevitably turned to money and the challenge to provide public benefit with extremely limited resources. Bake sales and car washes don't pay the bills.

The director of a local history museum told the councilmember, "For $5,000 I can give every fourth grader in the Auburn school district a meaningful history experience." The councilmember looked at his aide, turned back to the director, and said, "you've got it."

The poet who started the after school teen poetry program talked about the kids he worked with, alienated, troubled, some from dysfunctional families, kids that could easily fall through the cracks. They took all their frustrations and vented them through poetry. One kid remarked, “An open mic is my drug of choice.” The program director told to the councilmember, “Everyone is always asking me to quantify the impact of my program in order to get grant money. How do I quantify the number of Columbines I’ve prevented? How do I prove what didn’t happen?” The councilmember’s response? “What do you need?”

Why am I telling you this story? Because I think it illustrates how we can most effectively make the case for the arts at the local level. Advocacy is retail. It’s one-on-one. It isn’t making a good case, it’s making a personal connection. Our councilmember didn’t gain a passion for Art at this meeting, but he saw how “the arts” serve his passion for building community. The phrase “economic impact” was never mentioned; the teen poet who claimed that his life was turned around because he found an outlet for his anger (intrinsic) made a huge impression on this legislator. He saw instrumental benefits that derived from the intrinsic benefits, without realizing it.

I know those of you who love Art hate selling “the arts” on the basis of their social, economic or educational contributions, but for those of us on the ground, in the political arena, it’s the only game in town. If you want to appeal to the public sector, it has to be on the public sector’s terms.

Beginning to Wrap Up...
by Bill Ivey

Thanks to Adrian for the reminder that the global cultural system is being transformed and we don’t know what the system will look like in a few years. I would reiterate that the for-profit arts industries are also being transformed, mostly to no good end. Global media companies have gobbled up all but a handful of the book and music publishers, record companies, film studios and the like. Consolidation is always accompanied by claims of synergy and efficiency but you end up with research diving out creative instinct, too much aversion to risk, too great an enforced concentration on quarterly parent company earnings and stock price, and too many crucial decisions made in places distant from the issue at hand. Industry leaders who need to invest in and nurture new talent and innovative material are walking around with their hands tied. The symptoms are the same as in the non-profit world where too many leaders have to make creative decisions that appear to insure financial outcomes. If I could wave a magic wand and give arts executives in all our arts companies one thing, it would be a year of freedom from external financial pressure; not total freedom, perhaps, but enough elbow room to put creativity and artistry back in the room.

Andrew’s right about a new ecology; I wonder what our system would look like today if we had devoted funding to “small versus large,” rather than “non-profit versus for-profit?” The rarely-spoken conceit of our current system is that quality or excellence is the exclusive asset of the non-profit world, and that doesn’t stand up to research or even to anecdote, and maybe if we’d sliced off what was worthy of support in a different way, we’d be better off. But we are all headed for a new landscape and nothing is either inevitable or eternal about the symphony orchestra or the bluegrass band. Adrian points out that changing demography is menacing the Refined Arts; in many ways the U.S. started this trend 100 years ago by using technology to empower film and recording industries capable of shoving the refined arts into a corner.

A couple of specifics in response to Doug’s note:

Let’s paint a picture of what we think a vibrant cultural system should look like, and then advocate on behalf of policies that take us there. In my experience, arts advocates tend to ask for “more,” rather than for a specific outcome. If we want a drawing teacher in every fourth grade classroom, let’s talk that way. I think policy leaders and funders like to know exactly what will happen if they support a program. The challenge, of course, is that once we get where we say we want to go, we have to be willing to stop, and not ask for more...That’s been hard for us to do.

And what about a big idea? Say, let’s put a guitar in the hands of every 13 year old in the country. (Don’t groan, I could have said “banjo!"). It would take about $500 per kid, but would probably generate at least the level of lifelong pleasure that will be there from the $500 savings accounts somebody in

Congress is talking about. Oh, I know, half of the instruments would end up parked in closets, but, hell, three-quarters of the trumpets and clarinets played in high school bands end up in closets, so we'd be ahead of the game. (And that thought sends me off on a mini-rant: How did we end up with a music ed system that functions, for the most part, as a wholly-owned subsidiary of high school athletics? The guitar and piano have competed for the number one position among American instruments for the past 100 years; they're the basic tools of American composition and performance, and the glue of informal music making at home and around the campfire; they're just now creeping into schools...Give me a break!

We need to pay close attention to research on happiness and research on quality of life. Our population is aging and over the years whenever I've watched an Isaac Stern or BB King or Doc Watson or Martha Graham, I'm struck by the way art making youthfulizes old age. Right now culture is a second or third-tier component of quality of life, but I am convinced that it can be right up there beside health care, food, and shelter; the need to define and maintain quality of life into old age offers an opportunity.

Also, art offers a secular spirituality that can be a healthy companion to the kind of spirituality that is available through organized religion. There is clearly a spiritual search and a spiritual void in the U.S., but not everybody can or will resolve that search by going to church. There is a very healthy and I think logical way to establish value in this way, and even an opportunity to propose public policy that addresses spiritual longings through art (There's no separation of art and state in the Constitution, don't you know.), but many of us are instinctive secular humanists and so spiritual value may feel to some like a bridge too far.

And I do think the arts world needs to be willing to take on issues like copyright, mergers of arts industries, and consolidation of radio. We think of these as outside our domain but 1)they're not, and 2) they're the big factors shaping the character of our arts system. I mean, why didn't we, as a sector, work with unions 30 years ago to help keep American classical recording viable? There are plenty of ways to improve the cultural landscape that don't involve grant making.

I've got a few more ideas but I can't share absolutely everything...

Day Six | **March 11, 2005**

Some More Readers...
by Douglas McLennan

To read all reader comments, visit the web archive.

> How do you get a principal violist or a Renaissance art curator to become more expressive and communicate her passion more directly and immediately to her audience? And what would have to change about the concert or the gallery (not the music itself or the art itself)? Real questions, but worth answering, if only as a thought-experiment. We'll never know whether there's a larger audience for the arts, or a larger role for it to play in society, until we get it out of its own way. — Peter Linett

> The simple statement "No modern nonprofit could tolerate the failure rates accepted in movies, TV, or record business" is startling. Of course this does not mean that the corporate arts world is full of bold risk takers, but it should give pause to those of us who feel the not-for-profit world is the place to nurture risk taking. And it reiterates the need to build endowments, which may be the single dullest thing a not-for-profit director can say, but it is true. —Harry Philbrick

> Europeans will never use language like American administrators who refer to artists as "entitlement seekers." Europeans will hold to their centuries old belief that genuinely qualified artists are workers who deserve good jobs just like everyone else. —William Osborne

> Midori suggests that more artists advocate for the arts, but how about taking it a step further? Instead of just lobbying for support, shouldn't artists aspire to positions in political offices and funding entities where they can make these decisions themselves? It is not enough to try and convert our Senators and foundation officers into full-blooded arts enthusiasts. If we're distressed over the state of arts education in our schools, then we should choose one of our own to sit on a

school board and represent our interests. Some of us must answer a call to become policymakers and shape our communities in a manner influenced by our time spent creating and producing art. —Michael Newberry

Even if the arts had significantly greater funding levels and support, and there was a symphony, theater, opera company, and museum in every major city in the U.S.; I cannot be convinced that we would see more people in the theater, concert hall, at the museums, or even involved with the arts at all. Availability is one thing, Involvement is another. —Derek

Ask an artist, if the uniquely compelling power of art is transmitted through brief, passive and/or virtual encounters? Yes, performers and their audiences – be it baseball or violin – grow out of consistent, sustained, early exposure, with lots of "hands-on" practice. But to be fully engaged (some say "hooked") at the deepest level – the level of art –requires that it spark creativity through as many senses as possible, and quench the insatiable human need to make sense of oneself. Without that visceral "high" there will be no buy in and no repeat customers. —Jan Yager

Doug's Request—Strategies
by Midori

Doug is asking us if there are any practical strategies/actions.

From my humble point of a view, as a violinist/performer, who has started three non-profit organizations, I would like to make a few points:

1. We should re-examine larger "successful" non-profit arts organizations. If they are truly successful, what are they doing, and how can we learn from it? Are these mega-non-profits giving the rest of us a lopsided image that we are, after all, fine? Not all non-profits have a deficit, and although rare, some come out with a handsome surplus. How did they manage to do so? Is it a sign of good management, or are they attracting funding that might otherwise go to smaller organizations? In other words, is this surplus the result of "great" programs that warrant such funding? Also, how thorough is their non-profit mentality? From the top executive all the way down to the intern, is the non-profit mentality being experienced and felt? Adrian made a comment about the dilemma of the top tier museums. I think we have a similar phenomenon in the music world.

2. Now for the more practical, (and I'm speaking strictly from the point of view of a classical violinist), let's try to find a less stratified way of doing things. For example, we have different programs to attract different audiences. This is good, but we also need to be more inclusive. What about programs that bring different groups of people with different interests to share their interests with us? It seems to me that we try too hard only to give "them" but that we don't try to receive what they have to offer us. I'm not talking about only understanding audiences' tastes in music or their opinions about our organizations. If there were ways in which different individuals could participate non-musically, more people might start participating, perhaps not directly at first, but that could come. I think we have become too exclusive in a sense that if music is not the center piece of an activity, we don't think of it as doing us any service. This is not true. How many of us only tried something because a friend was doing it and then realized that it wasn't so bad? Human relationships must be the starting point for creating more interests. It's harder to refuse your friends.

I have experienced the success of this strategy in a project I started in 2002 (which will be repeated this coming June). There was a theme, intentionally not a musical one, which served as the common bond. In each of several locations, the activities, which all concluded with a recital, were organized exclusively by volunteers. Not all were music lovers or connoisseurs, but they were interested in the theme, and they all had a role, either as a volunteer or as a participant. The recital at the end of the project was only one component in the overall picture of the project and its theme. And, best of all, the relationships that were built in the process of the project were sustained and built upon. Many people who didn't initially have much interest in music got involved because they were interested in sharing and donating what they could, and they were not made to feel that they had to do anything musical. The important thing here is that eventually they did encounter music. Not all of them fell instantly in love with it, but they all had the

satisfaction of realizing that they were partially responsible for the success of the project—and the concert—which others (their fellow citizens) enjoyed so much.

3. We must educate our future performers about the importance of outreach activities and make it possible for them to learn the knots and bolts of the art of outreach. Learning the technical skills of an instrument should not be separated from learning the methods of outreach. The young performers and top music students need to understand that outreach activity is not extracurricular. I am committed to outreach myself and think of it as one of the best and most worthwhile things I do. The time must come when involvement in outreach is a consistent given and not a sporadic exception.

4. We need to form stronger partnerships with artist managements to convince them to stop thinking of outreach as extracurricular, and with presenters and promoters, who must not think that in requesting an outreach activity of their guest artists, they are asking for a favor.

I am sure there are other strategies others have, and I look forward to learning about them.

Today is the last day of this blog. Thank you Doug, for giving me this opportunity to give the topic of arts advocacy concentrated attention, and to share my thoughts!

Final Thoughts
by Bill Ivey

I'd like to know more about Midori's 2002 project that contained music but had a "non-musical theme." We do tend to see art as always having to be the centerpiece and there may be something in the notion of sneaking it in as a surprising and meaningful sidebar. Jim Kelly's reminder of the importance of retail advocacy is good. Earlier Bob Lynch talked about advocacy on behalf of the NEA a few years back. In practice that advocacy was, of course, caring individuals meeting one-on-one with members of Congress. I had 230 face-to-face meetings with members myself when I was NEA Chairman, and they were fun, challenging, and absolutely critical to restoring good overall relations between the agency and the Hill.

After reading the entries and responses to this blog, I'm convinced that our real challenge is to decide if we can enter a kind of "rub-your-stomach; pat-your-head" period in which we work hard to craft and execute good case making on behalf of nonprofits, while, at the same time, we step back to assess our current approach to cultural intervention in order to figure out what we do now, in the 21st century, in order to help the arts system work better for citizens and artists. My initial notion is that modern-day intervention will find us taking on tax policy, access to heritage, balancing copyright against larger public interests, and media regulation; grant making and public funding may not be, for the next few decades, "where the action is."

One example: The Curb Center's DC office coordinates a program called the "Arts Industries Policy Forum." It is a policy neutral, off-the-record, bipartisan rolling seminar on cultural policy subjects. Forum membership is restricted to senior career government staffers on Capitol Hill and with Federal Agencies. We now have 35 members, drawn from the FCC, the Office of the US Trade Representative, the Department of State, Trademark and Patents, the Justice Department, the Senate Judiciary Committee, the Commerce Committee —- you get the idea. We commission background papers on topics the Forum selects, bring in guest speakers, maintain a listserve, and so on. Last year we looked at radio consolidation and the public interest; next month we'll have a guest speaker talking about the value of impact analysis as a component of policy work; other topics are in the pipeline. The Forum acknowledges that, in our system, many different agencies and Congressional committees own a slice of the cultural policy pie; we're trying to produce a backdrop for better cultural policy by getting these multiple actors gathered up around arts and cultural system issues. Just one small activity we are trying to take on the bigger questions.

Back when I was NEA Chairman, it was a great deal of fun to work with the good Endowment staff, Americans for the Arts, NASAA, members of Congress pro and con, in order to get the agency moving again. We accomplished that together, and it's great. But at the very same time we, as arts public intellectuals, were all caught up in issues surrounding government funding, the term of copyright was extended, the 1996 Telecommunications Act paved the way for media consolidation, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act criminalized digital duplication, and the USIA was rolled into the Department of

State and basically eliminated. Now, it was nice to get an attitude shift in Congress and an additional $17 million dollars for our federal grantmaking agency, but those other actions (most initiated or strongly supported by the Clinton administration) really, really transformed the cultural landscape. If our goal is to advance quality of life by nurturing a vibrant arts system, we're going to have to worry less about a few million dollars in grants, and more about a range of laws and regulations that define and redefine the mechanisms of finance and control that give our cultural landscape its character. This is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable territory for many of us who care about the arts, but if we don't jump in the pond, we'll be left fiddling while Rome burns. (I did that on purpose, just to let you know my skill with mixed metaphors hadn't flown the coop.

Thanks for all the good ideas.

A thousand thanks
by Andrew Taylor

As this collaborative weblog winds down, I just wanted to convey a profound thanks to ArtsJournal, to The Wallace Foundation, and to all participants and readers submitting comments. As I said early on in the week, to me this issue lies at the core of cultural management, policy, marketing, fundraising, and the extended vitality of the field.

This conversation has been rich with nuance, new ideas, and spirited but friendly debate of a level I haven't seen much of anywhere else.

What fun. And what benefits, dare I say, to the public purpose.

Closing Out
by Jim Kelly

It's been terrific week and I want to thank my fellow bloggers and commenters for the fabulous exchange of ideas. I am flattered to have been invited to participate with such an august group of arts intellectuals, which believe me, I am not. Thank you, Doug.

I represent the ground troops, battling every day to secure funding, keep arts at the policy table, help artists and arts orgs fulfill their missions and realize their goals (or sometimes just keep the doors open) and find new ways to advance the work we all love. I will continue to do this work at the local level, but I agree with Bill and Midori who suggest that the arts should identify and pursue a "big idea," like guitars for every fifth grader. In King County, we'd love to see every child learn to read music before they complete middle school.

I have been reminded in this blog that the arts are much bigger than the non-profit sector and that policy may have much bigger impact on the arts than funding.

And I agree with all of the commenters who said artists should be elected to school boards, and city and county councils. Artists should be an integral part of a community, not consigned to the fringe.

I entered this conversation because I felt I needed a new case for the arts. I mentioned in my first blog that I am battling in the state legislature on behalf of a bill that will secure arts funding in King County for the foreseeable future. We have a hearing next Tuesday. I had hoped to find some new argument that would seal the deal. Instead, I gained a new appreciation for the tried and true, and new insights into the multiple benefits that we all experience when the arts thrive in a community.

I will use economic impact arguments next week. When asked by legislators why they should fund the arts instead of health and human services, I will tell them that the arts are a health and human service. I will echo commenter William Osborne that a civil and healthy society doesn't choose between the arts and transportation; it finds a way to do both. Wish me luck.

Signing off.

The Long Goodbye
by Adrian Ellis

Difficult to keep up with the sheer volume and hold down the day job. It's also difficult to respond in a considered fashion to points raised by fellow bloggers, rather than using them as the pretext for pre-cooked and deep-frozen reactions. But I tried, honest…

I am convinced that the territory covered over the past few days, both by the Doug-anointed blogotariat and by the people in the right hand column who have been heckling us, is of fundamental importance. And ArtsJournal, simply by aggregating English language hard news about the arts internationally in the way it does, has afforded all of us over the past few years the opportunity to observe trends in a way that would not otherwise have been possible without vast research capacity. Certainly my view of these issues has been profoundly informed by having ArtsJournal hit me in the face every day when I log on. Mmm…not another mid-western orchestra in trouble; not another new museum feasibility plan by the Guggenheim repudiated by local politicians etc. etc.

Equally, I am sure that, because most news is bad news, headline stories tell an overly down-beat tale. As someone once said to me: "Can you imagine anything worse than being trapped inside the world described by the headlines in your local newspaper?" Well, ArtsJournal is my local newspaper.

Doug suggested on Wednesday that there was a diagnostic consensus in our ramblings and then asked whether any of us had prescriptions to hand. Here are some thoughts that this blogathon prompted.

First, policy wonks like me should to be better able to define that vibrant cultural community than we are. And we should have a better analytical understanding of what the drivers are: why capital investment is unhealthy for us unless matched by operational funding, like carbohydrates without vitamins; why there needs to be a balance between investment in amateur and professional activities; what levels of investment in arts educational activities etc. etc. constitute a balanced cultural ecology. We lack the causal models that help other policy communities hone and explore areas of agreement and contention. The data we collect always seems to be for advocacy rather than analysis, leaving advocacy under-served by the absence of analysis. So one thing that the policy wonks can do is improve the technical understanding of the sector. We are, to use Bill's analogy the 'stomach rubbers' and we need to rub more vigorously.

Second, there seems to be a consensus that lobbyists and advocacy bodies—Bill's 'head patters'—need to find a more compelling public language for the core experiences that we know are what draws us towards cultural activities and that also engage many if not all funders and they get a bit more rigorous in their impact methodologies.

Head patters and stomach rubbers alike know that much of the current language of legitimization sets the bar of public accountability low and at a clumsy angle to the core purposes and value of many cultural organizations. A language that more accurately reflects why cultural activity engages is also more likely in turn to engage decision makers. The less authentic it is, the more likely it is to generate expectations than cannot be fulfilled in the longer term – and risk a backlash for which I fear the head patters will blame the uppity stomach rubbers.

Third, arts funders, public and private, should be more responsible and more attuned to the long term impact of different forms of cultural support. Foundations, who are supposed to be society's thought leaders, could lead the way on more of this stuff. I do not necessarily mean commissioning RAND XIV. Rather I mean thinking through the long term impact on the ecology on the sector of different forms of cultural investment. In particular they should think through the infantilizing impact of overly directive funding and the destabilizing impact of the emphasis on program funding rather than core activities, and the resulting under-funded expansion.

Fourth, arts administrators should not be as easily seduced as they have been by the trappings of the civic agenda; have the self-discipline to remain focused on their core mission; and be a little more leery than they have been of seeking roles and responsibilities (and a scale of operation) that diminish their ability to take the risks that creative endeavor requires.

It is very difficult for any of us to do any of these things if the climate of opinion is hostile or indifferent. The value of this sort of dialogue is that it helps climatic change. As John Maynard Keynes famously but succinctly put it "Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back… Sooner or later, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil."

Over and out.

One Town at a Time
by Robert L. Lynch

I found my day today to be a wonderful mix of multi-sector arts experiences. In New York this morning I spoke to a group of lawyers and collectors from the Clifford Chance law firm, the largest global law firm and this year's sponsor of the Armory Show, the wonderful for-profit international visual art sales exhibition in New York. Afterwards I was in a meeting at MOMA (yes, work) but surrounded by beauty in a non-profit setting. And I have just arrived back in DC where this weekend I will have the chance to sit in with some Irish musicians to celebrate this coming week's very important holiday. This will be an unincorporated pick-up group and probably the most fun for me.

If you think about it most of us engage this range of sectors in our daily arts lives. And most artists now live their lives this way too. This is both the grand story of the growth of the arts in the last century and the great dilemma as each of us now has a continually growing menu of cultural opportunity. Each of these three different sectors of art benefit from each other and from some common resources like arts education. Whether the gallery owners selling at the armory or the artists in the non-profit MOMA or the Irish musicians there was a teacher, a mentor, a publicly funded venue, and an inspiring commercial art product somewhere in the background. That mix goes back a long way, to Walt Whitman and Mark Twain or PT Barnum as the first presenter of opera singer Jenny Lind in the U.S. So for the record I love it all and I want other people to have the opportunity to experience it all. I do still believe it will change their lives for the better.

A few thoughts in response to Doug's request for suggestions to take us forward. What do I want? I want every community to have a true climate in which the arts can thrive just like the enabling legislation of the NEA hopes for. To achieve that takes people, policy, and money. It doesn't really matter much where an activated community starts—whether it chooses to invest in a museum or an active blues artists community or a street for commercial theater like Broadway. What do the people want? How can that be used to open new windows for new community desires? It's a continuing process of rediscovery and growth. And policy, actual regulations enacted by decision makers, is the gift that keeps on giving. A single percent for arts ordinance at the local level can mean millions of dollars automatically year after year to the arts. And that is just one of hundreds of policy vehicles. When I look at all of this locally it is very achievable ...and has been inspiring to me over the last thirty years of looking. And it often comes down to just a few people working to make that climate happen(patrons, advocates, teachers, visionaries, troublemakers), all the names for the kinds of people who get things done. They usually approach this in an old fashioned marketing style—who needs to be convinced to do something, what do they need to hear to be convinced. Every community will be different. The tools these leaders need are training and inspiration, useful case making facts, visibility about their cause, encouragement to actually ask for what they want, and friends from other parts of the community to buy in. This works, but we as a nation, we have never comprehensively and systemically invested in this approach. With half the money of the non-profit world coming from earned revenue and all of the for-profit and unincorporated dollars coming in this way our national cultural policy is still really one of local institutional and individual self determination.

When I look at the goal of helping each community get to where it needs to be from a national perspective it seems lofty and big. It is stated as an Americans for the Arts goal in the next five years as some 4 billion dollars more a year in public and private sector support for just the non-profit arts community plus the needed arts education, the broadened link to the for-profit, plus all that has been discussed here in the last few days. But it can be done—as it has always been done—one town at a time.

Many Thanks...
by Douglas McLennan

I would like to thank everyone—bloggers and readers—who participated in this weeklong public discussion. There have been so many ideas and observations, it's rather dizzying to try to keep up.

If I may offer a personal observation: I think one of our real challenges today is finding ways to have debates about culture in public. Politics is endlessly debated. So is sports. But where are the frank public conversations about art and about culture? Not just someone spouting an opinion. Not just another self-promotion or evangelical sermon. How do we get the public engaged in talking about art? We have to promote the conversations wherever we can.

To me, art is about wrestling with ideas, about engaging with creativity in a vigorous back-and-forth that leaves me changed in some way. I love that an encounter with really good art usually provokes more questions than answers and sends me out looking for more.

Maybe that's one reason that having a conversation like this and expecting clear answers and an action plan is impossible. Yet I think it is crucially important to try. How great to see people engage and talk about art as if it mattered. As demonstrated over and over, passion is one of the most attractive and effective ambassadors for art. Thanks to Andrew, Bill, Joli, Midori, Russell, Jim, Phil, Bob, Adrian, Glenn and Ben, as well as the astute and provocative reader/contributors who posted more than 100 comments and significantly broadened the conversation. Also thanks to Lucas Held and Mary Trudel and The Wallace Foundation, who helped make this blog possible.

This week we will archive the blog here on ArtsJournal (see "Blog Heaven" at the bottom of the right column). And we'll also prepare a version of the blog that can be downloaded and printed without killing too many trees. Thanks again, everyone.

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