

The Changing Face of Arts Engagement

A talk by Diane Ragsdale

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Good morning!

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be here with all of you today and to be a contributor to the Meighan Forum. I am sincerely grateful to Antony Cimolini and Anita Gaffney for the invitation and to Ted Witzel, whom I have known for almost a year, who has become a thought partner, and who also had a significant hand in creating this opportunity. Ted and I met last November as he was one of about 20 leaders in the arts and culture sector selected for the Cultural Leadership program at Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity.

I have the great good fortune to teach on that program and now lead it, in addition to being the faculty director of a program on arts management and entrepreneurship for artists at the College of Performing Arts at The New School in Manhattan.

I'm going to speak for about 30 minutes and then Ted and I will be in conversation with each other and all of you. I look forward to that.

Before I begin, I would like to do a short and painless exercise with you.

In a moment, I am going to ask you to close your eyes and bring to mind a peak aesthetic experience in the arts—in which you were an audience member or visitor. Something that is emblematic, in a sense, of your tastes in art (whether live performance, or visual art, etc.). OK, close your eyes and, if you can, revisit this experience and bring to mind the elements that are most memorable for you.

Now, open your eyes and turn to a person next to you—(if you came with someone perhaps turn to a person you don't know, or know as well)—and **first** tell each other three adjectives that you would use to describe the sensory or emotional qualities of the piece; and **then**, after you have each shared your adjectives, tell each other the name of the work and the artist or company, if you remember them.

Just curious – did any two people have an experience that was exactly the same or quite similar? How about quite different?

Over the past couple of years, each time I have been invited to teach a class or a workshop with cultural leaders, I've tried to start the session by doing a version of this exercise as a little icebreaker; however, with a small addition. I will ask people to bring from home an actual *image on paper* that represents their peak aesthetic experience and to *write down* their adjectives describing the experience.

The first person in the group posts their image on the wall and reads the associated adjectives. I then coach the next person to place their image and adjectives either close to those already on the wall—or farther away—depending on whether they think that the aesthetic values represented

are closely aligned or not. We do this until all of the experiences have been mapped on the wall in relationship to one another.

I do this icebreaker for a few reasons:

- More than anything it's interesting what people choose to bring in – it's a great way to learn a little bit about someone.
- I also find it interesting to listen to people describe works that have moved them emotionally or engaged them aesthetically. How do we talk about these beautiful experiences that draw us out of our day-to-day preoccupations? That wake us up?
- And finally, I'm always observing the extent to which the images tend to cluster with various groups of people. I am curious what arts leaders, in particular, make of this when it happens—is it a beneficial or problematic if all of us in a room appear to gravitate to the same kind of work?

I did this exercise at Yale a couple years ago—where I also teach on an adjunct basis—with a group of Theatre Management students.

Out of seven students, six brought in images that clustered around what I would call an “Experimental / Fringe / Outsider” aesthetic. The seventh student brought in the Playbill for *Dear Evan Hansen*—which, if you don't know is a hit Broadway musical about a young man with a social anxiety disorder. As you might imagine, the student placed the Playbill on the wall at some distance from the other six images.

So, two things about the exercise in this setting interested me.

First, despite hailing from various places in the world and coming from different socio-economic backgrounds, the aesthetic values represented in the images of most of the students were quite similar.

But the other thing that interested me was the adjectives students with the images that clustered around an “Experimental / Fringe / Outsider” aesthetic used to describe the emotional qualities of their experiences. They used words that could have been used to describe the emotions one might experience going to a mainstream Broadway musical like *Dear Evan Hansen*:

- Hopeful
- Spiritual
- Human
- Stirring
- Uplifting
- Belonging

I wonder whether or not you used words like these to describe the emotional quality of your experiences? (You can tell me during the Q&A, if you like).

Research tells us that many people these days are yearning for a greater sense of connection and belonging. That list of adjectives I just read would seem to suggest that *peak* arts experiences—if not *all* experiences—may have the ability to provide this.

So, I am not a Shakespeare scholar and I'm not here to talk about one of the plays in the season (though I do have an MFA and trained as a theater maker). The title of this brief talk is the **Changing Face of Arts Engagement**—a title selected by the Festival organizers. I like this title very much because it makes me think of a few things:

- the changing **demographics** of our communities;
- the changing **aesthetics** or sensory aspects of arts organizations; and
- the changing **identity** or role of cultural institutions vis-a-vis their communities.

I am stressing the word *changing* here because, indeed, much has changed since the mid-twentieth century when cultural policies were being formed alongside the emergence and growth of the arts and culture sector in many countries. In the main, I would characterize the policy change that has been happening as away from a colonial, “democratization of culture” approach toward what some would call a “democratic culture” approach.

I recognize that these two phrases sound nearly indistinguishable; and, indeed, they are quite often used interchangeably. But they are different and so I'd like to clarify what I mean when I use them.

A policy regime in which the goal, in principle, is for everyone to have access to experiencing, for instance, world-class professional productions of Shakespeare would be an example of a *democratization of culture* approach. What is generally understood by “culture” in this sense is “elite” culture.

A *democratic culture* is about cultural equity. It suggests that there is no pre-ordained artistic hierarchy that automatically places works made by “professionals” above works made by “amateurs”; works that are written down over works that are improvised; works performed in a gorgeous arts facility overlooking a body of water over works performed in the community center, the prison, the school, or on the streets; works by *dead* or *living* white men over ... basically everyone else.

Despite art having been created by people of all walks of life and all ethnicities and genders throughout the 20th century, it is a difficult reality that one might never have realized this if one were to have scanned the brochures of establishment cultural institutions in the US and elsewhere—whose seasons, for decades, in the main, were quite often White, Western, and Womanless (a phrase I first heard used by Dr. Johnetta Cole). Or as they tend to say in the UK, Pale, Male, and Stale.

Almost two years ago now I attended an event at the Public Theater in NYC—a book launch for the third edition of an anthology called *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*. At the celebration one of the individuals responsible for this anthology, Roberta Uno, described the

efforts to compile the first edition 22 years earlier. I was struck by two comments she made at the book launch.

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

She then told the story of putting the first edition of the anthology together—again, this was in 1995, not 1965—and recounted that when she and her collaborator first started “looking for plays it was a very difficult process.” She said they finally made a breakthrough, however, as a result of a “revelation” by a colleague at the time who said, “You know there is an archive of women of color plays. Go to any theater and ask for the reject file.”

They did this. Sure enough, they began to find worthy and important plays by women of color.

In the US, establishment cultural institutions are now, in a sense, being held to account for the women artists, LGBTQ artists, Indigenous artists, Black artists, and other artists of color that tended to be pushed to the margins where they quite often *found* or *formed* smaller, avant-garde, or community-based organizations, that *would* support their work.

And these smaller organizations were rarely if ever able to attract sustained funding or board support on par with those of the so-called “benchmark” arts institutions; hence they generally stayed smaller and undercapitalized—which resulted in a perception that they were somehow less able to manage their organizations, or were of lesser quality, and therefore less worthy of support.

A vicious cycle.

And this dynamic reproduced decade after decade an artistic hierarchy that ranked some aesthetic values—and *holders of those values*, including patrons, critics, board members, and cultural leaders—above others. When we hear calls for a democratic culture these days, it is this problem that cultural institutions are, essentially, being asked to address.

There is, of course, a competing path beckoning to many cultural institutions.

A few years ago someone forwarded me an article about cruise ships. You may or may not know this but there are now cruise ships in which those who buy first-class (or VIP) tickets enter the ship through a separate entrance and remain quarantined from the rest of the people on the ship for the entire duration of the cruise. As I understand it, they have their own sleeping and dining quarters; their own pools, movie theaters, shops, nail salons, and lecture halls, etc.

When I read the article I thought: *How different are we in the arts in the US, really?* When we scale our houses based on willingness to pay. Or construct lounges where donors and other VIPs can gather before the show or at intermission—significantly reducing the possibility of all of humanity bumping into each other in the lobby.

This is just smart business, some will say. Different people want different experiences and have different capacities to pay.

Perhaps. But at a time when many countries are experiencing significant and growing cultural divides policies like these may (consciously or unconsciously) contribute to perpetuating such divides, or even deepening them.

Capitalizing on growing income inequality or other divides may be a business strategy; but it is a troubling one for subsidized cultural institutions, particularly those claiming social justice, equity, or inclusion as core values.

Smart business or not, we will have lost something vital in the culture if cultural institutions must go the way of the cruise ships to survive—by which I mean some combination of *country club for elites* and *commercial entertainment for the masses*.

I want to say a bit more about that *something vital* ...

Last year, a new play by the celebrated poet, Claudia Rankine, premiered in Boston, a coproduction between American Repertory Theatre at Harvard University and the presenting organization, ArtsEmerson, at Emerson College. It was called *The White Card* and the question motivating the work was: “Can American society progress if whiteness stays invisible?”

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

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

Think about that.

In Boston—a majority minority city—with more universities per capita, I think, than any city in the US—in 2018.

“I want to know a black person.”

Cultural institutions are one of the few places in society that have the *potential* to bring people together across divides on equal terms. And I would argue bring them together not just to see a show or an exhibition but to connect in some meaningful way across those divides.

However, I am hard pressed to identify more than a handful of occasions in my adult life when I have experienced this, despite attending perhaps 1,500 performances/exhibitions over the past 15 years. Do we have anything to offer the person who wants to *know* a black person—and not just see a *show* written by a black person, or *starring* a black actor?

If not, should we?

In October of last year I gave a talk in Pittsburgh at a small gathering of major arts institution leaders, just a couple days *before* the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue that left 11 people dead. It was the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in US history.

Before my talk Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh spoke—and spoke eloquently about the importance of the arts and how they fit into his “resiliency plan” for Pittsburgh—a post-industrial city that, like so many others, had experienced tremendous economic decline. He was concerned about the economic rejuvenation of his city, but he was perhaps more concerned about the cultural divides in his community—and the anger and hatred that was brewing in Pittsburgh and the nation more generally. He talked eloquently about the role he felt the arts could play in addressing this.

So many cities these days are trying to figure out how to be a place where people can walk down the street and feel safe and sound; feel a sense of connection and belonging.¹

Whether we see ourselves in this role or not, many communities are counting on the arts to help foster *social cohesion*—which studies tell us is declining in many places. By social cohesion I mean the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper together.

Put another way, it’s becoming untenable for arts organizations to remain *above* the political, socio-economic, religious, and other divides. We have a role in addressing these.

I am by no means suggesting that all cultural institutions need to produce works that grapple directly with racism, sexism, economic inequality, religious extremism, political divides, migration, climate change, or other critical issues of our time. That might or might not be the work of the institution, depending on its mission.

But creating and holding space for connection and even conversation between humans who would not otherwise interact—like others, I believe this could be *the* vital work of today’s arts institutions.

We can’t do that work, however, if whole parts of our communities are invisible to us.

One of the questions I asked the arts leaders gathered in Pittsburgh was to reflect on the basis for their programming decisions, given current divides. In other words:

- What factors determine what gets programmed for whom?
- Who are you trying to get into the space?
- Who and what are you paying attention to systematically and who or what are systematically falling outside of your line of vision?

¹ As I talked about in the Q&A, this is an idea that Nina Simon held out as her vision for the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, which she so brilliantly transformed. That if she was doing her job right, people walking down the streets of Santa Cruz would look in each other’s eyes and would feel a sense of connection and trust.

- And if controversy erupts, which artists and works get preserved, cared for, fought for, and defended; and, these days, which get cancelled and why?

At the time, there were lots of cancellations happening. Robert LePage's show SLAV had been cancelled at the Montreal Jazz Festival because of protests. And quite a few institutions were dealing with the question of whether or not to cancel planned performances and exhibitions because of accusations of sexual misconduct being lodged against certain artists and entertainers, including the artist Chuck Close, and the comedian Louis CK.

During the Q&A after my talk, a leader raised a hand and picked up on this topic of cancellations and asked, essentially, "So, when, if ever, is it OK to present, for instance, Louis CK again? I'd like to hear how others approach a decision like this?"

Some organizations are, no doubt, asking the same about Robert LePage—on what basis will we decide whether to commission or present his next work, or not?

Likewise, museums are asking if it is still OK to keep their Chuck Close works on the gallery walls now that allegations of misconduct have surfaced about him. And if they come down on the side of cancelling Chuck Close, will they also stop exhibiting the many artists from the past who were known to have engaged in various forms of misconduct?

Or does this issue only matter once it's on the front page of the *New York Times* and it becomes a pressing PR issue?

Whatever the choice, it is now a socio-political as well as an aesthetic statement to cancel these artists, or not. *Or* to present them but bring the issues front and center for conversation. That's a third way that interests me greatly.

When the Chuck Close allegations surfaced, rather than cancel a planned exhibition, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts decided to add a parallel exhibition addressing "art and gender dynamics, power in the workplace, ... equity for all, and life as an artist." To my mind, that's helping to bring people together across divides for a conversation. That's cultural leadership.

As much as we might like to transcend what is going on in the world—which is horrifying in America—we can't. We, in the arts, need to stay present and awake and help others do the same.

In her essay, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf writes:

... if people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses. Sight goes. They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. They lose the sense of proportion—the relations between one thing and another.

Humanity goes.

When the experience of going to work each day is dehumanizing for many; when cultural divides are causing us to dehumanize "the other;" and when technology is quite literally

dehumanizing our interactions how much more important is it that we have art—and not only art streaming at us through our smart phones and tablets—but live art that brings us together into the same space.

Achieving this is a challenge if the “us” in the room is *not* going to be a small, homogeneous slice of humanity.

It requires institutions to pay attention to the structures, systems, and symbols that shape and signal who belongs—on the staff, in the boardroom, on the stage, and in the audience—and who needs to be invited in.

A couple years ago I gave a keynote address in New Zealand on transformative engagement, in which I talked about an organization called Mixed Blood that practices what it calls Radical Hospitality in its pricing policies.

Radical hospitality is actually a term that was first used in religious or church contexts. It is about going beyond invitation and creating for would-be participants a sense of belonging.

It struck me today that churches I’ve been to most of my life generally don’t have VIP sections or lounges. If they were to have them, I suspect many churches these days would be inclined to use them to welcome the newcomers into the fold rather than puff up the old guard.²

In that talk I argued that cultural institutions need to practice Radical Hospitality not only in how they *price*; but in what gets *programmed*; in the *place* where the arts experience happens; and how the organization *approaches and relates* to people.

This last point is perhaps the most important. Russell Willis Taylor, who ran the leadership organization National Arts Strategies, among others, once said:

A community isn’t just an audience ... a community talks back and it criticizes and it challenges and it questions and it reshapes our organizations to fit its needs or it walks away if we will not listen.

A community isn’t just an audience; that’s a lesson that many cultural institutions are learning, or re-learning, these days.

² After the talk a really nice man mentioned to me that, of course, for centuries churches did have special sections for the donors and other VIP members. He is, of course, exactly right; and it makes me wonder if and when that started to shift and that this would be a nice area to further research. In the Q&A the fact that the new facility at Stratford, opening next year, would have a VIP Lounge. I suggested that the patrons with access to that lounge (many of whom I suspected were in the audience for my talk) were the ones with the power to change what that lounge would be used for and that it would be great if they could make a point of bringing two locals who had never been to the theater with them every time they came to a show and visited that lounge. In that sense, it could become the lounge for welcoming newcomers.

I want to end by telling you about an extraordinary initiative at a cultural institution in Germany—one that I believe speaks profoundly to the changing face of arts engagement.

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

In a gesture of solidarity, the arts institution Kampnagel, led by Amelie Deuflhard, defied the government's position against refugees and courageously launched a crowdfunding campaign to support an "interventional art project" for which they built a tiny house—an arts installation—in the garden of their venue to host six refugees.

What started as a small, art project—a symbolic gesture, really—took on a life of its own. Each year for the past four years this initiative has morphed and grown and cracked open some colonized aspect of Kampnagel and, I daresay, is cracking open minds and hearts of locals in Hamburg. I recently read that Kampnagel now provides a lab and meeting space where *refugees* and *locals* regularly come together—each abandoning those identities—to commune, collaborate, and create.

On the Kampnagel website there is a definition and statement on Refugee-ism that reads:

Refugee-ism reflects on the situation of involuntary migrants. Migrants are very much involved in finding their roles in society as well as their current representation in art: as representatives of their biography and as self-determined actors of a future community.

The best definition of cultural equity I have ever heard came from Jamie Bennett, the brilliant executive director of ArtPlace America. He once said to me, "Cultural equity is the right to hear your own stories told and the obligation to hear the stories of others."

This is the very essence of fostering cultural democracy; and it represents profoundly the changing face of arts engagement:

- The changing **demographics** of our communities ... which we cannot ignore.
- The changing **aesthetics** of our institutions (represented in what we program, where, by whom, for whom);
- And the changing **role** of the arts from purveyor of elite culture for all, to a forum where all can hear their own stories told and experience the stories of others.

One of my favorite conceptions of the purpose of art comes from the writer Bill Sharpe who says that *art is the way we share with one another what it means to be human*. We might ask ourselves: Who in our city is able to engage in this exchange and who is being systematically left out?

I love the Kampnagel story because it speaks to the powerful *potential* of cultural institutions to help us all regain our senses of sight, sound, speech, and proportion. To open our eyes to the relations between one thing and another—so we might see ourselves and others without distortion. To help us all maintain, or regain, our humanity.

Thank you for your kind attention.