

*Good afternoon.* Today is Veteran's Day. Among many others in my family, I have a brother who served in the Navy, a stepfather who served in the Air Force; a great uncle who was a paratrooper who landed at Normandy and lost his hands and an eye fielding a hand grenade and thereby protecting others; a great uncle who was a WWII Ranger who made seven beach landings; a great, great uncle who trained horses for the Cavalry and served in World War 1, and a grandfather who served in the Merchant Marines. I acknowledge and give thanks for the great sacrifices of all military veterans and today in particular keep those who have lost loved ones to war in mind and heart.

I also want to acknowledge that I am Zooming to you today from what is now called St. Peters, MO, traditional lands of the Kickapoo, Kaskaskia and Osage peoples, on the site of Indian Land Session 50, and present-day home of the Sac & Fox Nation, which was nearly terminated in 1953. And I wish to acknowledge that Missouri's climate is changing. Most of the state has warmed one-half to one degree (F) in the last century and floods are becoming more frequent. In the coming years, we expect extremely hot days that will harm both public health and harvests.

So, I am in the unenviable position of following Ben Cameron, a truly great leader, beautiful human, and a brilliant mind and public speaker. It is a pleasure and privilege to be here with all of you and Ben, whom I have known for two decades now.

This gathering, broadly speaking, as I understand it, is focused on the business of the arts. As I was preparing to give this talk I happened to come across this reflection by filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami quoted in a book chapter titled *The Value(s) of Arts Business*: "I think the real question, which can be frustrating or satisfying, is to what extent cinema, when it was born, was meant to be lead where it is now, its present state; that's what I really wonder. We also need to know where is the border between cinema as an art and cinema as a business."

I would put it this way: Where is the border between meaning-making and money-making? I think a lot about boundaries between commercial and nonprofit forms and whether we should be seeking to blur them; or whether we should be seeking to strengthen them but find ways to span them.

A handful of years ago I gave a talk in New Zealand in which I was seeking to demonstrate the limits of neoliberal approaches in the arts - essentially, the limits of hustling ticket sales and contributions. I asked a question that dovetails with Kairostami's question about cinema as art and business. *Where is the boundary between the people out there as a market to be captured versus a community to be engaged? Can they be both?*

This time a year ago I grappled with just this question in real-time with ten cultural institutions in California. Over 22-weeks I co-led with field colleagues Karen Ann Daniels and Robert Martin an initiative called **Catalyzing Engagement**, which we conceptualized as a thought experiment centered on a question:

In the midst of the disruptions of 2020, when the core of many cultural institutions has been hollowed out, what would happen if we put the values, beliefs, practices, processes, and structures of engagement departments at the center of the institution? The process began with marketing and outreach departments of institutions sitting together to talk about concepts like engagement, community, audience development, outreach, and education. How to define them? Are they harmful (in the sense of being holdovers from colonialism)? What do we do about conflicting conceptualizations and goals?

Teams used the time in the program to listen deeply internally within and across departments; and when they felt ready, then turned their attention to the community and listened deeply to their partners and other stakeholders. Here is a gem from adrienne maree brown and her book *Emergent Strategy* that became a mantra with this work. →

**What we practice at the small scale sets the pattern for the whole system.**

adrienne maree brown

Likewise, for the better part of six months at the Banff Centre, where I run a Cultural Leadership program, and where we were essentially in hibernation for a year, I spent a large chunk of time recruiting a diverse faculty that would function as an ensemble, looking at the world and the arts and culture landscape through each other's perspectives, establishing the values that would guide our program, and working out together and with our alumni how we would operationalize these values in the programs we were building together.



As part of the process, here is a Jamboard where we spent time reflecting on two of the seven values embedded in the Right Relations Agreement that is central to many Indigenous communities and adopted by many programs at Banff Centre.

For years I had seen posters on walls and pages in session packets at Banff Centre inviting the agreement to engage with one another with love, respect, humility, courage, wisdom, honesty, and truth. But I had never led a process to explore what that meant, in particular, within the context of a leadership program. So we spent time doing this work.

*Why am I talking with you about my work in California and at the Banff Centre in the middle of the pandemic?*

To my mind this was the pandemic's greatest gift. The opportunity to focus on relationships. The opportunity to surface the beliefs and assumptions underpinning our models and then *potentially, if we dared*, flip them. The opportunity to focus on processes rather than products. And the opportunity to ask some truly awkward questions—which tend to be a specialty of mine.

Questions like this one: *To What End Permanence?*

This is the first page of an essay that I wrote for a book called *A Moment on the Clock of the World*, which was the final “production” so to speak of the Foundry Theatre—an exquisite gem of a theater company founded by Melanie Joseph that took the decision to close in 2019 at 25.

In one passage of the essay I wrote this:

“The decision for an arts organization to endure beyond the founder needs to be about something more than whether there is a stash of fixed assets, sufficient cash in the bank, subscribers and donors willing to renew, players wanting to play, and individuals technically qualified and desiring to take over. And this something more has to do with what it means to be a living art firm.”

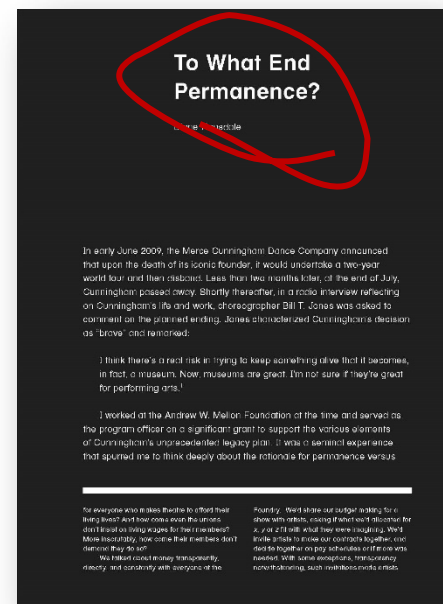
There is a price to institutionalism, a price to permanence.

Drawing on sociology and economics, Marshall W. Meyer and Lynne G. Zucker coined the term *permanently failing organizations* to describe firms that are no longer achieving their nominal goals but that continue to chug along – mere existence having, in a sense, displaced other goals.

[Their book](#) essentially seeks to understand why and how this happens. Among the key causal factors: those who are financially dependent on the organization take decisions in the interest of keeping the organization alive—even if in a mediocre state—rather than attempting innovations that might improve performance, because taking such risks could also lead to actual failure in the form of insolvency.

I remember reading *Permanently Failing Organizations* several years back and wondering whether arts nonprofits might be particularly prone to this state –

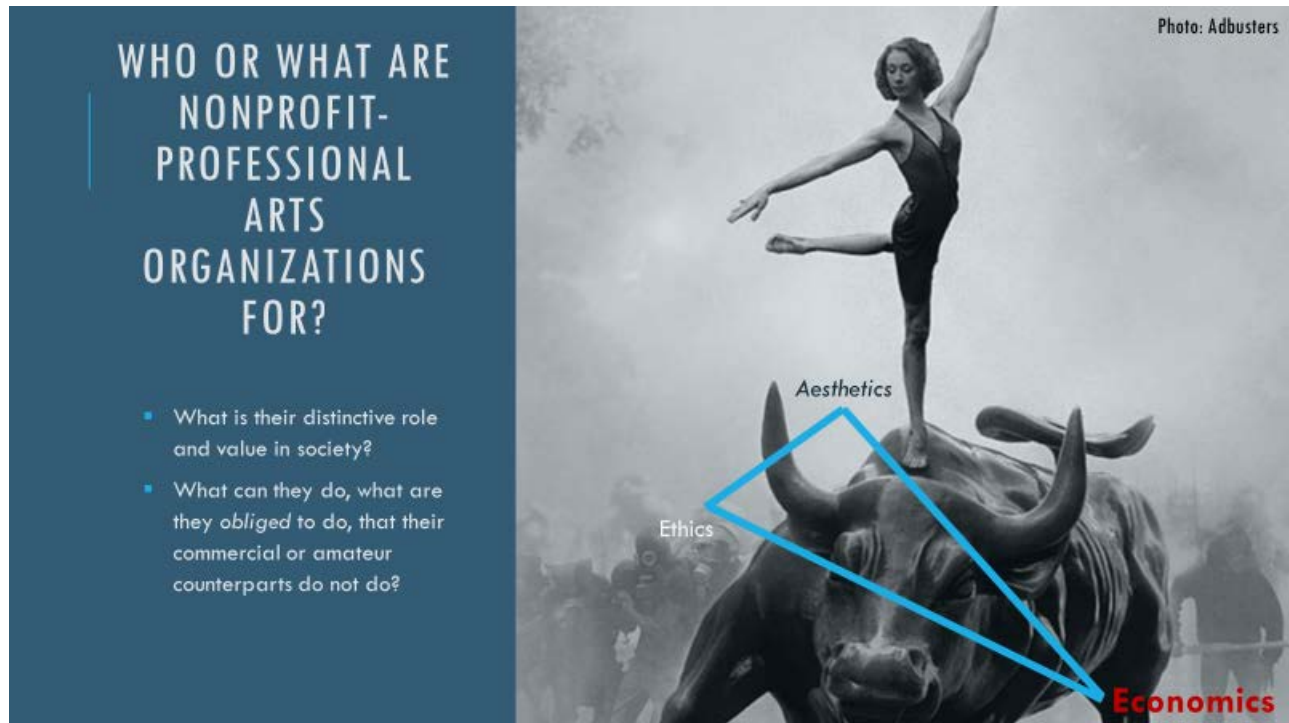
- because they lack owners;
- because their goals (“artistic quality,” “fostering understanding,” “relevance”) are notoriously difficult to measure;
- because venue and mission quite often get shackled and then, worse, conflated; and, yes,
- because arts nonprofits are quite often established with perpetuity in their sights.





Here is another set of existential questions I think about a lot.

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



I also think a lot about the consequences of erosions in the distinctive purposes of nonprofits and why and how this happens. I have an abiding interest in the relationship between economics, ethics, and aesthetics and, in particular, the consequences of economics being too often in the driver's seat.

More specifically, when cultural institutions don't have aesthetic and ethical guardrails that are as clear or firm as their economic guardrails I would assert that they are lacking structural integrity. And this is what I want to discuss for the remainder of my time: *structural integrity*, or the relationship between and *integration* of these three forms of value and valuation.



To delve into this topic, I'd like to escape this Covid moment and transport us back to late 2017 at the launch of the #MeToo movement. Comedian Louis CK was one of several individuals to be accused of sexual misconduct at the height of the #MeToo movement -- accusations the comedian later admitted were true.

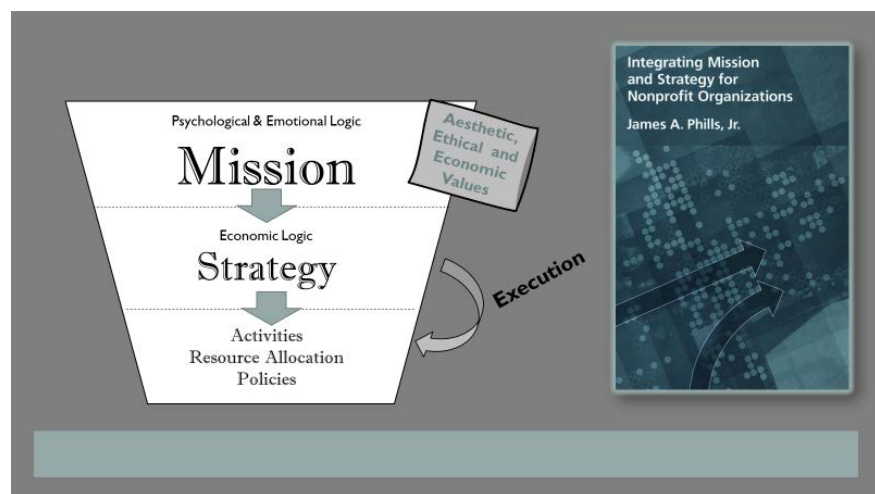
In the fall 2018 I gave a talk in Pittsburgh for a gathering of the leaders of the largest

performing arts centers in North America. During the discussion after the talk, one of the participants raised a hand and addressed the room. He said: “Louis CK’s agent called me the other day and evidently he has been doing sets in small comedy clubs in NYC and he is ready to get back out on the road. So my question for this room is: When is it OK to present Louis CK again? What do we think? Because I think his audiences may be ready to see him again.”

What did others think? A few participants weighed in with their personal opinions and then one spoke up and asked, “Doesn’t the answer depend on the values of *your* institution?” Indeed. I would put it this way: Your answer to that question depends on the goals and limits your organization has set on the three forms of value and valuation that I have mentioned already:

- **Economics:** How reliant are we on earned income? Is there an audience ready to see him? Can we afford to present him if audiences are weak and no one wants to sponsor the show?
- **Aesthetics:** Can he still deliver an excellent show? Will it increase our artistic reputation to present him (or at least not harm it)? Do we consider this to be an excellent show?
- **Ethics:** Given his admission of sexual misconduct, is presenting him the right thing to do? Could it harm some members of our community if we get behind him in this moment? Could it signal that we condone his behavior? How much does this matter to us?

In his book [\*Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations\*](#) Management Scholar Jim Phillips conceptualizes the relationship between economic strategy and mission as a “funnel”. Phillips characterizes mission as the psychological and emotional logic of the institution. It answers the question Why does the work we do matter?



I tend to think of mission as also carrying the aesthetic, ethical and economic values of nonprofit arts organizations. For instance, mission should ideally answer such questions as:

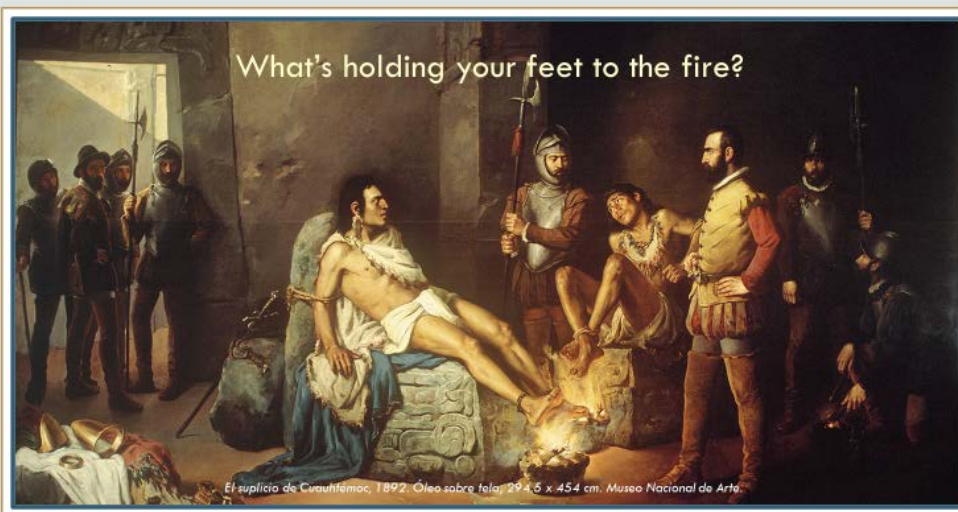
- Why contemporary art from Asia, Africa, Australia, South America, and the Middle East?
- Why free admission?
- Why sustained by memberships and individual contributions but not by corporate sponsorship from oil companies?

Phillips’ funnel is meant to convey that mission is established first and then sets the limits on economic strategy. When I encountered this model my first thought was – *Yeah, this is one of those places where the model is out of sync with reality.* Like a plant bending towards a window in search of sunlight, cultural institutions experience the bending of mission over the long arc of time in response to all manner of money with strings attached or market behavior. Institutions bend to ensure that they can survive economically.

We have a word for this form of resilience – *mission creep* – which both normalizes the behavior and makes it sound rather innocuous. But if I were to call it *Permanent Failure* that comes closer to conveying its significance. It begs a question:

### What's holding your feet to the fire?

- Missions are squishy; and buildings and bottom lines are not.
- And judgments about art are subjective.
- And human beings are often self-interested.
- And the nonprofit form lends itself to manipulation and to serving the interests of a few rather than the general public.



I would argue that cultural institutions need aesthetic and ethical guardrails, as strong as the bottom line, in part because of these dynamics.

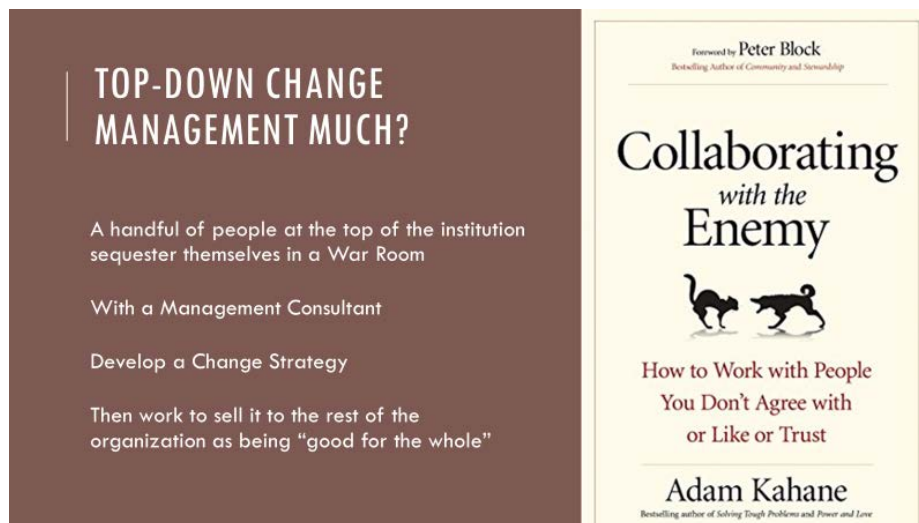
What do I mean by this?

Here are some examples of ethical values: trustworthiness, fairness, respect, caring, and responsibility. These are the kinds of behaviors that one imagines could (or should) distinguish cultural nonprofits from commercial entertainment industries.

- Going back to the Louis CK example, nonprofits might be expected to care about harms against people more than those in the corporate sector do, for instance, and to set policies to ensure a non-hostile working environment.
- Or to prioritize the safety, mental health and general wellbeing of their employees and artists throughout the pandemic and as organizations re-open.
- Nonprofits might also be expected to exercise *moral imagination*: to take the time to listen to internal and external stakeholders; to listen to the needs of future generations; to listen to the needs of the planet. Essentially to carefully consider the impacts of their decisions on staff, artists, and the communities their institutions exist to serve.

In his book [\*Collaborating with the Enemy: How To Work With People You Don't Agree With, Or Like, Or Trust\*](#) Adam Kahane describes a typical change management process in which a handful of people sequester themselves in a room with a consultant, develop a change strategy and then work to sell it to the rest of the organization as being “good for the whole.” Does this sound familiar?

Such efforts largely fail for many reasons, not least because the rest of the organization is smart enough to realize when the changes proposed are not, actually, in their best interests and are, instead, in the best interests of those who went in the conference room, closed the door, and came up with the plan. This, btw, is another pathway to permanent failure.



By aesthetic values I mean, quite simply, what your organization deems to be beautiful, or interesting, or *excellent*. Here is a list of some aesthetic values but we could list hundreds more.

## SOME AESTHETIC VALUES:

Simplicity / complexity  
Dark / light  
Local / global  
Coherent / chaotic  
Conventional / disruptive  
Scripted / devised / improvised  
Fast / slow  
Formal / informal  
Passive / participatory  
Intimate / distant  
Resourcefulness / extravagance

One of the big shifts of the past ten years has been away from passive engagement towards participatory engagement in arts experiences. This is an example of a shift in aesthetic values. Aesthetic values, among others, shape and are shaped by decisions about what to preserve, protect, produce, curate, and present – and what not.

A few years back I attended a book launch for the third edition of an anthology called *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*. One of the editors, Roberta Uno, described the efforts to compile the first edition 22 years earlier – in 1995. She said that when she and her collaborator first started “looking for plays it was a very difficult process.” But that they made a breakthrough 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 going back decades. Rejected.

Leaving those plays in the reject file had the longer term consequence of diminishing the awareness, understanding, and value of contemporary plays by women of color over time. We look to the walls of major museums and the stages of major theaters and the recordings of symphony orchestras to tell us which works and artists matter, and which do not.





“You know there is an archive of women of color plays!

Go to any theater and ask for the **reject file**.”

**Contemporary Plays by Women of Color**

**BOOK LAUNCH**

We are in a moment when predominantly or historically white cultural institutions are being challenged to acknowledge past errors in judgment, embrace an expanded set of aesthetic values, and to look carefully at past works in light of present social conditions.













If you are seeking to have a conversation about aesthetic values in your institution, or how you define artistic excellence, I highly recommend this framework and toolkit by Animating Democracy. It is called [Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change](#).

*Change* is a word one cannot escape these days. There is increasing pressure externally and internally not to return to the *status quo*—with racial equity, fair wages, flexibility, and safe and healthy workplaces being at the top of the list of expectations.

In cultural institutions, being able to talk transparently and intelligently about the aesthetic values of your cultural institution and why changes are *or are not* being implemented is becoming a core competence all leaders must have. Including CFOs and Board Members.

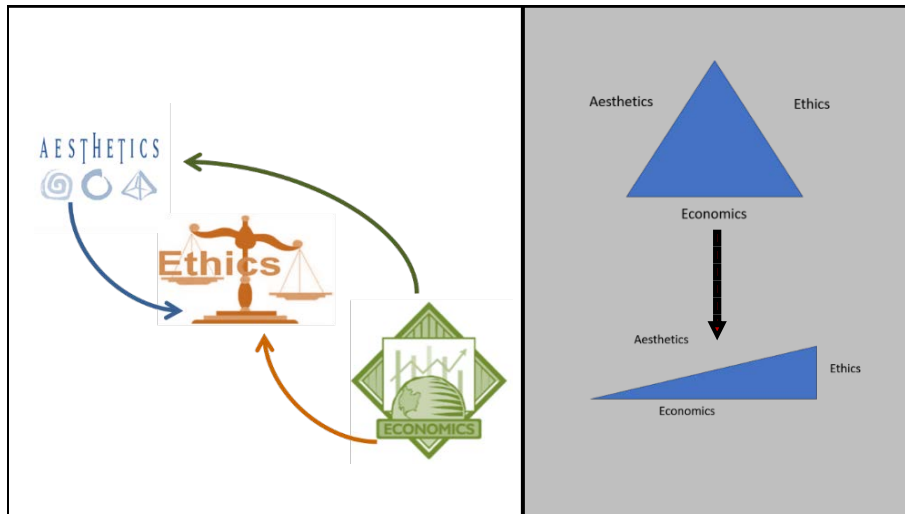
Can you talk transparently and intelligently about the aesthetic values of your cultural institution and why these are shifting, or not?

**AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES**  
*Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*

 disruption	 commitment	 communal meaning	 cultural integrity
 risk-taking	 emotional experience	 sensory experience	 openness
 Animatimg Democracy <small>A Program of OpenSource for the Arts</small>	 coherence	 resourcefulness	 stickiness

So, back to the birds-eye view ...





Different from Jim Phillips, within the context of an organization's business model I conceptualize these three forms of value and valuation as mutually interdependent. Meaning a shift in one will necessitate a shift in the other two and that we are ultimately seeking a structural integrity between them; something that is sustainable over time.

The 2020 pandemic is an interesting case in this. The prohibitions on gathering forced many organizations to change their conventional practice of producing live performances or exhibitions. In no time at all, in place of live performances, many cultural institutions began to produce or distribute digital experiences. In doing so, many also began to articulate beliefs that digital arts experiences are valuable (even if they had historically upheld "liveness" as an aesthetic value or eschewed such practices).

Was this dramatic shift motivated by a newfound belief in the value of digital work? For most, I think not. For most I believe it was a defensive maneuver, underpinned by a belief that our highest role during the pandemic was to continue to deliver artistic content to members or subscribers. A Canadian Cultural Leader and field colleague coined this "panic content." Regardless of the motivations for the shift, the new strategy shifted the *aesthetic values* of cultural institutions. And with that shift, came economic and ethical consequences.

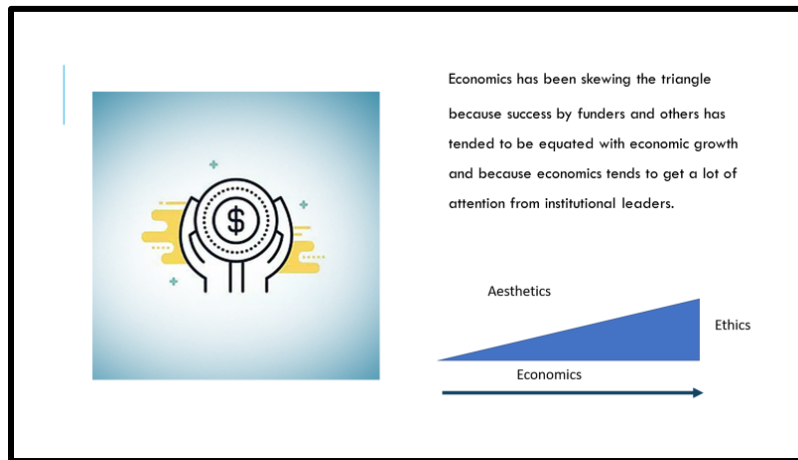
For example, *economically*, this shift has altered such things as:

- the complexity, scale, and costs of production and distribution;
- the types of skills and knowledge needed to bring a production to the market;
- the number of people and geographic locations that can be reached by a work;
- the prices that can be charged;
- the shelf life of content; and
- the nature and number of competitors or substitutes.

Likewise, *ethically*, this shift has raised such questions as:

- Do existing artist contracts (including rights & royalties) adequately and fairly deal with the sudden and dramatic shift from live to digital?
- When the pandemic is over should we return to practices that consumed scads of jet fuel, or are we beholden to find more climate conscious ways of engaging in cultural exchange?
- Are digital educational experiences potentially harmful to learning and meaning-making?
- Are digital forms crowding out something vital that can only be achieved with human bodies gathered in person?
- Do nonprofit cultural institutions now have an ongoing obligation to try to provide free or low-cost digital access to experiences that are otherwise inaccessible to those without the means or physical ability to access them in person?

I would assert that, for most cultural nonprofits in the US, economic values have long been stretching or crowding out ethical and aesthetic ones—and not only because buildings and bottom lines are firm and many missions are squishy.



Economics has been skewing the triangle because success by funders and others has tended to be equated with economic growth and because the budget tends to get a lot of attention from institutional leaders. Boards have finance and audit committees who debate and discuss the budget, establish targets, and implement policies to ensure the organization is sound financially both in the present and in the future.

On the other hand:

- How many cultural nonprofits have depth conversations at the board level to come to agreement on what is meant by artistic excellence (past, present, or future)?
- How many had depth discussions on May 26, 2020 about what it would mean to make the statement “we support #BlackLivesMatter” both in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and the rest of the year, as well?
- How many talked in depth about whether or not to embrace digital access and, if so, defined what that meant and established a few values-based principles to guide practices over time?

Many signal values like *artistic excellence*, *equity*, and *economic sustainability*; fewer give adequate time for deliberation, debate, and policy setting aimed at interpreting ... prioritizing ... and reflecting on what the integration and realization of such values in practice will mean for the institution. In part this is because many board members may feel more qualified and comfortable taking decisions and talking about the numbers than these other areas.

But how often are they invited into the conversation? For that matter, who is invited to weigh in?

**MTC**  
MANHATTAN  
THEATRE CLUB

**2015-2016 season**

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

**FORCE MAJEURE**

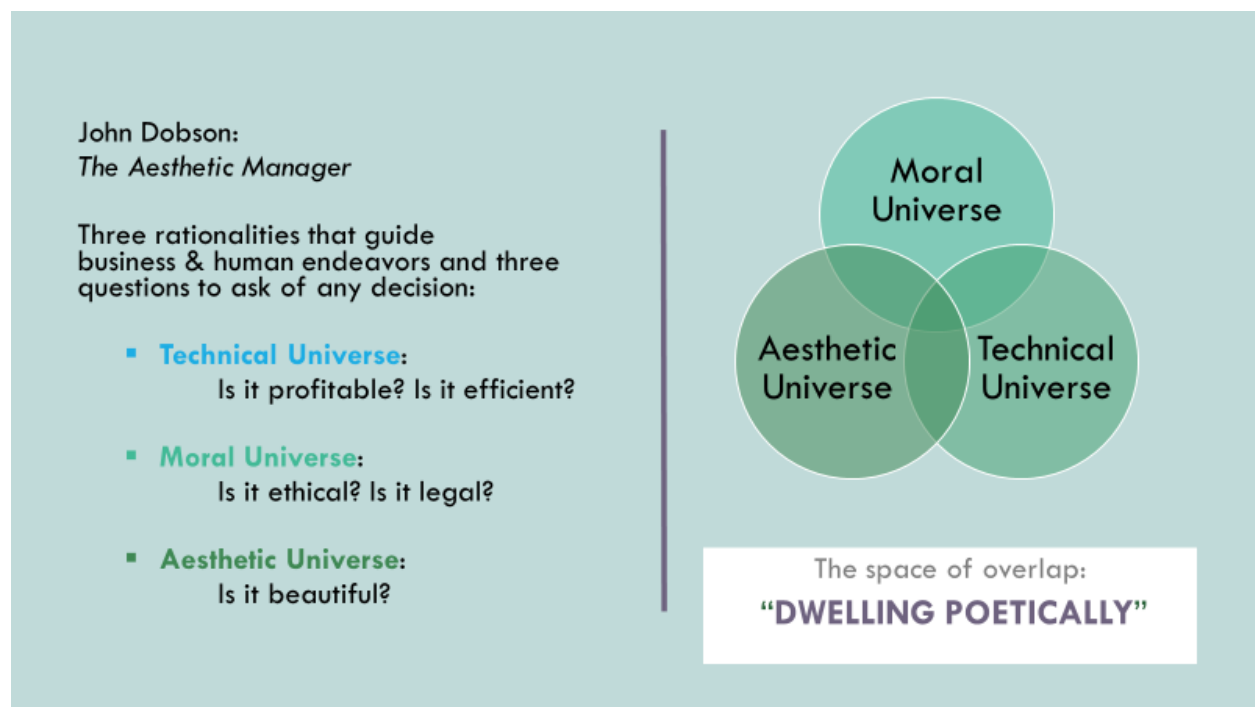
*"It's just how the season came together ..."*

Ideally, all staffers and board members alike should have clear definitions and policies that might enable and even compel them to ask their own awkward questions when, for example, the season is announced at a theater whose mission is to “produce work as broad and diverse as NYC itself.” and all the writers and directors are white and all, save one, are male.

Or when a pandemic hits and the decision is made within days to dismiss all freelance educators or trigger the force majeure clause in contracts with artists, rather than paying them some portion of their fees.

Getting economics out of the driver's seat is not comfortable or easy work. But it is necessary because the bottom line, the IRS code and the bylaws are inadequate reference points for taking the incredibly difficult decisions that cultural institutions must take in this time of cultural change and complexity.

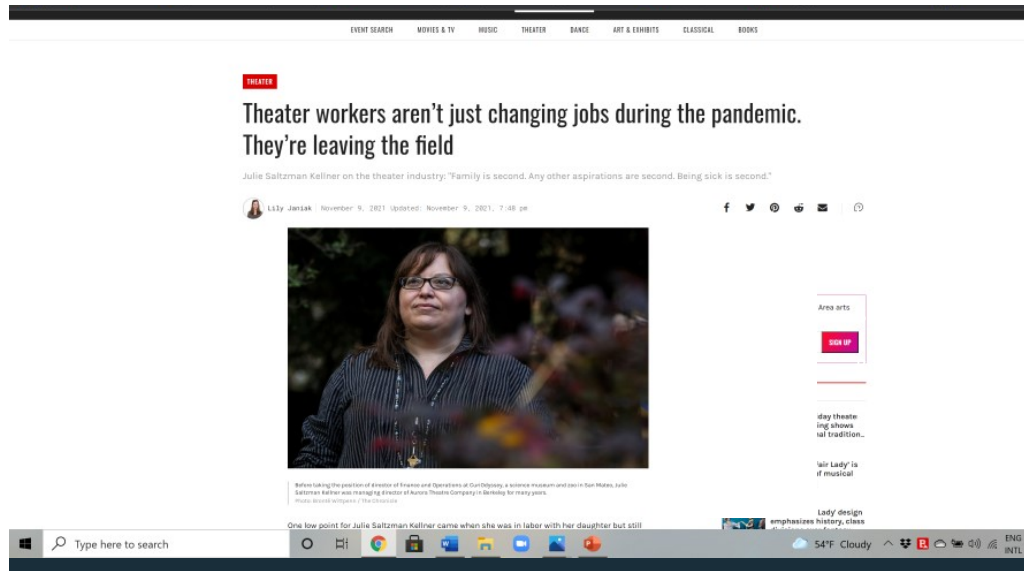
Professor of Finance at CalPoly Tech, John Dobson, has argued for some time now we are in an era that requires leaders and managers to “dwell poetically”—borrowing a phrase from Heidegger. That is, to balance between and draw upon three distinct rationalities: that of the technical universe (the financial bottom line), that of the moral universe, and that of the aesthetic universe.



I embrace the philosophy that cultural leadership is a *collective* capacity. So, building on Dobson, whose work I have admired for years, I would argue that beyond the capacity of *individual* leaders to dwell poetically, entire organizations and their stakeholders need to engage in necessary discussion, debate, and deliberation about these three areas – and with the goal of eventually establishing some ethical and aesthetic guardrails in their business models that are as strong as their economic guardrails. There is a lot at stake if we don't.

I read an article yesterday about theater makers leaving the industry. We are experiencing the consequences of changes in our sector over the past 30 years. The prioritization of products over processes; the quantifiable over the qualitative; transactions over relationships; and a range of divides, inequities, extractive practices, silos, precarity, burnout. This does not rest at your feet any more or less than it rests at mine. We have collectively gone on a strange journey together and have ended up at the same cliff.

As Slow Food did in the 1990s in response to the Fast Food Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, we are waking up today to the harms that came with much of what we once called progress and recognizing that we need our own counter-revolution.



I know that these are exceedingly tough times to be an executive leader for a cultural institution. I sincerely commend you all for staying in the arena, untangling hard knots, and daily making excruciating decisions. I hope my reflections have been valuable to you and that you take them as encouragement, not criticism.

I very much look forward to our conversation today. Thank you for your kind attention!

PS: Here is the [Jumper blog post](#) that eventually led to my writing this keynote and some further questions you might consider. [You can always contact me via my blog, Jumper, on ArtsJournal.com.](#)

