

Panel Remarks for September 15, 2021 Metcalf Foundation Panel Discussion on
Art and the World After This
by Metcalf Foundation Fellow
David Maggs

Thank you, David and Michael, for the invitation to be here today and to participate on this panel with Marcus and Hasan. It is a great privilege and I am particularly enthused to have been assigned this question of Ecosystem or Zoo as I am, among others, interested in the boundaries between the subsidized, commercial, and amateur arts sectors and in whether better outcomes are achieved by maintaining and spanning those boundaries, or blurring them.

As a reminder, the question at hand was inspired by an interview between David Maggs and Parks Canada ecosystem scientist, Michael Burzynski, who explains that apex species are without predators and that their presence is an indication of overall system health. Burzynski remarks: “A healthy ecosystem is the only way you can maintain an apex animal. Either that or a Zoo.”¹

Zoos are artificial, protected environments that foster public attention and engagement with their inhabitants and advance the general cause of animal conservation. Or do they? In a recent [op-ed in the NY Times](#), environmental writer Emma Marris remarked, it’s hard to find “evidence that zoos are making visitors care more about conservation: more than 700 million people visit zoos every year but biodiversity is in decline.” One thing I notice is that most zoos are so beautiful these days it is easy to forget that they are still places of captivity—to overlook the moral costs.

Cultural districts remind me of zoos. They are also protected environments designed to foster public attention and engagement with their inhabitants and the more general cause of the arts. Like zoos, however, it’s not clear that the existence of cultural districts bears much relationship to the “biodiversity” of artists and art forms. Moreover, cultural districts are so beautiful it is easy to forget that artists and smaller organizations often live on the edge.

It seems we cannot rely on the state of the zoo to tell us much about the state of the ecosystem beyond it. Likewise, we might lead ourselves astray by assessing the health of the arts system more generally by the ongoing **existence** of establishment institutions that tend to be featured in them—in part because such apex organizations are powerful and evidently too big to let fail.

But what if we were to adopt a notion of existence with some teeth in it? Here’s one from Susan Sontag: “Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past present and future.”²

Existence in 2021 is more than Covid protocols in place and a Zoom corporate account. It’s more than staffers continuing to plan and put on programs of some kind. It’s more than sufficient income to meet or exceed expenses.

It’s mattering.

¹ David Maggs (2021) *Art and the World After This*, p. 50.

² Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 74-5.

In the realm of the cultural, where symbols and meaning-making are paramount, relevance matters. One definition of relevance: closely connected and appropriate.

Perhaps a better way to assess the health of the arts system in 2021 is by answering this question: How closely connected and appropriate are apex organizations to the wider communities in which they are embedded? Put another way, how narrow or wide is the gap (economic, aesthetic, intellectual, social, physical, etc.) between them?

And if the gap is quite wide, indeed?

According to an organizational ecology perspective sectoral evolution or change happens largely through the decline and death of certain types of organizations and the birth and growth of others.³ One major cluster of theories on innovation argues the same: while innovation might emerge from monopolies if they invest in R&D (think Bell Labs) it largely happens through the emergence of new forms of organization that are a better fit with their environment. These eventually displace incumbents. As a sector we have a bias towards size and permanence and continue to sustain and valorize large institutions—even if they are holding up necessary sectoral change.

As one example, we are living in a moment of reckoning with calls for arts organizations to respond to the wider changes in the culture and to address historic harms, most notably those of colonization. But what is the capacity of large institutions to address these concerns?

In her excellent talk, [How Can you Decolonise Museums?](#) Shaheen Kasmani reminds us that museums were and are a celebration of colonialism. She wonders aloud: “Is expecting a museum to decolonize like expecting a brewery to support dry January?”

Notably, from an organizational ecology perspective the speed of any given systems change is limited by the speed at which the slowest organizational population can respond.⁴

So perhaps we are in need of a rewilding, a concept Maggs highlights in his report? A rewilding suggests a return to an ancestral state, an earlier state of “health” or (as I have been arguing) “relevance”—it is often stimulated by the reintroduction of a keystone species.

I have wondered since reading Maggs’ report whether (at least in the US) the sector’s keystone species could be midsized arts organizations, or funders, or arts journalists, or even the lost middle class. The past couple of days I have been toying with another idea.

I know of one rewilding in the US arts and culture sector—or think I do. Since the start of the pandemic, in the face of economic devastation to artists, there has been renewed interest among some in the historic Works Progress Administration and, in particular, its theatrical manifestation, the Federal Theater Project. Part of the New Deal, the WPA was an employment program launched by FDR with the goal of putting a wide range of professionals back to work during the Great Depression, including theater-makers, who were paid to form units and put on productions. The FTP was distinguished by its creation of topical plays called Living Newspapers and its efforts to advance racial equity through the formation of dedicated black theatrical units. Before it was eliminated *because* of its social justice aims, in four brief years, The Federal Theater Project realized an

³ Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman (1989), [Organizational Ecology](#), p. 10-15.

⁴ Ibid. The authors write on p. 3, “Because organizations play key roles in modern societies, the speed and direction of social change depend on the dynamics of organizations. In particular, the ability of society as a whole to respond to changing conditions depends on the responsiveness of its constituent organizations and on the diversity of its organizational populations.”

aesthetically, racially, geographically, structurally, and economically diverse theater that had widespread relevance and impact.

I am convinced the multi-dimensional diversity of the FTP arose because it was *not* a cultural policy program. It was an artist employment program. The only requirement was to work in the state where you lived and to show evidence that you were unemployed. I think there could be a lesson in here for this moment.

The FTP was an extraordinary example of cultural innovation: a boundary-spanning, open process that generated new works, methods, and relationships; improved the welfare of people; provided widespread access to heritage; fostered creativity; and generated beauty at a time when spirits and the public imagination needed to be lifted along with the GDP.

Could our keystone species be the cross-sectoral, relational, collaborative, and inherently entrepreneurial, place-based artist—and I use the word artist in its broadest sense?

Who knows?

I am sure *I do not* know with any confidence what form any present rewilding needs to take; but if it makes some folx *incredibly nervous* even to think about redistributing resources and power in this way—and others *incredibly enthused*—perhaps one **future** conversation could start there?

Thank you for your kind attention.