

## 4 In and Out of the Dark

*A Theory about Audience  
Behavior from Sophocles to Spoken Word*

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It is a common understanding that sometime during the course of the twentieth century, the live arts lost touch with the popular or mass audience. Experts ranging from economists to market researchers to cultural historians have all documented a shift in consumer patterns as audiences in search of live entertainment moved from the concert hall and the playhouse to the arena, coffee shop, and nightclub. This shift occurred because the audience no longer has an interest in—or the intellectual capacity for or the cultural connections with—the arts. In theaters and symphony halls across America, it is said, the audience has left the building.

This chapter argues the opposite. American audiences are very much as they have always been: looking for similar kinds of satisfaction from their cultural sources. What has changed, however, are the arts themselves, or rather, the culture surrounding arts participation—what I label the *arts experience*. In this chapter's analysis the traditional arts industry has abandoned responsibility for providing—or even acknowledging—



the importance of larger opportunities for engagement with arts events, particularly those that encourage an interpretive relationship. The result is an ever-widening interest gap between passive forms of high culture (i.e., orchestral music, theater, and concert dance) and more active types of entertainment (i.e., music concerts, spoken word, slam poetry, and interactive theater) that are either inherently participatory or are connected to opportunities that invite participation before and after the arts event. In twenty-first-century America the latter group most consistently encourages vibrant intellectual and emotional responses from audiences. To support this assertion, this chapter combines a brief history of audience behavior and an analysis of current trends in cultural participation with a theory about the psychology of contemporary adult learning and its relationship to audience engagement.<sup>1</sup>

### From Seeing Place to Hearing Place

In the performing and fine arts, the term *audience* is used to signify a group of people assembled together to experience a live performance, demonstration, or exhibit. The word *audience* connotes the action of hearing and is derived from the Latin *auditorium*, or hearing place. To *give audience* literally means to give ear, but figuratively it means to pay attention with both ears and eyes. An audience member is, by definition and by current standards of appropriate behavior, a person who looks, listens, and feels at a distance. An audience member is expected to be a passive participant.

This has not always been true. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Western audiences of all economic classes and from a wide variety of places were expected to participate actively before, during, and after an arts event. Few conceived of the arts event as existing independently of its audience—not the artists or the producers or the audiences themselves. In fact, the historical record suggests that the audience's presence was fundamental to the very definition of the arts event itself. Going to the theater—or the ballet, the opera, the symphony, or the museum—was usually a long day and evening out in which the arts event was a critical part of the experience but certainly not its sum total. People came to the arena, the playhouse, the concert hall, or the gallery, and they talked to each other—before the show began, while



the show was on, and after the show ended. They came to look, watch, eat, make deals, talk, flirt, learn, debate, emote, and engage with their fellow citizens.

This was certainly the case in classical Athens, a significant origin site for Western cultural practices—and hence, a good place to begin this historical sketch.<sup>2</sup> The assembly of male citizens, slaves, foreigners, and children who attended the drama competition at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in 425 B.C.E. (the year that *Oedipus Rex* competed) came to a *theatron* (seeing place) to participate in the City Dionysus, an annual religious and civic festival that included purification ceremonies, civic proclamations, community feasts, and a three-day competition for the best tragedy. Plays were commissioned and produced through civic mandate, financed both publicly (through taxation) and privately (by wealthy citizens appointed to pay for, e.g., costuming, the training of the chorus), and performed mostly by amateur members of the community. At the end of the three-day competition, the community fulfilled its collective duty—through a panel of judges selected from the audience—by voting for the best tragedy. It would be folly to assume that 15,000 or so audience members sat quietly all day, heard and understood every word of the tragedies under consideration for the prize, or had an agreed on set of criteria for judging them. Instead, Athenians disagreed with playwrights and with each other over the aesthetic, social, and political issues embedded in the tragedies. The historical record shows that they were extremely vocal in their opinions during the performance and afterward in the ongoing civic debate that followed. The Athenian audience was a sovereign entity in terms of measuring and evaluating the arts event.<sup>3</sup>

### The Active Environment

We are accustomed—and conditioned—to treating the arts environment, whether it is a concert hall, a playhouse, or an art gallery, as a kind of sacred place where there is no touching and no talking. But the *theatron* of the ancient Greeks was an active place in all senses—physically, intellectually, and emotionally. So, too, were the amphitheatres built by the Romans, the Elizabethan Public (outdoor) Theaters of Shakespeare's day, the first proscenium-style grand opera halls of



Renaissance Italy and France, and the entertainment emporiums of nineteenth-century America. In all of these sites, an active auditorium was an essential aspect of the live performance itself. Merchants came to do business; the aristocracy came to see and be seen; the laborers came to talk, drink, and exchange information; and on occasion, the king, czar, or president came to preside. Among the most telling extant period illustrations of a Renaissance performance, for example, is the famous rendering of *Ballet Comique de La Reine* in Paris in 1581. The illustration vividly captures the performance conditions of the first ballet, including the placement of the king, who is seated literally on the stage floor among the scenery. From the spectator-illustrator's perspective, the king was an important aspect of the performance.<sup>4</sup>

Extant period documents flesh out the active nature of the auditorium.<sup>5</sup> It was a common practice in England and France until about 1770, for instance, to place seats literally on the stage during the performance: These were either reserved for courtiers or sold at high prices. Since chairs were not routinely bolted down until well into the nineteenth century, even those relegated to the auditorium proper had a great deal of control over where they sat and how they oriented their sightlines. In the boxes (for the province of the upper class) as well as in the pit and galleries (for the working-class sections), audience members conducted all manner of social transactions, from the mundane (e.g., sharing tea and cake) to the profane (e.g., prostitutes selling their wares behind the upper galleries during the performances). Other aspects of the real world were transformed by the liminal space of the auditorium. In most nineteenth-century English and American theaters, the distinct social hierarchy of the outside world was reconstituted through separate entrances leading to seating areas organized by social status. Nevertheless, as a newspaper commentator from 1838 complained, the auditorium was a ripe site for expressing the spirit of class warfare: "The Babel confusion and uproar, the yelling and cursing—swearing and tearing—the friendly interchange of commodities—apples, pignuts, etc., between the tenants of the [gallery] and pit, have become intolerable."<sup>6</sup>

Early museums were also active, eclectic environments. As early as the 1820s, the display cases of Philadelphia's Peale Museum, often labeled America's first official museum institution, contained a wide array of items—portraits, landscapes, sculpture busts, insect specimens, stuffed birds, collections of shells and rocks—all democratically



laid out. At Barnum's American Museum established in New York City in the 1840s, people from a variety of economic classes looked at everything from specimens of natural history and displays of fine arts objects to curiosities. They also attended lectures, watched variety acts, and saw productions of moral drama (the temperance play *The Drunkard* was a favorite), all while mingling with each other inside Barnum's grandly appointed building. Patrons at these museums lived the art space fully; they saw their presence in it as a large affair that was not confined simply to quiet, reverent spectating.

### The Active Audience

Arts environments were open and unrestrained because the arts event itself was a form of community property. The arts object did not arrive with a fixed meaning; rather, it was received by the audience as an inherently interpretable commodity. This does not imply that there was regular, or even much, consensus in the process or even the protocol of interpretation, and the history of arts reception is full of vivid examples of the violent ways that artists, producers, and audiences disagreed. The function of interpretation was understood as both a cultural duty and a cultural right; that is to say, the arts event's meaning could and should only be discerned through a thorough interpretive process that by definition included the audience's perspective. Consider Sophocles, the author of *Oedipus Rex* and the winner of many prizes for best tragedy during his lifetime: As an Athenian citizen writing plays for a civic purpose, he was referred to not as *dramaturg* (playwright) but as *didaskalos*—the ancient Greek word for teacher and scholar. This is because competing tragic poets were required to appear before their audience a few days in advance of the performance to explain the themes and ideas of the plays presented. They did not expect the audience to understand their intentions solely through the presentation of the play itself. Instead, they accepted that the play was one part of a larger learning operation in which the audience's collective and individual reception would invariably shape the ascribed meaning. For the Athenian community, the tragedy was never an end in itself—and certainly not for its own sake—but the point of departure for the exchange of ideas, opinions, and passions that are the fundamental criteria of useful civic conversation.



This essential reciprocity among artist, citizen, arts event, and artistic meaning continued to guide Western culture. During the Middle Ages, when the concept of an *artist* was as yet unformed, crafts guild workers created their own art—everything from religious cycle plays to cathedrals. They functioned as citizen-artists and both created and interpreted the world of metaphor that surrounded them—albeit under the larger authority of the Catholic Church. Even as the force of professionalization began to dominate the arts ecology of the Renaissance, the audience did not see itself in a secondary position in relationship to making meaning. Through the nineteenth century audiences controlled events on stage, frequently directing the action by clapping, stomping, hissing, and throwing objects, or they stopped the performance to demand that an actor, singer, or dancer repeat favorite passages. This behavior was not confined to populist art forms. When the city of Paris erupted in 1830 over the premiere of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* at the Comédie Française, the young esthetes of the emerging Romantic movement debated with the old-school neoclassicists over the new tragedy's dramaturgical structure, language choice, and poetic meter. A literal battle occurred outside the Astor Place Theatre in Manhattan in 1849. Over the course of a few days, 31 people were killed and 150 injured as the result of an argument about who was the better actor—American-born Edwin Forrest or English-born William Macready. In contrast to the so-called moral concerns that characterize most of today's heated public discourse on arts related topics, none of these riots were the results of charges of impropriety or obscenity.

Instead, audiences erupted over what might be labeled *cultural aesthetics*. Disagreements about word choice, poetic meter, harmonic structure, and acting styles were aesthetic concerns with inherent interest to the audience because they were part of a societal discourse on nationalism, ethnic and class identity, and cultural progress.<sup>7</sup>

The audience's role in making meaning was not limited to the moment of production. Public discussions on the arts routinely occurred outside of performance and museum sites, from Sophocles' presentation at the City Dionysia to the seventeenth-century French salons to the more recent era of arts appreciation clubs sponsored by schools, churches, community centers, and public libraries. In addition, written forms of public discourse were steady and voluminous. Beginning in the early 1800s and through the mid twentieth century, for example, most



American cities had numerous daily newspapers that provided a range of cultural information through reviews, columns, letters to the editor, and educational articles. In light of this, an arts consumer had access to a wide variety of critical opinions and was reminded on a daily basis that even the experts disagreed, which in turn created the cultural space for the patron to disagree as well. In addition to newspapers, there were many theater, music, dance, and fine arts journals oriented toward the audience. Arts patrons also participated in a practical manner by joining amateur production companies, by taking studio classes, and by creating public works of art, such as historical pageants, as a form of celebration and as a way to solidify and document community identity. Although recent community-building efforts have recuperated some of these practices, most notably in the form of public murals, these efforts are primarily focused on school-aged children and not, as they were historically, on adults.

One of the more interesting examples of audience sovereignty among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Americans were audience leagues. In the United States, these organizations were created and led by professional audience members—that is, by serious patrons who organized themselves to create a platform for voicing opinions about the arts events they were attending. Often these leagues wrote, printed, and disseminated their own newsletters; efforts were rooted in a desire to maintain a sense of control over their cultural experiences.

### Constructing the Passive Audience

So what happened to the active, participatory ethos that defined Western audiences for more than 2,000 years? In studies of the evolution of American culture, historians locate the emergence of the passive twentieth-century arts audience in several cultural, economic, and technological shifts.<sup>8</sup> This chapter focuses on two key moments of this evolution that cross genre and class lines: one purely technological and the other essentially sociopolitical.

Beginning with the sunlit outdoor Greek theaters and through the introduction of gas lighting in indoor theaters during the 1810s, the stage areas and auditoriums were continually lit—an effect similar to the lighting arrangement in most sporting arenas today. In 1881, the Savoy



Theatre in London, the home of Gilbert and Sullivan, became the first theater fully equipped with discretely wired electric lighting on stage and in the auditorium. The benefits were myriad, from focusing attention on the actors instead of the audience (thus helping to establish the fourth wall illusion—a deep goal of the Realist movement) to making the playhouse significantly safer and more comfortable (lighting by gas caused headaches). By the early 1890s, cities across Europe and the United States boasted of theaters with state-of-the-art electrical systems.

The other effect of controlled lighting was to move the audience into complete darkness, while at the same time placing the actors, dancers, symphony musicians, and opera singers into a more focused and determined quality of light. This adjustment transformed the playhouse or concert hall from a site of assembly—ripe for public discussion and collective action—to one of quiet reception. Audiences also went from being active to passive participants in their own entertainment, as Richard Butsch noted in *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*: “Critical to any conception of public sphere and also to any potential for collective action is conversation, for the opportunity to assemble and discuss and come to consensus about what to do. Suppressing theater audience expression therefore eliminated the theater as a political public space. Quieting audiences privatized audience members’ experiences, as each experienced the event psychologically alone, without simultaneously sharing the experience with others.”<sup>9</sup>

A second factor in the construction of the passive arts audience is what cultural historian Lawrence Levine referred to as the *sacralization* of the arts. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the gap between popular culture and aesthetic, or high, culture widened dramatically. As Levine demonstrated in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, this shift was the result of a deliberate effort to create a cultural hierarchy in America. Informed in part by Mathew Arnold’s definition of culture (versus anarchy), the ostensible goal of “raising the masses through culture” came down to a simple recipe: provide American audiences with “the best that has been thought and known in the world ... the study and pursuit of perfection” (p. 223). Arnold’s theory of the high and the low was, as Levine noted, quickly and widely embraced: “The ubiquitous discussion of the meaning and nature of culture, informed by Arnold’s views, was one in which adjectives were used liberally. ‘High,’ ‘low,’ ‘rude,’ ‘lesser,’ ‘higher,’ ‘lower,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘modern,’ ‘legitimate,’



'vulgar,' 'popular,' 'true,' 'pure,' 'highbrow,' 'lowbrow' were applied to such nouns as 'arts' or 'culture' almost ad infinitum. Though plentiful, the adjectives were not random. They clustered around a congeries of values, a set of categories that defined and distinguished culture vertically, that created hierarchies which were to remain meaningful for much of this century."<sup>10</sup> Embedded in this new construction of the arts was an altered definition of the artist's function and social position; the artist was elevated to a position of authority that could and should not be questioned. But the inevitable problem soon revealed itself—a gap between the existing audience ethos (which assumed authority over the artist's intentions and the arts event itself) and the kind of auditorium etiquette that acknowledges this new definition of high art. Part of our evolution from a populist, mass cultural practice to segregated high, middle, and low cultural practices, then, was the necessary reeducation of American audiences in how to behave while in the presence of high cultural products. Symphony orchestras, fine arts museums, and opera houses led the way in instilling American audiences with the concept of high culture and the notion that great art needed to be received with awe and respect.<sup>11</sup> It is also clear that underneath this effort to raise the overall standards of American taste was the desire, among the economic elite, to segregate themselves from the mass audience using the "cloak of culture." But even if the reasons for this sacralization process were culturally complex, the public message was relatively concise: Sophisticated audiences do not interfere with great art, and unsophisticated people should confine themselves to other spaces.

Ironically, a similar message was also broadcast by other, more populist realms of the late nineteenth-century American arts industry. In the 1880s, for example, an entrepreneur by the name of Benjamin Franklin Keith reinvented the largely male province of the burlesque and variety theaters by sanitizing the material and relabeling it *vaudeville*. He added to the allure of an emerging, family-friendly theater experience by building new playhouses where middle- and working-class families could afford to spend a few hours in luxurious surroundings. However, the shift from burlesque to vaudeville demanded new standards of appropriate behavior. Inside the Keith-Albee vaudeville palaces audiences found the following instructions: "Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor .... All applause is best shown



by clapping of hands.” And “Please don’t talk during acts, as it annoys those about you, and prevents a perfect hearing of the entertainment.”

Such etiquette lessons soon became standard in theater playbills and programs, as did wall placards instructing patrons on how to behave inside galleries and museums. Audiences learned that physical responses—outside of applause—and verbal feedback were no longer welcome. By default, they also learned that any cognitive processing of their viewing experience had to be achieved in silence and in private. Eventually the combination of environmental forces (i.e., the dark auditorium and mandated etiquette) and the growing gap between the societal position of the artist and the arts patron effectively quieted the audience. By the early twentieth century people of all social classes were expected to treat arts events as private experiences. They were to sit still, to refrain from talking, and to keep their opinions to themselves. In the process opportunities for public discourse about the arts and the attendant opportunity for formulating and exchanging sets of opinions about the arts event itself were, for the most part, lost.<sup>12</sup>

### Silencing Twentieth-Century Audiences

The sacralization of the arts in America can be viewed as a Gilded Age project—an effort to reshape cultural interaction at a time when class lines were being drawn to fit late nineteenth-century economic interests. In a similar manner the so-called democratization of the arts that characterizes the twentieth century was a byproduct of Progressive Era reforms: the introduction of public and charitable support into what had formerly been a privately funded sector. These include the tax laws allowing for deductions based on charitable gifts to cultural organizations (1917), the artist employment projects of the Works Progress Administration (1935–1943), the institutionalization of a new model of foundational support with the Ford Foundation’s arts program (1957), the first legislation to sustain direct government subsidy through the implementation of the National Endowment for the Arts (1965), and the proliferation of state and municipal arts councils (beginning in the late 1960s).<sup>13</sup>

The reconstitution of the *noncommercial arts* into the *nonprofit arts* engendered unparalleled changes in the cultural life of American com-



munities. With the support of public funds, resident theaters, orchestras, ballet troupes, modern dance companies, and museums were established in regional sites, helping to decentralize the industry and offering many more opportunities for professional-quality production and consumption of fine arts at a local level. This new context for local art making nourished the idea of the professional arts as a normative part of a community's social fabric, and booms in art production occurred all over the United States. It also provoked material changes, most notably the construction of new concert halls and playhouses and in many cities, centralized performing arts centers servicing a variety of genres and organizations. Not surprisingly, arts organizations grew to meet the demand, taking on capital responsibilities, adding more support staff, creating departments focused on arts education and community development, and beginning in the 1990s, absorbing corporate business strategies, particularly in marketing and development.<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1960s, then, legitimate theater, concert dance, orchestral music, art and history museums—now relabeled the *serious arts*—had become the property of the nonprofit arts industry. This significant cultural shift could have had a leveling effect on the power dynamic between arts makers and audiences. But despite the rhetoric of democracy implied by terms like *public theater* and *civic orchestra*, the high-low binary that emerged in the late nineteenth century was not erased, just reassigned. From the perspective of audience sovereignty, public funding did not desecralize the arts. Instead, the cloak of culture once worn by wealthy audience patrons was draped over the shoulders of the professionals at the helm of publicly funded institutions: the artists, arts administrators, and board members. Although words like *high* and *pure* were abandoned—especially after the advent of multiculturalism—the operating assumption among nonprofit organizations continued to advance the Arnoldian principle of raising the masses through culture. The idea of taking into account the audience's opinions on arts events—so formative to the shaping of the Western arts tradition—morphed into a distasteful compromise of artistic integrity to pander to public tastes.<sup>15</sup> Curiously, although the advent of postmodernism has encouraged artists and arts institutions to dismantle the distinction among high, middle, and low when it comes to defining appropriate material content or structure, postmodernism has not attempted to redefine appropriate audience behavior. This attitude has led to a kind of double objectifica-



tion of the audience: They are being asked to buy a product over which they cannot ever expect to have any control. Ironically, after forty years of public art paid for twice by its audience—through tax-based subsidies and ticket sales—the intellectual and emotional distance between public arts producers and the average cultural consumer has never been greater.

### Into the Light: A New Era of Active Audiences

Most working artists and arts producers acknowledge that what occurs in the concert hall or the gallery or on the playhouse stage is a complex interaction of intention and reception that no one person or institution can forecast or contain. They learn—sometimes by design and often through failure—that a meaningful definition of art does not originate solely from knowledge of the art object or from understanding the artist's intention. Instead, a meaningful definition of a production of *Oedipus Rex*, whether it is staged in 420 B.C.E. or in 2005, acknowledges the active and engaged interplay of all constituent elements of the creative act, from production to reception and beyond. This changing relationship is the calculus of an arts experience.<sup>16</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions of the word experience: "the fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event; personal knowledge; to feel; to undergo" (p. 563). I am most interested in the last term—to *undergo*. Experience implies undergoing a cognitive journey from receiver to perceiver—from a passive to an active state—from a neutral condition to an opinionated stance. But to realize the full potential of experiencing an arts event, the audience member must possess two qualities: the authority to participate in the process of coauthoring meaning; and the tools to do so effectively.

The concept of co-authorship is fundamental to many late twentieth-century methodologies for analyzing the process of encoding and decoding meaning in the arts, from reception theories to performance semiotics. Furthermore, the problem of who gets to interpret a work of art is a common one in both industry and academic circles, where it is familiar territory in the culture wars over relativism versus dogmatism. Nevertheless, in my twenty years of working with adult arts audiences



in theaters and concert halls, I have found repeatedly that audiences are unaware that they have the cultural right to co-author the meaning of the arts event. What previous generations of arts-consumers took for granted—the sovereignty over their own cultural choices and the attendant authority to ascribe meaning in a publicly valued manner—contemporary adult arts-consumers do not even consider as a possibility. After all, they have been taught to remain quiet to keep their feelings hidden inside a calm, still body and to wait for the appropriate moment to express an opinion. Further, they have been conditioned to wait to receive meaning from the experts: the artist, the newspaper critic, the professor, and other, more sophisticated patrons who have somehow earned the right to post an opinion.<sup>17</sup>

This does not mean, however, that contemporary audiences are not interested in co-authoring arts events. I believe what today's potential arts audiences most want out of an arts event is the opportunity to co-author meaning. They don't want the arts; they want the arts experience. They want the opportunity to participate—in an intelligent and responsible way—in telling the meaning of an arts event. Like their forebears in the amphitheaters of fifth-century Athens and the vaudeville palaces of nineteenth-century America, they want a real forum—or several forums—for the interplay of ideas, experience, data, and feeling that makes up the arts experience. They want to retrieve sovereignty over their arts-going by reclaiming the cultural right to formulate and exchange opinions that are valued by the community.

This thesis is supported by surveying the ways that today's consumers actually spend their leisure time and discretionary money. What characteristics connect the arts of the past to the forms of live, real-time cultural participation that enjoy the most popularity today? It is events that invite physical or intellectual freedom and provide, in tangible and socially relevant ways, opportunities to co-author meaning and to make choices. Think of the physical freedom of the rock concert environment. Or the opportunity for ongoing verbal feedback during a jazz set. Or the intellectual stimulation of a spoken word event, a performance site where thousands of years of oral poetic expression meet the rhythms of popular culture and the tensions of contemporary life in a way that invites analysis and engagement among its young audience set.

By comparison, consider what it means to *attend* a football game. I acknowledge that sports—with their emphasis on competition and



tribal affiliations—serve a set of individual and collective impulses quite distinct from those serviced by our contemporary definition of art. Though I also take the opportunity to remind the reader that *Oedipus Rex* was created in a competitive, tribal environment. Perhaps sports attendance is so high in the United States because of the felt value of participating in the sports experience rather than in simply watching the sports event itself. Sports fans are constantly invited to co-author meaning and are regularly provided with experiential opportunities that facilitate that co-authoring process. The enormous amateur sports enterprise—enabling children and adults to participate on a physical level—supports a connection to and engagement with the professional industry. But even nonathletes can participate in significant and meaningful ways. Every day they can read in newspapers about their game of interest: its current conditions, its people, its politics. Every day they can watch and listen to expert analysis of their game on the television or the radio, and every day they can debate their own opinions with a coworker or a neighbor or make a call to radio and television talk shows. In our society opportunities for the analysis of and debate about sporting events are so abundant, in fact, that we can be democratic in how we field those opportunities. We have the cultural space, so to speak, to listen to everyone's opinion.

The same is not true for arts lovers. People who have an interest in theater or dance, for instance, and want to learn more about the history of the work or genre or to listen to an expert discuss a recent trend in the fine arts or to express their opinion about a chamber concert to someone who actually cares, where do they turn? Where are the opportunities to analyze, formulate, and debate works of art in the same way as sports fans? In most cities they must take some significant steps: enrolling in a university course, buying a season subscription to qualify for the postconcert discussion groups; or organizing their own play-going group.

The distinction here is obvious: We do not have the same attitude or approach to arts as to sports. We rarely carry the energy of an arts experience into our work environment, and we seldom, if ever, feel knowledgeable or empowered enough to debate the meaning or value of an arts event. Sports fans, unlike their arts counterparts, have been given permission to express their opinions openly and the tools they need to back up those opinions. The experiences that surround the sporting



event—from talk shows to twenty pages of sports writing in the daily newspaper—help the audience to prepare, to process, to analyze, and to feel a deep sense of satisfaction. As every sports fan knows, the real pleasure of the sports experience is not limited to watching the game. It is also located in talking and arguing about it the next morning. Throughout the twentieth century, the sports industry has understood its responsibility to promote opportunities for public debate and civic discourse. The arts industry has largely neglected that task, and we are paying for it now.

### Redemocratizing the Arts

Although the profound social changes since Sophocles' time have certainly affected both the role and function of civic engagement, they have not altered the spectator's basic need to co-author the meaning of an arts event. Today's consumption patterns make it clear that adult audiences—like their forebears—seek entertainment promoting the interplay of ideas, experience, information, feeling, and passion. They, too, seek the cognitive satisfaction that comes from the opportunity to formulate and express an opinion in a public context. Simply put, today's audiences are willing to spend their money and leisure time on live entertainment that puts them in the position to participate in, through and around the arts event itself.<sup>18</sup>

Reassembling a similar model for the live arts is an enormous challenge since our society no longer provides the same kind of infrastructure for arts assembly and public co-authorship that it did in the past. The burden for providing it, then, weighs heavily on arts institutions. Creating these opportunities will involve an institutional realignment, for even though the arts education and community outreach programs installed during the 1980s and 1990s are certainly valuable, they have been modeled on what Paolo Friere called the "banking" system of education in which knowledge is considered a gift bestowed by the "expert" teacher on the "helpless" student.<sup>19</sup> Preconcert lectures given from a distant podium, program notes written in discipline-specific jargon, and feedback sessions monopolized by an artist's point of view begin and end with a one-way transfer of information and cannot, when offered as the sole audience enrichment program, meet the standards of co-authorship.



Happily, a new ethos is brewing in many facets of the nonprofit arts community—this time with the audience's interests at the center. Evidence of change can be seen in the museum industry, where many theorists, curators, and administrators are embracing the concept of an *open work*—that is, the notion that the meaning of an object can only be derived in the real-time exchange between the object, the exhibition environment, and audience.<sup>20</sup> The result has been a decade of innovative programming designed to suit different tastes and styles of adult learning. These include playful scavenger hunts that invite adult patrons to follow clues—loaded with information and interpretive suggestions—to trace their own path through an exhibit, signage that acknowledges multiple interpretations of the art work on display instead of a single, authoritative definition, and in-gallery activities that encourage the patron to employ the artist's strategy in making their own piece of art.

More recently, performing arts organizations have also begun to experiment with this new ethos by expanding the boundaries of their audience-centered programming. Ballet troupes are offering movement for nonmover workshops that help put visual imagery into the spectator's muscles. Modern dance presenters show video and offer pointer sessions directly before a concert to help prepare the eye of the spectator for what they are about to see—a strategy that has been proven to increase audience satisfaction.<sup>21</sup> Theater companies invite their audiences to attend rehearsals and to e-mail the designers, directors, and actors with questions or comments. Opera companies hold salons run by passionate subscribers interested in debating points of view. Symphony orchestras place interpretive aids inside the concert hall, marking a significant disruption to the discipline's long-established etiquette. The Concert Companion (currently being tested by several leading orchestras), for example, is a hand-held PDA device featuring a small screen scrolling real-time interpretation of the live concert.<sup>22</sup> All of these organizations are exploring the world of online opinion forums by building sites that host discussions in a structured manner.

When an arts organization combines two-way interactive experiences with well-designed lectures, program notes, and other forms of information dissemination, the audience wins. They have the information and the opportunities they need to begin formulating and expressing an opinion. This, then, is the practical, bottom line definition of co-authorship in the twenty-first century: a critical mass of surrounding experiences



that converge in and around an arts event to provide useful information, opportunities to process that information, and, finally, a follow-through experience that allows for synthesis, analysis, debate, and—at least some of the time—consensus on the meaning of the arts event.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

It would not be possible, or desirable, to return to the nineteenth-century stage and the kind of active live arts audience behavior of the past. In the twenty-first century it is reasonable to expect a quiet auditorium during an arts event—if only because we are accustomed to this reception environment and have learned, through experience, to need silence to concentrate. Nor am I proposing that audiences become programmers, curators, or sole arbiters of taste. Building opportunities for the audience to participate in the arts event should not be confused with dumbing down the repertoire, nor should we worry that empowered audiences will interfere with the need and desire among artists and arts producers to create and program challenging work. Effective arts experiences are more likely to lead to progressive, adventurous programming because they provide audiences with the tools for looking and listening to unfamiliar art with confidence and with useful forums for co-authoring meaning.

What I am proposing is that nonprofit arts producers and their institutions look to the histories of their disciplines for examples of the arts experience—those larger, surrounding opportunities for engagement. In doing so, they must also acknowledge that the hierarchal idea of arts reception, in which great art will automatically find its true audience without mediation of any kind, is behaviorally inaccurate. As this chapter shows, there is a historical relationship between a given community's interest in attending an arts event and the opportunity to inform its meaning; it is a reciprocal status that reflects a healthy balance among the needs of artists, producers, and audiences. To compete in the cultural marketplace of the twenty-first century, the nonprofit live arts community must concede that an audience-driven cultural transformation is already under way—with or without our permission or approval. American audiences of the twenty-first century, especially younger patrons, are busily and happily engaged in the process of redemocratizing the arts.



With their money and leisure time they are willfully undoing the sacralization of cultural experience, refusing to be influenced by out-dated definitions of respectable concert hall decorum, and eagerly engaging with new technologies that alter the very definition of art and art making in our time. If we want this newly empowered audience to follow us into our theaters and concert halls, then we must be willing to participate in this redemocratization process by encouraging the kinds of surrounding arts experiences that people are clearly seeking.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 A portion of this chapter was originally commissioned by the Heinz Endowments' Arts & Culture Program as a policy statement for the Arts Experience Initiative—an audience enrichment laboratory involving Pittsburgh-based arts organizations. The policy statement was published under the title "Who Gets to Tell the Meaning?" Grantmakers in the Arts Reader 15, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 11–14.
2. For practical reasons I limit my historical survey to a discussion of the Western European trajectory of cultural practices in the United States. There are, of course, many other influences that inform contemporary American audience behavior.
3. For a discussion of Athenian cultural practices and Greek drama, see Green (1994) and Pickard-Cambridge (1988).
4. Cohan (1992, p. 19).



5. For reproductions of period illustrations depicting active auditoriums and museums, see Gascoigne (1968), Butsch (2000), and Levine (1988).
6. Quoted in Wilson (1898, p. 880).
7. Audience-led conflicts over impropriety and obscenity are good examples of cultural participation, but I divert from citing them in this chapter to make it clear that our legacy of interactivity is not reducible simply to them.
8. Butsch (2000), for example, noted that the move away from production for use toward production for exchange in the arts industry firmed up the distinction between producers/performers and consumers/audiences and elevated the artist's status while demoting the audience's. McConachie (1992) narrated the construction of discrete high and low genres for the purpose of separating respectable and unrespectable people. Other useful historical analyses of the economics of nineteenth-century leisure and cultural practices include Allen (1991) and Grimsted (1968).
9. Butsch (2000, p. 15).
10. Levine (1988, pp. 223–24).
11. See especially Levine (1988) and Butsch (2000). I also point readers to Greg Sandow's ongoing Web log commentary on the history of applause during classical music concerts: Sandow, "Greg Sandow on the Future of Classical Music," <http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/>.
12. The intermission is perhaps the sole remaining domain of active behavior within the real time construct of a live arts event. Interestingly, more and more productions—especially in the theater and dance communities—are being designed without intermissions.
13. For a discussion of the history and policy surrounding public funding for the arts in the United States, see Benedict (1991), Lowry (1984), and Arian (1989).
14. The latter adjustment became increasingly necessary because, as Paul DiMaggio (1984, pp. 58–59) first pointed out more than twenty years ago, American arts organizations are "nonprofit" but not "nonmarket" institutions. They are required, in most cases, to earn at least 50 percent of their operating budgets and thus must compete in the arts marketplace. This has proven to be an awkward situation because the "arts marketplace consists of firms that ... steadfastly refuse to maximize profits." In other words, by definition the nonprofit arts organization sell a constantly changing, unknown, and unproven product.
15. It might even be argued that today the only sovereignty left within our nonprofit arts ecology is that of the publicly funded artist, who maintains the right to create along individual rather than collective desires.
16. My use of the phrase arts experience is distinctly different from its use in current arts education and cultural participation literature. See, for example, varying usages in McCarthy (2004), Connolly and Cady (2001), and Walker (2000).
17. As Chapter 10 in this volume illuminates, an audience member left to interpret an unfamiliar and uncomfortable arts event without support will most likely choose to exit rather than to voice an opinion. Even sophisticated



adult audience members have problems absorbing unfamiliar art forms. Open learning is a risky undertaking for most adults because the process underscores what we do not know and, as such, exposes our weakness.

18. Although some current studies observe a trend away from cultural participation among overworked Americans of all economic classes, these findings do not entirely square with the significant amounts of money and time being spent on events that clearly satisfy an essential need to convene and interact in a public setting. One reason why book clubs and restaurants are currently enjoying so much success, for instance, is that they allow Americans to participate in their own entertainment.
19. Obviously, Friere's revolutionary thesis on the role of power abuse in Pedagogy of the Oppressed was distilled from his experiences among impoverished and abused peoples. Still, it seems to me that the idea of a powerful expert bestowing a gift of information on a helpless audience is a reasonable analogy for some attitudes within our contemporary high culture environment.
20. In her essay "Performing Openness: Learning with Our Audiences and Changing Ourselves," Jessica Gogan describes a wide range of experiential programming at the Andy Warhol Museum based on the theory of an open work and notes that the concept "suggests a new model of curatorial synthesis that is open to creating/curating together with audiences and communities and amongst museum staff. Here, the museum plays a critical role in galvanizing energies and promoting the sharing of knowledge that in turn builds trust and relationships within communities and within the institution. An 'open' museum ultimately offers richer and more meaningful possibilities for learning and experience and an expanded sense of a museum's civic role and place in community." (Contact GoganJ@Warhol.Org)
21. For an interesting description of the effectiveness of pre-performance education in terms of enhancing the audience's enjoyment, see Kriegsman (1998), which outlines the history of Jacob's Pillow's experimental audience enrichment programming inaugurated in 1996.
22. For a full description of the Concert Companion and other innovative audience-centered programming in the orchestra field, see Brown (2005).
23. If there are no opportunities for public talk about the arts, then a sense of cultural isolation and class segmentation sets in. In American life, this cultural isolation and fragmentation has been the focus of much academic and popular analysis since at least 1915, when Van Wyck Brooks (1934) first published his theory of the high-low binary of American culture. Notable mid-century analyses include Russell Lynes (1949), wherein the concept of the middlebrow gets a thorough treatment. Most recently Robert Putnam (2000) argued that as a nation our social capital has plummeted. He used the bowling alone metaphor literally, claiming that recent statistics show that even though more Americans bowl now than ever before, we do so by ourselves rather than in leagues or social groups, as in the past. Another recent study, Richard Florida (2004), redefined the term creative as an economic indicator by telling us that people who are paid to think for



100 Lynne Conner

a living—doctors, lawyers, engineers, programmers—are drawn to arts-infused communities because this empowered, emerging creative class seeks fulfillment through stimulating leisure, not just work. In my own reading of these last two texts, the compelling common idea is the demonstration of an ongoing psychological desire among Americans of all classes for civic engagement and the opportunity for meaningful public assembly.



