

Keynote Presentations

Diane Ragsdale *The Excellence Barrier*

Introduction

Diane Ragsdale currently serves as Associate Program Officer for the Performing Arts at the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, where she has worked since 2004. Prior to her work at the Foundation, Diane served as managing director of On the Boards in Seattle and as executive director of a destination music festival in a small resort town in Idaho. She has worked on several major festivals including Bumbershoot, Womad USA and the Sundance and Seattle film festivals. As well as consulting for a variety of profit making and not-for-profit organisations she has also lectured at universities and colleges, is a frequent keynote speaker and panellist, and has worked professionally as an actor, director and producer. In 2002, she was one of 40 arts leaders in the US to receive a fellowship to attend the inaugural Executive Program for Non-profit leaders at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business.

Diane believes that arts organisations across the globe need to find themselves, rethink why they exist and change their value proposition in relation to their communities. This means that achieving artistic virtuosity and being relevant to the community are not competing or mutually exclusive goals; successful organisations are pursuing both excellence and equity.

The Excellence Barrier

To attract and retain new audiences arts organisations may need to stop selling excellence and start brokering relationships between people and art(ists).

I want to express my sincere thanks to the Arts Marketing Association of the UK, for the invitation and opportunity to speak today. It's an honour and a privilege to be here.

Before starting, I need to preface my remarks by saying three things: (1) a little disclaimer: my viewpoints are personal and should not be taken to be the viewpoints of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; (2) many of my examples come from the US - not because I believe we're doing better work, simply because these are the organisations with which I am most familiar; and (3) I have extraordinary respect for the staffs and boards of cultural institutions. Prior to coming to the Foundation, I worked for 15 years in arts organisations and I know first hand how difficult it can be to produce great art, sell admissions and memberships and raise contributions, even during a strong economy. I thank you all for your time and look forward to a discussion afterwards.

It's not you, it's me

So, I think we kid ourselves when we believe a primary reason people are not patronising the arts is because they have no time. Even if they tell us they have no time. Saying 'no time' reminds me of the let-me-down-easy breakup line: 'it's not you, it's me.'

If you've heard this line, or used it, then you probably know it really means just the opposite. Is the barrier really time?

About 14 years ago - long before podcasting, blogging, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, and iPhones - I was teaching a general survey course, 'Intro to Theater', at a small public university in Idaho (a

rural state known primarily for its potatoes) and on the first day of class each term I would ask the 120 or so students to raise their hands if they had ever seen a professional theatre production.

About 10 hands would go up. Not surprising, perhaps, given that it was Idaho. I would then say, 'Raise your hand if you would like to see a professional theatre production.' Fifteen hands, at most twenty, would go up. And these were the students who had decided to take a theatre class.

So, I would ask the remaining students, who had not raised their hands, 'Why wouldn't you want to go to the theatre?' The answer was generally something along the lines of, 'I've gone this long without seeing a play and I don't feel like I'm missing anything.'

Economics is the science that studies how people and societies make choices about what to do with their limited resources. Economists theorise that an individual evaluates his or her choices, looks at constraints or trade-offs between them and then ultimately chooses the option that will maximise his or her well-being or happiness.

My students did not have direct, personal experience with *the theatre* and to the degree that it was in their worldview at all (and I'm not sure it was), evidently their general sense – from talking to friends, growing up in their particular families, and from listening to the people whose opinions mattered to them – was that the theatre would not bring them much happiness.

They may not be alone in shrugging off the arts.

About a month ago, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a report on arts participation trends in the United States, which indicated double digit rates of decline for theatre, ballet, opera, orchestras, jazz and visual arts festivals since 1982; faring only slightly better, museum participation rates are basically on par with 1982, though they have been declining since 2002. Surprisingly, participation is declining most among 45-54 year olds (so much for the theory that the boomers would show up once their kids were older). Even those who are college educated (a demographic with historically high participation rates) are curbing their attendance. Finally, but not surprisingly (since we've been talking about the greying of the audience for decades, it seems), the report indicates that performing arts attenders have continued to age and are now older than the average US adult (which is 45).

When reports such as these come out, there are inevitably those arts leaders and advocates that rush to characterise this as a symptom of a deteriorating society – 'What's wrong with people?' they ask incredulously. But perhaps the arts are partially to blame for not proactively responding to the changing culture?

- In the US, over the past few decades, arts classes have been all but eliminated at most public schools and the arts critic is becoming an endangered species at most newspapers – changes that make it very difficult for people to navigate the arts scene. Most people feel like *outsiders* yet our programmes and marketing materials are often targeted to *insiders*.
- Cities and towns have become more *diverse*, but the leadership, boards, and staffs of most arts organisations are still predominantly *white*.
- We are living in an increasingly free, time-shifting, DIY, multi-tasking culture, yet we're hawking time-based, often fee-based, experiences that demand undivided, respectful, passive and sustained attention.

- Substitutes have exploded around us, but the arts have by-and-large responded with a business-as-usual approach. Why pay higher ticket prices year after year to experience the live theatre when some truly talented writers, directors and actors are now working for TV and Hollywood and companies like HBO and AMC are producing bold, ambitious programmes like *The Wire*, *In Treatment* and *Mad Men*. 'But, you protest, 'the live arts are intrinsically better than television. That's why.'

Maybe. Or maybe not. Either way, the culture has changed and evidently, there is declining appreciation for the excellent work we are doing and other, more attractive options for people looking for something to do tonight, or to experience some culture, get an art fix, impress the date/boss/next door neighbour, delight their senses or stir their souls, express their creativity ...

... get a little happiness.

The question is 'can anything be done about it?' Perhaps.

Slow food versus the fast food industries

In 1986, McDonald's opened a restaurant near the historic Spanish Steps in Rome. It was the incident that launched a movement, a counter-revolution to the Fast Food industry, which had 'revolutionised' dining beginning in the mid 20th-century. Perhaps you know this movement – it's called Slow Food and it was founded in 1989 by the culinary writer Carlo Petrini, who was horrified by the spread of fast food chains across his country and the world.

Of course, Slow Food was not a new idea; it was what was in existence before Fast Food and it continued to be in existence as the Fast Food industry exploded and achieved global domination. The problem was not that there was an inadequate supply of slow food *per se*; farmers around the world were growing fresh, delicious produce. The problem was that the distribution chains that get food into restaurants and onto kitchen tables were increasingly oriented to the high profit strategy of providing quick, low-cost solutions to time crunched women and men working full time who were trying to put meals into their stomachs and those of their kids three times a day.

In addition, appreciation for local food traditions was disappearing and there was dwindling interest in where food comes from, how it tastes and how one's food choices affect the rest of the world.

In the *'Innovator's Dilemma'*, Clayton Christensen writes, *'When the performance of two or more competing products has improved beyond what the market demands, customers can no longer base their choice upon which is the higher performing product.'* At that point, he says, *'the basis of product choice often evolves from functionality, to reliability, then to convenience, and, ultimately, to price.'* (Clayton Christensen, *'The Innovator's Dilemma'*, HarperCollins, 2003)

Fast Food became king because there was declining appreciation for *'fresh, local, seasonal produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; and leisurely dining with family and friends.'* (Carl Honoré, *'In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed'*, HarperCollins, 2004) Fast Food became king because the McBreakfast Meal consumed in the car on the way to work was a tasty-enough, more reliable, convenient, possibly even cheaper alternative to the eggs, toast, coffee and hash browns one could make for oneself at home. As a bonus for the fast food industry, once people started eating processed foods they became habituated to them. And kids that grew up eating

potatoes 'baked' for eight minutes in the microwave, canned soup, cakes made from a box mix, and fried chicken from the drive-thru, didn't even realise what they were missing.

This was the difficult reality that Carlo Petrini faced when he wrote a manifesto, started a movement, and adopted the following three strategies for dealing with the culture change he was facing (www.slowfood.com):

1. Defence of biodiversity

Slow Food believes the enjoyment of excellent food and drink should be combined with efforts to save the countless traditional grains, vegetables, fruits, animal breeds and food products that are disappearing due to the prevalence of convenience food and industrial agribusiness.

2. Taste education

By reawakening and training their senses, Slow Food helps people rediscover the joys of eating and understand the importance of caring where their food comes from, who makes it and how it's made. They provide Taste Education classes and teach kids and adults how to grow their own food.

3. Linking producers with consumers

Slow Food organises fairs, markets and events locally and internationally to showcase products of excellent gastronomic quality and offers consumers the opportunity to meet producers.

To fight the impact of the Fast Food Industry, you'll notice that what the Slow Food Movement did not do was set up expensive Slow Food restaurants next to the Fast Food chains and hang a sign in the window that said,

'Welcome Cultured Persons! Please come in, and for \$140 we'll serve you a four-course meal featuring olive oil-soaked ladotiri cheese from Greece, lentils from Abruzzi, sausages made from Sienese wild boar raised in Tuscany and a dessert featuring Vesuvian apricots.'

One can imagine that the message people passing over the Sienese wild boar sausages in order to get a burger at the joint next door would hear in their heads, might be something like:

'To Everyman Else: If you are the kind of person that is content to eat a \$6.89 McCrappy Fast Food Meal at that low-class food chain next door with tacky vinyl seats and neon lights or if you can't appreciate why lentils from Abruzzi are intrinsically better than that instant rice you are buying and cooking in two minutes in your microwave, then we consider you to be 'disinclined' to participate in the Slow Food Movement and, to be honest, you probably wouldn't appreciate the experience.'

Why selling excellence isn't working for us

But, in essence, isn't this the approach we've taken in the arts, if not explicitly, then implicitly? Selling the idea of excellence and distributing marketing materials that, essentially, have been aimed at making insiders feel superior and embarrassing other people (who don't really understand the marketing materials) into believing that if they want to prove they are cultured and have any taste at all, then they should be associating with our excellence instead of sitting on the couch in their underwear watching 'House' or patronising venues where people wear flip flops and tank tops

and talk and eat while the performance is going on or (worst of all) deluding themselves that they have talent and creativity because they have made a 'film' on their digital cameras and uploaded it to YouTube and a bunch of their 'friends' watched it.

How's this approach been working for us?

Not so well in the US, it would appear, if the figures from the NEA report are any indication. So much of what we do in the name of excellence creates barriers to participation.

- We get hung up on professionalism and defining the terms of participation
- We cater to and value the opinions of our long-time patrons, the intelligentsia and the critics over everyone else
- Through advertising and pricing, we give people the perception that the arts are only for an elite group of culturally sophisticated people
- We fail to provide the information, guidance and encouragement that could help people confidently and enjoyably navigate the arts scene and derive greater pleasure from the arts
- We create large, intimidating uptown venues or dark freaky downtown venues and do very little, if anything, to make newcomers feel welcome, comfortable or part of the tribe
- We promote artistic hierarchies and (often inexplicably) value certain kinds of art over other kinds of art
- We privilege 'liveness' over mediated art forms and resist allowing what we do to be distributed and modified electronically, even though we know that this might help us reach more people
- In essence, we have too narrow a viewpoint on what a legitimate artistic experience is and whom we exist to serve.

When we do these things, we are, in essence, keeping people from having a meaningful relationship with art.

Today, I'd like to argue that selling the *superiority* instead of the *diversity* of the arts; being *exclusive* and *mysterious* rather than *inclusive* and *open*; privileging the *professionally* performed and *passively* received experience over other forms of participation; and *competing* against one another to get people to consume one's particular variety of exclusive, mysterious, and professionally created and distributed art rather than *collaborating* to develop arts participation, have not been particularly effective strategies.

It's time to try something else.

I'd like to propose seven ways that the arts could shift from creating barriers to brokering relationships between people and art and artists, inspired in part, by the Slow Food movement and its efforts to fight the Fast Food industries. Some of you may hear these points and think, 'we're already doing this,' or 'that would never work for us' or 'we don't need to do any of these things; we're doing just fine'. And I'm sure you're correct in each case.

1. It's not enough to Facebook them

When artistic director, Irene Lewis, arrived at Center Stage Theater in the early nineties the theatre was producing works primarily by white playwrights, performed by white actors, for white audiences. Center Stage is based in Baltimore, where more than two-thirds of the population is African American. Irene Lewis astutely determined that Center Stage was not serving the larger community of Baltimore and made the commitment to change that by programming two or three out of six plays each season by African American playwrights or about the African American experience. Despite angry subscribers and financial consequences the theatre stayed the course.

Today, the African American plays in the season generate the highest attendance and revenues. It took 15 years for Center Stage to cultivate a more diverse audience.

Similarly, under the baton of Esa Pekka Salonen, the Los Angeles Philharmonic gradually and successfully updated its programming, shifting to a focus on more modern works and new music.

In a 'New York Times' article by Alex Ross in 1994, Salonen was quoted saying, *'If you want to reach a young person who has not learned classical music at home or in the schools, the best repertory is 20th-century repertory rather than Mozart or Haydn or Beethoven. Just because of the familiarity of the sound world, something like [Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps] gives you a sense of recognition, even if your only point of reference is rock music. It doesn't belong to the establishment; there is no political or class difference.'*

(www.therestisnoise.com/20061110/esapekka_salone.html. 'Becoming the Next Bernstein', by Alex Ross, The New York Times, Nov. 27, 1994)

This is not about commercialisation of the arts or pandering to the audience; it's about arts organisations understanding the communities they exist to serve and doing programming that is culturally relevant.

No Podcast, YouTube video, Tweet or other new media strategy is going to make 25-year-olds want to go to a performance that doesn't seem relevant to their lives in a venue in which they do not see other people their age. And a token, ethnically specific play on a season is not enough to develop a relationship with that ethnically specific community.

Intellectual relevance cannot be relegated to the PR department.

Arts organisations need to programme consistently and authentically to the audiences they are trying to reach and they may need to be prepared to lose some current patrons in order to gain new ones.

2. Free the art

First, as Bill Ivey suggests in his new book, *'Arts, Inc.'* (Bill Ivey, 'Arts, Inc.' University of California Press, 2008), it might be time for us to let go of the idea of artistic hierarchies. In other words, if we want more people to participate, we may need to stop hammering so hard on the idea that Bach is intrinsically better than Bjork, who is intrinsically better than my brother, Mickey, who plays Banjo (really well, I must add) in a pro-am Banjo club in St. Louis, Missouri.

I recently interviewed Bill Ivey, and he said that rather than seeing themselves as 'the be-all and end-all', professional arts institutions need to see themselves as an important part of a spectrum of

art making (Diane Ragsdale, 'A New Conversation about Culture,' *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Vol. 20 No. 1, Spring 2009). In other words, *it's all valuable*.

Second, if we're going to have an audience in the future, we may need to let go of our hang-ups about art being recorded, digitised, downloaded, duplicated, or re-purposed. The NEA report heralding the bad news about declining participation at live performances says there may be good news: 70 percent of US adults go online typically once per day; of those, nearly 40 percent use the internet to view, listen to, download or post artworks or performances. However, this is only good news for non-profit arts organisations if they are able to capitalise on this trend.

Many musicians give their music away as away of generating awareness, building a fan base, and developing an audience for their live performances. I'm not advocating that all content needs to be free; but it's important for arts organisations to recognise that mediated experiences can break down geographical, social, economic and time barriers. They are not the enemy; they are a way to reach more people. Let's not forget that for many people, if it doesn't exist online, it doesn't exist. Furthermore, a track, a concert, a clip, an image, or a video that can be downloaded, streamed, or in some way shared, enables devoted fans to spread their enthusiasm and potentially encourage participation by others. If I encourage my friends to buy a song and video, it's going to mean a lot more to them than if an organisation does.

American Repertory Theatre's (ART) new artistic director, Diane Paulus, director of the Tony Award-winning production of *'Hair'* now on Broadway, believes that responsibility for declining audiences lies with the people who create theatre, who have failed, she says, to 'provide a theatrical experience that values the audience's engagement and empowerment.' Among the innovations planned under Paulus's leadership, ART will renovate its black box space to become the first theatre in the country that has a club venue as its second stage. Club Zero Arrow will be a space where cell phones can be turned on and where people can participate as they would at a rock concert or sports event. Audience members will be allowed to take photos, make videos and recordings and send creative content and messages through social networking sites, all while experiencing the live theatrical event ('AT:25 Eye on the Future,' *American Theatre Magazine*, April 2009).

This example raises a third issue: space. Your three-quarter thrust, exhibit space, or concert hall, long one of your greatest assets, may not be able to accommodate the ways that artists currently want to make work or the ways that audiences want to experience it. To free the art, we need to ensure that content dictates form and not the other way around. We need spaces (live and virtual) that support artists, support socialising and that enable a more dynamic interaction between patrons and artists.

3. Free the people

The fifty or so chefs featured on The Food Network want to teach everyday people how to cook feasts and Slow Food wants everyone to have a garden; Target wants everyday people to be able to afford designer fashions; and professional baseball teams want every kid in the U.S. to play in the little leagues. Unlike the culinary, fashion and sports industries which have actively worked to make their products 'for everyone' and have given people the tools and guidance they need to 'do' as much as they 'view,' arts organisations more often than not seem to underscore the distinctions between the professional arts and the amateur arts and as a result often leave people feeling mystified and unworthy rather than curious and eager to join in.

Let them clap when they feel like it; let them come to a rehearsal even if they haven't donated money to the organisation; let them express opinions – yes, even publicly and even negative ones; give them dance, acting, and music lessons – yes, even the untalented adults who never wanted to be professional artists and have no experience.

In January of this year, The Joffrey needed a way to generate new income so it decided to offer dance classes to the public. Evidently, since January, the classes have generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenues. Moreover, people who take the classes are buying tickets to see their teachers and the rest of the company perform (Shelly Banjo, 'Helping Themselves,' The Wall Street Journal, April 23, 2009).

Four years ago, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater launched a program called First Look 101 in which they invite 101 regular theatregoers (not VIP patrons) to join them at key steps along the development process for a new play. They are able to attend a table reading, the first day of rehearsal, a rehearsal involving blocking and scene work, a technical rehearsal and then a final performance.

Some professional companies are inviting amateurs to share the stage. Some are putting the power of programming in the hands of their patrons. In a six-week 'People's Opera' contest, Chicago Opera Theatre lets its patrons (for one dollar per vote) select among three options and programme one of the slots in its season.

Interestingly, when On the Boards in Seattle, Washington (an organisation that I worked at prior to coming to the Foundation) launched a patron review blog several years ago – another way to empower patrons – one of the first things we noticed was that the people we asked to blog started showing up to volunteer and donating money to us.

People like to be invested in, to feel ownership.

By the way, the Slow Food movement prefers to call food consumers 'co-producers.' Why? Because it believes that when consumers become informed about how food is produced and actively support the farmers and artisans who produce it, they become a part of and a partner in the production process.

4. Be a gateway

In the arts, we don't often acknowledge that the experience of going to a live performance or museum can be unfamiliar and difficult for the uninitiated. In fact, sometimes it's difficult for the initiated. Like the gym, one needs to go on a regular basis before going feels better than not going.

In his book, '*Economics and Culture*', scholar David Throsby writes, 'our taste for artistic services or goods is cumulative. It is apparent that a person's enjoyment of music, literature, drama, the visual arts and so on, and hence her willingness to spend money on consuming them, are importantly related to her knowledge and understanding of these artforms.' (David Throsby, '*Economics and Culture*', Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Are arts organisations helping people choose 'art' over whatever else they might do with their time and money?

First, are we helping them figure out what to see? People are bombarded with choices. In his book, '*The Tyranny of the Moment*', Thomas Hylland Ericksen writes, '*... information is no longer scarce.*

The point is no longer to attend as many lectures as possible, see as many films as one can, have as many books as possible on the shelves. On the contrary: the overarching aim for educated individuals in the world's rich countries must now be to make the filtering of information a main priority. (Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age', PlutoPress, 2001)

While many communities have developed arts and culture calendars, making it possible for the curious to learn that there are, for instance, thirty visual arts events going on in Seattle on July 22, 2009, most haven't gone the next step and helped people figure out which one, or two, they might enjoy seeing. It's the same for individual organisations. Arts organisations tend to sell everyone the same package of performances. It's important for arts organisations to help people select wisely.

Second, are we giving people the information some may want and need to derive everything they can from a piece? And this is not merely a call for arts education for school children – though arts education is critically important.

Jazz at Lincoln Center has a great programme called Swing University, geared to adults, in which cool cats spin records and explain jazz, its development and how to be an effective listener. Chicago Symphony Orchestra has developed a concert programme called *Beyond the Score*® which is geared not only to aficionados, but also to newcomers. The first half of the concert features a multimedia examination of the selected score and after the intermission people return to the concert hall to hear the piece of music played. The *Beyond the Score* programmes, written and created by Gerard McBurney, are incredibly popular.

5. Create and foster social networks

A recent survey of the national programme *Free Night of Theater* found that the regularity with which one attends theatre positively correlates with whether one's social group attends theatre ('2009 "Intrinsic Impact" Study of Free Night of Theater Audiences,' WolfBrown, May 2009. www.theatrebayarea.org/docs/datalIntrinsicImpactFNOT_2008_FinalReport.pdf)

Watching long-time patrons at opening night of a performance or exhibit, it's clear that they are well acquainted and that seeing one another is as important as seeing the art on the stage or on the walls. But newcomers to the arts may feel like outsiders.

Very few arts organisations do much, if anything, to help foster social networks among their new or existing patrons, and yet arguably this could be as or more important than the quality of the art in determining whether or not people show up or return.

I recently heard about a theatre company that began calling its lapsed subscribers to determine why they had left and discovered that quite a few were widows whose husbands had died and who had stopped attending because they had no one with whom to attend. Wisely, the theatre organised an opportunity for these widows to attend a performance together. The arts organisation even arranged for a bus to pick them up and bring them to the theatre and provided a special time and space for socialising over cake and tea. It's been very well received.

And of course, technology could be used to facilitate social networking. You know what social networking/arts concierge application I would like someone to create? I want an email once per month notifying me of upcoming arts and culture activities that fit my preferences. I want to go through the list and sort them, 'definitely,' 'maybe,' and 'no.' I want the 'definitely' and 'maybe'

events to sit in my shopping cart and then I want this system, which is linked to certain of my friends in Facebook, to alert them to the items in my shopping cart and ask if they would be interested to attend any of the events with me.

If they express an interest, I want the application to check our Outlook calendars against the performance dates and identify dates when it appears that we have blocks of time free when we could all attend. I want this system to send us each an email saying, 'Hey Diane, Annie, Lisa and Jamie – all four of you are interested in attending Christopher Durang's new play, *Why Torture is Wrong and People Who Love Them* at the Public Theatre. We've identified three dates when you all appear to be available. To view them, log-in to the system. Let us know if any of the dates we've identified would not work, and whether it is OK for us to charge your credit cards (which we have on file). We'll book the best available tickets for the first available date that all of you can attend.'

And then I want this system to recommend places near the theatre where we could go for drinks or dinner beforehand or after the show and offer to book a reservation for us. The day after the event, I want an email that nudges us to do it again sometime soon.

6. Focus on impact rather than growth

There is a real danger if we conflate growth of the operating budget, economic impact on the community or even box office success with having intellectual relevance and creating meaningful impact on individuals and on society. It is not sufficient to create artistic experiences and sell or give them away without regard for the capacity of people to receive them and find meaning in them.

To say that there is an intrinsic value in art is not to say that there is an intrinsic value in arts organisations. Too many organisations behave as if the mission of the institution is to preserve the institution (*wrong answer*).

Susan Sontag once wrote, '*Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future.*'

I take particular note of the phrase, 'precarious attainment of relevance.' No organisation can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on the size of its (shrinking) endowment, the permanence of the building it occupies, the fact that it was the first or largest of its kind in its region or city, or its historic accomplishments. The institution exists to matter to people, in a particular community, today. That is the impact that must be assessed.

What does impact look like if not the metrics we're currently assessing? Alan Brown has done terrific work in this area and I couldn't begin to summarise his research here - but I suggest you take a look at it. I would, however, describe what I consider to be one of the best examples in the US of an organisation that is brokering relationships between people and art, and artists.

In 2003, choreographer Elizabeth Streb opened a performance space in the Williamsburg neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York, called S.L.A.M. Instead of creating a church-like space that patrons visited once a week for a sacred experience, Streb opened the doors and let people come in anytime to watch a rehearsal or use the restroom. She added popcorn and cotton candy machines and let people walk around and eat during the performances. Streb noticed that her patrons wanted to join in on the action, so she installed a trapeze and began teaching people how to fly.

Performances largely feature the professional company, but Streb also features her students in the shows. Not content simply to use the platform of S.L.A.M. to promote her own work, Streb began fostering the development of the next generation of artists, through an Emerging Artists Commissioning Programme. Streb is constantly learning and innovating in response to the needs and interests of artists and the needs and interests of her community. And it's working.

Streb no longer needs to advertise her performances because she has created a robust social network that drives ticket sales. There is a palpable energy and familiarity in the room; people know each other and interact in the space as they would at a backyard barbecue. People come back to the performances time after time and the 'initiated' (kids and adults alike) delight in showing newcomers the ropes, both literally and figuratively. The experience is participatory, not transactional.

Streb's success is measured not when the ticket gets sold at the box office, but thirty minutes after the show when everyone is still lingering, buzzing, and talking with one another and the artists. Streb is cultivating 'true fans' - a diverse group of people who are deeply engaged, enthusiastic, and loyal. As Kevin Kelly, author of the article, '*1000 True Fans*' would say, Streb's fans 'buy the t-shirt and the mug and the hat.'

(Kevin Kelly, '*1000 True Fans*' at www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true-fans.php)

Streb does not behave as if achieving artistic virtuosity and being relevant to the community are competing or mutually exclusive goals. She is pursuing excellence and equity. She has fostered the growth of a diverse range of artists and audiences, she has freed the art and the people, she has helped regular civilians develop a curiosity about bodies in space, she has been a hub where neighbours meet, and in the process of doing these things she has created a community cultural centre that matters to Brooklyn.

Streb is not saying 'Buy my excellent art.' She's *doing* excellent work but she is *saying*, 'Come, let's explore movement, physics, space and time together.' (Clay Shirky, '*Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*', Penguin, 2008: see Shirky's '*Buy Cheesy Poofs*' vs '*Join us, and we'll invent Cheesy Poofs together*' idea)

7. Adapt (and to foster adaptation foster diversity)

How did we end up in this place with audiences declining and ageing? Why did we fail to see the culture change? If you know the story of the boiling frog (and if you don't then Google 'boiling frog' and read about it) then you may be familiar with the idea of 'creeping normalcy.'

Creeping normalcy refers to the way a major change can be accepted as normality if it happens slowly in unnoticed increments, when it would be regarded as objectionable if it took place in a single step or short period. Some couples wake up years after being madly in love to find that the intimacy that was created in the early days has faded slowly and silently because they stopped noticing and nurturing each other.

Relationships require sustained attention. Perhaps like the husband and wife that wake up one day and realise, 'We don't know each other anymore; we have nothing in common,' we failed to see that our communities were changing and that art and artists were changing, and we, as institutions that exist to broker a relationship between the two were not changing in response.

Why not? Perhaps because we were paying attention to the needs and preferences of long time patrons, at the expense of others in the community? Perhaps because we were holding onto tried and true practices and cherished beliefs about art - who makes it, how it's made, who it's for and how it's delivered. If we are to be relevant, we must be able and willing to adapt in response to the artists and communities we exist to serve.

You may know that, from a biological standpoint, adaptation is fostered, in part, by allowing diversity into a system. In organisational systems, diversity comes from having leaders and staffs and boards that reflect the various communities (young, old, rich, poor, of different cultural backgrounds) you exist to serve and allowing them to influence the organisation. Diversity also comes from working with new artists, new thinkers and new partners.

This does not mean that all arts organisations must support emerging, midcareer and established artists, across a range of aesthetics or serve audiences of all ages and ethnicities. On the contrary, if anything this is a call for arts organisations to gain clarity about the specific artists and audiences they exist to serve and to be able to make a case for why, in a community that ostensibly has other arts organisations, this is important.

At the sector level, diversity comes from allowing young leaders to be at the table and listening to them. Diversity means recognising excellence outside of the historically leading institutions that are so often held up as the pinnacle of success. The fact is that there are many small or young or non-traditional arts entities whose audiences are growing and are diverse, and who are attracting people under 40. Arguably, *they* are leading the field as much as anyone right now.

When tributaries dry up it's not good for the river. Diversity in the arts ecosystem is critical. I would assert that we cannot measure the value of any individual arts institution in a community without looking at the entire community. Funders and organisations should work together to assure that the gates are wide and that a diversity of artists are being supported and are able to access the system and that diverse audiences are as well.

Conclusion: slow arts movement anyone?

When arts organisations use the term 'audience development' it seems that what they really mean is 'member development.' They are trying to entice people to become patrons of their particular organisation. But creating a customer for one arts organisation is not the same as developing the capacity of an individual to engage meaningfully with the arts. If the latter is the goal, then it's arguable that it takes a village to develop an 'arts-enthusiast' or 'arts-goer,' and it also takes time. There are arts organisations now pursuing this idea, including some engaged in a burgeoning effort funded by the Mellon Foundation, for which Roger Tomlinson is the lead consultant, called *Project Audience* (www.projectaudience.org). The initiative is aimed at envisioning the next generation of technology and practices that would support collaboration among arts organisations to build arts participation within their communities.

Like the Slow Food movement, we may need to focus less on persuading people to come to our particular institutions (selling our particular brand of excellence) and more on working together to connect our diverse communities with a diverse range of artists and artistic experiences. We may need to shift away from conceiving of ourselves as powerful gatekeepers to humbly embracing our roles as enthusiastic brokers.

A 1965 Rockefeller Brothers Fund report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, states *'The arts are not for the privileged few, but for the many. Their place is not on the periphery of daily life, but at its center. They should function not merely as another form of entertainment but rather should contribute significantly to our well being and happiness.'* The US came a long way but didn't fulfil John D. Rockefeller III's vision in the 20th century. But wouldn't it be great if we - all of us - could do it in the 21st? If we could actually put the arts at the centre of daily life?

Who in this world couldn't use a little more happiness right now? Look at the countless people whose lives and well-being are affected by the declining economy, or by war, or who are simply worn down by the daily grind. The arts have the potential to contribute to anyone's well-being and happiness. Let's not buy into the idea that some people are simply 'disinclined' to the arts and so we should not bother with them. And let's not declare mission accomplished just because we get people in the door. Attendance is cheap. We need to hold ourselves accountable for mattering to people, for making life better.

As I was putting this address together I began to think it's somewhat ironic that I have held up the Slow Food movement as a model as, along with cooking shows, it has begun to have such a powerful influence on our culture, it could be among the reasons that people now claim to have 'less time' for the arts. Plenty of boomers who have no time for the ballet appear to be spending hours shopping at their farmers markets and chopping in their Viking-stove equipped kitchens so they can enjoy leisurely meals with family and friends. While this is mildly disconcerting, it should give us hope. The Slow Food movement has given people a reason to make time for preparing, growing and enjoying good food.

Yes, people perceive that they have less time because even the tiniest gaps in our lives seem to create vacuums that are instantly filled with activity - texts, emails, podcasts, snail mail, television, conversations, or all of them at once - what author Thomas Hylland Eriksen calls 'information lint.' (Eriksen, *Tyranny of the Moment*, 2001).

But I know the deep joy and happiness that can come from spending two or three hours letting a great performance or an afternoon at the museum pull me out of the 'Tyranny of the Moment' and help me find my humanity. I'm sure you do too. We wouldn't be in this crazy business if it weren't the case. We need to help people discover or rediscover, why the arts matter. There's something worth preserving here.

No arts organisation can get there alone or by being the first to discover more clever Web 2.0 methods for selling its particular brand of excellence. It's not about whether or not you Tweet before the other guy Tweets. Focus first on seeing better, then on selling better (beware creeping normalcy - remember the boiling frog!). Look beyond the walls of your institution and see that your communities are changing, that art and artists are changing, and have the courage and humility to change accordingly.

I wonder...what would a slow arts movement look like?

Thank you for your kind attention.

Diane Ragsdale: Recommended Reading and Related Resources*Books*

- Arts, Inc. by Bill Ivey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008)
- Convergence Culture by Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 2006)
- Culture and Economics by David Throsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- Deep Survival by Laurence Gonzales (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2004)
- Engaging Art, edited by Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008)
- Entering Cultural Communities, edited by Morris Fred and Betty Farrell. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008)
- Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations by Clay Shirky (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2008).
- In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed by Carl Honoré (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 2004).
- Integrating Mission and Strategy for Non-profit Organizations by James A. Phills, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- The Innovator's Dilemma by Clayton Christensen (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.,2003).
- The Long Tail by Chris Anderson (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
- The World is Flat by Thomas Friedman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005)
- Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age by Thomas Hylland Ericksen (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press,2001).

Articles

- 1,000 True Fans by Kevin Kelly. www.kk.thetechnium
- Creating High Impact Nonprofits, Heather Mcleod Grant and Leslie R. Crutchfield. The Stanford Social Innovation Review (Fall 2007). (Leslie R. Crutchfield has recently written a book 'Creating High Impact Nonprofits').
- Let's Put the Word 'Nonprofit' Out of Business, by Claire Gaudiania. Chronicle of Philanthropy (July 26, 2007)
- The Cellular Church, by Malcolm Gladwell. The New Yorker (September 12, 2005)
- The Pro-Am Revolution by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller. Demos (November 24, 2004). Available at www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy.

Reports

- 2009 Intrinsic Impact Study of Free Night of Theater Audiences, WolfBrown, May 2009. www.theatrebayarea.org/docs/data/IntrinsicImpact_FNOT_2008_FinalReport.pdf
- Arts Participation 2008: Highlights from a National Survey, National Endowment for the Arts, June 2009. <http://arts.endow.gov/research/NEA-SPPA-brochure.pdf>
- Discussion and White Paper by Andrew Taylor from the National Arts Strategies and the Getty Leadership Institute, June 2007 www.getty.edu/leisure_trends/tags/leisuretrends/.
- How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups, by Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus. Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) (also available online as a separate article).