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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Recreating Fine Arts Institutions

By Diane E. Ragsdale

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Recreating *Fine* *Arts* Institutions

By Diane E. Ragsdale | Illustration by David Herbick

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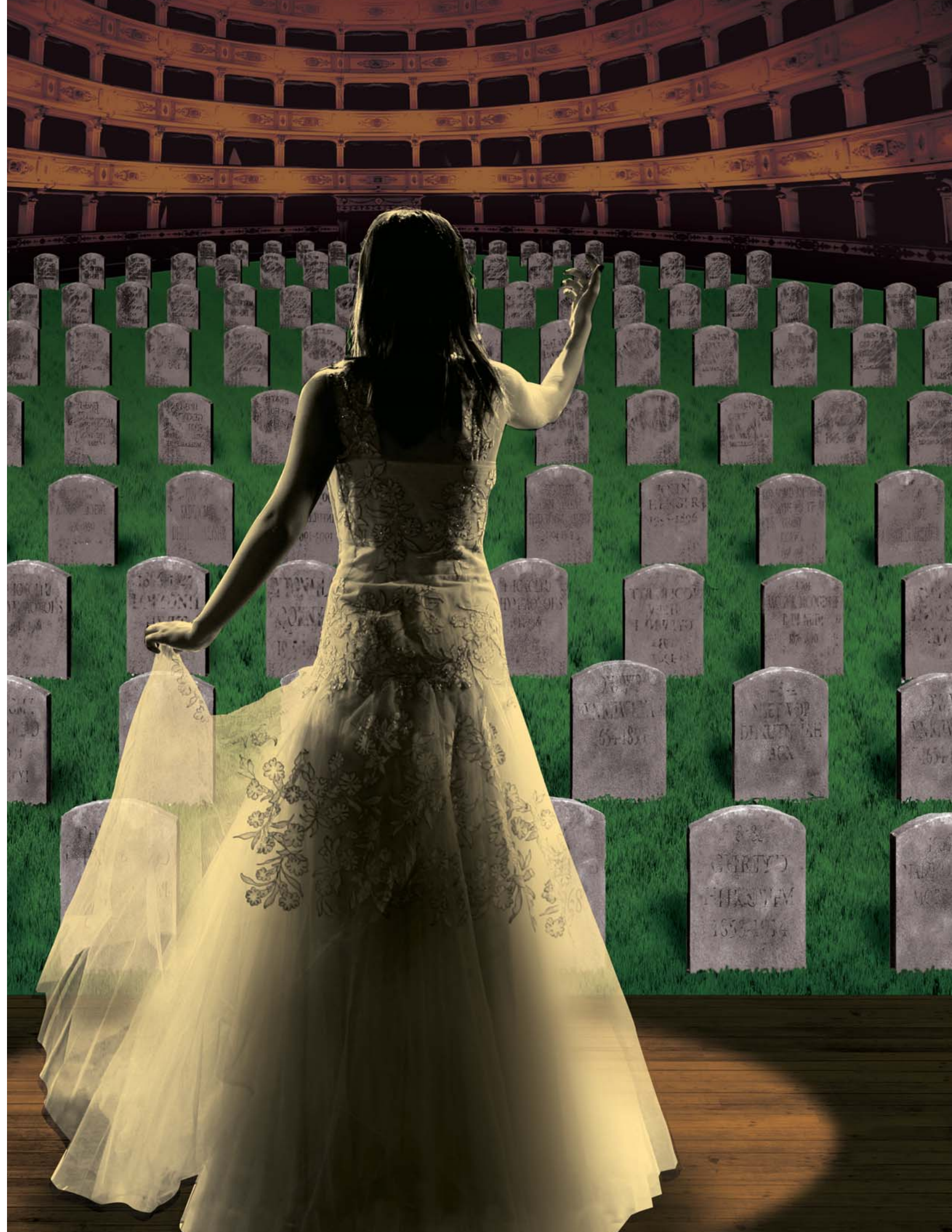
The fine arts in America are on a perilous path. Attendance at opera, theater, jazz, symphony, and ballet performances has dropped precipitously in recent decades. Just as worrisome, the median age of people attending these events has increased dramatically. If the fine arts are to survive as a living, creative, and significant force in American life, arts institutions need to radically recreate themselves.

Y SOME MEASURES, the fine arts have been enjoying a boom. The number of U.S. nonprofit arts organizations has grown exponentially, from a few thousand in the 1960s to more than 50,000 today. Not only are there more organizations, many individual institutions have grown significantly in size. Bolstered by ever-larger donations and endowments, leading symphonies, museums, and theaters have built larger and more opulent spaces and vastly increased their programming. To support these new endeavors, institutions have bulked up their infrastructures. Many organizations that had 10 to 20 employees in the 1970s now boast 100 to 200 employees, with much of the growth coming in development and marketing.

Unfortunately, as a recent survey of arts participation in the United States indicates, demand did not keep pace with the growth of the sector. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reports that between 1982 and 2008, adult attendance declined in almost every art form: ballet attendance was down 31 percent, opera was down 30 percent, classical music was down 29 percent, nonmusical theater was down 21 percent, and jazz was down 19 percent. And the rate of decline has accelerated in most of these disciplines in recent years.¹ (See “Percentage of U.S. Adults Attending Fine Arts Events” on page 39.)

Not only is the number of people attending fine arts events falling, the median age of those who are attending is getting significantly older. According to the same NEA report, between





1982 and 2008 the median audience age rose from 37 to 46 for ballet, from 43 to 48 for opera, from 40 to 49 for classical music, from 39 to 47 for nonmusical theater, from 28 to 45 for jazz, and from 36 to 43 for art museums. The numbers are even bleaker for season ticket holders. The Metropolitan Opera, for example, reported that the average age of its subscribers rose from 60 in 2000 to 65 in 2005.

Some arts leaders have convinced themselves that fine arts audiences have always been gray, but that isn't true. As recently as 1964 the median age of performing arts audience members was 38. In the seminal book *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, published in 1966, economists William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen write: "Older people (those over 60) are the scarcest members of the audience relative to their numbers in the urban population in the United States. In a word, audiences are young."²

Other fine arts leaders claim that attendance has fallen because people don't have time to attend a lengthy ballet or opera. On the contrary, studies indicate that many Americans actually have more leisure time now; they are simply choosing to spend it differently. Between 1965 and 2003, leisure time increased by 7.9 hours per week on average for men and by six hours for women. Unfortunately, most people aren't using those additional hours to patronize the arts. Time diary studies show people on average spend only 10.2 minutes per week participating in fine arts activities, or just under nine hours per year.³

Why then, are fine arts audiences getting smaller and older? Dana Gioia, former NEA chairman, paints a sobering but accurate picture. "The primary issues facing the American arts at present are not financial. They are cultural and social. We have a society in which the arts have become marginal. We are not producing another generation of people who attend theater, opera, symphony, dance, jazz, and other art forms."⁴

Cultural Chasm

Not unlike newspapers, automotive companies, and record labels, many fine arts organizations have failed to adjust to the radical social, cultural, and technological changes that have taken place in the United States during the last few decades. In fact, many arts organizations did just the opposite, catering to an increasingly aging and conservative group of mostly white subscribers and donors.

As a result, many fine arts organizations have lost touch with the new American zeitgeist. The leaders of these arts organizations often have outdated perceptions about who lives in their communities, what those people value, and what role the arts and their organizations do—or do not—play in their lives. Rather than acknowledging that they are out of touch, many arts leaders have engaged in what Edward Cornell calls "bending the map" or "trying to make reality conform to [their] expectations, rather than seeing what's there."⁵

The reality is that America has undergone vast changes in recent decades. Cities and towns have become more ethnically diverse, but

the leadership, boards, and staffs of most arts organizations remain predominantly white. The suburbs have boomed, but most art still happens in the city, where performances end around 11 p.m., making the hour-long commute home exhausting, no matter your enthusiasm for art. Ticket prices have increased astronomically, while the income gap between the wealthy and poor has widened. And why pay between \$85 and \$185 to attend live theater when talented writers, directors, and actors are now producing bold and ambitious television programs like *The Wire*, *In Treatment*, and *Mad Men*?

Young adults' taste for the fine arts has waned, in part, because arts and music classes have been all but eliminated at most public schools. Other Americans are turned off, not by the art form itself, but because the arts are seen as elitist and exclusive. And then there's the havoc that technology has wrought. Americans live in an increasingly free, time-shifting, do-it-yourself culture. Fully half of all teens have created a blog or Web page, posted original artwork, photographs, stories, or videos online, or remixed online content into their own creations.⁶ People listen to an entire album online before purchasing it and can watch many of their favorite movies and television programs at their leisure on their computer or iPod touch.

For a growing number of Americans, particularly young ones, showing up at a prescribed time, paying a hefty admission fee, and spending an entire evening passively watching a performance in a dark and sacred venue, where even the crinkling of a cough drop wrapper is enough to elicit glares from the patron next to you, feels more akin to penance than an enjoyable way to spend an evening.

Recreating the Institution

No arts organization is guaranteed perpetual relevance simply because of the size of its endowment, the permanence of its buildings, its preeminence in a city or region, or its historic accomplishments. To say that there is an intrinsic value in art is not to say that there is an intrinsic value in arts institutions. Too many arts organizations behave as if their mission is to sustain and preserve the institution rather than to create or showcase art that matters to people. When audiences decline, too many arts leaders ask, "What's wrong with these people?" What arts leaders need to ask is, "Are we willing to make the necessary changes in our mission and practices to attain, maintain, or regain our relevance?"

That's what Peter Gelb did when he became general manager of New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2006. He declared that if opera didn't become more accessible, it was heading for extinction.⁷ Among the many things he has done to retool the Met is to hire contemporary theater directors to enliven the productions, commit to producing more new works and fare for families, develop a discount ticket program, stream performances in Times Square and Lincoln Center Plaza, and launch high-definition simulcasts in movie theaters around the world.

Arts leaders may be tempted to think that the solution to dwindling audiences lies in better marketing, but if arts organizations are going to survive, they have to put more than the season brochure on the autopsy table. Organizations need to rethink who they are, why they exist, what value they create, which people they need to reach and how they will reach them, and what the meaningful measures of success will be. Arts organizations need to shift away from conceiving

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of themselves as powerful gatekeepers to humbly embracing their roles as enthusiastic brokers, helping their communities to engage with art and artists in meaningful, joyful, and diverse ways.

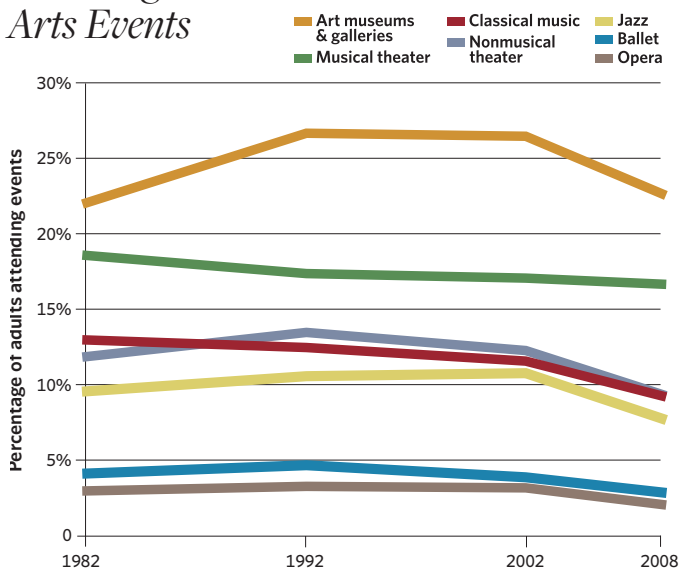
The good news is that there are a number of fine arts organizations that are succeeding by doing things differently. I have distilled the best of their work into seven practices: Focus on Impact, Create Social Networks, Let the Art Dictate the Space, Set the Art Free, Cultivate a Young and Diverse Audience, Let People in on the Action, and Become an Arts Concierge.

Focus on Impact

Arts organizations and their funders have spent the better part of the last two decades focused on metrics that gauge the organization's size, such as the number of performances and programs offered, the total contributions raised, box office revenues, or the number of tickets sold. Instead, arts organizations need to begin focusing on metrics that gauge the organization's impact on its patrons, such as frequency of attendance, the curiosity to learn about the art form and the ideas encountered, the depth of emotional response, or the quality of social connections made.

One person who is focused on creating art that matters is choreographer Elizabeth Streb. In 2003, she opened a performance space in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., called SLAM. 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 rehearsal or use the restroom. She added popcorn and cotton candy machines and let people walk around and eat food during the performances. Streb noticed that her patrons wanted to join in, so she installed a trapeze and began teaching people how to fly, developing classes for preschoolers to adults. Performances largely feature the professional company, but Streb also features her students in the shows.

Percentage of U.S. Adults Attending Fine Arts Events



SOURCE: National Endowment for the Arts, *Arts Participation 2008*, June 15, 2009

Streb doesn't need 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” (particularly the kids) 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 30 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—and in the process is creating a community cultural center that matters to Brooklyn.

Create Social Networks

Watching longtime subscribers and major donors at the opening night of a performance or an 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 the walls. Newcomers to the arts, however, often feel like outsiders. Very few arts organizations do much, if anything, to help foster social networks among their patrons, and yet this could be even more important than the quality of the art in determining whether people show up to a performance or return for another.

The 2006 New Zealand Arts Survey found that the No. 1 reason (given by 29 percent of respondents) why people said they were attending more arts events was that they had someone to go with.⁸ The survey also noted that when participants in the “low attendance segment” were asked why they are attending more often now than they were three years ago, this segment (more than the others) identified the need to be encouraged by their social network to attend.

One arts organization that has successfully built and fostered social networks is the Foundry Theater in New York City. In 2008, the Foundry produced *Open House*, a two-person play that examined the long-term impacts of the escalating costs of real estate on New Yorkers and the growing anxiety over housing costs and neighborhood change. The play took place in two dozen apartments across all five New York boroughs, which the Foundry located through an “open call.” When patrons bought their tickets, they signed up to see the performance at one of 24 residences around the city.

I signed up to see *Open House* at an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Before the performance started, I mingled with the actors, production staff, and the other 30 or so patrons and heard the history of the apartment from the owner and host of that night's performance. At the end of the performance, everyone was invited to stay and eat, drink, and talk. When the entire project was over, the Foundry invited all of the people who had opened up their homes—representing a wide array of New Yorkers—to a dim sum party. Not only did these generous city dwellers break bread together, but friendships were formed.

Let the Art Dictate the Space

For nearly three decades, the vast majority of capital spending in the arts has been used to construct ever more grand and expensive museums, concert halls, and theaters. Perhaps there should be a moratorium on this type of spending, with money instead redirected

to convert existing spaces so that they are better suited to the ways contemporary artists are presenting their work and that encourage a more dynamic interaction between artists and audiences.

Diane Paulus, the new artistic director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., has developed Experience A.R.T. She plans to renovate the organization's black box space to become the first theater in the country that has a club venue as its second stage. At Club Zero Arrow cell phones can be turned *on* and audience members will be allowed to take photos and make videos and recordings, and post this content and their comments on social networking sites, all while experiencing the live theatrical event.

Another innovative performance space is New York's 3LD Art & Technology Center, a space designed to allow all types of artists to work together and perform using a variety of new media technologies. In the spring of 2008, the center hosted a series of performances of *Fire Island*, a piece about relationships on the bohemian barrier island off Long Island. The production incorporated panoramic film footage on enormous concave and convex screens that enveloped the space and that was deftly edited against a live performance, featuring actors who performed their scenes in and around audience members who drank wine and sat on blankets and beach chairs throughout the open space.

Sometimes, the best approach is not to create a permanent performance space at all. The National Theatre of Scotland made the bold choice when it was launched in 2006 not to build a facility, but instead to bring the theater to people all across Scotland and beyond. Since then, the theater company has performed for more than 406,000 people, on three continents, in 74 productions, done in 101 different locations.

Set the Art Free

To reach a broader audience, fine arts organizations need to create free and low-cost ways for people to sample and share art with others in the same way they sample and share music, videos, and photographs on the Web. It is important for fine arts organizations to make their performances easily available online, but it is just as important for the patrons of that organization to be the ones who promote the performances. If I encourage my friends to buy a song or a video, it means a lot more to them than if an organization does so.

Indie rock bands have long used albums and CDs as loss leaders to generate attendance at their live concerts, where the band makes most of its money. Now, more and more individual artists are giving their music away online as a way to generate awareness, build a fan base, and develop an audience for their live performances. Some fine arts organizations have begun to use the Internet to showcase performances. On the Boards, a contemporary performing arts organization in Seattle where I was managing director several years ago, recently received \$750,000 from the Wallace Foundation to launch OtBTV—a pilot program offering full-length, high-definition experimental performances online.

Most arts organizations, however, have not yet embraced the online culture. The American Composers Orchestra (ACO) performs mostly new and experimental classical music. On Oct. 13, 2006, I attended an ACO concert that included a new composition and video. I recently went online to find a recording of the piece, but I was not

successful. If the ACO had recorded and posted the performance online, allowing people to sample a three-minute clip for free or download the entire piece for \$2, I would have e-mailed at least a dozen people the day after the concert and said, "Go to the Web site and check out this fantastic piece." If even only 10 percent of the audience had spread the word, imagine how many more people from around the world would have seen the piece than the several hundred who were in the New York concert hall that night.

Cultivate a Young and Diverse Audience

Many fine arts organizations focus too much of their attention on their existing subscribers and audience members, most of whom are older and white. If these institutions are going to survive in the long run they must begin cultivating a much younger and more ethnically diverse audience.

When Irene Lewis arrived at Baltimore's Centerstage Theater in the early 1990s as the new artistic director, the theater was primarily producing works by white playwrights, performed by white actors, for white audiences. The population of Baltimore, however, is two-thirds African-American. Lewis determined that Centerstage was not serving the community and made a commitment to produce two or three plays a season that were written by African-American playwrights or were about the African-American experience. Despite angry subscribers and financial consequences, the theater stayed the course. Today, 15 years later, the African-American plays generate the highest attendance and revenues.

Under the baton of Esa-Pekka Salonen, the Los Angeles Philharmonic gradually updated its programming, focusing more on contemporary classical music. Challenging the sentiment and bucking the experience of many U.S. orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic demonstrated that new music *can* sell tickets. According to Salonen: "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 *'Le Sacre'* 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."⁹

Let People in on the Action

More often than not, arts organizations 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. Some fine arts organizations, however, are beginning to demystify the artistic process.

Four years ago, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre launched First Look 101, in which they invite 101 patrons to join them at important steps of developing a new play. Most arts organizations offer behind-the-scenes opportunities only for major donors. First Look 101, however, is affordable (\$45 for students and \$75 for others) and open to anyone. The three-month program gives people the chance to attend an unrehearsed table reading, the first day of rehearsal (including designer presentations), a rehearsal involving blocking and scene work, a technical rehearsal (when elements such as lights and sound are incorporated), and then a final performance.

Some fine arts organizations are using the Internet to involve patrons. In 2006, New York's Museum of Modern Art invited anyone to create a video to accompany a short audio piece by avant-garde multimedia group the Residents. The museum then selected 11 videos and posted them on YouTube, where the public could comment and vote for their favorite video. From the public's feedback, MOMA ultimately determined which videos to screen at the museum.

Other professional theater companies are inviting amateurs to share the stage. New Zealand's Auckland Theatre Company created Open Call to cast *Taming of the Shrew*. Ten people were selected through a nationwide audition open to anyone aged 18 to 25. One reviewer called it "the most vibrant, engaging and truly alive 90-odd minutes of theater I have ever witnessed from Auckland Theatre Company." And some organizations are putting the power of programming in the hands of their patrons. In the People's Opera contest, Chicago Opera Theater lets its patrons (for \$1 per vote) select among three options and program one of the slots in its season. The Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic have begun to let patrons use their cell phones to vote for which encore they want to hear.

Become an Arts Concierge

One of the biggest challenges U.S. consumers face today is that they have too many choices. People can pick from more than 100,000 DVDs on Netflix, more than 2.5 million books on Amazon, and more than 10 million songs on iTunes. To sort through the clutter, companies are developing ways to help people make more informed choices. When someone buys a book on Amazon, for example, the Web site often encourages the purchase of another book by the same author or about a similar subject.

Many communities have developed calendars of arts and culture events, but very few communities or organizations have gone the next step and helped people figure out which event they might most enjoy attending. In fact, ever since subscriptions became the preferred method of selling tickets, organizations have tended to tell the public: "We've got eight shows this season and they are all fantastic!" The shows may all be pretty good, but it is doubtful that everyone will be equally interested in all of them. By not helping people make informed choices and find the shows that they are most likely to enjoy, organizations increase the likelihood that people either will decide not to attend any performance, or if they do attend, will not have a positive experience and will become disengaged.

Arts organizations need to stop trying to sell everyone the same package of performances, and instead become arts concierges: responsive, reliable, and trusted friends who help customers make decisions about what performance to see. Arts organizations could even cross-promote each other's products and services. Like Amazon, a theater Web site could nudge patrons to try other performances they might enjoy based on their current selections—for instance, "Diane, since you bought two tickets to a performance of Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, you might also be interested in buying tickets to Christopher Durang's *Why Torture Is Wrong and People Who Love Them* at our partner theater. Purchase tickets to both shows now (you can pick your dates for the Christopher Durang play at a later time) and you will receive a 15 percent discount on your entire order."

There are organizations across the United States that are experimenting with becoming an arts concierge. One example is an effort funded by the Mellon Foundation called Project Audience, which is aimed at helping develop the next generation of technology and practices that would support collaborative strategies among arts organizations to build arts participation within their communities.

Be Creative

There is no simple formula that fine arts organizations can follow to engage people. Podcasts plus Facebook plus \$10 tickets does not equal success. Instead, leaders of arts organizations need to be brutally honest about the state of affairs and boldly adapt to them. Phelim McDermott, cofounder and co-artistic director of the London theater company Improbable, put it well when he said: "Improvisation as we practice it is less about being quick-witted and wacky and more about embracing paradoxical skills. These include the ability to be courageous and decisive while at the same time open and vulnerable to whatever happens around you. We work on developing the ability to be humble, not armored, in the face of unexpected events."¹⁰

What do successful arts organizations, such as those highlighted in this article, have in common? First, their artistic leaders are involved in and deeply committed to their transformations. Second, they do not behave as if achieving artistic virtuosity and being relevant to the community are competing or mutually exclusive goals. They are pursuing excellence and equity. Third, they had the courage, capacity, and willingness to adapt.

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." America didn't fulfill John D. Rockefeller III's vision in the 20th century. We have the opportunity to do so in the 21st century, but only if we embrace and become engaged in the social, cultural, and technological changes that are occurring. ■

Notes

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- 2 William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966.
- 3 Andrew Taylor, *Cultural Organizations and Changing Leisure Trends, A National Convening, Online Discussion, and White Paper*, June 2007.
- 4 Alicia Anstead and Dana Gioia, "The Gioia of It All," *Inside Arts*, August/September 2006.
- 5 Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- 6 Pew Internet & American Life Project, *The Majority of Teen Internet Users Create, Remix, or Share Content Online*, November 2, 2005.
- 7 Carol Pogash, "Opera Hits a High Note: Student-Outreach Efforts Tap Technology," *Edutopia*, October 2008.
- 8 New Zealand and the Arts, *Attitudes, Attendance and Participation in 2005*.
- 9 Alex Ross, "Becoming the Next Bernstein (Or Boulez)," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1994.
- 10 Phelim McDermott, program notes for the production of Philip Glass' opera *Satyagraha*, directed by McDermott and co-produced by the Metropolitan Opera and English National Opera.