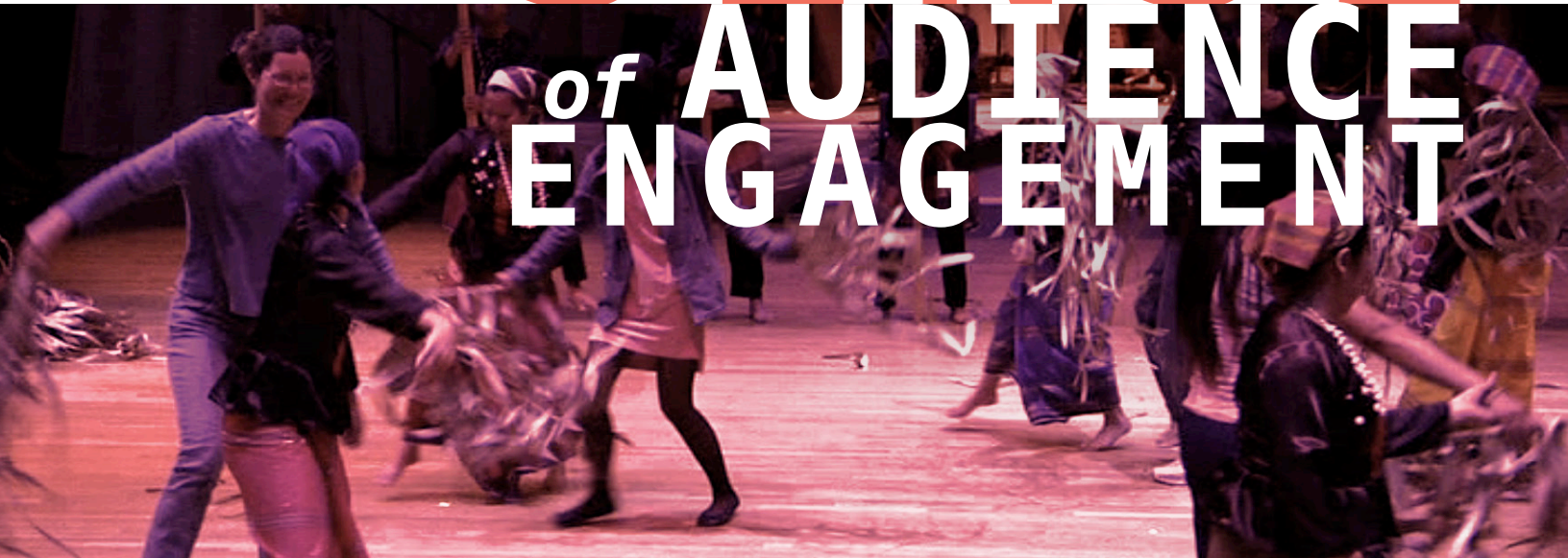


# MAKING SENSE

## *of* AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT



### VOLUME I

*A critical assessment of efforts by nonprofit arts organizations to engage audiences and visitors in deeper and more impactful arts experiences*

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# ABSTRACT

This report takes stock of a growing body of practice in the arts sector referred to as “audience engagement” – a somewhat bewildering array of programs and activities such as lectures, open rehearsals, docent tours and online forums. To help make sense of this rapidly developing landscape, an “Arc of Engagement” model is proposed to aid in understanding the stages through which audience members pass in constructing unique experiences around a shared work of art. A wide variety of engagement programs can be placed along this arc. Drawing from audience studies in the dance, theatre and classical music fields, six diverse audience typologies are described in terms of their engagement preferences: 1) Readers; 2) Critical Reviewers; 3) Casual Talkers; 4) Technology-based Processors; 5) Insight Seekers; and 6) Active Learners. Engaging these typologies requires an under-

standing of four underlying dimensions of engagement, extracted from an examination of several dozen engagement programs: social vs. solitary, active vs. passive, peer-based vs. expert-led, and community vs. audience. A range of current practice in engaging audiences and visitors is illustrated in 11 brief case studies. Helping audiences and visitors make meaning from artistic work is a major focus in the field right now, motivated by the need to attract and retain audiences in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Arts organizations hoping to reap the benefits of an engaged audience must think holistically about managing the total experience, from the moment a decision is made to attend, to the days, months and years after the event. Engagement is a unifying philosophy that brings together marketing, education and artistic programming in common service of maximizing impact.

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# KEY WORDS & PHRASES

**Audience engagement** is defined as a guiding philosophy in the creation and delivery of arts experiences in which the paramount concern is maximizing impact on the participant. Others refer to this vein of work as “enrichment programming” or “adult education.” Throughout the report, we use the term “audience” in the broadest sense, referring to groups of people who attend and participate in exhibitions, performances, film screenings and other types of events.

**The Arc of Engagement** refers to a five-stage process through which audiences pass, including build-up and contextualization, the artistic exchange, post-processing and an extended impact echo.

**Contextualization** occurs when audience members acquire information and insight about an arts program, allowing for deeper understanding and appreciation.

**The Artistic Exchange** is the transference of emotion and meaning between an artist or curator and the public, bounded in time between the start and finish of the event or experience.

**Meaning making** is an all-encompassing term for the process of reflecting on a work of art, consciously or unconsciously, after the artistic exchange.

**Interpretive assistance** may be provided before, during or after an arts program, and refers to the practice of helping audience members gain an understanding of what they are seeing (or will see, or have seen).

**The moment of curatorial insight** occurs when an audience member grasps the unifying idea behind a performance or exhibition and gains a sense of why the organization or artist selected a work of art. It is a key threshold of understanding that can unlock the experience and allow for higher impacts to occur.

**Impact echo** is a term referring to the beneficial result of remembering a work of art days, months or years later.

**Six audience typologies** are defined in this report, based on their engagement preferences. A typology is a group of people who share common traits.

**The audience engagement cycle** refers to the process through which arts organizations plan, deliver and evaluate engagement programs.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

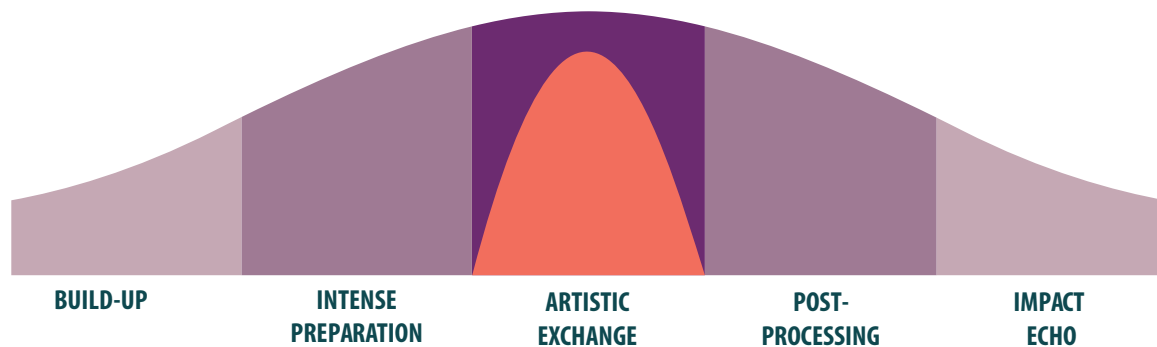
In an effort to attract and retain audiences, arts groups are experimenting with a wide range of innovative audience engagement programs and activities. This paper aims to making sense of this rapidly developing area of arts practice and provide artists and arts administrators with helpful frameworks for thinking about the dizzying array of engagement formats and features. At the outset, we wish to acknowledge the multiplicity of viewpoints, needs, and capacities that arts groups bring to the topic. Our aim is not to argue for a specific strategy or approach, but to offer readers a common understanding of the landscape of audience engagement in hopes that they will develop a clearer understanding of the possibilities, and then consider what will work within their own unique set of beliefs, resources and constraints.

This period of accelerated experimentation and adoption represents a transitional moment for the field, with many challenges and opportunities. New uses of technology for engaging audiences are bubbling up almost daily, it seems, like QR codes and social games using geolocation applications like foursquare. Arts groups are reaching out to businesses, social service agencies, and other community partners more frequently to integrate art into civic dialogue.

Adapting and appropriating unusual settings and venues for engagement is another focus of activity, such as Center Theatre Group's conversion of an old ticket booth into a "YouReview booth" where audience members video record their reactions to a play. Another significant trend in audience engagement programming relates to the increased availability of interactive and participatory activities such as choreographic workshops and interpretive stations in museums.

To prepare this report, WolfBrown conducted both qualitative and quantitative research into existing engagement practices and philosophical viewpoints on the subject. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse cross-section of Bay Area arts administrators representing large, small, and culturally diverse organizations. Ideas for case studies were collated from a survey of Bay Area artists and arts administrators and through desk research, resulting in the selection of 11 case studies of post-event engagement programs for detailed analysis. WolfBrown's previous research on engagement preferences among dance, theatre and classical music audiences also informed the study, as well as a review of the relevant literature.

## The Arc of Engagement



The “Arc of Engagement” diagram traces how the engagement process unfolds in five stages, from the build up that occurs leading up to an arts event to the “impact echo” which can last a lifetime. The “total experience” begins from the moment an audience member makes a decision to attend an event (or gets invited, as is often the case). From that moment onward, patrons move along a conveyor belt of sorts, gathering and sharing contextual information about the upcoming program with the ultimate goal of heightening anticipation. Bringing more structure and direction to the contextualization stage will help to prepare audiences more fully.

The artistic exchange (i.e., the transference of emotion and meaning between the artist and the public) is the apex of the arc and is, in many cases, the only stage an audience member may experience. Although interpretive assistance, the practice of helping audiences understand what

they are seeing, can be accomplished at any stage, a growing body of practice revolves around incorporating interpretive assistance into the narrow window of the artistic program itself, such as curtain speeches, surtitles and real time interpretive content received through mobile devices. Museums focus most of their attention on this stage, since interpretive assistance is most likely to occur while visitors are in the building.

Directly following the artistic exchange comes a period of post-processing and meaning making, often in the form of post-event discussions, artist receptions, and online forums. Feedback mechanisms such as audience surveys can play a significant role in helping audiences build critical reflection skills. When the artistic exchange resonates, the lingering impact can last for days, months or even a lifetime, a phenomenon we call the “impact echo.”

Every audience member has a unique arc of engagement based on his or her appetite for, and approach to, engaging. Research on engagement preferences suggests six general typologies of audience members:

- 1 **Readers** are “light engagers” who enjoy doing little except for reading program notes, wall texts and an occasional article;
- 2 **Critical Reviewers** pay attention to critic’s reviews and other independent sources of information before deciding to attend;
- 3 **Casual Talkers** process art by talking about it informally with friends and family members;
- 4 **Technology-based Processors** are facile with blogs, social media and other digital venues for engagement;
- 5 **Insight Seekers** seek an intellectual experience, and like to absorb a lot of information before and after arts programs;
- 6 **Active Learners** want to get personally involved in shaping their own experience.

Arts groups will typically find some blend of these typologies in their audience, and should think carefully about which typologies are served by current engagement programs, which typologies are underserved, and which of the many types of engagement activities will best suit them. Providing a diverse menu of programs and activities — social and solitary, active and passive, peer-based and expert-

led, community-based and audience-focused — will help to increase uptake. Many engagement programs, especially those that activate conversation amongst and between audience members, do not cost much to produce. Some level of engagement programming, therefore, is within reach of nearly all arts groups.

The institutional process for generating engagement programs is examined in the last section of the report. The continuous process of planning, marketing, contextualizing, delivering, interpreting, and evaluating engagement programs is a virtuous cycle that can be highly fulfilling for artists and staff. Arts organizations are encouraged to think of engagement as a unifying philosophy bringing together marketing, education, and artistic programming in common service of maximizing impact on audiences.

Much remains to be discovered about how audiences engage, and the many opportunities for drawing them more deeply into the arts. If you are new to the subject of audience engagement, we invite you to use this paper as a conversation-starter. If you are a decorated veteran, criticize the ideas and frameworks presented over the pages that follow, and replace them with a model of your own.

*Engaged audiences are a cornerstone in the foundation of a strong arts ecosystem.*



# WHY ENGAGE AUDIENCES?

*“In today’s environment, we are going to have to do more than simply provide the work that will draw adult audiences back to our stages and museums— we are first going to have to help them value, connect with, and engage in the arts.”*

Nello McDaniel and George Thorn, *Learning Audiences*, 1997

*It is five minutes before curtain as Joe and his wife Laura settle into their seats. The small theatre is packed. Next to them in row M, Aisha and her friends talk about their plans for the weekend. Aisha has never been to this theatre before and came tonight, rushing directly from work, because one of her friends bought tickets. Joe and his wife, on the other hand, purchased their tickets months ago as part of a subscription package. The couple attended the pre-performance talk with the director an hour before, and Joe also went online the day before to read the local paper’s review of the production, and viewed the director’s commentary on the theatre’s website.*

*The curtain ascends and the performance begins. Everyone laughs when they are expected to, holds their breath when they are expected to, and claps at the end. Aisha is moved to give a standing ovation, one of only a few people in the theatre to do so. Joe and Laura hurry out, concerned about parking and traffic on the way home. Aisha and her friends linger in the lobby, talking intensely before heading out for drinks.*

*One month later, Aisha finds herself recalling scenes and lines from the performance. She has already told other friends about the play and posted a link to the theatre’s website on her Facebook page. Meanwhile, the performance has completely slipped out of Joe’s mind. He has moved on to other things and, if asked, would only be able to remember the name of the play but little else.*

Aisha and Joe are fictitious audience members. They attended the same play, but their preparation efforts and post-performance “meaning making” activities were vastly different. While Joe made a greater effort to gain context on the work he was about to see, Aisha knew little about the play before the curtain rose. Afterwards, Aisha and her friends dove into an animated conversation about the play, while Joe didn’t. Both walked away with personally valuable experiences.

The sequence of events and activities leading up to, and extending after a performing arts event is different for every member of the audience. Although they share a common artistic experience, every audience member also has a unique

experience. In the case of museums and gallery exhibitions, every visitor might take a somewhat different pathway through the museum and spend different amounts of time and energy with different exhibitions and works of art. In this case, the “artistic exchange” (i.e., the transference of emotion and meaning between the artist and the public) is different for every visitor. While performing arts organizations are generally able to remain in contact with ticket buyers after a performance, the same is not true of most museums. Their ability to engage visitors before and after the visit is more limited.

These are just some of the complexities that arts groups face in negotiating the terrain of audience engagement. While every participant has a unique trajectory or “arc of engagement” in relation to a specific work of art, much can be done to define pathways through the work that lead to deeper and more meaningful experiences. The goal of this report is to make sense of the many pathways that audiences take through the arts, and to produce useful tools for thinking about, and planning for, audience engagement programs and activities.

Audience engagement is not a new idea. Arts presenters and producers have been working to engage audiences for centuries with tactics as simple as printed program notes and wall labels. Historically, efforts to assist audiences in contextualizing and making meaning from the art have been ancillary to the program itself — a sort of educational afterthought. In many arts organizations, engagement programs and activities are designed and implemented by marketing or education staff without much thought as to how they fit into a larger strategic framework. As one dance presenter explained, little energy remains for planning and execut-

ing engagement activities after the main artistic program is curated, funded and produced.

But this approach is giving way to a more holistic planning model in which engagement activities are an integrative part of artistic programming decisions. Several executive and artistic directors of Bay Area arts organizations articulated the viewpoint that audience engagement is a foundational principle of artistic programming, not a byproduct. According to one museum director, “It [audience engagement] means the institution is thinking about the audience member as central to the event or exhibition... We need to think of the whole arc of the experience in a different way.” Acting on their convictions, some arts organizations have established dedicated departments or staff positions whose sole charge is to plan and implement engagement programs and activities.<sup>1</sup>

Why this dramatic shift? In part, the increased focus on engagement is a response to broad social trends and changes in the preferences and tastes of cultural consumers. Expectations for interactivity and interconnectivity, fueled by social media, are the “new normal.”<sup>2</sup> As a growing number of consumers demand more and more intense, multi-sensory, and customizable experiences, arts groups find it more and more difficult to satisfy everyone with one experience. The types of kinetic and social experiences idealized by the younger, over-stimulated generation of cultural consumers have diverged substantially from the more conventional experiences idealized by older audiences. So, too, may this shift be attributable to a new generation of artists who more comfortably balance the roles of artist, teacher and activist, and who prefer a more interactive and symbiotic relationship with their audience.

Offering a range of engagement activities is one way that arts groups are responding to demand for a greater diversity of experience. Many are experimenting with innovative engagement activities that build audience and donor loyalty, magnify impact and help to sustain a lifelong connection to the arts. Along the way, arts groups are learning that not everyone wants to engage, and those who do have wide ranging preferences for how to do so. An emerging sense of the different typologies of audience members with respect to engagement is discussed in the third section of the report.

Four general categories of engagement programs surfaced in the research:

**Engagement via Technology.** Not surprisingly, much of the innovative new work around audience engagement revolves around creative uses of technology. Most arts groups have jumped on the Facebook and Twitter® bandwagons, and many have established blogs and YouTube stations. Some are developing sophisticated online engagement strategies that serve to build community (e.g., simulcasts of performances, visitor tagging of objects in online art collections) and prolong the arts experience (e.g., posting of audience reviews on YouTube). While a growing body of exemplary practice is emerging, many arts groups are still struggling

with how to make the online experience more interactive and less of a one-way conversation.

**Collaborations and Partnerships.** The most frequently cited barriers to implementing more engagement activities are “time, people, and money.” To circumvent these challenges, arts groups are increasingly seeking out partners, both across artistic disciplines, such as the Chandham Chitresh Das Dance Company’s partnership with The Asian Art Museum, and across sectors, such as the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project’s affiliation with local health organizations. Collaborations allow for both the arts group and the community partner to pool resources, reach populations of interest, and highlight civic issues of common concern.

**Experimentation with Setting.** Another area of engagement activity relates to creative uses and re-uses of settings and spaces. Underlying this vein of work is a heightened awareness that artistic experiences begin the minute someone walks through the door of a venue, and that the setting itself plays a role in shaping the artistic experience (and, oftentimes, the audience). Museums, theatre companies and performing arts centers are re-envisioning their lobbies and other spaces and experimenting with alternative uses. Shotgun Players, for example, has used its lobby installations to reflect the time period and scenery of the current production. In the

*“I’ve imagined impacting people from the moment they’ve walked through the door... These places I imagine as a dense, rich, spontaneous kind of experience of the arts...”*

Todd Brown, Founder and Executive Director, The Red Poppy Art House

museum field, curators are designing informal lounge spaces where visitors can read books and catalogues, converse with docents and socialize with other visitors. This experimentation extends to off-site venues such as restaurants, bars and private homes where audiences are invited to engage before and after arts programs.

**Participatory engagement.** Arts groups are experimenting with more participatory forms of audience engagement — typically involving some form of physical or creative expression. Examples abound. Dance organizations such as STREB invite audience members to stay after a performance to learn bits of choreography or acrobatic moves.<sup>3</sup> Museums are developing and testing new interactive interpretive stations surrounding specific exhibitions or works of art, such as the Denver Art Museum’s Daniel Sprick Focus Area (Case Study 11). Even the orchestra field is getting into the picture, with audience activities such as intermission games and “Tweet-certs,”<sup>4</sup> during which audience members receive concert commen-

tary on their mobile phones via Twitter. For the purposes of this paper, we limit the discussion of participatory forms of audience engagement to those used for interpreting a specific artistic work. A much larger body of participatory artistic work is gaining attention internationally,<sup>5</sup> but is beyond the purview of this report.

Arts organizations are conceiving, testing, refining and implementing all sorts of audience engagement programs at a rapid rate. In such a decentralized field as the nonprofit arts, there is no system for capturing and disseminating new practice, and scarce resources for evaluation and research. As a result, little has been transmitted to the field about what works and what doesn’t, or about specific practices that might be adapted and replicated more widely, with some notable exceptions.<sup>6</sup> In this period of accelerated change, there is an urgent need for shared vocabulary and a coherent conceptual framework that makes sense of the many different approaches to audience engagement.

# TRACING *the* COUNTOURS *of the* AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Over the years, numerous researchers and writers have delved into arts participation and its value to society, all of which has contributed to a stronger theoretical understanding of arts participation and the conditions under which it flourishes. Much of this work focuses directly or indirectly on audience development (i.e., broadening the base of audiences and visitors), a topic of perpetual concern to arts groups and their funders. The most important new vocabulary to enter the lexicon of arts participation emanated from The Wallace Foundation in the mid-1990s, describing three strategies for increasing cultural participation: “broaden, deepen and diversify.” Other funders adopted this terminology and integrated it into their funding programs. This catalyzed much experimentation in the area of “deepening” participation, including many of the same audience engagement practices discussed in this report.

The research literature on contemporary practice in audience engagement, specifically, is more limited. One helpful source of insight stems from “experience design,” an emerging discipline in the corporate sector through which products and services are designed with an emphasis on the quality of the user experience. Experience designers help companies define and manage customer “touch points.” The principles of experience design, when translated to the arts, suggest that audiences and

visitors have a “total experience” much larger than the arts program itself. Stronger bonds of customer loyalty will result when the totality of the experience is well managed, not just the artistic product. Of particular relevance to audience engagement is a framework conceived ten years ago by Conifer Research and the Doblin Group, “The Five E’s of Experience Design” — 1) Entice, 2) Enter, 3) Experience, 4) Exit, and 5) Extend.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, the Australia Council for the Arts generated a simple conceptual model of “The Arts Attendance Journey” in its 2011 report *Arts Audiences Online: How Australian audiences are connecting with the arts online*, a six-stage model moving from 1) Awareness, 2) Research, 3) Booking (i.e., acquiring a ticket), 4) Preparation, 5) At the event, and 6) After the event.<sup>8</sup>

Noted museum consultant Randi Korn’s 2005 study of visitors at the Dallas Museum of Art identified four distinct visitor clusters based on a wide range of psychographic factors including attitudes about interpretive assistance and preferences for engaging with art. Korn’s four clusters (Tentative Observers, Curious Participants, Discerning Independents, and Committed Enthusiasts) exhibit markedly different engagement patterns. For example, Discerning Independents, strongly oppose being told what to think about a work of art.<sup>9</sup> These findings parallel those from our own studies of perform

ing arts audiences, which reveal a diversity of preferences both in terms of the desired amount and preferred types of engagement.

A particular debt is owed to Nello McDaniel and George Thorn for their work on *Learning Audiences* (1997), a seminal text on the nature of arts presenters' obligations to their audiences and communities. Their "Learning Consciousness Framework" identifies six disciplines of good practice: 1) creating public value; 2) promoting

relationships; 3) being relevant; 4) supporting meaning making; 5) unifying programming; and 6) defining and measuring success.<sup>10</sup> McDaniel and Thorn framed audience engagement within the larger context of mission and community service, thereby shifting focus away from engagement as a marketing add-on, and moving it to the center of dialogue about mission and strategy. In many respects, their conceptualization of engagement as a unifying approach to programming is as radical today as it was 14 years ago.

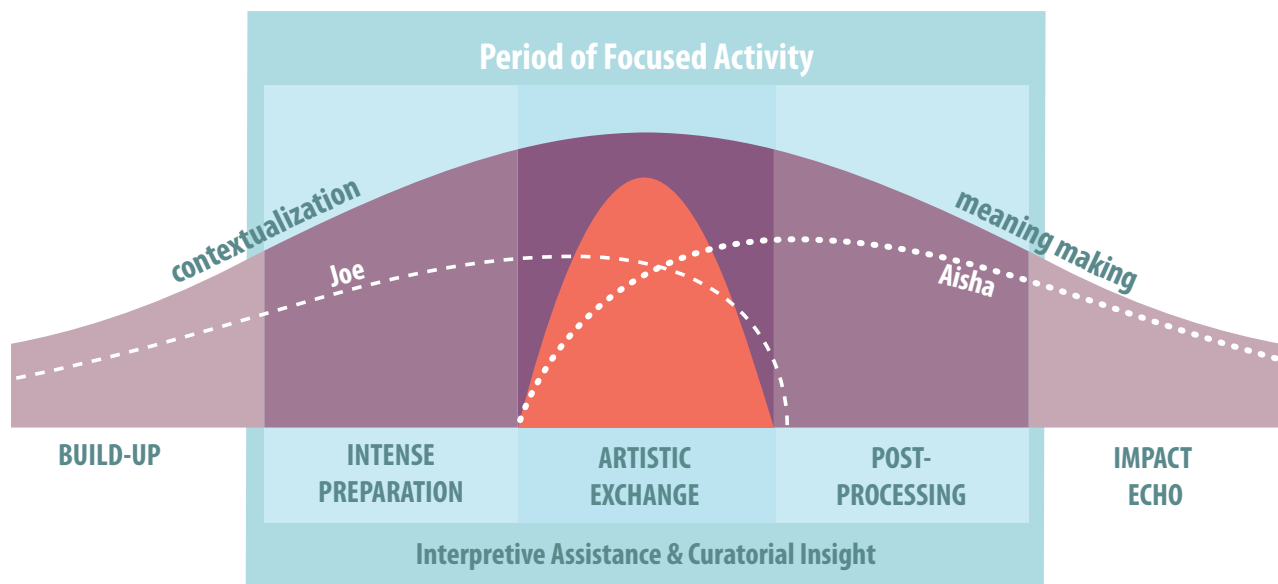
# THE ARC of ENGAGEMENT

While every arts organization will have a different engagement approach based on its unique resources and philosophy, the Arc of Engagement (Figure 1) is a good starting point in thinking holistically about how to shape the audience experience. This diagram illustrates the five stages of engagement through which audience members pass: 1) Build-up, 2) Intense Preparation, 3) The Artistic Exchange, 4) Post-Processing, and 5) Impact Echo. Not all audience members pass through all five stages, of course. But each of the stages represents a unique set of opportunities to deepen understanding and enrich the experience.

## Stage 1: Build-Up and Contextualization

The arc begins the moment that a commitment to attend is made, although we recognize that the engagement process really starts when the first marketing message is received. In the absence of any other information, the marketing message is often the only context that an audience member has, going into an arts experience. This is one of the reasons why marketing is so strategic to mission fulfillment — because it serves to calibrate expectations and contextualize the art.

Figure 1: The Arc of Engagement



*“Presenting a work of art takes a week, but the creation process takes 18 months. How is a week long enough for the public to understand a work that took 18 months to create?”*

Rob Bailis, Theater Director, Oberlin Dance Collective

The decision to attend may occur hours, weeks or months before the event. It might be helpful to think of the advance period as a kind of conveyor belt. People jump on the conveyor belt at different times, but they will all converge at the same time and place for a shared experience. Along the way, there are many opportunities to exchange information and build context. The extent to which this process can be structured is a focus of current practice. For example, a Broadway producer described a ramp-up process in which carefully crafted email messages are sent to ticket holders at specific intervals leading up to the performance date. Immediately after the sale, all ticket buyers are invited to join the show’s Facebook page. Two weeks in advance, they receive a link to a short video of the director working with cast members in rehearsal. One week in advance, another message is sent with a link to an audio file previewing one of the musical’s most famous production numbers. The day before the show, a final welcome message is sent from the star of the show. The primary goals here are to build anticipation and fuel word of mouth.

Other examples of contextualization efforts include pre-program lectures, open rehearsals, video interviews with artists and curators, season “preview CDs” with audio excerpts, and selling scripts to audience members who wish to read through a play in advance of attending. Opening windows into the artist’s creative process is a focus of current practice. For

example, Shotgun Players invites its “superstar subscribers” to the very first rehearsal of a production, including a read-through of the script, an explanation of the artistic approach by the director, insight from the playwright, and a preview of the set designer’s model.

A milestone in the Arc of Engagement, which may occur at any point, is what we call the moment of curatorial insight. Like a light bulb switching on, the moment of curatorial insight occurs when an audience member grasps the “why” of the artistic impulse—the curator’s intention, or an artistic director’s inspiration for a particular interpretation of play, for example. Curatorial insight is most likely to arise from personal statements from people who make artistic decisions, rather than from informational materials like artist biographies and synopses. The transmission of curatorial insight might take sixty seconds or several hours, and may take the form of a curtain speech or a curator’s statement in an exhibition catalogue. But, when it happens, the effect on the audience experience can be transformative.

Of course, audiences must ultimately choose whether or not to access the information provided by arts groups. Here, again, it is important to understand the diversity within your audience base. While some like to prepare extensively, others prefer to enter the artistic exchange with a “blank slate”—in other words, free from the bias of any event-specific context—to allow for



*“The education work really helps in people being more engaged in what they’re seeing. They are able to understand more of it and more able to have a critical eye.”*

Rachna Nivas, Education Director, Chitresh Das Dance Company

the element of surprise. A 2010 study of Toronto area performing arts ticket buyers found that roughly half prefer doing “just a bit” of preparation, while about 30% prefer to do “a moderate amount” of preparation, and less than 5% want to do “a lot” of preparation. The remaining 15% want to do “no preparation.” These proportions will vary from organization to organization, but it is almost certainly true for most organizations that a majority of audience members prefer at least a small amount of preparation.

What contextualization opportunities might you offer along the conveyor belt leading up to attendance? How might you engineer moments of curatorial insight? Taking a structured, multi-layered and sequential approach to contextualization, and explaining the options that are available to audiences, will likely result in greater uptake.

## **Stage 2: Intense Preparation**

The Arc of Engagement includes a period of intense preparation directly before the artistic exchange begins. As the event approaches and people start making logistical plans, attention begins to focus on the upcoming program and the likelihood of engagement increases. This brief window of time, which may be several minutes or several days, is identified as a separate stage in the diagram because it represents a “hot spot” or key milestone in the process. For many

audience members, the period of intense preparation spills over into the event itself, when they enter the venue, pick up a printed program or museum map, and learn about the experience they are about to have (often for the first time).

In reality, the first two stages of the arc blend together. Concertgoers and opera patrons may listen to recordings well in advance, while others will attend an open rehearsal<sup>11</sup> earlier on the day of the performance, or watch an online video about the work just prior to attending. Some museumgoers plan their visit weeks in advance, working from catalogues or the museum’s website to make lists of specific works of art to see, while others wait until they enter the museum to discover what’s on offer. In this case, the period of intense preparation is compressed into the few precious minutes spent looking at a map or consulting with a docent.

What are the implications for your engagement programming, in light of the fact that a majority of audience members prefer doing just a bit of preparation, and that this preparation is most likely to occur in the hours and minutes just prior to the event? Printed programs still play a prominent role in the engagement arc (both before and after, and sometimes during), but how might you take better advantage of this “hot spot” of opportunity? If time pressures continue to compress the arc of engagement, as evidenced by later and later buying patterns, it seems likely that a growing share of the audience will not prepare at

all. The only opportunity to engage them, then, will be within the boundaries of the event itself.

The larger point of the whole build-up and contextualization period is to build anticipation and increase the likelihood that the artistic program will deliver high intrinsic impacts to the audience.<sup>12</sup>

### Stage 3: The Artistic Exchange

At the center of the Arc of Engagement is the artistic exchange itself—however short or long—when the audience member encounters the artistic work, and the artist encounters the audience. The reaction of each audience member is inherently unpredictable and idiosyncratic.

A growing body of engagement work relates to providing audiences and visitors with different layers of interpretive assistance within the envelope of the artistic exchange.<sup>13</sup> Interpretive assistance refers to the practice of helping audience members gain an appreciation for what they are seeing. It may be provided before, during or after an arts event. One might think of interpretive assistance as a process of “getting people in touch with their own powers of perception,” as suggested by the director of a community-based arts center.

Philosophies differ with respect to the appropriate role of interpretive assistance. A survey of 56 Bay Area arts leaders found that seven in ten believe that “benefiting from arts experiences often requires a great deal of contextualization and interpretation” while three in ten believe that “everything you need from a work of art can be obtained from the act of viewing or listening to it.” Of course, this is a false dichotomy, and both are legitimate points of view.

Much good work in the museum field focuses on engaging visitors in on-site interpretive activities, such as efforts by the Denver Museum of Art and the Oakland Museum of California (see Case Study #11). Of particular note are efforts by a wide range of arts organizations to provide real-time interpretive content via mobile devices, and to invite audience members to use mobile devices to capture and share their experiences.

Outside of the museum field, this is still an emerging area of practice.<sup>14 15</sup> In the orchestra field,<sup>16</sup> for example, interpretive assistance is starting to be addressed through format experimentation. A 2008 study of a large orchestra’s base of ticket buyers revealed that 20% prefer an educational concert format with extensive context and explanations, and another 60% prefer short spoken introductions of each piece by the conductor or a

*“Because we are a culturally specific organization, I have to explain the culture. In order to get the audience to understand what we are doing, I have to go through another layer. It is a constant challenge to include the audience in what we are doing.”*

Patrick Makuakane, Founder and Artistic Director, Na Lei Hulu Dance Company

musician. The remaining 20% prefer a traditional format with no talking from the stage.

In situations where an audience member experiences nothing but the artistic exchange—no preparation and no formalized meaning making, as might be the case when a tourist happens upon a museum and spontaneously decides to go in—the totality of the experience lies within the artistic exchange (i.e., the red area in the diagram). While the quality of presentation most certainly affects the audience experience, the work of art itself is a large variable in the equation. Notice that the height of the arc reaches its zenith at this stage, suggesting that a heightened level of engagement can occur with contextualization and interpretive assistance. This is not to suggest that high impacts cannot occur without any preparation or post-event meaning making. In fact, when the quality and relevance of the artistic exchange are high enough, the experience can be life-changing.

*What interpretive assistance can you provide your audiences without compromising the integrity of the artistic exchange? What trade-offs are you willing to make in order to engage audiences at or during your programs?*

#### Stage 4: Post-Processing and Meaning Making

Following the conclusion of the artistic exchange, the audience member enters a period of intense “post-processing”—a time for making sense of what happened and forming a critical reaction. This is another “hot spot” for engagement, while the experience is fresh.

The process of meaning making may be deeply personal or very public, and may be facilitated actively, or may occur subconsciously without any outside mediation. The ultimate level of impact that an audience member derives from an arts experience can be dramatically affected through his or her participation in meaning-making activities or self-guided reflection.<sup>17</sup>

Again, it is important to understand the diversity within your audience base, as illustrated by our fictitious theatregoers Joe and Aisha. Whereas Joe and his wife left immediately after the play finished and didn’t speak further about it, Aisha and her friends lingered in the lobby and talked intensely about the play. A 2009 survey of Chicago area theatregoers found plenty of audience members like both Joe and Aisha. Roughly a quarter of respondents reported a preference for “vigorous discussion” after a play, while a larger proportion—just over half—prefer to “reflect privately.” The remainder expressed no preference between the two extremes.

Post-performance discussions have long been standard practice, although we see an increased level of experimentation in this area and hear anecdotes of large increases in the numbers of people staying afterwards for these discussions.<sup>18</sup> Post-program meaning making is the focus of our case study research, which uncovered a great deal of innovative work employing techniques and tools as simple as Post-it® notes (Case Study #7) and as heady as A.C.T.’s

Theatre on the Couch discussions led by professional psychoanalysts (Case Study #2).

Historically, arts groups have focused their efforts on meaning-making activities that take place within the venue, such as “talk-back” sessions and artist receptions. While these activities will always play an important role in the Arc of Engagement, recent research suggests that casual conversation amongst audience members outside of the venue plays an even larger, yet unrecognized role.<sup>19</sup>

Reading critical reviews is another means by which audiences engage, both before an after arts events. Given the near absence of professional criticism in the mainstream media in a growing number of communities both large and small, arts groups such as South Coast Repertory are cultivating a new cadre of “citizen critics” who agree to write about their arts experiences in blogs and social media (Case Study #5).

Audience feedback, typically collected through surveys, can also play a role in the Arc of Engagement. The act of completing a survey about the artistic experience forces the respondent to consider his or her reaction to the art and formulate an opinion. Well-executed impact assessment survey efforts can play a role in the long-term aesthetic development of the audience, especially when audience members are allowed to compare their own reactions to those of others (Case Study #8).

*What might you do to encourage private reflection amongst those who choose not to participate in facilitated discussion? Where are the “citizen critics” in your community? What might be done to encourage casual conversation outside of your venue?*

#### **Stage 5: The Impact Echo**

Following the intense period of post-processing, the final stage of the arc plays out. It is a phenomenon we call the “impact echo,” during which the event may be totally forgotten or remembered and recalled from time to time. As we all know, some arts experiences remain vividly in our minds for decades, while others fade into distant memory as soon as we walk out the door. The impact echo can last for a few days, a few weeks, or a lifetime.

Little has been learned about the long-term impact of individual arts experiences, although many people, when asked, can quickly recall arts programs they attended many years ago as if it were yesterday. What explains why some arts experiences “stick” and others don’t? It’s a complicated question. Virtuoso performances or blockbuster exhibitions by legendary artists are often cited as memorable experiences. But sometimes an arts experience might “stick” because it was offensive, confusing or challenging in some way. We do not pretend to

understand how the brain remembers, a topic better suited for cognitive scientists. Rather, we suggest that artists and arts administrators focus instead on providing audience members with tools for remembering—a practice that consultant Jerry Yoshitomi calls “memory elicitation.” At the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, for example, volunteers distribute “baseball cards” to children leaving family matinee performances, each card containing a few bits of information about the artist and a photo. The cards accumulate in scrapbooks, taking on the symbolic importance of the experience and eliciting memories for years to come. With the advent of digitized art collections and shared ticketing systems, we foresee a time when people can log on to a community website and manage an interactive, personalized scrapbook of their arts experiences, including images, audio files and other digital souvenirs.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot say for sure, but would like to believe that contextualization and meaning-making efforts pay off in the form of an extended impact echo. This is mission fulfillment on a long, slow burn. When people remember arts experiences months and years afterwards, a sort of impact dividend is paid.

Joe and Aisha, our prototypical theatregoers, attended the same play but had different arcs of engagement, which are overlaid on the diagram. Note how Joe’s arc began much earlier than Aisha’s, but ended shortly after the artistic exchange. In contrast, Aisha’s arc began only when she walked into the theatre, but extended for a longer period of time.

*What might you do to help people remember your programs and increase the length of the impact echo?*

*“We see our timeframe not being linked to an event but rather for three years, four or five years.”*

Jordan Simmons, Artistic Director, East Bay Center for Performing Arts

# AUDIENCE TYPOLOGIES WITH RESPECT to ENGAGEMENT

*“There are people in it to be social, people who are there for art, for personal growth, and some want engagement on all levels.”*

Marcia Lazer, Director of Marketing, San Francisco Opera

**J**oe and Aisha, our favorite theatregoers, demonstrate how different people have different ways of engaging. How many Joes are there in the typical audience? How many Aishas? What other groups or “typologies” of audience members can be identified based on their engagement preferences? This section synthesizes what we’ve learned about audience typologies across a handful of quantitative studies in the dance, theatre, and classical music fields. While the model was built from data on performing arts audiences, aspects of it may be germane to museums, as well.

The Venn diagram on the following page illustrates six overlapping categories of audience members within a typical performing arts audience, defined by their overall appetite for engaging and their preferred methods of engagement. The six typologies are (in order of low appetite to high appetite): 1) Readers; 2) Critical Reviewers; 3) Casual Talkers; 4) Technology-based Processors; 5) Insight Seekers; and 6) Active Learners. The diagram illustrates both the overall prevalence of each typology (signified by the size of the circle) as well as the inter-relationships between the typologies (denoted by the degrees

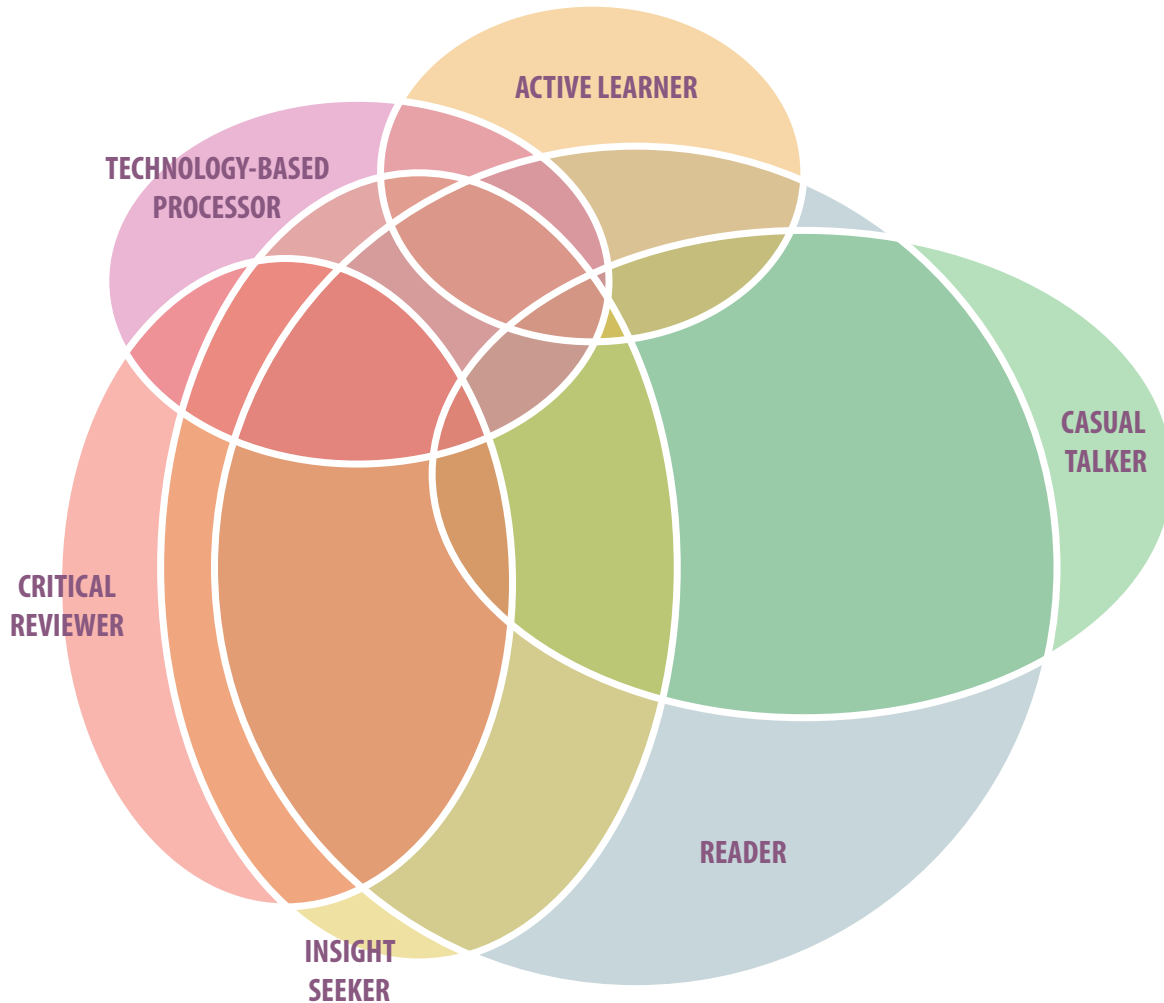
of overlap). Thus, a given audience member may exhibit the characteristics of more than one typology at a given point in time. For example, observe how Critical Reviewers (the orange circle) overlap with Insight Seekers (the yellow circle), signifying the tendency of many Critical Reviewers to also behave like Insight Seekers.

Please note that this model is an abstraction and amalgamation of several different models, and is not intended to reflect exact proportions or exact relationships. Rather, it depicts general tendencies. Actual proportions will vary from organization to organization. For example, a small contemporary arts center may have a relatively larger proportion of Technology-based Processors in its audience compared to a large opera company.

The largest circle represents Readers, the most prevalent of all typologies. They are followed by Casual Talkers, another predominant typology found in audiences, then, Insight Seekers, Critical Reviewers, Technology-based Processors, and finally Active Learners, the least prevalent of all six typologies.

Consider the makeup of your own audience as you review the brief descriptions that follow.

Figure 2: Audience Typologies with Respect to Engagement



**Readers** are “light” engagers. They enjoy reading program notes and wall texts, but otherwise do little else to contextualize their experience. They may read previews and reviews, but are generally not interested in further engagement (at least those who are not also associated with other typologies). Most everyone is associated with this typology.

**Critical Reviewers**, like Insight Seekers, seek intellectually stimulating experiences. They are defined by their habit of making decisions based on what others say. They seek the expertise of professional critics and other trusted sources. Some are quite knowledgeable about the art, but still require an external stimulus in the form of an expert’s recommendation. They are most interested in critical dialogue about the work itself.

**Casual Talkers** enjoy an informal social environment where they can discuss their experience with others. Talking in the car on the way home from an event is often their favorite form of engagement. Most audience members are Casual Talkers. This typology is most attracted to informal peer-exchange, although they might listen in on an expert-led talk if asked by their partner or friend. They prefer the casual environment of a restaurant, bar or café (i.e., outside of the venue) where they can talk freely with friends and family members about what they each took away from the artistic exchange.

**Technology-based Processors** love all forms of online engagement, and appear to be growing in number, especially among younger audience segments. Technology-based processors search for information online before and after the event. They connect with others through Facebook and other social media, and are most likely to read and contribute to blogs and discussion forums on the arts organization's website. Their motivations are both intellectual and social in nature.

**Insight Seekers** like to dive into the meaning of the art, whether it is at an open rehearsal, pre-performance lecture, or post-performance talk-back. Like Critical Reviewers, they are intellectually motivated. Insight Seekers look for opportunities to gain "insider" information, such

as a composer's reflection on a new work, or a sculptor's explanation of his inspiration, and enjoy learning from their peers as much as being privy to the curatorial insight that the artist, director, or other expert may provide. They are most likely of all typologies to attend lectures, discussions and artist demonstrations at the venue.

**Active Learners** want get their hands dirty, so to speak. They look for "making and doing" engagement opportunities that offer a way into the art. They might enjoy learning a few steps of choreography after a performance, or having the opportunity to touch and play musical instruments in the lobby in advance of an orchestra concert.

*Which typologies do you cater to with your engagement programs? Think about some of your biggest donors. Where do they fall in this taxonomy? Which typologies would you prioritize for future development?*



# FOUR DIMENSIONS of ENGAGEMENT

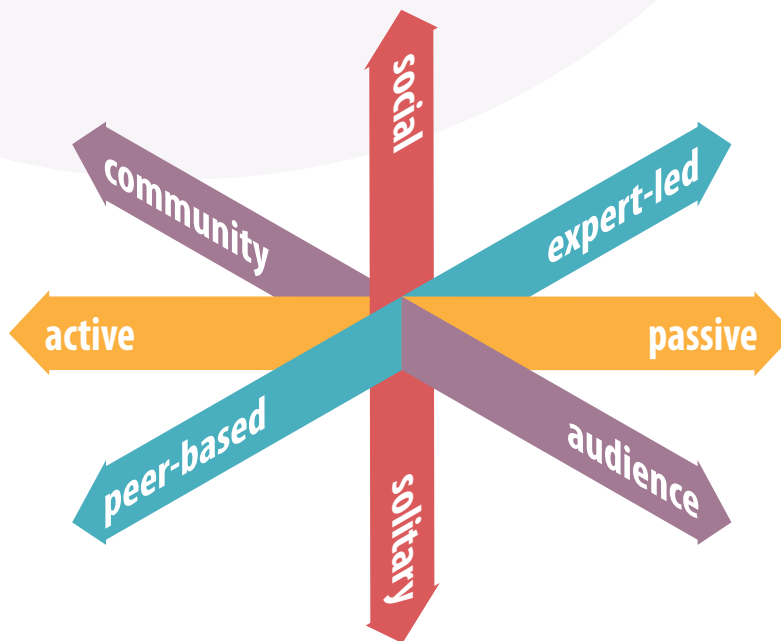
Previous sections explored the Arc of Engagement and identified a range of audience typologies in regards to engagement. Next, we explore the underlying characteristics and dimensions of audience engagement programs and activities. The goal here is not to provide a “cookbook” or laundry list of interesting practices, but to provide artists and managers with general guidelines for thinking about program design in reference to the various typologies.

Across the many engagement practices examined in this study, four underlying

continuums were identified, as illustrated in Figure 3. Individual engagement activities can be described in terms of their placement along each of these four dimensions.

Clear relationships are found between the six typologies outlined in the previous section and the four dimensions. For example, peer-based engagement activities (i.e., those closer to the peer-based end of the peer-based/expert-led spectrum), might appeal more directly to Casual Talkers than to Critical Reviewers.

**Figure 3: Key Dimensions of Engagement**



**Continuum #1: From Social to Solitary**

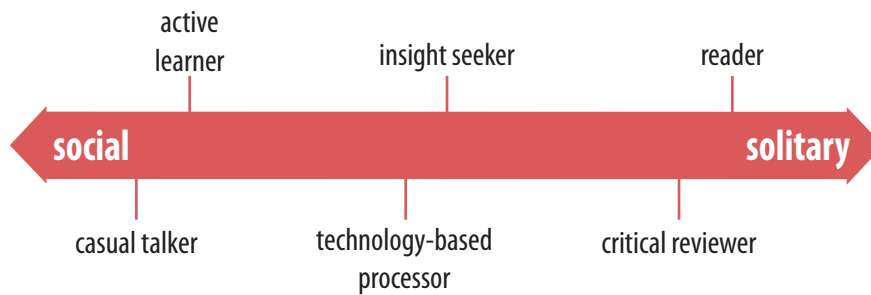
The social to solitary axis defines whether the activity is shared with others or is done alone. Arts groups are increasingly focused on creating social opportunities, driven by audiences' greater desire for interconnectivity. In fact, 65% of Bay Area arts administrators either "agree" or "strongly agree" that they "work hard to fashion and encourage the social experiences patrons have at our programs."

It is important to offer both social and solitary engagement opportunities for patrons with different preferences. Solitary acts, appealing to Readers and Critical Reviewers, like reading program notes before a performance or ruminating in front of a sculpture, are equally valid and valuable as more social acts of engagement, which are more likely to appeal to Active

Learners and Casual Talkers. Insight Seekers may enjoy both social and solitary activities.

Consider two museum visitors viewing the same work of art. One enters into a discussion with a docent in front of a painting, while another listens quietly to an audio-guide. Both gain interpretive assistance, one through a social activity (i.e., casual conversation with a docent) and the other through a solitary activity (i.e., listening to a carefully scripted audio description). What are the pluses and minuses of solitary versus social engagement? Deep value is possible at both ends of the spectrum. Solitary engagement allows the participant greater control over the experience, while socially based forms of engagement introduce an important human dynamic in which the exchange of ideas can have unpredictable outcomes.

**Figure 3a: Map of Audience Typologies - From Social to Solitary**



**Continuum #2: From Peer-based to Expert-led**

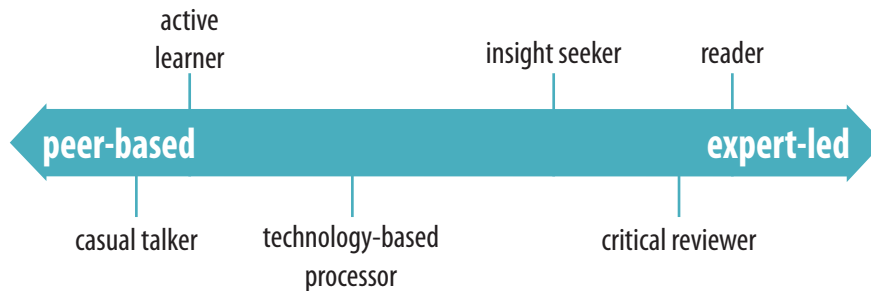
Another defining aspect of engagement is the extent to which it is peer-based or expert-led. This dimension is particularly helpful in understanding Casual Talkers, including the majority of audience members who engage by talking about the performance on the way home.<sup>21</sup> They are processing through conversation with peers. Research suggests that audiences especially enjoy activities that allow them to learn from one another through programs such as Yerba Buena Center for the Arts’ “Download”—a lightly facilitated post-performance discussion format (Case Study #3). One of the benefits of peer-based engagement is that it is relatively easy to expand and bring to scale. For example, a museum

might place an open notebook next to a painting, inviting visitors to write what they liked or disliked about the work, for others to read and react to.

This is not to say that peer-based activity is, or should be, replacing expert-led discussions or professionally delivered “curatorial insight.” In fact, many audience members are most interested in understanding the motivations, inspirations and meaning behind a work from the artist’s point of view.

There are many possibilities for combining peer-based and expert-led elements. The challenge lies in allowing for both dimensions to coexist within one program.

**Figure 3b: Map of Audience Typologies - From Peer-based to Expert-led**

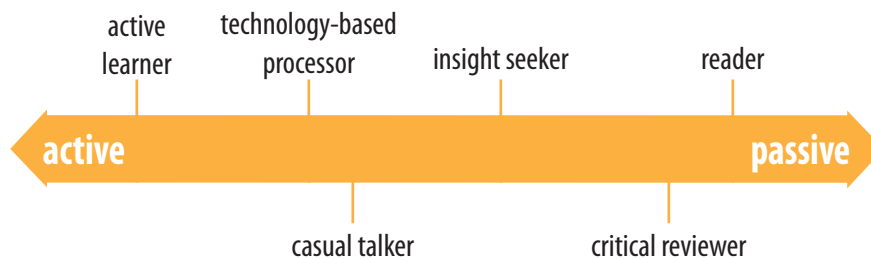


**Continuum #3: From Active to Passive**

More and more audience members want to feel personally involved in the artistic process, and want to play an active role in shaping their experience. The fourth dimension of engagement reflects the range of involvement levels that are possible. Along this spectrum, involvement ranges from sitting in the back row and listening to a lecture (towards passive) to jamming with musicians on stage after a concert (towards active). In a museum setting, involvement can range from contemplating a painting without reading wall text to playing with interactive interpretive games that are part of an installation. The San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus, for example, activates audiences during intermissions by inviting them to take out their cell phones, photograph a neighbor, and post it to Facebook.

Few people will say that they idealize passive experiences, but will decline to participate in the more active forms of engagement for one reason or another. Interactivity is not for everyone. Here, it is important not to make value judgments about how people like to engage and make meaning. Both modalities must be respected and supported. Rather than think of this dimension as an either/or situation, it is more useful to think in terms of designing activities with active and interactive components that appeal to Active Learners, Insight Seekers, and other typologies. Docent tours, pre- and post-event discussions, and master classes are examples of formats that allow some to actively participate and others to sit back and learn by listening and observing.

**Figure 3c: Map of Audience Typologies - From Active to Passive**



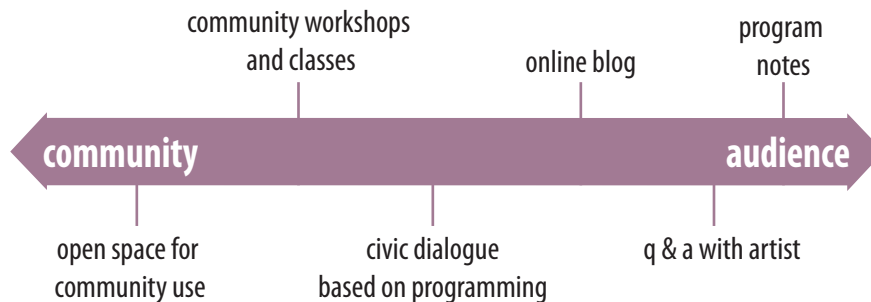
**Continuum #4: From Community to Audience**

Bay Area arts leaders have passionate feelings about the connections between “community engagement” and “audience engagement.” The former aims to serve the broader community, while the latter aims to serve those who attend. In reality, many engagement activities serve both purposes. This paper concentrates on engagement activities that are closer to the audience end of the spectrum, primarily those related to specific performances, exhibits and events. Of course, audience engagement activities can have a spillover effect on communities when audience members share their enthusiasm with others who did not attend. The same is true for community engagement activities, which can build interest in the arts and stimulate attendance in the long-term. It is most productive to think of community and audience engagement

as two inter-related ideas existing on a single continuum. Unlike the other three dimensions, it is more useful to consider how activities fall along the spectrum, as opposed to typologies.

In seeking to enhance their stature and relevance, arts groups are increasingly positioning themselves as civic institutions that employ art (and engagement activities) as a medium for addressing community issues such as violence, health, and youth development. Examples of engagement activities that sit more towards the community end of the axis include the San Francisco Film Festival’s post-screening activities, which often incorporate discussion and debate about current issues (Case Study #1), and community-based organizations like the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts that provide space for the community to come together.

**Figure 3d: Map of Engagement Programs - From Community to Audience**



*“We engage with people on all different levels outside of just looking at art.”*

Courtney Fink, Executive Director, Southern Exposure

### **What’s the Right Mix of Engagement Opportunities for Your Audience?**

Designing, testing and implementing audience engagement programs is a process of aligning target audiences (i.e., typologies) with the wide array of formats and features discussed here. The overarching goal is to engage as many audience members as possible through one means or another.

Unfortunately, audience members don’t show up with a typology identification card. Regardless, many arts managers have an intuitive sense of their audiences and how they like to engage. Additional insight can be gained through informal research techniques such as lobby interviews and focus groups. In reflecting on your existing engagement programs, you may ask:

- What dimensions of engagement do these activities represent (i.e., where are they situated along each of the four axes)?
- Who is the target audience for these activities?
- Which of the six typologies are you serving the best?
- Which typologies are not well-served by your existing programs?
- Which typologies will you prioritize for future engagement efforts?
- What kinds of engagement activities are they likely to respond to?
- What “baseline” level of engagement do you want everyone in your audience to have? What interpretive assistance or curatorial insight, if any, are you willing to embed in the artistic exchange?

To illustrate the diagnostic process, a short exercise is in order. Consider this scenario:

*A theatre company hosts artist talk-backs after select performances. These talk-backs are expert-led, as the education director typically moderates a discussion with the artist, and tend to be more passive. These discussions are social in nature (not solitary) and, of course, are specific to the audience for that performance. Subscribers are the most likely to participate, although the theatre desires to engage single ticket buyers and younger audiences — who are more likely to be Casual Talkers, Active Learners and Technology-based Processors — more deeply.*

### **What is your diagnosis?**

In this case, the theatre might be best served to consider offering more social, peer-based activities, such as post-performance lobby receptions where artists or knowledgeable volunteers (e.g., artists not affiliated with the particular production) can mingle with audience members. Another option might be to create an online competition in which audiences are invited to write an “unauthorized sequel” to the play (e.g., “Imagine the story wasn’t over when the curtain descended. What happens next?”).

Designing effective engagement programs involves a great deal of creativity, as well as discipline, on the part of staff, artists and audiences. Whatever your course of action, the quality of work can be enhanced through careful experimentation and assessment. Taking a structured approach to engagement, as suggested here, can help make sense of the limitless possibilities.

# TOWARDS BETTER PRACTICE

*“The key to any successful relationship is that you continue to do it. Think about relationships with audiences as you would want to have a relationship with anyone. You want to feel known. You want to feel trusted. You want to feel respected. You want to feel robust curiosity all the time.”*

Rob Bailis, Theater Director, Oberlin Dance Collective

**A**rts groups’ relationships with audiences are changing. Recognizing that the “total experience” is a much longer journey that extends both before and after the artistic exchange has inspired many arts groups to incorporate engagement as a core component of program planning. Roughly half of the Bay Area arts administrators who responded to our survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that “engagement and enhancement programs and activities are considered in coordination with artistic program planning, and can influence artistic decisions.”

Although a lot of good thinking and practice is currently happening around engagement, much of it tends to be ad hoc. Engagement offerings vary from year to year, and from program to program, often rising and falling on the knowledge, energy, and whims of staff. Obstacles to implementing engagement programs include financial and administrative costs, as well as staff time. Gaining the cooperation and participation of artists can also be a challenge. If they aren’t on board, the possibilities diminish.<sup>22</sup> Arts groups are learning to work with — and around — artists in order to assure that audiences are provided with regular engagement opportunities. The overall picture is still one of uneven availability, as audiences aren’t

sure what engagement opportunities are available when, or where, and are left to navigate information and opportunities on their own. To audiences, this can be confusing and counterproductive.

Despite what may seem like insurmountable challenges, many types of engagement activities cost little and can be accomplished with a minimum of staff time and artist involvement. Low- or no-cost engagement activities include curtain speeches, lobby discussions, spontaneous gatherings at nearby restaurants and bars, and unattended laptop stations where visitors can search for further information or record their own comments (Case Study #6). The challenge, then, lies in balancing resources with the many available approaches and formats.

The recurring process of conceiving, testing, refining and implementing engagement programs is summarized in Figure 4, The Audience Engagement Cycle. This “virtuous cycle” of activity provides a general framework for how arts organizations can approach the engagement process from a planning and implementation perspective.

Unlike the Arc of Engagement described earlier, there is no “starting point” within the insti-

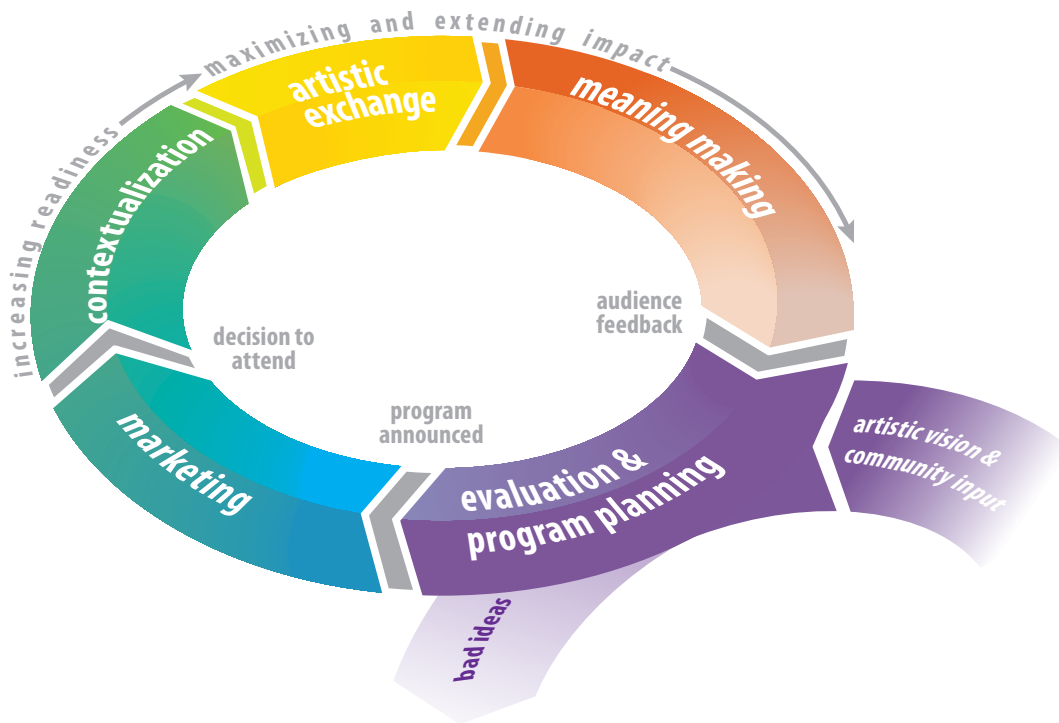
tutional cycle of engagement. Rather, it is a continuous, renewable process with many entry points. Of the five main stages of the cycle, three illustrate how arts institutions support the corresponding stages of engagement from the individual’s perspective—contextualization, artistic exchange, and meaning making.

For many arts groups, the engagement cycle starts with marketing, which serves the dual purpose of promoting attendance and also contextualizing the art. Copywriters who make exaggerated promises about the likely impact of a work of art can inadvertently set up unrealistic expectations and leave the audience unprepared for what they are about to see.

The decision to attend, one of the three major inflection points in the cycle, starts the conveyor belt of build up and contextualization, leading up to the artistic exchange, and extending into meaning making. During the contextualization stage, information is exchanged between the arts organization and its future attendees (and, sometimes, amongst attendees, such as when video links to artist interviews are shared on Facebook).

Whereas the overall goal of the marketing and contextualization stages is to increase audience members’ readiness and capacity to receive the art, the primary objective of engagement efforts during the artistic exchange and meaning making stages is to maximize and extend impact.

**FIGURE 4: THE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT CYCLE:  
The Institutional View**





*“Most people think of audience engagement as a marketing function but if you do it right, the actual work can benefit from the feedback of audiences as it’s being developed.”*

Jessica Robinson Love, Executive & Artistic Director, CounterPULSE

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Following along the circle, the next inflection point occurs between the meaning making and program planning and evaluation stages, when audience members provide feedback. The act of providing feedback can enhance an audience member’s critical reflection skills and build loyalty. Feedback also represents a valuable source of information for arts organizations with respect to artistic impact, customer service and other topics.

There is still a great deal of debate and disagreement over the appropriate role of audience feedback in an artistically-driven organization. Three in ten of the Bay Area arts administrators who responded to our survey consider audience feedback to be “an important input into the artistic process,” while half consider it to be “an appropriate input into artistic development from time to time.” Only one in ten think audience feedback “is for informational purposes only but not an input into program selection.” There is no right answer here, and viewpoints on this question may vary within an organization.

*What role should audience feedback play in your artistic process?*

The evaluation and program planning stage is critical to the overall health and vitality of any arts organization. Here is where a variety of inputs—both internal and external—can influence decision-making. Ideas for new artistic programs and engagement activities may bubble up from audience members, artists or staff, and may be advanced through the development process or discarded entirely. Little is known about the different program planning models employed by arts groups. Some processes are driven by the artistic vision of a single individual, while other processes involve numerous stakeholders and community input.

If engagement programming is on a separate track from artistic programming, arts groups might want to explore the underlying reasons and examine how the two might be integrated more closely.

In sum, the Audience Engagement Cycle offers an institutional view of the continuous process of engaging audiences, and illustrates the fundamental interdependence of engagement and artistic programming.

## Concluding Thoughts

The ideas put forth in this paper attempt to provide a structural framework in which to consider the unique experience of every audience member. Engagement is more than what happens when someone sits in a seat or stands in front of a painting; it is the totality of the arts experience from the moment someone decides to attend. The path an audience member chooses to take through the Arc of Engagement is partly influenced by the nature of the art itself (e.g., performing arts programs and museum exhibitions offer different engagement opportunities), as well as the audience member's own appetite for engaging. From an institutional perspective, engagement is a unifying philosophy that bridges marketing, education, programming and even development, in the sense that engaged audiences are more likely to give.

Much research and development remains to be done. Arts groups are particularly adept at serving audience typologies such as Readers (i.e., those who like to read a bit of information beforehand) and Insight Seekers (i.e., those intellectually curious souls who show up at lectures and discussions). The larger challenge facing the field is figuring out how to serve the large segments of arts lovers who fall somewhere in between these two extremes (i.e., “the big middle”) with small bites of context and insight.

*“We are interested in building relationships over time. This drives our engagement, which drives our programming. If our theory of change is around building diversity and collaboration, [then] this is our goal.”*

Deborah Cullinan, Executive Director, Intersections for the Arts

How can audience members who are unsure of how they feel or think about a work of art be welcomed into the engagement process? Some of the most sophisticated engagement programs we've seen leverage "peer-to-peer" learning principles—providing learning opportunities for both experts and novices within the same format with little or no facilitation. Arts groups can play a significant role in helping audiences interpret and legitimize their own feelings, and move beyond the "thumbs up/thumbs down" culture of instantaneous feedback.

It is an exciting time for arts groups open to this expanding set of possibilities. As the field learns how to serve diverse typologies of engagers, new and refined programs and activities must be evaluated and disseminated quickly and widely. Successfully engaging audiences on a broader scale is strategic to the long-term health of the field, and to the cultural vitality of our communities.

*Engaged audiences are a cornerstone in the foundation of a strong arts ecosystem.*



1. The Oakland Museum of California, after extensive research and evaluation of visitor engagement, established a new department, the Center for Audience and Visitor Engagement. In the performing arts field, it is becoming more common to see staff positions dedicated to audience engagement, such as the Pacific Symphony's director of audience engagement position.
2. Nina Simon discusses the expectations and motivations of museumgoers in her book, *The Participatory Museum* (2010).
3. The **STREB** company refers to its "hallmark audience participation event, S.L.A.M. Inclusive, where audience members sample Extreme Action moves!"
4. The Houston Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, and Pacific Symphony have all pilot tested "Tweet-certs" or similar events.
5. In October 2011, The James Irvine Foundation released a report by WolfBrown exploring active forms of arts participation, entitled "Getting In on the Act: How arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation," available from the [foundation's website](#).
6. Several publications commissioned by The Wallace Foundation or its grantees have addressed audience engagement specifically, including *Engaging Audiences*, by Kay E. Sherwood, a summary of the 2009 convening of Wallace Excellence Awards grantees in Philadelphia, and *The Art of Participation: Shared Lessons in Audience Engagement*, by Patricia Harris Dixon, an overview of the efforts of 22 Boston area arts organizations to increase participation. Also, a report on Dance/USA's **Engaging Dance Audiences** initiative will be released in late 2011, including lessons learned by the nine grantees.
7. See **How to Find Buried Treasure Using Experience Maps**, by Conifer Research, 2002
8. *Arts Audiences Online: How Australian Audiences are Connecting with the Arts Online*. The Neilson Company. June 2011. Source: <http://connectarts.australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Arts-audiences-online.pdf>.
9. Korn, Randi. *Dallas Museum of Art: Levels of Engagement with ArtSM, A Two Year Study, 2003–2005*. Museum Visitor Studies, Evaluation & Audience Research. October 2005. Source: [http://dallasmuseumofart.org/idc/groups/public/documents/web\\_content/dma\\_215746.pdf](http://dallasmuseumofart.org/idc/groups/public/documents/web_content/dma_215746.pdf).
10. McDaniel, Nello, and Thorn, George. *Learning Audiences: Adult Arts Participation and the Learning Consciousness, the Final Report of the Adult Arts Education Project*. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. 1997.
11. In a 2011 national study of over 7,000 dance ticket buyers, a great deal of interest was expressed in attending open rehearsals. The study may be accessed from the [Dance/USA website](#). This suggests a healthy appetite for "curatorial insight"—or, in this case, opening a window into the creative process.
12. WolfBrown's research on intrinsic impact suggests that anticipation levels are correlated with higher levels of captivation, which, in turn, are associated with higher emotional, intellectual, aesthetic and social impacts. See [www.intrinsicimpact.org](http://www.intrinsicimpact.org) for more information on impact assessment, including a bibliography of recent impact assessment efforts worldwide.
13. It is important to note that the arts experience is inherently different in a museum setting compared to a live performance setting. Most museum engagement occurs as visitors walk through the museum and view exhibitions, rather than before or after the visit.

14. While audio guides, wall texts and docent tours have long been standard practice in the museum field, interpretive assistance at live performances got off to a rocky start in 1985 when James Levine, music director of the Metropolitan Opera, famously proclaimed, “Over my dead body will they show those things [supertitles] at this opera house. I cannot imagine not wanting the audience riveted on the performers at every moment.” Since that time, supertitles (now available in some opera houses in seat-back mounted personal video panels) have become standard practice, and are credited with opening up the art form to a new audience. The Martha Graham Dance Company’s 2009 touring production of *Clytemnestra* featured supertitles.

15. Injecting interpretive content such as supertitles or explanatory text over, around, or on top of, art brings up many artistic and philosophical issues that very much need to be further discussed and debated in the sector. One such debate took place on April 29, 2011 in Chicago, in which Alan Brown, Principal of WolfBrown, and Martha Lavey, Artistic Director of Steppenwolf Theatre Company, explored the **role of technology devices in theatres and concert halls**.

16. The **New World Symphony** is one of many orchestras now experimenting with innovative concert formats, including Journey Concerts, Discovery Concerts, Mini-Concerts, and club-style PULSE concerts—involving different levels of interpretive assistance, visual stimuli and speaking from the stage.

17. This assertion is based on qualitative data (e.g., focus groups with post-performance discussion participants at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts) and also a small body of quantitative research through which impacts reported by audience members who participate in specific engagement activities are compared with the impacts reported by those who don’t.

18. According to Andrea Snyder, who has moderated post-performance discussions after dance performances at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC since 1995, the number of people staying for discussions has roughly doubled over a 15-year period.

19. A 2009 WolfBrown study of Chicago area theatre-goers revealed that the dominant means of post-processing for most audience members occurs when they discuss a work of art informally in the car on the way home, or over coffee the next morning. Rather than dismissing the realm of “casual conversation” as something outside of their control, however, some arts groups are taking concrete steps to elicit self-guided conversation both inside and outside of their venues. Might this be as simple as distributing a list of questions for audience members to ask each other?

20. Google’s **Art Project** allows website visitors to “create” exhibitions or galleries from the digitized collections of museums around the world.

21. The Casual Talker typology emerged from several studies of theatre audiences, and was underscored in a national study of dance audiences.

22. Some arts groups reported difficulties working with artists who do not desire to communicate more about their art beyond the performance itself, or to expose themselves to audiences’ comments and criticisms. As more and more artists enter the scene with a genuine interest in engaging audiences, and as audiences demand more engagement, arts presenters are placing additional demands on artists. “Now,” as the artistic director of a small dance company noted, “administrators want artists to break that third wall and engage with the audience... although they might not feel comfortable with it.”

# MAKING SENSE

## *of* AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT



### VOLUME II

*Case Studies of Post-Event  
Engagement Practices*

ALAN S BROWN

REBECCA RATZKIN

*with* DAVID ALWORTH

# INTRODUCTION

This case study report is the second volume in a body of work exploring emerging practices in audience engagement. It complements a white paper, “Making Sense of Audience Engagement,” which takes stock of this emerging area of practice and offers new perspective and conceptual frameworks. Through its 11 detailed case studies, this volume describes a wide range of interesting and innovative approaches to engaging audiences and visitors immediately after arts experiences. The common goal of all of these programs is “meaning making.” Our exclusive focus on post-event engagement activities reflects a desire to delve deeply into a particular area of practice, rather than superficially treat the whole range of engagement practices.

Most of the case studies explore one aspect of engagement from multiple perspectives, encompassing several examples of similar practices. This allows for a deeper discussion of practice, and offers the reader more reference points. In preparing the report, it became clear that engagement in the context of art museum programming is inherently different than in the performing arts. At performing arts programs, audience members have more or less the same experience, whereas visitors to museums and galleries largely determine what experience they have by making choices about where to go, what to see, and how long to stay. While performing art groups have a means of contacting ticket buyers in advance (or afterwards), museums seldom are able to contact visitors before or after a visit. Thus, museums focus most of their engagement efforts

on the visit itself, rather than before or after. For this reason, we have included a case study on two museums’ efforts to help visitors make meaning from a work of art while they are in the gallery.

Case studies were chosen through a rigorous nomination and vetting process. Arts groups throughout the Bay Area were invited to suggest engagement programs they felt were exemplary in some way. Other nominations were gathered through recommendations from funders, consultants and practitioners in the field. In total, these efforts yielded a pool of 52 examples of post-program engagement methods.

Although all the nominated practices are worthy of their own case studies, we were only able to include a handful in this report. We’d like to thank everyone who took the time to communicate with us about their work, and especially the numerous representatives of organizations selected for case studies, who offered their valuable time and insight to help generate this document.

No matter how large or small your organization, or what resources you have, there are many lessons and perspectives to learn from others’ experiences.

Throughout the report, suggestions are provided for adapting programs at any scale, while considering some of the challenges and larger goals of each type of programming. We hope you will find it useful.

## Overview of Case Study Topics

### 1. Addressing Civic Issues Through Post-Performance Dialogue:

Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project, amongst others, incorporates community discussions on topics that resonate with their community and are represented in the work they present.

### 2. Collaborating with Local Business and Experts from Other Fields:

American Conservatory Theater and the San Francisco Opera work with psychoanalysts in special post-event programming to help audience members “analyze” the work on stage.

### 3. Facilitating Post-Performance Discussions Without Artists:

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Walker Art Center have developed new formats for informal conversations that rely on peer-to-peer learning.

### 4. Facilitating Personal Engagement with Artists:

Music at Kohl Mansion, Brava Theater and Joe Goode Performance Group invite audience members to interact with artists in intimate and casual settings, encouraging one-on-one conversation and forging deeper bonds with the organization.

### 5. Nurturing Citizen Critics to Engage Audiences:

South Coast Repertory recruits local Facebook users and bloggers to provide and share criticism of its productions.

### 6. Sharing Audience Feedback Through Social Media:

The Brooklyn Museum and Center Theatre Group harness accessible technologies, like video, to gather patron feedback and immediately distribute it via the Internet.

### 7. Scaling Up Post-Event Processing Through Interactive Questioning:

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and The Walton Art Center utilize index cards and Post-it® notes to collect feedback from audience members, and then post comments both on-site and online.

### 8. Using Survey Feedback to Increase Learning and Engagement:

Destiny Arts and The Cutting Ball Theatre Company, amongst others, regularly survey their audiences after performances, providing audience members with an important opportunity to make meaning.

### 9. Incorporating Audience Input into Artistic Productions:

CounterPULSE and Dancers’ Group ask audiences to react to and provide input towards works in progress, thereby involving the audience as a co-creator of the work itself.

### 10. Blending Participatory Engagement with Attendance:

Many organizations, like Chitresh Das Dance Company, Na Lei Hulu, STREB, and World Arts West, teach audiences dance moves they’ve just seen performed live.

### 11. Using Interactive Activities to Enhance Engagement:

Denver Art Museum and Oakland Museum of Art have created installation areas with multiple interactive activities that aid visitors in gaining context and insight into a single work of art.



# ADDRESSING CIVIC ISSUES THROUGH POST-PROGRAM DIALOGUE

**H**ow can arts groups connect with their communities around shared values and issues of common concern? How can artistic work be leveraged to position an arts organization as a key player in civic dialogue about important issues? Arts organizations, like Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (San Francisco, CA), Aurora Theatre Company (Berkeley, CA) and The San Francisco Film Society all incorporate civic dialogue into their regular programming.

This case study explores their experiences. Key learnings include:

- Post-event dialogue about important issues arising from arts programs provides an important opportunity for building community and a deeper understanding of both the issue and the art.
- This type of programming is energizing in a different way – the focus is not only the art, but the underlying thematic issues it represents. The art provides a platform for raising awareness and inspiring action around pressing civic issues.

## Organization and Program Description

### Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP) – Community Convenings



The QWOCMAP annual film festival links art with social issues through panel discussions and partnerships with local organizations serving LGBTQ, minority, and low-income communities. Post-film discussions and **community conversations** accompany many of the films screened during the festival. Films are grouped into thematic screenings, and community partners are paired with these screenings as appropriate. As part of the festival, the organization hosts formal community convenings, where community partners and leaders join in a discussion around a particular issue addressed by a group of films, such as “Queer Immigration.” Although proximity to the film screenings may vary (i.e., some may have

seen a film and others not), these community discussions help audiences make connections between festival films and important civic issues.

## **San Francisco Film Society – Salon Discussions**

Similar to QWOCMAP’s community convenings, the San Francisco Film Society (SFFS) hosts salon style discussions during its film festival. These **salons** are part of the organization’s larger programming focus called **Causes and Impacts**, the screening of films that focus on social and civic issues, like AIDS and civic unrest. The salons are post-screening discussions with filmmakers and others who address the films’ topics or themes.

## **Aurora Theatre – Friday Forums**

Aurora Theatre hosts a program called **Friday Forums**. Running for twenty minutes after a performance, these dialogues typically begin with a question such as, “Is that what you expected tonight?” This kind of question often helps audiences to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings by connecting their personal experiences to the narrative. The facilitator lightly moderates the conversation, encouraging audience members to see how the performance and their individual reactions speak to broader social issues.

## Assessment and Lessons Learned

No formal assessment has been done for any of these programs, although all have received positive reviews informally. The organizations all view these civic discussions as an important and fundamental component of their overall programming. QWOCMAP is keenly aware that its convenings inspire participants to see themselves as “partners” with the organization because of their dedication to highlighting and addressing topics relevant to their community. By partnering with local community-based organizations, QWOCMAP makes the issue the focus, rather than the art. The art serves as a vehicle to communicate and explore the issue.

These programs give audiences the chance to think about and discuss the ways that artistic practice can have a social and political component. In doing so, they not only deepen their respective audiences’ investments in the organization, but also work to cultivate widespread awareness, and even action, around pressing civic issues.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

QWOCMAP continues to partner with community organizations to screen and discuss films

that encourage dialogue with and about the communities they serve. A recent example from the spring of 2011 is “Catalyzing Knowledge in Dangerous Times: Women of Color Feminist Interventions in Pedagogy and Praxis,” a discussion organized by the Center for Race and Gender at the University of California, Berkeley.

Aurora’s Friday Forums and SFFS Salons will continue as part of their regular programming.

- Building strong and lasting relationships with local community organizations is key to mounting these types of discussions. In fact, being able to build upon conversations from one program, or season, to another will only enhance the dialogue, making for a richer experience and stronger bond with the organization.
- Staff time is required to build community partnerships and plan the events. Sometimes, a financial commitment is necessary to secure a venue and pay for refreshments.
- As with any post-program discussion, skillful facilitation is required. Perhaps teachers or community leaders, who are knowledgeable about your mission and programming, can help lead the conversation. Sometimes it is best to let the community partner, or someone else from outside the institution, facilitate.

*How can you connect with deeply held social, political and cultural values in your community? What causes and issues are at the forefront of community life? What other community organizations are working on these issues? What opportunities can you create for meaningful dialogue in an artistic context?*

## Summary Observations

These programs illustrate how arts groups can deepen ties with constituents through post-program dialogue about important issues. There are many other examples of arts groups, both small and large, creating community conversations. The art may be curated towards the issue, or the issue may derive from the art, such as when a panel discussion on gender identity is

organized in conjunction with a performance by a male soprano. The experiences of QWOCMAP, SFFS and Aurora Theatre suggest that arts organizations need not shy away from provocative or challenging subjects when they design engagement programs. In fact, asking audiences to interact with each other, with artists, and with community activists around notoriously sensitive topics such as race and sexuality can generate a high level of interest and investment.

# COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES & EXPERTS FROM OTHER FIELDS

Collaboration is sometimes the best way to accomplish programming and engagement objectives when budgets are tight and staff resources are minimal. Arts groups often partner with community organizations and local businesses to connect to specific target constituencies and to gather support, both in-kind and monetary, for programming. This case study focuses on collaborations that are instigated by external stakeholders that offer a different perspective and language with which to understand the arts experience. Examining American Conservatory Theater’s “Theater on the Couch,” and the San Francisco Opera’s “Opera on the Couch” programs, this case study illustrates how:

- Audiences can gain fresh tools for making-meaning by learning new interpretive paradigms such as psychoanalysis.
- Experts from outside the arts can help to deepen audience understanding and appreciation of a work, and deepen their appreciation for the art form.
- Being open to collaborative partnerships can result in dynamic programs that are also cost effective and mutually beneficial.

## Organization and Program Description

### American Conservatory Theater – Theater on the Couch

A.C.T. conceived the **Theater on the Couch** post-performance discussion after meeting a group of representatives from the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis (SFCP) in 2004. Inviting expert psychoanalysts to lead discussions was a natural expansion of A.C.T.’s existing post-performance discussions with artists, directors and playwrights. The program involves three psychoanalysts who lead a discussion immediately after a performance, initially providing their own interpretations of what happened on stage. Then, they field questions from audience members and encourage them to use the insights and language of psychoanalysis to uncover the deeper meaning of the performance through shared conversation. Initially, A.C.T. placed the analysts on stage and held the discussion in the theater, but have since moved the event to a smaller and more intimate lounge space.

### The San Francisco Opera – Opera on the Couch

Interestingly, is not an official program of the San Francisco Opera. Given the successful experience with Theater on the Couch, SFCP members were inspired to approach the Opera

about adapting the program for opera performances and audiences. Basically the same program as A.C.T.'s, Opera on the Couch occurs three times per season after a performance (typically a matinee). The main difference between the two programs is that the opera events take place in a local bookstore close to the opera house. SF Opera provides refreshments and promotional assistance, requiring minimal staff time. While the program is open to all audience members, the opera's most loyal patrons tend to participate.

### Assessment and Lessons Learned

Neither program has been formally assessed, although participants have offered strongly positive feedback on an informal basis. For example, SF Opera "couch" participants have commented on how the event helps them to think more deeply about the performance and develop fresh perspectives on new and classic operas. A good deal of the success of these events is due to the casual

settings in which they occur. A.C.T. started off the program in the theater itself with the experts on stage and 250 audience members in their seats. Moving the program to the more casual downstairs lounge decreased capacity but allows for a more intense and fruitful exchange. According to staff, the change of setting really helped to make the program work.

In the case of the Opera's "couch" sessions, the space issue was resolved through a partnership with Books Inc., an adjacent bookstore eager to welcome opera patrons into its space. Because the Opera has allowed both SFCP and BookThink to manage the program, minimal effort and expense are necessary to sustain it. Being open to program ideas from external sources has given the Opera the opportunity to provide its patrons with a high-quality post-performance engagement event that otherwise would not be possible due to venue and budget constraints.

*Who might you approach in your community about adding an interpretive element to your programs? What local businesses might want to host a post-event gathering?*

### Sustainability and Adaptability

Both programs are expected to continue indefinitely. A.C.T.'s is offered as part of a regular schedule of engagement programming, and the Opera's has become "a well-oiled machine." So long as SFCP members continue to facilitate the "couch" discussions, there are few barriers to sustaining them.

- Be open to working with professional groups and their constituents, even if such groups seem to have different interests or audiences.
- Even if done in-venue, take care to engineer an informal, welcoming space that encourages exchange.
- Local businesses looking to increase traffic and visibility may be potential partners in hosting engagement programs. Locations closer to the performance or exhibit venue will increase participation (i.e., so that patrons don't need to drive and park again).
- Minimal staff time is required if you find the right partner who is willing and interested in taking a lead in managing the event.

### Summary Observations

Post-performance discussions are key learning opportunities for audience members. Inviting experts from other intellectual fields to shed light on the art and its underlying themes can provide audiences with a fun and unusual opportunity to build understanding and see the work through a different lens. The programs highlighted in this case study demonstrate how partnership and collaboration can allow arts organizations to offer successful engagement programs at little expense.

# FACILITATING POST- PERFORMANCE DISCUSSIONS WITHOUT ARTISTS

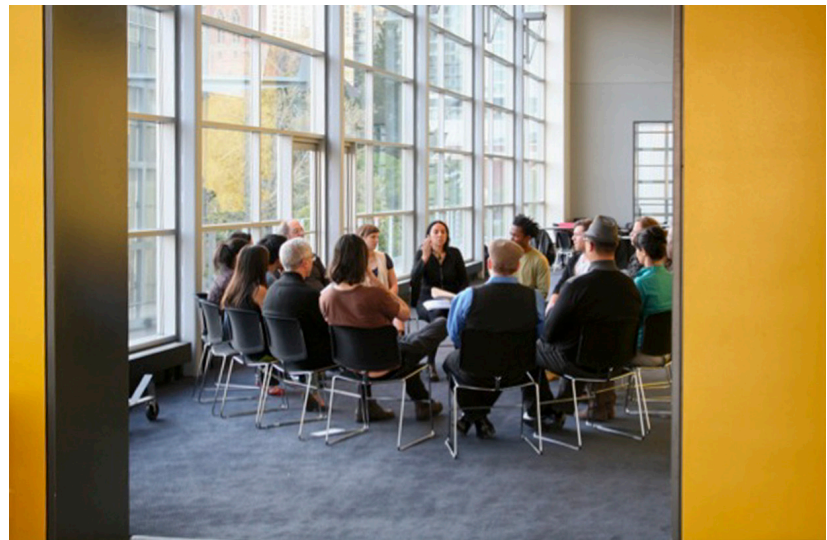
**L**ightly facilitated post-performance discussions – without the artist present – can be an effective way to help audiences engage in candid conversation around a specific work of art. In essence, these types of discussions allow participants to learn from each other through informal peer-to-peer exchange and community building around the art. The Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco, CA) developed two approaches to post-performance discussions with funding assistance through Dance/USA's Engaging Dance Audiences initiative. Key learnings include:

- Lightly moderated post-performance discussions enable peer-to-peer learning, a powerful and scalable approach to engagement.
- Two typologies of participants – those who actively voice their opinions, and those who prefer to listen but are not prepared to voice their own opinion – benefit greatly from the experience.
- These formats benefit from moderators who do not represent themselves as “experts” but nevertheless have some facilitation skills.
- Because of their interactive nature, these types of post-performance discussions can simultaneously satisfy educational and social objectives, and help to build community around the art.

## Organization and Program Description

### Yerba Buena Center for the Arts – Dance Savvy Download

YBCA's “Download” is a component of its **Dance Savvy** program, a pilot that aimed to stimulate interest in dance and to build dance literacy among YBCA's existing visual arts audiences. Dance Savvy also included a series of workshops designed to introduce YBCA's visual arts audiences to dance artists and concepts. The Download itself is a lightly moderated audience discussion that takes place at the venue directly after the performance.



Participants in the pilot were recruited from YBCA's galleries and screening rooms and compensated for their time. Four Dance Savvy sessions were implemented during the pilot.



*“I was amazed at the range of opinions and perspectives. It deepened my understanding of the performances.”*

[Download Participant](#)

Each session consisted of a pre-performance workshop, a dance performance, and a post-performance discussion – the Download. The discussions ranged from 30 to 90 minutes depending on the energy level of the participants. YBCA experimented with several different locations for the Download during the pilot, ultimately settling on a public meeting space in the Novellus Theatre building. Staff wanted to create a more casual feel to the conversation and so arranged individual chairs in a circle. They also experimented with using three different pairs of facilitators: a dance expert and non-expert, two YBCA staff, and two leaders of the Dance Savvy participatory workshops. Facilitation techniques were based on Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)\*.

### Walker Art Center – Speakeasy

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota created a similar post-performance discussion program called “**Speakeasy**.” The Speakeasy is an on-site, post-performance discussion and social gathering held at the Walker’s Balcony Bar, where, like YBCA’s Download, chairs are set in a circle to promote more casual and informal conversation amongst participants. It is announced on their website, and as part of post-performance announcements from the stage. Unlike the Download, where participants were recruited into the program, the Speakeasy is open to all audience members. On average, 23 audience members participated in each of the pilot discussions. Local choreographers and Walker gallery docents were recruited to facilitate the discussions and encourage audience members to share openly about their experience.

\* **Visual Thinking Strategies** is a teaching methodology used in the visual arts to help audiences see and think critically about a work of art. Facilitators ask three simple, direct questions to participants at the outset of the discussion to encourage easy and insightful conversation: 1) What is going on here? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? 3) What else can you find?

## Assessment and Lessons Learned

Both YBCA and the Walker conducted rigorous assessments of their programs as part of the pilot study, including both focus groups and post-event surveys. Overall, participants enjoyed the conversation, which allowed them both to hear others and to share their own viewpoints of the work without fear of offending the artist. In both cases, a majority of participants said that they attended to hear others share their viewpoints on the performance, suggesting a desire to engage in peer-exchange and informal conversation.

These post-performance discussions are intended as open, unstructured forums. In designing these programs, YBCA and Walker were challenged with how to “structure” unstructured conversation, and how to balance the need for context with the need for participants to share their thoughts and feelings. Skillful facilitation is one of the keys to finding this balance, as the experience hinges upon the quality of the collective discussion and exchange. Utilizing VTS allowed facilitators to encourage discussion amongst participants. Instead of telling participants what the performance was about, facilitators prompted others to develop the language to describe their experiences and interpretations of the work. YBCA found that more advance preparation on the part of the facilitators encouraged quality conversation. Walker creat-

ed guidelines for facilitators, similar to YBCA, which helped facilitators to keep the conversation going and ensure that everyone who wanted to contribute had the chance to do so.

The number of participants is a critical factor to creating an open and informal forum. The “sweet spot” appears to be between 10 and 15; YBCA recommends no more than 20, and Speakeasy was successfully with 23. Limiting the number of participants helps to ensure that almost all, if they chose, can contribute to the conversation in a more intimate setting. Too large of a group can act as a disincentive for some participants. The physical space also contributes to the need to limit number of participants, but more importantly, is key to creating an informal and comfortable environment conducive to peer exchange. YBCA played around with physical space throughout the program, and found that although the large lobby with city views was aesthetically appealing, it was too noisy for conversation, and found that while a rehearsal room was more intimate and quiet, it was too cramped and too far away from the theatre. Ultimately, a public meeting room near the performance space, yet far from post-show commotion, proved ideal.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

Both YBCA and Walker will be continuing these programs after the pilot ends. Walker, in fact, plans on incorporating the Speakeasy into programming across all disciplines, including visual art and film. YBCA, on the other hand, is officially re-launching the complete Dance Savvy program as “**Night School**,” which includes a pre-performance discussion and demonstration (similar to Dance Savvy workshops), dinner and the performance, and a post-performance Download.

- Think strategically about available space that would be conducive to small group discussions in and around your venue.
- Set up the physical space so that seating is comfortable and arranged for sharing between participants. There should be no “head of the table.”
- Recruit and train facilitators from staff, volunteers, artists and community members (e.g., train an initial participant to be a facilitator at future events).
- This type of discussion is easily adaptable to other disciplines (e.g., a museum could use the “speakeasy” or “download” format in conjunction with a docent tour).
- Audience members and visitors will most likely want to eat, drink and talk, just as they would in a bar, restaurant or café. Anticipate their needs, and try to increase their comfort level.

## Summary Observations

Post-performance discussions allow audience members to make sense of their own feelings about a work of art and “go deeper” into its intellectual, spiritual and emotional meaning. Without the artist present, audiences are given permission to be more candid and often more comfortable in speaking their minds and voicing frustrations, confusions as well as deep insights. Akin to casual conversations with friends and family members on the way home from the event, these discussions also satisfy audience members’ desires for nurturing social experiences by encouraging an open discussion with each other in which non-expert voices are heard and validated.

The setup of the physical space, the number of participants and the type of facilitator all contribute to the success or failure of the conversation. When well-executed, these programs can be transformational for participants, and illustrate an emerging trend in engagement practice that places peer-to-peer learning at the center of the experience.

# PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ARTISTS

## FACILITATING

**M**any arts organizations facilitate interaction between artists and audiences, typically through moderated discussions and post-event “talk-backs.” As audiences look for more intimate and informal experiences, arts groups are shifting focus to orchestrating less structured, more socially fulfilling interactions between artists and audiences. This case study examines Music at Kohl Mansion’s (Burlington, CA) Meet-the-Artist receptions, and also references Brava Theater’s Kitchen Series post-performance parties and Joe Goode Performance Group’s (San Francisco, CA) post-performance “Twitter gatherings” as examples of how:

- Giving audiences the chance to connect personally with artists can increase knowledge of an art form and strengthen loyalty to an organization.
- Both audiences and artists can derive satisfaction from one-on-one exchanges about art in a casual setting.
- Post-performance receptions can give audiences a unique opportunity to make meaning from a performance by hearing reactions and insights from others—including artists, staff, and peers.

## Organization and Program Description

### Music at Kohl Mansion – Meet the Artist Reception

After each chamber music concert, Music at Kohl Mansion hosts a Meet-the-Artist reception where audience members and artists have the opportunity to interact “up close and personal.” The goal of the program is to make music and musicians accessible to audiences on a more personal and intimate level than found in the concert hall. All audience members are invited to the receptions. The logistics of the program are straightforward. It is run primarily through volunteer hours and donations. Food and drinks are set up, buffet style, in dining rooms adjacent to the concert hall, along with autograph tables for the artists. Immediately after the performance, audience members are invited to move into these rooms. The reception format is unstructured, allowing free movement and mingling. A volunteer corps, consisting of Mercy High School students and families and Kohl board members and subscribers, plan and supervise the event, while food and wine are provided through individual and corporate donations. Artists are contractually obligated to participate and must be present in the reception area immediately after the concert. Receptions typically last from 30 to 45 minutes. The program is promoted through a variety of channels, both on-site and off. Music at Kohl publicizes the receptions on its website as well

as in traditional press releases and brochures. Box office staff also encourages participation.

### **Brava Theater and Joe Goode Performance Group – Post-Performance Parties**

Brava Theater in San Francisco hosts a post-performance party after a play reading, called the Kitchen Series, and the Joe Goode Performance Group (JGPG) invites audience members to meet dancers at a local bar or restaurant by tweeting their location directly after a performance. Whereas both Brava Theater and Music at Kohl provide refreshments for a party at, or attached to, the venue, JGPG takes a more impromptu approach, spontaneously inviting audience members to “hang out” with dancers at a local bar or restaurant. The company began Tweeting the location as a way of engaging audiences after performances at rented venues. Using Twitter as a means of communication also provided an opportunity to increase social media engagement and potentially reach beyond the audience by encouraging loyal Twitter followers to re-post the Tweet.

Many other arts organizations offer audiences a wide range of opportunities to interact with artists, both online and in-person. Some, like the BATS Improv company, shepherd artists to the lobby or green room after performances to greet audience members. Others,

like the San Francisco Symphony with its Davies After Hours program, go to significant lengths to construct an open and fun environment for audience/artist interaction.

## **Assessment and Lessons Learned**

Audience participation in the Kohl program has been very high. Typically 90% to 95% of a concert’s audience attends the receptions (approximately 200 people). Kohl’s annual audience surveys indicate a high level of satisfaction with the program. Although Brava and JGPG have not engaged in any formal assessment of their programs, anecdotal comments suggest that audiences enjoy the opportunity to have one-on-one interactions with artists.

Artists – who rarely have time for personal conversations with individual audience members – have also provided positive feedback about their experience at these events. Although it is part of their contract for performing at Kohl, musicians are enthusiastic about the receptions, and some have even fashioned friendships with audience members at these events. They enjoy the direct feedback, which is mostly positive and so re-enforces their bond with the audience and the art form.

Hosting these events did not require major financial resources or staff time for these particular organizations. This was particularly the

*How and where might you make artists accessible to your audience? Allowing audience members to meet artists in person can have a profound effect on their experience.*

case with JGPG’s “Twitter gatherings,” which cost nothing at all, since participants paid for their own food and beverages at a local bar or restaurant. For Kohl, expenses were greatly reduced due to their strong volunteer corps and community and business connections, through which refreshments were provided at no cost.

In allowing these sorts of unmediated interactions, arts groups (especially in the case of Kohl) must let go of some amount of control that they would normally have at a more structured event. Conversation is not moderated, and the outcomes of these interactions are not pre-determined as with more structured discussions. Rather audiences are allowed to ask artists about any topic – the performance, their own personal work, the art form, their life as an artist, etc. Although Kohl initially found this lack of control to be a somewhat risky proposition, the positives have outweighed the negatives. A byproduct of the program has been stronger connections with artists.

### Sustainability and Adaptability

Kohl intends to continue its program, as does Brava Theater. JGPG does not consider its “Twitter gatherings” as a formal engagement program, but hopes to integrate more of these types of events and communications into their regular engagement offerings.

- Although receptions and parties can be accomplished at little to no expense, volun-

teers and donations may not come through, or may only last for one season. Plan accordingly. Staff most likely will have to take responsibility for preparing and managing the event.

- Not all audience members will enjoy the same type of reception or gathering. Consider asking audience members and/or artists for suggestions.
- These events are meant to be un-choreographed. It is up to the organization to prepare the environment and invite participants. The rest – conversation and connection – will happen naturally.
- The artists’ presence and enthusiastic participation is key to the success of this type of event.

### Summary Observations

The success of these casual receptions underscores both artists’ and audiences’ desires to have more opportunities for personal connection. Although social in nature, the casual nature of these receptions unwinds the sometimes formal and forbidding atmosphere of the venue where most of current “interaction” between artists and audiences takes place, and allows for audience members to engage the artist in a deep conversation about the artwork itself. Moreover, welcoming audience members into a closer relationship with artists engenders a stronger sense of connection with the organization, thereby encouraging repeat attendance and a greater commitment to the organization overall.

# NURTURING CITIZEN CRITICS *to* ENGAGE AUDIENCES

**W**ith the decline of professional arts journalism, rise of the blogosphere and increasingly influential role of social media on fashioning taste, many arts organizations have created their own blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to encourage conversation and interchange around their work. South Coast Repertory, a large theatre company in Costa Mesa, California, has turned to its audiences, Facebook community and local bloggers to provide criticism and stimulate dialogue after performances. SCR's "Blogger Nights" program illustrates how:

- Amateur reviews can make a unique and valuable contribution to the conversation around an organization's programming.
- The blogosphere can be a dynamic and powerful site for engagement, both for the bloggers, their readers, and the organization's audience.
- Audiences who engage in critical writing tend to think more deeply about a performance by relating it to their own experiences.

## Organization and Program Description

### South Coast Repertory – Blogger Nights/Facebook Ambassadors

South Coast Repertory's Blogger Nights program invites hand-selected local bloggers to view and review SCR performances. SCR also developed a similar program, Facebook Ambassadors, in which a handful of active Facebook users (who are also regular SCR attendees) are invited to attend a performance and write a Facebook post about their experience. These programs serve both to engage audience members after performances, and to generate interest amongst those who have not yet committed to buying tickets.

Responding to an audience segmentation study, SCR staff conceived the Blogger Nights and Facebook Ambassadors programs to better serve "open-minded review readers"—a specific segment of ticket buyers that tends not to buy tickets until or unless they've read a compelling review from a trusted source. First, SCR would need to cultivate a cadre of local reviewers. The communications team began by implementing the Facebook Ambassadors program. They identified local Facebook users with strong writing skills and a sizeable number of "friends" and invited them to attend performances for free, provided that they post comments to Facebook afterwards. When this program was deemed successful, SCR then developed Blogger Nights.

Staff worked to find a variety of bloggers – both inside and outside of the arts world – who seemed both highly literate and influential in the community. These bloggers were invited to attend an opening weekend performance as guests of SCR, with the understanding that they would post reviews and comments on their personal blogs. In its first year, Blogger Nights commissioned 17 invited blog reviews, while an additional 16 unsolicited reviews appeared on other local blogs, for a total of 33 new reviews. The upfront investment of staff time in identifying and connecting with the right bloggers was essential. Once indoctrinated into the program, the bloggers themselves generate a good deal of critical content around SCR's productions.

## Assessment and Lessons Learned

Several lessons may be learned from the Blogger Nights program. First and foremost, the program's success shows how organizations can generate criticism and commentary independent of mainstream media. While SCR reports that it is “terribly difficult to measure in any really solid way” how Blogger Nights has influenced attendance, the program, along with other strategies, is credited with effecting a 12.6% increase in single ticket sales from the 2009-10 to the 2010-11 season. Although targeted at “open-minded review readers,” Blogger Nights serves the larger SCR audience and Orange County theatre community, as commentary is available to SCR audiences and potential audiences alike.

The second lesson of Blogger Nights is that amateur reviews can make a unique and valuable contribution to the conversation around an organization's programming. The bloggers discuss facets of theatergoing experiences that professional critics typically do not discuss, which can be refreshing and stimulating. For instance, one reviewer included a playful photo of the bathroom in her blog post, while commenting on the physical space of the Folio Theatre. Moreover, amateur bloggers tend to connect the play to personal experiences. A blogger reviewing SCR's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, included remarks about the conversation that it generated with her daughter. This exemplifies how amateur critics can make meaning on their own terms, and, given that SCR shares blog links on its Facebook page, Twitter feed and in email blasts, this program has the potential to connect to others on a personal plane that the organization itself may not be able to.

A third, and more general, lesson of Blogger Nights is that the blogosphere can be a powerful and dynamic place of engagement, as long as its risks and challenges are addressed. Organizations must consider what a negative review might mean, while recognizing that some potential patrons might dismiss blog writing as novice and therefore untrustworthy. As SCR sees it, though, the practice of online reviewing by amateurs is, on balance, a good thing. Overall, SCR thinks of the Blogger Nights program as a means of cultivating a new generation of “citizen critics.”

*Everyone is a critic. Encouraging audiences to express their viewpoints can only help spread the word about your work.*



## Sustainability and Adaptability

Blogger Nights has become self-sustaining to a large extent. SCR continues to see unprompted commentary on various websites and blogs even after the bloggers' official affiliation with the program has ended. Regular attendees of performances at the Folio Center's two main stages are actively posting comments on blogs and Facebook, assuming unofficial, but informed, roles as commentators. Given the continued and un-prompted participation of the bloggers and Facebook friends, SCR slowed its recruitment of bloggers in the 2010-11 season.

- Although identifying and recruiting bloggers (who are already out there writing about you and your art form) does not require a major financial investment, it will require a significant amount of staff time and effort in researching, selecting, and creating relationships with high-quality bloggers and the local blogosphere.
- On one level, these programs help to generate word-of-mouth through social media. But they also serve a larger purpose, which is to build and sustain a capacity for criticism in the marketplace – a long-term investment in audience development.
- A critical mass of reviewers and reviews takes on a life of its own and will become self-sustaining in time.
- Every once and awhile, find and invite new voices to be a part of the conversation.

- The blogosphere is an independent collection of voices that cannot be managed in the same way that an on-site engagement program might be. There is always the potential for negative viewpoints. However, when dozens of people write about your work on a regular basis, there is likely to be a wider range of opinions, both positive and negative.

## Summary Observations

Programs like Blogger Nights and Facebook Ambassadors harness the burgeoning power of social media and the web to engage audiences in conversations about the art. Moreover, these programs help to fill a critical gap in the mainstream media. Bloggers voice their opinions and construct meaning from their experiences, and invite commentary from others. The dialogue serves the dual purposes of extending the experiences of audience members who've seen the production, and generating interest amongst community members who have not.

The critical voice offered by community writers who are not professional critics is different than the voice of professional critics. While some audience members still prefer reading professional criticism, many audience members, especially younger adults, attach a premium to the personal stories of friends and acquaintances, which they consider more authentic and believable. Programs such as SCR's Blogger Nights generate content from a range of voices that speak to a range of publics.

*Who is already talking about your work in your community? How can you encourage and introduce your audiences to what they, and others, are saying?*

# SHARING AUDIENCE FEEDBACK THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Increasingly, arts organizations are using social media and technology as an effective means of engaging audiences. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, etc., are pervasive and necessary tools for connecting with younger audiences. Regardless of their sophistication and expertise with technology, however, many arts groups are still experimenting with how to best take advantage of these tools to create interesting and effective engagement activities beyond simply asking audiences to comment on a Facebook page. The Brooklyn Museum and Center Theatre Group (Los Angeles, CA) provide two examples of low-cost engagement programs that marry video technology and social media. This case study illustrates how:

- Recording devices connected to social media allow for instantaneous feedback that can fuel word of mouth and help facilitate critical conversation about the art.
- Video “diaries” are a means of personalizing arts events, and can increase long-term impact through the act of sharing one’s own experience in relation to the art.
- On-site, interactive engagement not only creates a greater bond between audience members and the organization, but also provides needed content to enhance online and social media presence.
- Incorporating technology and social media into engagement programs can be cost effective.

## Organization and Program Description



### Brooklyn Museum – The Black List Project Video Diaries

The Brooklyn Museum’s 2008/09 exhibition “**The Black List Project**” included a computer video station for visitors to video record their reactions to the exhibition and its subject matter – race in America. After viewing the exhibit, visitors were encouraged to visit temporary video kiosks that were set up in a large, open space near the gallery with two MacBooks equipped with webcams linked to YouTube’s Quick Capture feature that automatically uploads videos directly to the museum’s **YouTube channel**. The computers’ desktop screens displayed a simple question relating to the exhibit: “How has race made an impact on your life and accomplishments?”

Simple instructions guided visitors through the recording and uploading process. As videos were instantly uploaded to the museum’s YouTube channel, visitors were immediately able to see their own videos, as well as others’. Given the personal nature of the question and the exhibit’s subject matter, visitors’ “video diaries” were deeply personal, both in their reflection on the exhibit’s photographic works, as well as their own thoughts and experiences of impact of race. Since the laptops were already on hand at the Museum, the kiosks were neither expensive nor time-consuming to set up, which is why Shelley Bernstein, the museum’s Chief of Technology, calls them “a Scrappy-Doo solution” to creating an on-site interactive engagement program.



### Center Theatre Group – YouReview Booth

Center Theatre Group (CTG) staff at the historic Kirk Douglas Theatre saw untapped potential in the dormant ticket booth in front of the theatre and decided to refashion it as a booth for video recording patrons’ reactions to their experiences as they exit the theatre. The “YouReview Booth” was born – a mini recording studio where audience members record a thirty-second video “review” of the performance they’ve just attended. The theatre then posts selected reviews to its Facebook page and website. CTG Concierges promote the program before and after performances, encourage patrons to provide their honest opinions, and troubleshoot problems. Inside the booth, patrons find instructions for operating the video recorder and a notice that the video they record may appear on the theatre’s website and social media sites. After a one-time investment in a basic video camera, lighting, and signage, the main cost of the program is staff time. Unlike “The Black List” video diary program where videos are automatically uploaded to the museum’s YouTube page, YouReview videos are screened by CTG staff and then uploaded to CTG’s [Facebook page](#) (un-edited). Thus, staff time for archiving, watching, and selecting videos for online publication, as well as cleaning and maintenance of the ticket booth, add to the overall costs of the program.

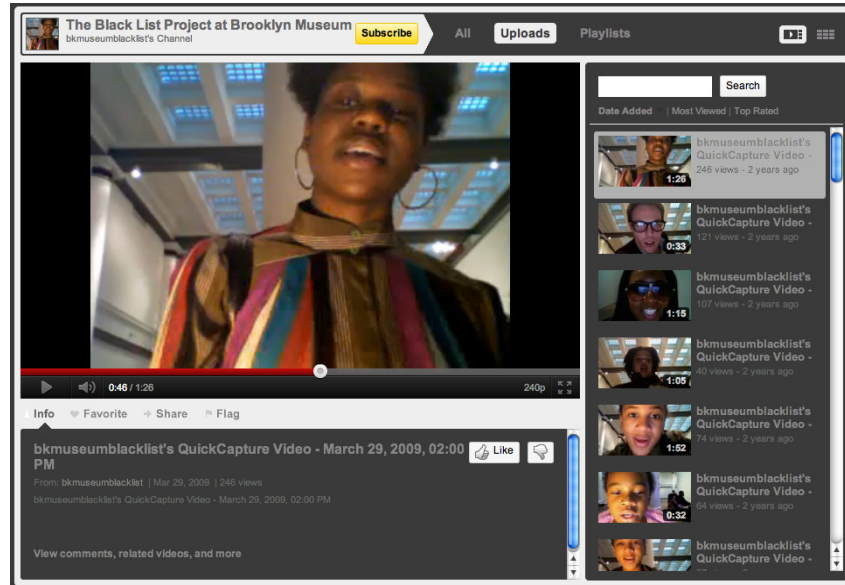
### Assessment and Lessons Learned

Neither the Brooklyn Museum nor CTG have done any official assessment of their video

*What questions would provoke your audience and visitors to reflect on the meaning of the work they just experienced?*

programs, but have received anecdotal evidence of the success of these programs in encouraging conversation and sharing amongst audience members and visitors. The content can also serve as a marketing resource. For example, CTG includes some of the YouReview videos in its ticket buyer emails, while Brooklyn Museum staff has blogged about the “video diaries.” This program also raised the level of conversation around the art for the museum. In engaging visitors in a challenging and inflammatory topic, such as race, the museum found that asking visitors to reflect personally through video elicited “thoughtful, candid, and revealing” observations.

Both programs demonstrate how utilizing technology and social media tools does not necessarily require significant investments of money and time. Brooklyn staff worried that the video program would require substantial editing time, and that video kiosks would far exceed their budget. However, by using in-house laptops and webcams that connect directly to YouTube, staff was able to produce a high-quality and cost-efficient program that enhanced the visitor experience. CTG also relied on what they already had to create and support the program – the ticket booth and the Concierge staff. Start-up and ongoing costs consist of a one-time investment in basic recording equipment, and staff time. Neither program includes heavy editing of audience or visitor feedback. Instead, they have opened themselves to the risk of disseminating unfavorable opinions. In the case of Brooklyn’s program, this risk is greater as videos are automatically uploaded and shared online. However, the immediacy of the responses plays into the social media ethos of immedi-



ate and personal feedback, and shows a level of transparency on the part of the museum.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

Based on the success of The Black List Project video diaries, the museum incorporated a similar video diary component into “**The Latino List Project**,” an exhibition which opened in August 2011. In its latest form, the program prompts both on-site and online visitors to reflect on the role that cultural heritage has played in their life. This allows both visitors and others in the community to contribute to the conversation at any time.

CTG also plans to continue and expand the YouReview Booth program, and further hopes to expand its use of the ticket booth for other engagement programs, like an on-site talk show with audience members, artists and community members.



Other organizations, like CounterPULSE in San Francisco, are using inexpensive flip cams to record short interviews with audience members after performances. Links to these videos are subsequently emailed to the organization's entire list, as a means of promoting the program and the organization.

- Existing technologies, like YouTube, offer an easy way to store unedited or lightly edited videos, rather than setting aside staff time for editing and organizing a large video archive.
- Handheld devices, like flip cams and many cell phones, have video capabilities. Some cameras and smart phones also automatically upload videos and images directly to Facebook or YouTube.
- Think about existing spaces in your venue that might be converted into a comfortable, fun place for collecting feedback.
- Providing provocative questions, either through a live person or printed instructions, will encourage feedback and help start the sharing.
- Consider whether this type of engagement program will serve your mission. Are amateur video reviews an appropriate format for your programming and for your audience?

## Summary Observations

These video and social media programs demonstrate how digital technology can be utilized to accomplish multiple visitor engagement outcomes. They offer a forum for personal commentary and reflection on important social issues, and provide a cost-effective medium for audience feedback. Moreover, these programs can play a significant role in the larger effort to encourage and empower audience members and visitors to articulate critical responses to art, which is a long-term investment in their own aesthetic development.

# SCALING UP POST-EVENT PROCESSING THROUGH INTERACTIVE QUESTIONING

Asking audiences to respond to questions after a performance can help them to think deeply about what they have just witnessed, especially when they are invited to share their thinking with others via social media. Several organizations, including the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company (Washington DC) and the Walton Arts Center (Fayetteville, AR), have developed innovative programs to give their audiences the chance to answer thought-provoking questions. Key learnings from this case study include:

- Posing questions to audiences after performances can help them to have more meaningful arts experiences.
- Social media can be leveraged to sustain ongoing dialogue long after the date of a given performance.
- Developing a post-performance engagement program can involve some trial and error before it is truly successful.

## Organization and Program Description

### Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company – Crack It Open

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company’s “Connectivity” department focuses on audience and community engagement initiatives. **Crack it Open** was an interactive program that used fortune cookies to solicit audience reactions to performances, while encouraging social bonding. Crack It Open was implemented for five shows during the 2009-2010 season. The program had two aims: to establish a dialogue between Woolly Mammoth and its audiences, and to build community among audience members. Local residents were envisioned as the target audience for the program, aiming to deepen audience investment in the theatre and its offerings.

The program was logistically simple. Free fortune cookies were served in the lobby during the run of a show. Inside each cookie was a question that prompted audience members to think about “what the play means to them.” Multiple questions were written, so that not all audience members received the same one. Audiences were encouraged to generate “honest, uncensored, and imaginative” responses, which could be handwritten and left at the theatre or emailed to a dedicated address. Staff posted selected responses to the theatre’s website. Prizes, such as t-shirts and tickets, were awarded to unconventional and creative responses. Audience members were also encouraged to use the

questions as prompts for their own discussions, both at the theatre and online via social media.

### Walton Arts Center – 10 x 10 Post-Performance Post-it® Notes

The Walton Arts Center initiated the **10 x 10 program**, which includes post-performance parties with artists and shared comment “exercises,” to reduce the anxiety that audience members feel about contemporary dance and other art forms. The Post-it® note component provided an easy, fun and anonymous forum for audience feedback and sharing. The program is simple enough: a branded Post-it® note is affixed to the cover of each printed program for a certain set of performances. The note prompts audience members with a question about the performance or how it affected them. Signs in the lobby and a pre-curtain announcement encourage the audience to participate. After the performance, audience members congregate in the lobby for the post-event party. Cocktail tables with extra Post-it® notes and pens further urge response. Audience members who write comments are instructed to stick them to the front window in the lobby for everyone to see. Most comments are posted anonymously. Although the notes are only displayed during the post-event party, they are compiled and transcribed for future use in marketing promotions and online content development (e.g., as an additional component for YouTube videos).



### Assessment and Lessons Learned

Woolly Mammoth found Crack It Open to be a productive first step in augmenting its engagement initiatives. However, staff felt the dialogue was more of a limited, and somewhat contrived exchange between the audience and staff instead of a rich, ongoing dialogue between audience members. Walton, on the other hand, found the Post-it® note program to be highly successful on multiple levels. Not only did it encourage audience members to provide feedback in general, it also allowed them to share thoughts with others in a non-threatening environment because the notes were mostly anonymous. Comments were also useful to staff in that they provided input to future marketing. Artists, who read comments at post-event parties, were highly affected by the notes, which provided them with direct and often personal feedback on their work.

*How might you encourage dynamic conversation between audience members using simple communication tools and social media?*

Overall, these types of engagement activities have the possibility of being useful to both foster conversation between the organization and the audience, as well as amongst audience members themselves. One of the keys to scaling up audience conversation is to disseminate comments online. The comments and feedback that audiences provide is valuable content for any form of communication with other audience and community members. Woolly Mammoth’s questioning focused on expanding the conversation to reflect on topics brought up in the play, whereas Walton’s approach was to gather reactions to the performance.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

Although Woolly Mammoth does not plan to repeat Crack It Open in its initial form, they used the experience as the basis for another program called Secret Desires. This program, linked to the 2010-11 production of “In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play,” takes the Crack It Open idea to the next level. Similar to Walton’s Post-it® note program, audience members are encouraged to write “what they long for” and other feedback onto index cards and post them in the lobby after the show. Staff takes pictures of the cards and posts highlights to the company’s Facebook page. Additionally, a Secret Desires online forum was set up for both audience members and others to join the conversation, and Woolly posts a “Desire of the Day” via Twitter.

Walton will definitely continue to utilize Post-it® notes to generate and disseminate audience feedback. Their vision is to have a visual artist work with the comments to create a digital art

piece for their lobby that would continually incorporate new comments as they are collected.

- Minimal staff time is required to craft appropriate questions or prompts that elicit feedback; hard materials, like index cards and Post-it® notes are relatively inexpensive.
- A more formal Crack It Open program would require more staff time to review and select appropriate responses for posting, whereas open forums allow for a more dynamic and unpredictable conversation.
- If there is no screening of responses, expect some potentially inappropriate or offensive contributions.
- Think about what type of feedback you want to elicit: questions asking for reactions to the artistic production, or more topical questions related to a theme or issue arising from the work.
- When feedback is anonymous, more personal and interesting responses are possible.
- Utilizing both on-site and social media is key to disseminating audience feedback and encouraging audience dialogue. The online component prolongs the conversation and can serve to magnify the impact of the experience.

## Summary Observations

Overall, these low-cost, post-event engagement programs are great vehicles for audiences to provide and share feedback. Provocative questions encourage deeper reflection on the experience and themes related to the artwork specifically. The resulting torrent of user-generated content can be re-packaged for marketing purposes and leveraged through social media to benefit a wider audience.



# USING SURVEY FEEDBACK to INCREASE LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

Asking audience members how they experience art heightens their abilities to reflect critically and helps arts organizations build a stronger understanding of how their programming affects audiences. While arts groups have been surveying audiences for many years, conceiving of this feedback as a core component of the audience engagement cycle is a new development. There are many examples of how audience surveying can lead to increased learning and engagement. This case study focuses on the experience of two organizations – Destiny Arts (Oakland, CA) and Cutting Ball Theatre in San Francisco. Based on our examination of these and other survey efforts, we've learned that:

- Surveys are an avenue for engaging a large number of people, over time.
- Regular surveying acclimatizes audiences to giving feedback and helps them develop critical reflection skills.
- Although a significant amount of planning and design work is required at the beginning of a survey effort, once the process is started, it is relatively easy to maintain.
- It is important to review, consider and respond to audience feedback. Audiences need to know that you're looking at their responses, and want to see some of the results. Otherwise, surveying remains a one-way exercise rather than a two-way learning opportunity.

## Organization and Program Description

### Destiny Arts Center – Audience Surveys

Every year, Destiny Arts Center (DAC) surveys its 25,000 audience members at its Youth Performance Company (DAYPC) performances. Although the program began as a student project, DAC has continued the practice because it found the act of surveying to be helpful in improving its programming and strengthening relations with audiences. Surveys and pencils are distributed prior to performance, and a post-performance announcement invited audience members to complete and hand-in surveys to volunteers. In general, the survey questions aim to assess audience reactions to a given production and to identify the themes that resonate most powerfully. For example, audience members are asked if they “learned something” about a topic represented in the performance such as money or beauty, and whether they feel differently about youth as a result of attending the performance. DAC also collects demographic information, including age, race, gender, and household income. To measure the effectiveness of marketing efforts, questions about sources of information and motivations for attendance are included. There is always an open space for audience members to write-in general comments.

### The Cutting Ball Theatre – Intrinsic Impact Surveys

Cutting Ball was one of 18 theatres chosen to participate in a national study of the intrinsic impacts of live theatre, commissioned by **Theatre Bay Area**. Because of its small venue size, the study design required Cutting Ball to survey almost every performance during the course of a production's run. Survey packets were taped to every seat in the house, and patrons were asked to take the survey home, complete it within 24 hours, and mail it back in a postage-paid reply envelope. After a period of time allowing for data entry and other logistics, Cutting Ball was provided with password access to an online dashboard where staff could review and interrogate the results. Survey questions focused on the audience members' experience of the performance. For example, "Overall, how strong was your emotional response to the performance?" and "How much did the play stir your imagination?" "What were one or two of the questions you would've liked to have asked the actors, director or creators of the work?" These types of questions help audiences to deconstruct their experience and provide them with language with which to further explore their reactions and interpretation for subsequent events.

### Assessment and Lessons Learned

Although the Destiny survey is intended to identify themes that resonate most powerfully with young audience members, logistical issues tend to come up in the open-ended responses (e.g., comments on bathrooms, lighting, sound system, box office). Nevertheless, both Destiny and Cutting Ball have found responses to be useful overall, and assert that the survey questions prompt audiences to think more deeply about their experience of the performance.

Destiny uses its survey results to inform programming choices for future seasons, and to help build an overall better audience experience. Cutting Ball had only received its survey results a short time before publication of this report, and was still reflecting on their meaning. The response rate was approximately 26%. Overall, Cutting Ball staff enjoyed the survey process and found that audiences want to share what they are thinking and feeling about the production.

Each organization relied on a partner to initiate the survey – a student in the case of Destiny, and Theatre Bay Area for Cutting Ball. These partnerships allowed the organizations to undertake their survey efforts without much work. This helped to alleviate the typical financial and staff burden associated with implementing a professional quality survey effort.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

Destiny intends to continue conducting post-performance surveys. They have not engaged with another student to assist with the surveying, and so are now reliant on staff and other volunteers. The executive and artistic directors review results to inform programming decisions for the following season. Cutting Ball hopes to continue the impact surveying, and also considers audience feedback an important input to program planning.

- Explore pre-performance, post-performance, and online survey methods to see what works best for you and your audiences. There are many trade-offs to consider.
- Surveys should be short and fun to take. Be creative in thinking of what questions you want to ask. For helpful background and specific suggestions, visit [www.intrinsicimpact.org](http://www.intrinsicimpact.org)
- Establish a relationship with an academic program, or develop an internship program, to help with preparation, administration and processing of audience surveys.
- Be mindful of the challenges associated with relying on volunteers, as they do not always continue the work and are not accountable to you at the end of the day. This is one

of the reasons why a recurring internship program in partnership with an academic institution can be most helpful. Interns might be eligible for school credit as part of their participation in the program.

- Transparency is important. Consider how you can reflect highlights from the survey results back to audiences, perhaps in a newsletter, through social media, or on the website.

## Summary Observations

Audience surveys serve to engage audiences in the process of reflecting on their experiences, and provide arts organizations with important insight. The act of providing “intelligent feedback” through post-performance impact questionnaires is an important step in the cycle of audience engagement. Because Destiny continually surveys its audience, staff has been able to gain a sense of how performances affect the audience by tracking themes that resonate over time. This is the benefit of regular surveying – observing the changing relationship of your audience to the work over time and understanding the lasting benefit of attending your programs.

# AUDIENCE INPUT INTO ARTISTIC PRODUCTION: CO-CREATION

Post-performance “talk-backs” and Q&A sessions with artists help audiences gain insight on completed works, although the art itself is unlikely to change as a result of these discussions. Research conducted by Dance/USA suggests that audiences increasingly want to see “under the hood” of a work in progress. They not only want to better understand the artistic process, but actually be a part of the creative act itself as a way of deepening their experience, a form of engagement known as “co-creation.” More and more artists and their sponsors are learning how to welcome audience input into their artistic process without compromising the integrity of the work. CounterPULSE and Dancers’ Group (both based in San Francisco) provide two examples of this practice. Key learning include:

- Asking audiences for feedback on a work in progress helps develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the art form and the creative process.
- Co-creative engagement encourages critical dialogue between audiences and artists, creating a shared learning experience.
- Engagement can happen on multiple platforms, but is always a conversation focused on the work itself.
- When audiences become an essential part of the process, their investment of time and energy yields stronger connections with the individual artist(s), the work, and the organization, some of which may last a lifetime.

## Organization and Program Description

### CounterPULSE – Artist Residency Commissioning Program

CounterPULSE’s Artist Residency Commissioning Program (ARC) is a career development program for emerging and mid-career dance artists and companies in the Bay Area. Incorporating audience feedback into residents’ artistic process is a fundamental component of the program. Artists are selected through a competitive application process. Throughout their residency, they are required to set up a **blog** on the organization’s webpage and regularly post comments, ideas and videos of their work. Artists present three performances of the work-in-progress, open to the public, for the purpose of soliciting feedback from audiences about the work before it is complete. Audiences are instructed to provide feedback through Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process (CRP), an artist-centered feedback format. At the end of the residency there is a final public performance followed by a post-performance discussion facilitated by CounterPULSE staff. In a follow up email, staff include a link to a comments page on their website where audiences can continue the conversation online. Staff also regularly record audience reactions to artists’ in residence new work on flip cams and post these videos to the organization’s YouTube channel.

### Dancers' Group – 2nd Sundays

Dancers' Group promotes dance and serves dance artists in the San Francisco Bay Area. In collaboration with CounterPULSE, Dancers' Group produces **2nd Sundays**, a series of free, salon-style events at which artists present works-in-progress and audiences provide in-depth feedback. Forty minutes of performance are followed by 75 minutes of conversation. The program's goal is similar to that of ARC's in that it seeks to foster more in-depth dialogue and understanding around contemporary dance. It is also similar to ARC in that it utilizes Liz Lerman's CRP as a basis for facilitating conversation: audience members are handed a clipboard with paper and pen or pencil as they walk into the theater; the paper contains questions to help audience members think critically about the work, and provides space to take notes during the performance. The program is free and open to the public, although many audience members tend to be friends of the choreographers or dance students. Attendance ranges widely, from 15 to 90 people.

Another example of note is the Battersea Arts Centre's 2010 Scratch Festival, where playwrights showcase new work in development and audiences provide feedback that influences the outcome of the finished product. According to Battersea, "Scratches are new theatrical ideas developed by artists and shaped by audience feedback."

### Assessment and Lessons Learned

Although ARC and 2nd Sundays were conceived as artist resources rather than audience engagement initiatives, engagement has been a fortunate byproduct of both. Neither has been formally assessed, although both appear to foster a deeper understanding of contemporary dance, especially for those audience members who are new to the form. This understanding enhances enjoyment of dance, particularly in cases where the performance itself is notably abstract and challenging. These programs also encourage a sense of investment in the artists and their work.

The ARC program's effectiveness is attributed to a solid facilitation structure – Lerman's CRP. CounterPULSE and Dancers' Group found that the CRP format alleviated audience members' anxieties of appearing uninformed while providing them with a clearly defined way to "plug in." Secondary to a strong facilitation process is the artist's openness to critical feedback during development. It is important that artists view the program as an opportunity to grow and to create work in dialogue with the community, rather than as just another "gig." Otherwise, the activity will appear hollow for the audience, and dampen its effect to actively involve others in the creative process. This type of program is, at its core, a collaboration between artist and audience to further the development of a specific artwork.

*How can you make your audiences and artists comfortable discussing new work in development?*

## Sustainability and Adaptability

CounterPULSE and Dancers' Group are pleased with the success of ARC and 2nd Sundays. Both are now long-running programs integrated into the organizations' core offerings. CounterPULSE would like to develop other programs on the model provided by ARC, but this would require significant investments of both time and money. Both programs require significant staff time to publicize and administer (e.g., soliciting and reviewing applications, administrative support for artists, management of online content). ARC requires a significant material and monetary investment. Artists are provided with studio space, numerous workshop and performance opportunities, publicity, technical support, mentoring, and networking assistance—a total package valued at over \$7,000. This includes a share of box office proceeds, plus a stipend of \$1,000 and a production budget of \$1,000. 2nd Sundays is smaller in scale and therefore less costly in terms of both time and money. It requires a dedicated space, and staff to administer and market the program.

- Consider smaller programs, like 2nd Sundays, as an initial step.
- Both artists and audience members will need time to understand their roles in the process.
- No one is suggesting that artists' creative output should be dictated

by audiences. Rather, this should be viewed as an opportunity for artists to explore how their work is received.

- Artists have very different viewpoints on revealing their creative process, and none should be coerced into a situation that makes them uncomfortable.
- Find a facilitation and feedback technique that works for both artist and audience. This could be the Liz Lerman process or some other established structure. After a period of time, experienced participants may be able to help with facilitation.

## Summary Observations

Programs that welcome and encourage audience input into the artistic process are some of the more in-depth forms of engagement. The act of co-creation can be deeply fulfilling for both audience and artist, and a bonding experience for all concerned.

Many artists and curators bristle at the thought of opening up their artistic process to audiences. On the surface, it feels antithetical to their sense of artistic autonomy. Rather than diminishing the creative process, however, a growing number of artists are choosing to engage audiences in a dynamic process of co-creation that results in strong artistic work with a built-in audience.

*Artists draw inspiration from many sources, and sometimes from audiences and patrons.*

# BLENDING PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT WITH ATTENDANCE

Cultural participation is no longer defined solely in terms of attendance at live events. A growing body of research paints a more complex and dynamic picture of the arts ecosystem that includes media consumption and many forms of arts practice. Today's audiences, particularly those who are younger, seek out interactive arts experiences that let them be an "actor" in the event. Participatory engagement takes many forms, ranging from participatory dance workshops to theatre events in which audience members play a role in the action. More arts groups are beginning to incorporate participatory elements into their programs with great success. Organizations like Chitresh Das Dance Company, Na Hei Hulu, World Arts West (all of San Francisco, CA) and STREB (Brooklyn, NY) strive to engage audiences through participatory activities, and are the subject of this case study. Key learnings include:

- Getting audiences actively involved creates opportunities for personal expression, animates the art form and makes interpretation of the program more accessible.
- Participatory forms of audience engagement are particularly well suited for learning about unfamiliar or challenging art forms and works of art.
- These programs help audiences gain a heightened sense of involvement with the artist and the work, as well as a stronger affiliation to the organization.
- Active participation taps into audience members' past experiences in doing and making art, which can both validate and liberate.

## Organization and Program Description

The **Chitresh Das Dance Company** (CDDC) offers post-performances classes after particular performances as an opportunity for audiences to try Kathak dance for themselves. At the end of a performance, audience members are invited to get out of their seats and learn a series of Kathak steps they just saw performed on stage. A company member describes the history and major elements of Kathak dance and instructs audience members in basic footwork methods. Audience members then dance an excerpt from a classic epic, learning how Kathak dance can be used to tell a story.

Similar to CDDC's program, **Na Lei Hulu's** artistic director, Patrick Makuakane, often takes time after particular performances to provide background on the story and movement of the dance. Then he provides a few lessons in hula. **World Arts West**, presenter of The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, incorporates participatory engagement into festival events through dance party showcases, which intersperse dance performance with instruction. Festival performances end in a sort of participatory dance party in the lobby – with the performers in full costume. These organizations, like CDDC, strive to educate participants about their cultural practices and traditions through active participation.

**STREB**, Elizabeth Streb's innovative dance company based in Brooklyn, NY, provides another example of participatory engagement in its "SLAM Inclusive" program. Immediately

after performances, company members invite audiences to remain afterwards for upwards of an hour to try out some of the company's signature acrobatic moves. In fact, the company's Brooklyn facility, the **Streb Lab for Action Mechanics** (or SLAM) is designed specifically to facilitate participatory involvement.

## Assessment and Lessons Learned

Unlike SLAM Inclusive and the World Arts West dance party showcases, many of these types of programs come together in an ad hoc fashion without much structure or planning. Informal feedback has been enthusiastic, suggesting that further development could engender a deeper level of engagement and overall satisfaction with the art. CDDC audience members, for example, report feeling “exhilarated,” “alive,” and “challenged” when they stand up and move. The experience is both fun and a good way of learning about Indian culture and tradition.

World Arts West's dance party programs also serve to educate audiences about different dance traditions. The program sold out in its first year in 2011. According to staff, audience response was overwhelmingly positive, and the dancers loved it. The experience corroborated earlier focus group research indicating a strong desire amongst some audience members to “get up and dance.” The high-energy/high-

impact experience of dancing with accomplished dancers connects participants to one another, to the artists, and to the organization.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

Although CDDC and Na Lei Hulu currently offer these types of programs on an ad hoc basis, they do not require much effort and would not cost much to expand. CDDC does not dedicate financial resources to promoting or planning its classes, and thus there are few barriers to sustaining the program as it exists now, provided that staff continues to volunteer teaching time.

- Test the waters and introduce a few steps, lines, notes or visual cues after a performance. Gauge interest amongst audiences, and re-assess.
- Brainstorm different ways your organization could incorporate participatory engagement around programs. For example, a theatre company might invite audience members to act out a scene from the play after a performance. Jazz presenters could invite audience members to bring their instruments and stay afterwards for a jam session on stage. Art museums might encourage visitors to explore techniques and materials used by the artist in a featured exhibition. Symphony orchestras might create an “instrument petting zoo” to give audience members a hands-on introduction to music.

*How can you get your audiences and visitors “out of their seats” and actively involved in making, doing and creating, so that they become a part of your creative process?*



## Summary Observations

Participatory engagement programs give audiences an opportunity to take an active role in the process of making meaning through physical experiences. CDDC has found that when audiences participate in Kathak dance, they achieve “a completely different level of understanding” about the art form, as well as “a whole new sense of involvement with the performance, the artists, and the organization.” Simple activities that allow audiences to be active in some fashion can transform ordinary arts programs into dynamic, fun and personally relevant experiences. Instead of looking and listening, audiences move, act and create. Participatory activity allows audiences to not only absorb and process artistic work, but can elevate their understanding of the work to a deeper level.

# USING INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT

Research has shown that museum visitors learn and process artworks in different ways. Museums, like the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) and the Denver Art Museum (DAM), have addressed this “invisible” form of diversity by surrounding specific artworks with interactive installations that provide different interpretive viewpoints and activities and offer visitors choices for how to engage with the art. This case study focuses on DAM’s **Daniel Sprick Focus Area** installation and OMCA’s Art360 as demonstrations of how:

- Interactive spaces can help visitors with diverse learning styles to understand artworks in new ways;
- Both new and traditional modes of engaging visual art can co-exist productively in the museum setting;
- Visitor feedback can be a vital resource for museums seeking to design and implement new programs.

## Organization And Program Description

### Denver Art Museum – Daniel Sprick Focus Area

Focusing on Sprick’s photorealist still life, *Release Your Plans*, the Daniel Sprick Focus Area was unveiled in 2006 with the opening of the Hamilton Building. It is an interactive aesthetic environment, designed to attract visitors who want to gain deep contextual knowledge and insight through reading and viewing materials related to the painting. The painting itself hangs in an alcove

containing a sofa. Next to the sofa is a booklet divided into sections that focus on four different parts of the painting. Each section folds out to display a series of photos showing the painting at different stages of Sprick’s process. The photos are accompanied by quotes from the artist and explanatory captions. Also next to the sofa are two sets of six FAQ cards, hung on rings for easy browsing. Each card contains a question, originally generated by a museum visitor, that is answered in the artist’s own words on the back. To the left of the entrance into the alcove is a sign that invites visitors to: “Explore this painting from the artist’s point of view” and directs visitors to an adjacent room where a video is projected on the wall in a continuous loop. Transcripts are available in a box on the wall, and quotes from the video are projected next to the video projection. To the right, niches in another wall hold the objects that inspired the painting—a table wrapped in cloth, a



red rose, a skull, a candelabrum, and a soup can. On this same wall are three touchscreens display quotes from the artist when activated by visitors. On another wall, visitors find a self-portrait of the artist and an additional touchscreen with quotes from Sprick about using himself as a subject. An ottoman in the center of the room provides seating for at least four people.

## Oakland Museum Of California – Art 360

**Art 360**, an installation area in the Oakland Museum of California’s (OMCA) Gallery of California Arts for Robert Hudson’s sculpture *Double Time*, was developed as part of the gallery’s renovation. The installation includes interactive stations that enable visitors to learn about and experience the sculpture in a number of ways.

Museum staff saw the renovation as an opportunity to engage visitors’ varied learning styles and to make artworks more accessible. Staff drew inspiration from the Denver Art Museum’s Focus Area program and from activities at the Art Institute of Chicago as they designed the installation. The target audience for Art 360 is the visitor who comes to the museum with a great deal of interest but without a high level of knowledge about art. A second target audience is families, as Art 360 is a space where children and adults can share active, tactile experiences with one another around a specific work of art. With these audiences in mind, Art 360 aims to make visitors feel more comfortable viewing art, while helping them to understand the creative process. OMCA also hopes that Art 360 encourages visitors to look closely at the artwork in a variety of ways in order to construct personal meaning.

*Double Time* is positioned on a turntable in the middle of the installation area, with four activities stations positioned around the sculpture. One station features a short audio clip of Hudson



describing how he constructed parts of the sculpture, while another holds touchable samples of the metals used in the artwork. The third station contains a model of the sculpture that can be taken apart and put back together with Velcro. Two activities are available at the fourth station: colored-lens glasses that heighten awareness of the two- and three-dimensional aspects of the sculpture and jazz recordings that demonstrate musical “double time,” the conceptual inspiration for the sculpture. Also in the Art 360 area, but separate from the four stations, is a three-minute video of the artist discussing his creative process and a panoramic photograph of Hudson’s studio that was contributed by his daughter. The space also includes a comment board on which visitors can write responses to prompts such as “Share your thoughts about this sculpture” and “What is your favorite part of this sculpture?”

## Assessment and Lessons Learned

Both museums went through a rigorous assessment process of their new interactive and interpretive activities with the help of professional consultants. Research included on-site and phone individual interviews, and on-site

comment boards. Overall, visitor feedback for both programs was largely positive. OMCA found that families, in particular, expressed appreciation for the hands-on activities, most likely because the installation allows for parents and children alike to ‘play’ and fashion a more tangible learning experience. OMCA also discovered that Art 360 and other interactive installations in the California Gallery seemed to increase the time visitors spend at the museum, mitigating what staff calls “museum fatigue.”

Both installation areas have evolved since their initial unveiling based on direct visitor feedback. For example, while DAM staff originally intended the Sprick Focus Area to be a site for self-guided exploration, they now recognize that visitors need more direction than was originally provided. Prompts on the touchscreens (“Please touch square on screen to begin”) and other instructions have been added to help make the activities more accessible. Another example of visitor feedback informing program improvements include signage around DAM’s other focus area of a Marcel Duchamp work, titled *Boîte* (a portable mini-museum displaying 68 miniature reproductions of the artist’s work). Focus group respondents reported that they walked by the focus area because they thought it was classroom or excess space, not part of the exhibit. The placement of the artwork itself was actually discouraging visitors from entering the Focus Area by blocking their view of the room. To address these issues, staff moved the artwork farther into the room and added colorful wall graphics to attract attention, realizing that eye-catching visuals would more likely draw

visitors into an unusual or nontraditional space.

Although feedback was generally positive for both programs, in each case the museums learned that certain visitor segments do not see the value of such interactive activities. These are visitors who tend to prefer more traditional, curator-driven content, like traditional wall labels and docent tours. This type of engagement activity is often a departure for visitors who traditionally look to authority or expert opinion, mostly in the form of text descriptions, recorded audio guides, and tours. Some patrons may even view such initiatives as frivolous or threatening to more traditional modes of viewing art, and certain elements of the Focus Area could be considered distractions from the artwork itself, rather than complements to it. In fact, OMCA was initially concerned that Art 360 and the other interactive installations in the Gallery of California Arts might diminish the role of docents. However, this has not been the case. In fact, OMCA has maintained many of its more traditional practices while exploring more experimental approaches to visitor engagement like Art 360. The key lesson here is that visitor engagement initiatives can be very successful, even if they reach only a segment of visitors.

DAM and OMCA’s experiences seeking out and using visitor feedback in the planning process resulted in a stronger final design. From the beginning, the museums looked to visitors to inform the design and selection of activities in planning these interactive installations. They continued soliciting visitor feedback to assess the effectiveness of the activities and address

*How can you help visitors better understand the creative process when the artist isn’t present?*

potential problems. Overall, visitor feedback provided invaluable information for fashioning a well-received final product, and helped the museums, especially DAM, generate appropriate solutions in a timely and effective manner.

## Sustainability and Adaptability

DAM and OMCA plan to maintain these intensive interactive installations. Constructing a new building or gallery space does not need to be the impetus for re-evaluation of visitor engagement or introducing new engagement programming. Rather, thinking creatively about the different ways visitors learn and experience art can lead to new ideas for renovating existing installations and public spaces into interactive learning centers.

Now that both museums have developed a strong foundation in designing interpretive activities, barriers to sustaining the program are minimal. Still, significant staff time must be devoted to selecting appropriate artworks, developing activities, and testing prototypes as needed. OMCA was able to hire additional staff through private funding, which enabled them to implement the program and mitigate over-burdening other staff.

- Temporary niche spaces or under-utilized spaces (e.g. a classroom, a closet, an empty gallery) could become the home to a special interpretive installation using movable room dividers or curtains.
- Gathering or generating the appropriate contextual materials (texts, images,

or videos to accompany the artwork) will take some time and effort.

- Working with living and local artists will ease the process; Sprick himself was generous and helpful throughout the construction of the Focus Area devoted to his painting. He provided much of the content.
- Know that not all visitors will appreciate this type of in-depth engagement
- Organizations on a tight budget might consider less extensive prototyping to make the investment more manageable, but still incorporate visitor feedback during the design phase, to the greatest extent possible.
- Additional staff (possibly volunteers), or a re-structuring of existing staff, may help alleviate the burden of initial program planning and implementation.
- Visitor feedback most likely will lead to changes in approach or content of existing or subsequent program, event, or installation.
- Including interactive engagement activities does not mean replacing existing interpretive elements like wall text or docents; rather, it is about complementing and serving a diverse visitor-base.

*How can you help visitors better understand the creative process when the artist isn't present?*

## Summary Observations

The Daniel Sprick Focus Area and Art 360 are just two examples of the many different types of interpretive spaces museums are using to enhance visitor engagement. Both institutions' commitment to visitor engagement permeates the entire organization, and has helped guide choices about overall program planning.

The Daniel Sprick Focus Area helps visitors to see beyond the art into the creative process and the intention of the artist. Art 360 provides visitors with multiple tools with which to enhance their experience of a singular work of art. The intense focus of the interactive installations offers visitors a new level of connection to and appreciation for the work, and has the potential to elicit deeper and more sophisticated responses to it. In a setting where many visitors stroll by dozens

of art works in an afternoon, this kind of engagement offers a unique experience. It is important to recognize that not all visitors will find this kind of experience appealing or worthwhile. Both DAM and OMCA are aware that it is important to take into account the diversity of their visitors when considering installing these types of interactive activities. Overall though, the experience has been that new interpretive practices can co-exist productively with more traditional ones. There is no need to replace what already works. Simply complementing and diversifying existing interpretive assistance programming will offer more choices for a more diverse audience base. These two museums have succeeded in striking a new balance between traditional “expert-guided” museum experiences and new, more interactive experiences like those offered by the Focus Area. So far, they seem to be succeeding.

*Respect the diversity of your audience in conceiving and planning engagement programs. Some will want to engage deeply through interactive activities where they are in control. Others will want to have a more traditional “curated” experience.*