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What is Artistic Vibrancy?

By Alan Brown, Principal

I was sitting with a group of CEOs recently, all representatives of large budget arts organizations, and asked each of them to describe their most creative programming endeavor. With fervor they talked about wonderfully inventive projects languishing on the back burner, at the fringe of their organizations’ programming portfolios. Granted, innovation is more likely to occur at the periphery, rather than the core. But it struck me as ironic that many of these prestigious creative enterprises are confined to iron clad programming formulas that are decades old.

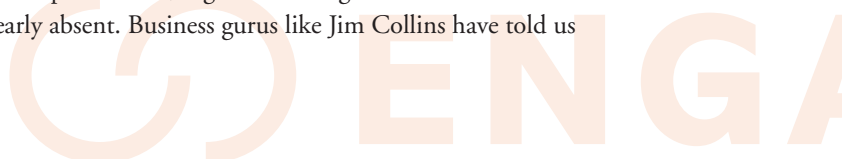
Is “artistic excellence,” the unassailable gold standard of peer-adjudicated quality, still a useful benchmark, or do we need a better rubric for artistic health?

At conference after conference, I listen to arts leaders complain about declining attendance or low levels of community support. “If we could just find more people who look exactly like the ones who are already coming, then we’ll be fine,” they say. Inevitably, the conversation about “audience development” turns to marketing. But I wonder if the urgent focus on audience development is misdirected, and instead we should be talking about how to achieve higher levels of artistic vibrancy and more creativity in programming – not just at the fringe, but at the core.

If the audience is a reflection of what’s on stage, then what use is talking about audience development *without* talking about programming?

At the very heart of every arts organization is a process of conceptualizing and curating artistic content. It is *the* most essential process. Yet, high level dialogue in our field about what defines artistic vibrancy is nearly absent. Business gurus like Jim Collins have told us

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to focus relentlessly on our “core competencies.” But what does “core competency” mean in the context of an artistically-driven enterprise? Is the core competency of a regional theatre company, for example, producing professional quality theatre, or is it maintaining a flexible creative muscle, and using that muscle to engage the community in different forms of dramatic expression?

Much of the arts sector, I believe, is caught in a stranglehold between hermetically-sealed, bullet-proof missions and closed artistic planning models that do not yield either the quantity or quality of creative programming ideas that will engage the community or inspire donors. This goes beyond the “crisis of legitimacy” that John Holden has written about.¹ It is a crisis of creativity. Artistic excellence has been conflated with creativity in programming. In this cloud of confusion, artistic excellence is used as a defensive shield to dismiss creative programming ideas as either “off-mission” or “dumbed-down,” when they are neither. While administrators debate the finer details of enrichment activities for existing audiences, no one is talking about mounting a new series of programs, say, in a warehouse starting at midnight, for a completely different audience. A dear price is paid by the public, and by donors who continue to finance creatively underperforming organizations.

It is time for a new conversation about artistic vibrancy.

Late last year, the Australia Council for the Arts released a series of discussion papers on artistic vibrancy, including case studies and a self-reflection tool, which I highly recommend.² Based on the Australia Council’s research and some of my own ideas, I would like to offer a beginning definition of “artistic vibrancy.”

¹ Holden, John, *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: Why Culture Needs a Democratic Mandate*, 2006, published by Demos, available through <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/culturallegitimacy>

- Clarity on desired programming outcomes at the board level (i.e., what is the organization hoping to achieve by offering programs?)
- Regular debate as to how to balance the commitment to artistic ideals with community relevance
- Technical proficiency, imagination and artistry in the execution of performance and production
- Impact on audience (i.e., quality **relative** to the audience)
- Impact on other arts groups and non-arts organizations (and their constituents) through programming partnerships
- A demonstrable commitment to continuous improvement on the part of artists and artistic staff, including receptivity to critical feedback on programming and artistry
- An inclusive and consultative program planning process
- A full pipeline of new programming ideas matched to constituencies and resources
- Policies and capital for managing artistic risk
- Innovation in the preservation and development of the art form
- Development of artists of all skill levels

What does artistic vibrancy mean to you? We’ve asked three visionary leaders to offer their viewpoints, and I hope you will add yours.

Pam Tatge

*Director
Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University*

Vibrancy is defined as “moving to and fro rapidly” and “pulsating with vigor and energy.” As a presenter at a liberal arts institution where our core audience turns over every four years, we simply can’t stand still, and there is no way we can truly “pulsate” without staying in close touch with our student audience and what excites them. At the same time we need to keep an eye out to the needs of the community in which we operate. We aspire to do this with an inclusive programming process that includes the often-arduous

² The Australia Council’s papers may be accessed at: http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/music/reports_and_publications/artistic_vibrancy_resources

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AGE

task of presiding over programming committees that include both faculty and students and collaboratively making artist selections within financial and scheduling constraints. The result is that we are inviting artists to our campus whose work is integrated into our curriculum. We also have student ambassadors and bloggers commenting on the work who have participated in the selection process, or who have perhaps interacted with an artist on an advance visit, and can, therefore, help build the campus energy for the work.

To maintain artistic vibrancy on our campus also requires us to bring non-arts faculty and students into the discussion.

How can the arts illuminate urgent societal topics that are too huge for us to understand, such as the repercussions of genetic research or climate change? What kinds of arts programming can address some of the unspoken issues on our campus and provide a neutral ground for dialogue?

To do this successfully, programming decision-makers need to be willing to surrender some of their control of the process, spend time listening to the needs of their constituencies and embrace the fact that artistic vibrancy comes from a culture of shared discovery.

Janet Sarbaugh

*Senior Program Director
Heinz Endowments*

This week a respected arts leader in our community called me to say that if one more funding source asked him for “indicators of success” he was going to take the bridge. The indicators he spoke of were wholly quantitative measures such as financial performance and attendance, which meant that the work that is his organization’s reason for being – which is decidedly not quantitative – would go unaddressed.

What’s wrong with this picture? I think the fault is on both sides – on the funders for not taking the time to define artistic excellence and on the cultural organizations for not helping/educating us to do so. At the Heinz Endowments we have tried to tackle this issue by

explicitly valuing artistic self-awareness, and by asking grantees to show us and tell us how they practice this self-awareness. We want to understand their ability to describe their place in the artistic landscape, to state their aspirations, to practice self-critique, and to course correct their work based on reflection. I am amazed at how often we get public relations hyperbole trying to pass for an artistic statement. But I am also heartened by the many organizations that approach this issue in thoughtful ways.

Fundamentally this is a both/and situation. We need both qualitative *and* quantitative evidence of impact.

Artistic vibrancy should be at the core and we should spend a lot more time discussing and defining what it looks like.

The Australia Council’s work is exciting and something that we all should be discussing. But financial viability affects artistic vibrancy. If you are being crushed by debt or cash flow problems, your ability to be a real cultural force in your community is compromised. We funders need to understand these quantitative aspects. But cultural organizations and artists need to help us shape, gather and value qualitative information. At the end of the day, it’s the qualitative factors that are most important in the world and make the work of the arts worth fighting for.

Sarah Johnson

*Director
Weill Music Institute, Carnegie Hall*

Within large performing arts institutions, it’s easy to get into the habit of defining artistic excellence by judging what happens on the main stage, sometimes overlooking even audience response as part of the equation.

Community programs require us to think more broadly about why we present live performances in the first place, what they offer us as human beings, and what we can do to maximize the benefits and impact of concerts for everyone involved, including participating organizations. When a cultural institution considers its community programming to be an essential and high-priority piece of its programming mix, crucial aspects of the learning that emerge from the community work can and must inform the artistic conversation and long-term thinking within the organization.

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Powerful, mission-driven musical experiences in community settings begin with active inquiry:

What does artistic excellence mean when the venue and the “audience” are so different from what we find within our concert halls?

An effective community program requires the highest level of artistry, but that is not enough. In our Musical Connections program at Carnegie Hall, we are uncompromising about the quality of our artists, but in the program’s goals, professional development, and assessment, we talk about two essential elements: making both **musical** and **human** connections with the “audience.” (Audience here also has a broader meaning, including venue staff and the musicians involved.) So, what does an effective program look like in a maximum security prison with an audience of 400? How about in a homeless shelter for adults with cognitive and emotional disabilities? How about when a singer walks into a hospice room to sing to a patient who is expected to die that day? In these situations, quality must be determined specifically and rigorously in relationship to the artists and audiences. Members of these groups must be included in the planning and design of the program, and they must play a role in assessing success and impact. In this collaborative model, the musicians become highly invested, and their work both feeds and challenges them as artists and humans.

It makes me wonder what an orchestra made up of such actively invested musicians might look like.



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