



*We Invite You to the
First in a Series of
Roundtable Discussions*

*The following comments are
intended to spark discussion and
debate on an issue currently being
faced by Wolf, Keens & Co.
consultants and their clients.*

*We have set out the issue briefly
and then asked a few individuals
to start out the discussion by
giving us some response.*

*If you would like to share your
opinion or an experience related to
this issue, we urge you to do so
through our World Wide Web site
(<http://www.wolfkeens.com>)
Roundtable section. Instructions on
how to read the site and leave mes-
sages can be found there.*

Working Papers

Can Anything Appeal to Everyone?

How broad, inclusive, and popular should the programs of cultural organizations be? Is it limiting to be narrow in what one is programming? Do audience numbers in and of themselves constitute success?

A Discussion Paper by

Dr. Thomas Wolf
Chairman and CEO, Wolf, Keens & Company

Additional Comments by

Claudine K. Brown
Program Director-Art, Nathan Cummings Foundation

Joseph Horowitz
Executive Producer, Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra

Peter Marzio
Director, Houston Museum of Fine Arts

John O'Neal
Artistic Director, Junebug Productions

Challenges from the Field

Consider the following three situations:

- A state arts agency was attempting to develop funding policies. One of the most hotly debated issues was how to rate organizations that were artistically and managerially excellent but offered only very specialized programs to small audiences. On one side, people argued that these organizations were, in many cases, establishing a high standard for their art form and serving a select clientele in an outstanding way. Others said that the state arts agency (which was supported by all taxpayers) should only fund organizations whose programming appealed to large numbers of people in the state.

- A music presenter with a strong track record in providing classical music concerts and a more recent history offering jazz presentations found that most of its audience members were selective, coming either to classical concerts or jazz concerts but not to both. Two major national foundations agreed to provide funding to help the organization develop musical offerings and educational services that would increase the popularity of both kinds of presentations and make these so-called “cross-over” activities attractive to both types of audiences. But some subscribers and a few Board members believed that such an initiative compromised the quality and integrity of both types of programs.

- A new museum is engaged in developing an outreach program intended for Native Americans living nearby. A goal of the program is to motivate the target audience over time not only to take an interest in Native American artifacts and history but also to learn more about other offerings of the museum. The initial reaction has been mixed, with many Native Americans leaders preferring to create their own local cultural programming, organizations, and facilities.

How Broad? How Popular? How Inclusive?

Each of these situations illustrates what has become a complex issue among cultural organizations, funders, and policy makers. How broad, inclusive, and popular should the programs of cultural organizations be? Is it limiting to be narrow in one’s programming? Do audience numbers in and of themselves constitute success?

On the surface, the answer is easy: we should design programs whose appeal is as broad as possible. If programs are not drawing a large audience, perhaps they are too esoteric or elitist, or perhaps they draw only from a single cultural tradition. In this case, we should consider rectifying the situation by being more attentive to the interests of other, often underserved constituencies and changing or expanding the content of the offerings. At the very least, we should offer special educational opportunities, provide free or discounted admission, or develop other means of access.

On the other hand, what seems to be the obvious answer is also seen as simplistic. While some policy makers and funders say that we should always be as broadly inclusive as possible, others support the idea of strengthening particular organizations that have a very specific agenda and program. Some of these organizations are linked to a particular medium or aesthetic; others to a specific cultural heritage; still others to a specific geography.

Inclusive and Exclusive

The City of San Jose, California has wrestled with the dilemma of inclusivity versus exclusivity and appears to have come down on both sides of the question of how broad and inclusive organizations and their programs should be. Major cultural institutions are being rewarded for broadening their programming and their audience base. At the same time, the City has just invested close to \$30 million in a Mexican Heritage Center, and also supports many other small, culturally specific organizations whose programming serves a limited audience. Clearly, these organizations

enhance the multicultural texture of the City and no one would deny them funding because they are not all things to all people.

Supply versus Demand

One way of helping clarify the confusion over goals is to remind ourselves that arts philanthropy has itself been inconsistent over the last half century. Between the late 1950s (when the Ford Foundation invented the system of arts grantmaking we know today) and 1980, the purpose of most public and private funding in the United States was to increase the quality and quantity of the supply of organizations and programs. In effect, more was better, whether from large presenters booking everything from Bach to Broadway, or tiny artist-run spaces originating performance art.

By the 1980s, it was clear that more supply was not necessarily better for the arts. Too much supply and not enough demand meant, in some cases, that arts organizations struggled to find an audience. Furthermore, the supply itself was unevenly distributed. Many potential audience members could not find the artistic expressions or activities that reflected their cultures or backgrounds, and some were unable to appreciate what was offered because they had never been exposed to it. Policy makers, funders, and arts leaders started asking much more pointed questions about who was being served and how accessible organizations were, in the process enlarging a debate that has yet to be resolved.

Join us

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Questions:

Those of us who work in the arts are challenged by the issue of how broad, how inclusive, and how popular our programs should be. Among the questions we ask ourselves are the following:

- I** Is there any arts and cultural programming that appeals to almost everyone? Should the missions of cultural organizations focus on offering programming that appeals to the broadest possible public?
- 2** Is an arts group necessarily failing if few people in the community take an interest in what it offers? What if its programs are of very high quality, advance an art form, or are intended to serve a specific aesthetic or cultural tradition?
- 3** How far should organizations go to make their programs appealing? What kinds of artistic compromises, if any, should be permitted if new constituencies can be attracted to their programs?

We asked these questions of several practitioners whose work we have admired over the years. Here are their comments.

Comments:

Claudine K. Brown

Program Director—Art, Nathan Cummings Foundation

I have never experienced any art or cultural offering that would appeal to all people. But I do believe that cultural institutions should strive to reach different audiences using a variety of strategies. For example, museums should aspire to reach learners of all ages, from diverse ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. They should be mindful of the changing demographics in their communities and consider language, group history, levels of education, and traditional uses of leisure time when programming for under-served audiences. If museums are truly public insti-

tution for all people, they should provide learners with experiences that go from the general to the specific and those that call for minimum knowledge and engagement as well as those that call for specific knowledge and more in depth engagement.

The scope of a cultural institution's offerings may be limited by its collections, space, human resources, and intellectual capital. Thus, few of these institutions can be encyclopedic or all encompassing. Staff of cultural institutions must define that which they are able to achieve most effectively with their existing resources. As a result, very few institutions meet the needs of a broad constituency in a satisfactory manner; and many focus on a particular audience, body of scholarship, or ethnic group and attempt to work effectively within a limited scope. Many succeed. However, even these specifically focused institutions can benefit from cross-fertilization and expanding their audiences beyond their obvious constituencies.

I often pose the question, "who are the intended beneficiaries of the work of a nonprofit cultural institution?" The lay public? Scholars? Other artists? Social historians? Critics? If the organization's mission suggests that its purpose is to educate the public and the public is apathetic, should the mission be reconsidered? Finally, should the organization exist if it has no constituency? While I value research and scholarship, I ask to what end? It is incumbent upon organizations to define their constituency and to acknowledge that if that constituency is narrow, their sources of support may be equally narrow.

The notion of artistic compromise is value-laden and raises issues of objectivity and cultural chauvinism. When members of the public engage in cultural activities that are foreign to them, are these acts of compromise? Is a public's willingness to put aside their personal and cultural aesthetics to be exposed to, to acknowledge and possibly to embrace the artistic values of another an act of compromise?

What I would recommend is the development of programs that begin with an acknowledgment of the public's previous art experiences and gradually moves them through new and possibly alien experiences. These programs can be comparative, and complimentary; however, they should never be condescending or ancillary to programs that are considered to be culturally superior. In incremental steps, the audience and the cultural institution will arrive at the same destination.

Joseph Horowitz

*Executive Producer, Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra
Resident Orchestra of the Brooklyn Academy of Music*

When I began my association with the Brooklyn Philharmonic in 1992, I was most eager to undertake "The Russian Stravinsky"—an exploration of the folk sources of early Stravinsky. The Pokrovsky Folk Ensemble performed folk dances, songs, and rituals that influenced Stravinsky; the Brooklyn Philharmonic performed the relevant Stravinsky pieces on the same stage. It worked, and we've been mounting similar weekends ever since, including "Orientalism," with two gamelan orchestras, exploring the influence on Indonesian music on Ravel, Debussy, and Colin McPhee; and "Flamenco," juxtaposing flamenco singers, dancers, and guitarists with music by de Falla and other relevant Spanish composers.

What essentially inspired this kind of programming was an artistic vision. The Stravinsky festival was something we felt we had to do. While we weren't blind to the larger statement we were making about revitalizing the concert experience, we did not begin with the conscious intention of creating a new template or new marketing possibilities. It gradually became obvious, however, that we had created a fresh and versatile format we could return to many times, and which other orchestras could (and did) adopt. It also happened to be a template that dramatically reinforced our mission as an innovative orchestra, committed to expanding the boundaries of "classical music" by incorporating folk and popular music. Furthermore, we had hit upon a programming strategy that was inherently, and effortlessly, multi-cultural, and ripe with marketing and outreach possibilities beyond anything afforded by Beethoven and Brahms.

None of these extra-musical ramifications were wholly coincidental. Any time you do something you're really excited about, you'll feel motivated to tell people about it. And there is the Zeitgeist. To seize the moment is to resonate with audiences and potential audiences, with the contemporary situation. It's not simply fortuitous that, in striving to burst the traditional parameters for symphonic presentation, we stumbled onto multi-cultural terrain, and new constituencies. The way not to seize the moment—the way to put the cart before the horse—is to begin by searching for those new constituencies, and for a multi-cultural agenda. In clas-

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sical music, this is called “crossing over” into pop. It results in forced marriages that may seem gaudily successful at first, but can’t last.

I don’t mean to be simplistic about the present challenge. The Brooklyn Philharmonic can sell “Flamenco” or “The Russian Stravinsky,” but we’re still struggling to find a sustained audience. In the short-run, we could fill the house more reliably by programming Beethoven’s Ninth and “The Messiah,” or by engaging jazz and pop artists to perform Bach and Mozart. In the long run, that leads nowhere.

With reference to Tom Wolf’s three questions, it’s cart-before-the-horse to try to “focus on offering programming that appeals to the broadest possible public,” or to make “artistic compromises” in order to find “new constituencies.” The art of presentation is to find artistic strategies that elegantly incorporate fresh sources of appeal.

Peter Marzio

Director, Houston Museum of Fine Arts

You have posed a classic question about the role of the arts in a democracy: If you have a democratic art that appeals to a broad audience which elects to acknowledge and enjoy it, is it de facto a “low” art? Critics and commentators disagree, some believing that the popularity of art is a curse, others that it is the promise of the future.

Count me on the side of popularity—at least, to the extent that programs with broad appeal can reflect high standards and help win support for our institutions. We have to think about reaching people who have not had the educational and economic advantages often associated with the fine arts. Why? Because we want to be affected by their sense of excitement and discovery. Because as institutions that benefit from public privileges we have public responsibilities. Because we have something to learn as well as teach, and our work is unfinished unless we are doing both.

Here at the [Houston] Museum of Fine Arts, we play this out in interesting ways. We think of the galleries as a magazine, with up to four exhibitions featured at any one time. One makes a big splash and draws the crowds, while the other three are typically quieter experiences drawing smaller audiences. We also are developing the community relationships and trust we need to include more of the

public in the exhibition experience. We recently mounted an exhibit of photographic documentation of barrio life by its young people (whom we provide with cameras and training), and hung it adjacent to the work of well-known photo journalists.

We need to talk about the economics of this issue. I am alluding here not only to the income disparity we see between our core audiences and supporters on the one hand, and much of our community on the other. I also think we need to be talking about the trend by nonprofit institutions to adopt the marketing, promotional and presentational tactics of for-profit businesses in order to reach more people and generate more earned income. At the same time, more corporations are adopting some of the trappings of nonprofits, even to the extent of sponsoring their own choirs or underwriting their own museums. What does the future hold, as both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors get pushed toward the middle, and the old distinctions between them begin to blur?

I have my own ideas about what the ideal future would look like. And in that future, the doors of all our cultural institutions are wide open, the crowd inside spills out onto the street, and electricity is almost palpable. The art will still be there, and it will still be just as good.

John O’Neal

Artistic Director, Junebug Productions

Our society rests on the “Great European Standard:” all great art, it holds, “rises to the top.” This is just an expression of the effort of European culture to postpone its decline from glory. Historically, racial, cultural, and national differences (further divided by class interests) have been suppressed by conquest supported by military, economic, political, and cultural institutions. Global economic interdependence makes the effort to create coherent global political and cultural systems inevitable. European cultural dominance is near its end. Whether it’s initiated by the ruling class as it resists change or by oppressed people who seek to hasten change, turbulence is unavoidable in the process. The issues Tom outlines reflect the impact of this historical process on arts policy.

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A “standard of quality” that stands outside of a particular culture is like a river without banks, a sea without a shore, or freedom without responsibility. Ideas reflect experience. Aesthetic responses follow from a given viewpoint. From the big house, Ol’ Master views the cotton fields, bolls bursting with fluffy white stuff, and sees dollars in the bank, barges full of bales floating downstream, fine dresses for his daughters floating back up and says, “What a beautiful sight, would that I were a painter!” Ol’ Joe peers out through the cracks in his shack on the other side of the field, sees the same cotton and says, “Damn! Another year of backbreaking work; another year of debt! If I only had a match and somewhere to run.”

It’s only possible to have a uniform standard of quality in the arts when there are no penalties—by tradition, in law, or in fact—for racial, cultural, national, and class differences; when African American youth don’t feel that they must master the European classics before they will be taken seriously as musicians; when the forests, plains, and mountains where

native Americans worship are taken as seriously as medieval cathedrals are; when the USA’s 5% of world population no longer produce the majority of the world’s toxic waste and consume 60% of its wealth; when . . .

Major change is needed. Cultural institutions must rethink their relationships to their communities, be clear and honest about whose interests we would serve, and build strong partnerships with them. Artists who do so will get ideas and inspiration that will fuel the creative imagination. The community organizations will get crafts and skills from the artists that may be transferable to community development efforts. The artists will learn what things are important to people who don’t normally go to theater, how to include those people and their concerns in our ongoing work. Community people will learn how to use artistic skills to improve their regular work and to expand their range of audience experiences. Both sides will learn how to criticize each other effectively. Together we’ll build a new world.