



Number 18

*Join Us in Our  
Continuing Discussions*

Solid, quantifiable research data on arts and culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its value is significant for public policy and to inform programming decisions. In this issue, we have asked Alan Brown, an authority on cultural market research and a frequent collaborator on WKC projects, to highlight a new conceptual model to help us understand the myriad ways in which individuals participate in arts and culture. Does this model help you? Can you envision ways to use it to inform your day-to-day decision-making?

We're interested in hearing from you on this topic. Send an e-mail to [info@wolfkeens.com](mailto:info@wolfkeens.com) or fax a response to 617.679.9700. We'll post your comments in the Publications section of our web site, located at [www.wolfkeens.com](http://www.wolfkeens.com).

# Working Paper

## A Fresh Look at Arts Participation

Alan Brown  
*Principal*  
*Alan S. Brown Associates*

**H**ow can we gain a better framework for thinking about arts activities? One way is to look at them through the lens of the consumer — from a demand standpoint, that is, rather than from a supply standpoint. Recent research commissioned by the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism sent 20 teams of arts administrators and board members to conduct individual in-depth interviews with a cross section of audiences using a common set of questions.

*continued on page 2*

*continued from page 1*

Some 100 interviewees discussed their involvement in the arts in all types of settings across the four disciplines studied (visual arts, theatre, dance, and classical music). The activities were then classified based on the relative amount of creative control exercised by the individuals. The classifications transcend discipline, genre, cultural context, and skill level and include the following:

1. **Inventive Arts Participation** engages the mind, body, and spirit in an act of artistic creation that is unique and idiosyncratic, regardless of skill level.
2. **Interpretive Arts Participation** is a creative act of self-expression that brings alive and adds value to pre-existing works of art, either individually or collaboratively.
3. **Curatorial Arts Participation** is the creative act of purposefully selecting, organizing, and collecting art to the satisfaction of one's own artistic sensibility.
4. **Observational Arts Participation** encompasses arts experiences that an individual selects or consents to, motivated by some expectation of value.
5. **Ambient Arts Participation** involves experiencing art, consciously or unconsciously, that is not purposefully selected — art that “happens to you.”

Modes 1-3 involve some level of personal artistic expression; modes 2-5 involve experiencing art that others create, at various levels of engagement.

Think of the various arts activities that you do, where to place them in this model, and the value that you attach to each. If you work in a specific artistic discipline, think about how your programs fit into the model — and how they don't. If you're a policy-maker, think about the arts “involvement opportunities” in your community within each modality.

The degree to which an individual values a particular arts activity, the study suggests, is not always a function of the level of creative involvement, skill, or knowledge of the art form. For example, numerous respondents spoke of the joy and satisfaction they derive from arts activities in which they have little training or technical knowledge.

Another theme from the interviews was a new emphasis on curatorial participation, such as downloading music and making your own CD compilations, selecting wallpaper for your computer desktop, or collecting art for the home.

The framework offers a new way of thinking about the panoply of arts activities available to individuals, families, and communities. It also raises questions. Does a healthy arts community provide its citizens with activities across the five modalities? Is intervention implied where there are gaps? Which modes of participation most effectively foster creativity? Where is aesthetic growth most likely to happen? What does the rise in curatorial participation mean to arts organizations?

We've asked three leaders in the cultural sector to address these questions and their responses follow.

---

## Andrew Taylor

*Director, Bolz Center for Arts Administration  
University of Wisconsin-Madison*

The evolution of the nonprofit arts brought a strange disconnect between creative expression and daily life. As funding, audiences, and other energies encouraged more technical excellence, more administrative effort, and more physical infrastructure, we inferred that our new professionalism required a new division of labor. Excellence and integrity belonged to the professional arts; participatory practice was quaint, but valuable mainly as a tool to foster appreciative audiences for professionals.

We now just assume that audiences belong in observational mode — participating quietly, on our terms, appreciating excellence, absorbing content and experience. The other modes are either the domain of professionals (inventive, interpretive, or curatorial) or part of the wasteland of commercial culture (ambient). Yet we're also surprised to find our organizations disconnected from the larger lives of our audiences and downgraded in the priorities of our communities.

This list clarifies what was always true: each of us connects to our creative spirit in a full spectrum of wonderful ways. The value we find in artistic expression comes in many currencies — some of them

observational, others participatory, and still others lingering at the edge of our conscious awareness. To impose hierarchy or restriction on this continuum dishonors our audiences and distorts our work.

Of course, we can't serve all modes all the time—

that would just disconnect us in other ways. But in our focused work as arts professionals, we might occasionally lend a space and a hand to the artists outside our walls. Perhaps our organizations could even be the appreciative audience from time to time.

---

## Ann Stone

*Senior Research and Evaluation Officer  
The Wallace Foundation*

The Values Study underscores, and contributes to, an important theme that has emerged in several recent studies: participation in the arts takes multiple forms. Specifically, this study helps us distinguish the different modes of participation from one another—for example, how creating a poem is different from reciting a poem that someone else has written, which is different still from attending a poetry reading.

Its analysis of different participation modes, and of different values that people find in the arts, complements what we've learned from other recent studies. *Motivations Matter*, a new Urban Institute report, finds that people often have different motivations for attending, say, an art museum (“to learn something new”) than they do for attending a concert or a play

(“to socialize with family and friends”). And the recent RAND study, *Gifts of the Muse*, helps us understand the wide variety of benefits associated with arts experiences—benefits that range from the private to the public, the intrinsic to the instrumental—and reminds us that all benefits begin with individual engagement. (Both studies were commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and are available without charge in the Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).)

Through conceptual clarity and evidence, these three studies begin to paint a nuanced picture of arts participation that reveals a wide range of expectations, forms of participation, and benefits from involvement with the arts. For providers and funders, both private and public, it is a picture that illuminates new points of potential connection with new audiences—connections that, if made, can help make the arts a part of more people's lives.

---

## An-Ming Truxes

*Director, Arts Division  
Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism*

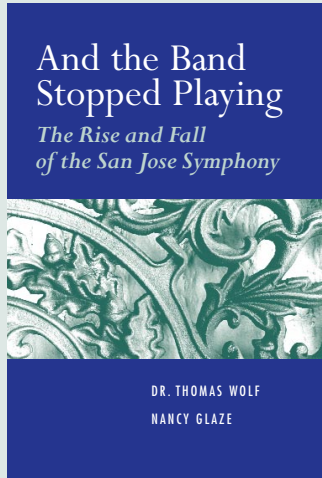
The five modes make funders pay attention to the verbs rather than the nouns of arts participation. Invent, interpret, curate, observe what one purposely selects, and observe that which “happens to you”—rather than the art work, the music, dance, and theater performances produced through market mechanisms (with paying customers) supported by public and private funds. The five modes remind us that people experience and derive meaning from art on many levels—some on an intensely personal level that is often invisible. Most importantly, all modes of participation accrue benefits for the individual.

For the arts community, this presents an important shift in thinking that opens wide the possibilities

for program innovation. Using the five modes, an organization might perform a “participation audit” to determine the type of involvement opportunities it currently offers. If one discovers, for example, an abundance of observational activities (such as performances), what other modalities might one tap into in order to create value connections while awakening latent interests among potential participants? In the case of performances, one might look at popular curatorial activities such as collecting CDs, listening to the radio, or downloading MP3s as a means to encourage meaningful observational or interpretive experiences.

The five modes help us focus on the verbs of arts participation and the personal meanings they hold for consumers. For funders, this notion will help encourage fresh thinking and foster program innovation that ties to the full range of public benefit.

# And the Band Stopped Playing: *The Rise and Fall of the San Jose Symphony*



“This book is a welcome addition to the body of scholarly work on orchestras.”

Mark Volpe  
Managing Director, Boston Symphony Orchestra

“This sad story will be of tremendous benefit to many organizations in performing arts and other fields as well.”

Paul Brest  
President, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

You can download a PDF file of the entire book at <http://www.wolfkeens.com/BIGPICTURE/pages/books.html> or you can purchase a copy directly from us for \$15 post paid. Just call us (617-494-9300) or e-mail us ([info@wolfkeens.com](mailto:info@wolfkeens.com)) to place an order.



Wolf, Keens & Company

10 Rogers Street, River Court, Suite 102  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142