

Holding Up the Arts: Can we sustain what we've created? Should we?

by Diane Ragsdale

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My sincere thanks to Arts Midwest, the Minnesota Community Foundation, and the Arts Learning XChange for the invitation and opportunity to speak with you today.

Susan Sontag, the late, Dark Lady of American Letters, once wrote, “Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future.”

Existence is more than breathing.

It’s more than functioning.

It’s mattering.

The topic of this talk is sustainability in the arts. Not in the environmental sense. But in the sense of how do “the arts” continue to exist ... to matter.

Introduction to Ideas from Previous Talks:

I am not a sustainability expert. I have been an artist. I have worked in and led arts organizations. I have been an arts funder. And now I am an arts blogger and scholar. The last few years, alongside my jobs (working at the Mellon Foundation until 2010 and now lecturing and working towards a PhD at Erasmus University in Rotterdam) I have spent a good bit of time thinking, writing, and giving talks about the role of arts organizations in the 21st century. Before launching into the topic of sustainability I thought I would take just a couple of minutes to share some key ideas from talks I have given in recent years.

In 2008 I gave a lecture in New Zealand & Australia, *Surviving the Culture Change*, which I have now given in many cities in many countries. My choice of the word “survival” stemmed from having read a book, *Deep Survival*, by Laurence Gonzales, recommended to me by Ruby Lerner at Creative Capital. Gonzales spent years trying to understand why some people survive harrowing circumstances—like an avalanche—and others do not and trying to determine whether there are common characteristics of survivors. A key takeaway from Gonzales is that those who survive see the world, see it changing, and change their behaviors accordingly.

That talk, *Surviving the Culture Change*, suggested that the world had changed dramatically over the past few decades and that if arts organizations wanted to matter, wanted to be intellectually and socially relevant, now and in the future, that they would need to see this culture change, accept it as real, and begin to respond to it.

I argued that no organization can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on its laurels or the size of its endowment, or granted a pass to become static or stagnant because it is—to use a Wall Street comparison—“too big to fail.” To exist, to thrive, to be artistically vibrant in the 21st century, arts organizations need to see and *respond to* cuts in funding for the arts in K-12 education, generational shifts and economic divides, increasing diversity in cities and towns across America, the trend towards anti-intellectualism, evolving tastes and aesthetics, increased competition for people’s leisure time, the decline in the quality and quantity of arts coverage in the mainstream media,

and new media technologies—which have shifted the relationships between people, space and time and the ways that people create, consume, commune, and communicate. All of these changes in the culture have everything to do with who we are, what we do, and how we do it.

In a second talk, *The Excellence Barrier*, I examined the successful strategies of the Slow Food movement.

What prompted me to look at Slow Food? I observed that people who claimed to have no time for the ballet were spending hours every week shopping for Swiss chard and organic chicken at their local farmers' markets, cooking gourmet meals on their Viking stoves, planting gardens with heirloom vegetables and fruits or participating in community gardens, buying cookbooks and watching cooking shows, restoring family mealtime as a sacred part of the day, and bypassing McDonalds to make healthier choices for their families. When I grew up cakes came in a box, vegetables came in cans, and the goal of cooking was to make it as efficient and simple as possible: three ingredients and three minutes in the microwave—brilliant! I started wondering, “Why and how has Slow Food succeeded in changing people’s values, tastes, habits, and relationship to food? And what can we learn from this?”

As I looked at the Slow Food Movement I saw that Slow Food connected consumers with producers and made it enjoyable to develop a taste for good food, to learn where food comes from, and to understand how our food choices affect our health, our communities, and our environment. I saw that Slow Food was social—it wasn't just *part of* the community, it *created* community. I saw that by being grassroots and local Slow Food was having tremendous impact all over the world. And I saw that Slow Food made it possible for anyone to be an agent of change—what they would call a co-producer—in its cultural revolution through food. Slow Food has programs for young and old, rich and poor, and encourages the Alice Waters in everyone.

After spending time learning about the strategies of Slow Food I came to believe that our primary strategy in the fine arts—an almost exclusive focus on getting people to adore and patronize our world class art—had come at the expense of helping them have more meaningful relationships with and through the arts. I argued that arts institutions need to stop selling their own excellence and, instead, focus on brokering relationships between people and art, people and artists, and people and other people. My point was not that organizations should stop doing excellent work—by all means, do excellent work. My point was that organizations should not let the pursuit of excellence become a justification for perpetuating beliefs and practices that create obstacles between people and the arts.

If you want to know more about the specific changes in thinking and practices that I recommended in these two talks you can access PDFs of both of them on my blog (Jumper, on ArtsJournal.com) or I am happy to talk more about these during the Q&A. I have also written an essay looking at the Slow Food Movement and the arts in a newly published book by Doug Borwick, called *Building Communities, Not Audiences*.

If I had to boil my talks and blogs down to a single idea I would say that I am eternally thinking about how the nonprofit arts (and in particular fine arts institutions) attain, maintain, or regain their intellectual and social relevance in a changing world.

And as I suggested at the opening, this idea is not unrelated to our topic today—sustaining the arts.

So, let's talk about sustainability.

What do we mean by sustainable?

Sustainability comes from the Latin *sustinere* (*tenere*, to hold; *sus*, up). To hold up. Hence, the title of this talk—*Holding Up the Arts: Can We Sustain What We've Created? Should We?*

I don't know about you, but when I hear the word sustainable I start to picture rain forests in Costa Rica, happy cows grazing in grass fields, automobile tires turned into cute little handbags, and windmill farms—all good stuff. Sustainable gets tossed around quite a bit in the nonprofit arts world these days, along with words like ecosystem and ecology. But (as my very smart friend in the UK, John Knell, has suggested) these terms seem to have become a bit of a panacea. We're not sure exactly what sustainability of the ecosystem means, or how to achieve it, but we somehow trust that if we invest in this idea our future environment will not be a cultural wasteland.

Again, I'm not an expert on sustainability; but after reading a bit on the topic the past few years I've begun to think that we have a rather romantic and, therefore, inaccurate, view of sustainability. This is perhaps unsurprising given that it is a political concept as much as a scientific one.

As I've given talks here and there over the past few years, I have frequently used the following definition: *Sustainability is using resources at the rate at which they can be easily replenished.*

What sorts of resources? We need talented people motivated to do the artistic, production, and administrative work; critics and audiences to show up and give the work attention; and, yes, critically, we often need cash from donors or governments or sponsors to help cover the costs not covered by the box office.

Curiously, arts organizations and those that support them often have different, perhaps even contradictory, ideas about what is meant by sustainability. When arts organizations use the term "sustainable" what they often mean is, "How do we cultivate stable, reliable sources of support? How can we get our donors, our funders, and our corporate sponsors to commit to long term support?" "How long before we are no longer clawing our way to break even at the end of the fiscal year?"

However, when those that support arts organizations use the term sustainable with arts groups what they often mean is, "How long before you are no longer reliant upon me to help you pay for this?"

“The arts need to be more *self-sustaining*” or “*self-reliant*” is a common refrain, particularly in Europe, where there are increasing calls for organizations to become less reliant on public support and move towards the American model.

And in the US, one of the phrases that crops up over and over again on project funding applications (which is increasingly what is available to arts organizations here) is, “Please discuss how this program will be sustained once the grant period ends.” The implication: We’ll get you started, but then you’re going to have to find somebody else to keep this program going. As John Kreidler has written brilliantly in his piece, *Leverage Lost*, everyone learned this trick from the NEA, who learned it from the Ford Foundation. Even board members and individual donors are often more enthused to help get programs off the ground and less enthused to help sustain them.

Of course we understand why governments, funders, and donors want to believe that programs that are worthy will eventually find a way (through “leverage” right?) to run without significant subsidies. They have limited resources. They are seeking to ensure that they are not burdened with organizations that are dependent upon them for survival. They want to feel as though they can (without guilt) stop funding organizations and expect the growth or capacity that was developed (with their support and perhaps even at their encouragement) to be sustained ... somehow.

And of course, in recessions, when wealthy patrons and governments often have less money to give to the arts, and citizens have less money to spend on tickets, the arts find it quite difficult to secure the necessary resources at the rate required to keep their operations going.

In April 2011, the Tony Award-winning Intiman Theatre in Seattle curtailed its season, laid off its staff, and suspended operations. Like other arts organizations, it discovered that it had grown its operations to a size that demanded a level of resource that was simply not sustainable.

We’ve had more than a few bankruptcies and reorganizations in the US arts and culture sector in the past few years; the same is true of previous recessions. However, we haven’t had as many as one might have predicted. Curiously, there are organizations that manage to stay alive despite being unsustainable. A topic we’ll get to later.

The key take-away from my working definition of sustainable: Arts organizations are not self-sustaining. You require the investment of time, attention, and resources from others: don’t spend more than you can reliably take in.

Interestingly, the Intiman Theater has backed away from death’s doors, reorganized, and is giving it another try. It has reduced its budget from upwards of \$8 million to \$1 million and its reorganization plan requires that the Intiman not spend money that it doesn’t have. Unlike most organizations which start each season with some percentage of the funds projected but not raised, as I understand it, the Intiman will now raise the money up front and then produce its season. Also interesting, after years of competing with its larger and older neighbor, the flagship Seattle Repertory Theater, pursuing Broadway transfers, and

hiring artists from New York, The Intiman has turned its attention locally—it is using a core group of local actors, directors, and designers and is working with a bare bones administrative staff. This is the same strategy that was adopted by another theater that faltered in Seattle about a decade ago, A Contemporary Theatre. So, the Intiman seems to have learned the first lesson of sustainability—unfortunately, as is often the case in life, the hard way.

Jane Jacobs' Definition of 'sustainable':

So, I thought mine was an adequate definition of sustainable, but several months ago I started thumbing through my copy of Jane Jacobs' book, *The Nature of Economies*, and found her definition. The book, if you don't know it, is written in the form of a Platonic dialogue and Jacobs' premise is that we should look to the processes of nature for models of economic planning. I came across the following description of the term sustainable in her book:

“Sustainable commonly applies to the practice of drawing on renewable resources at a rate no speedier or greedier than the rate at which the resources can renew themselves; the practice implies environmental morality.”

So, Jane Jacobs adds a speed bump, of sorts, into our conversation. Those words 'speedier', 'greedier', and 'morality' ring in the ear after the sentence has ended. The implication is that even if we are able (because of economic, social, or political power, let's say) to influence the environment and manipulate the system to our advantage and draw significant resources to our individual organizations, we have a moral obligation to look out for the system as a whole and not simply our own welfare.

Winner-Take-All Sector?

When I first read this definition the first phrase to pop into my minds was 'Winner-Take-All'. While the term has been around for awhile, it was popularized by Robert H. Frank in his 1995 book *Winner-Take-All Society*, in which he discusses the contemporary trend toward concentration of wealth. Frank argues that more and more of society is moving toward a state in which a small number of winners take much, while the rest are left with little.

The Occupy Movement is a response to this trend.

Last year I pulled some figures from the National Center for Charitable Statistics on arts disciplines. These are 2009 figures.

- Approximately 1% of nonprofit theaters captured 48% of the revenues for the nonprofit theater sector.
- Approximately ½ of 1% of dance companies captured 60% of revenues for the dance sector.

- Approximately 1% of orchestras captured 60% of revenues for the orchestra sector.
- Approximately 2 ½% of opera companies captured 70% of revenues—but within that 70%, one company, The Metropolitan Opera, captured 26% of revenues for the opera sector.

You may have read the article a few weeks back announcing that, “While arts groups struggle to balance their budgets, the Metropolitan Opera, the largest U.S. opera company, ended with a \$41 million surplus in 2011. [A surplus] that reverses a \$25 million deficit the previous season. A surge of donations and revenue caused the surplus, according to the Met's 2010-11 tax returns.”¹

Listening to Jane Jacobs we might ask whether we are growing the size of some companies at the expense of other parts of the system.

What do you think the percentages would look like if you analyzed the arts organizations in the Twin Cities area?

If we think of the arts sector as a garden with trees, bushes, and grass, it sometimes seems that governments and private funders would sooner turn off the sprinklers to all the bushes and grass than decrease even modestly the water supply to one very large, increasingly thirsty, old tree.

Witness the Netherlands, where I live and where, rather controversially, the ministry of culture has announced significant cuts to the arts sector beginning 2013. The new plan calls for maintaining support for some of the largest and oldest institutions while eliminating all funding to all 23 production houses in the Netherlands, incubators that have played a critical role in the development of theater-based artists and new work.

The Dutch government is letting these production houses fall off the truck, so to speak. And it is trusting that someone else will pick them up.

Of course we did the same thing in the US. Apocryphal as it now seems, in the 1960s and 1970s the US government – the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in combination with grants from state and local arts agencies – provided significant direct support to many nonprofit arts groups. This enabled artists and organizations to take artistic risks and encouraged, among other things, the development of diversity, preservation, access and education initiatives.

As some will remember, not all organizations fared equally in the fallout from cuts and shifts in priorities at the NEA and other foundations in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, community-based, grassroots, artist-led, folk/traditional and culturally-specific organizations – as well as smaller, alternative ones that support emerging artists and produce challenging works – have often struggled to develop and sustain a sufficient base of individual donors to support their institutions.

¹ http://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2012/06/metropolitan_opera_enjoys_a_wh.html

In part this is because these groups often serve a constituency that is not able to make large contributions (which is one of their primary values to society). But it is also because support from private foundations has tended, on average, to gravitate to larger, high profile, “fine arts” institutions. It has long been assumed that the plurality of the American model would result in a diverse arts community. However, the reality that it has been difficult for certain groups (for example, black theatre companies and single choreographer modern dance companies) to remain competitive in the battle for private dollars would seem to indicate that when the government turns its back on the arts and culture sector, it cannot assume that society will dutifully and equitably fill all the gaps.

Society let these important groups fall off the truck. And we are now experiencing the long term impacts of having done so.

The Netherlands theater scene has long been considered incredibly vibrant and innovative. They may not immediately experience negative effects from closing the production houses, but I suspect they may ten or fifteen years from now.

Donor Fatigue & the Erosion of Goodwill

A second phrase that came to mind as I pondered Jacobs’ words ‘speedier’, ‘greedier’ and ‘morality’ was “donor fatigue,” a term that has become rather commonplace in the US. It refers to that point when donors have been over-tapped. As some of you have perhaps witnessed or experienced firsthand, following large campaigns (to build an endowment, or a facility, or to rescue an organization from death’s door), or simply after years of providing ongoing annual support, some donors will become unresponsive to ongoing appeals.

I would suggest that this pulling back of support is less about needing their bank accounts to be replenished and more about needing the will-to-give to be replenished. It’s no different for governments—though we perhaps assume it should be. Bill Ivey, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has said that when we face resistance to the idea of support for the arts it’s often because our highest priorities are out of sync with those of everyday Americans. Too many people receive little or no tangible benefit from the current nonprofit arts system, he says; thus, whatever generalized good feelings citizens may have about the arts don’t translate into sufficient “goodwill” when the arts must compete with causes like education or the environment—when advocacy really counts.²

Unless you are a “club good” and can survive exclusively through the support of wealthy individuals you cannot afford to turn your back on society-at-large. We need to be concerned if public goodwill has been eroded. We cannot use up the resources of the public at a rate faster than the will-to-give, the will-to-patronize, can be renewed.

² Ragsdale (2009). “A new conversation about culture: Bill Ivey’s big ideas for the arts” in the *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*. Vol. 20:1, available at <http://www.giarts.org/article/new-conversation-about-culture>

Moreover, I think this fatigue sets in not only with contributions and subsidies but with other areas of arts organization as well. We cannot pay our artists poverty-level wages, burn out our staffs, ignore or underutilize our volunteers, or continually push our subscribers and ticket buyers to buy more, more, more concerts on our season, at higher and higher prices, without consequences. It's greedy. And it is not sustainable.

Many organizations and cities have been getting signals for awhile now that their systems are unstable but rather than making the changes that might correct the problem they often intensify it by, in essence, doing more of the same. They create a vicious circle.

Contributions become harder to raise but rather than taking that as a signal that we may need to look carefully at the value we are creating and the level of support we are expecting in return, we invest more money in fundraising departments in order to more aggressively fish an already overfished pond. Board members that are already weary are asked to make stretch gifts and to twist the arms of their friends one more time. Those who have already given are prodded time and again to consider another gift. We push people past the point where giving feels good. We burn through development staff and with each new hire pay higher and higher wages. Large organizations, in particular, often end up in the equivalent of a fundraising arms race with other organizations in the city. In the end the organization with the biggest army of development staff and the most high profile board members may win—but it may do so at the expense of the overall health and vitality of the community at large.

Jacobs suggests that we have a moral obligation to look out for the entire ecosystem by not using more than our fair share even if we have the power to control our environment and do so. Indeed, it is not only the right thing to do but the necessary thing to do if we want to see the arts survive.

What do I mean by that?

The Paradoxes of Sustainability:

Well, this brings me to a third and final concept, the paradoxes of sustainability, which I came across in a paper of the same name by a scholar named Alexey A. Voinov from the Institute for Ecological Economics.³

So ... let's talk about the paradoxes of sustainability.

First, what's a paradox? To find love you have to stop looking for it. The same is often said of happiness. A paradox is a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory but in reality expresses a possible truth. Here are four key points from Voinov's paper:

1. After examining the definitions of sustainability of many scholars, Voinov determined that all of the definitions had one thing in common: an assumption about 'keeping something at a certain level' – that is, a resource, system, condition, or relationship. In other words, a goal of 'avoiding decline.'

³ Voinov, A. (1998). "Paradoxes of Sustainability" in *Journal of General Biology*, 59:1, pp. 209-218.

2. Voinov says, however, (and here's where the first paradox comes in), that this kind of behavior—the sustaining of something at a certain level or state—seems to belie the fact that *living systems tend to go through life cycles*: growth, followed by conservation (or inertia), followed by release (obscurity or death), followed by renewal and new growth.
3. Sustainability is, thus, an unnatural attempt to break this cycle and extend a certain stage of the life cycle and avoid decline. The term sustainable development contains this first paradox. Sustainability seeks to preserve the growth or conservation phase. But development requires the death and renewal phase.
4. Furthermore, there is a hierarchy of systems. And here's where the second paradox comes in. Sustainability of a certain level of the hierarchy may impede sustainability of systems at a higher level that are potentially more important. For any 'supersystem' to be sustained its sub-systems or components must be free to recombine.

An example might be the best way to make this concept clear:

- (1) Forest fires naturally occur and burn down portions of the forest ecosystem. Without these fires the forest ecosystem as a whole could not persist.
- (2) If we endeavor to prevent forest fires we damage the forest ecosystem.

So, there are two paradoxes of sustainability: (1) We cannot have sustainability (life) without renewal (death). (2) Sustainability of the 'supersystem' cannot be achieved by trying to sustain parts of the 'subsystem'; indeed, trying to sustain parts of the 'subsystem' may prevent the sustainability of the 'supersystem'.

So what does this mean for the arts and culture sector?

It means we need to think about where we may be seeking the “unnatural perpetuation of what might otherwise die”? It means that we need to think very carefully about which level of our ecosystem we are seeking to sustain.

Are the arts in America sustainable? It's a different question from “Is the nonprofit arts and culture sector sustainable?” Or “Are nonprofit arts institutions sustainable?” Or even “Is my arts organization sustainable?”

What shall we permit to be a legitimate and sufficient form for the perpetuation of “the arts”?

What's the best way, for instance, to sustain the theater?

Keeping alive all organizations currently in existence and any others that are created in the future?

Ensuring that one flagship resident theater company remains in place in every major city from now until the end of time?

Ensuring that every city has a community theater?

Ensuring there is a constant churn of independent artist collectives that live and die with their members?

Ensuring that MFA programs persist and theater artists continue to be trained in the historic methods of theatermaking?

Ensuring that kids learn how to appreciate Shakespeare?

Ensuring that kids are given the guidance and tools to create their own theater?

Or do we ensure that theater survives by allowing for instance what Dan Sinker created to be called theater? Who is Dan Sinker?

Dan Sinker is the man who created MayorEmanuel a Twitter account caricaturing Rahm Emanuel and his run to be mayor of Chicago, and who captured more than 44,000 followers for his highly theatrical tweets.

How do we pass along the theater *genus*?

Or the classical musical *genus*?

Does vinyl count? A CD? A digital download?

How about a children's chorus? What about El Sistema, the Venezuelan social program founded in 1975 by economist and musician José Antonio Abreu, which reaches upwards of 300,000 children, 70 to 90 percent of whom come from poor socio-economic backgrounds? By all accounts classical music is thriving in Venezuela thanks to this program.

What about the YouTube orchestra?

Or the Philadelphia Opera Company's *Hallelujah Chorus* Flash Mob performed at the department store Macy's, which has been downloaded more than 7.75 million times on YouTube?

What about San Francisco Opera's broadcasts at the baseball park, one of which drew 32,000 people to see *Aida*?

What about a diehard opera lover who has an extensive collection of recordings, listens to opera broadcasts on the radio at every opportunity, and even sings it in the shower every morning?

What if this diehard opera fan never purchases a ticket to see a production at his local professional grand opera house, but frequently goes to see the Metropolitan Opera screenings at the local movie theater?

For that matter, how *do* we feel about the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts in movie theaters which continue to expand in reach and numbers (and as I understand it, earn higher revenues and profits) year after year?

On the one hand, we need the Metropolitan Opera to create those broadcasts. But, over time, one could also imagine that some people would start to go to the movie theater exclusively and not to their local opera house. Perhaps there have even been moments when we have wondered at two in the morning, sweating in our pajamas, whether the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts in a movie theater might, in fact, eventually displace some opera companies somewhere?

Would that be an example of sustainable development, do you think? Or cannibalism: the extinction of one form of opera at the hands of another?

When we say we need to try to find a way to make things “more sustainable,” what are we talking about? Sustaining the reputations, salaries, and benefits for directors and other professional arts workers that are lucky enough to have them? Sustaining all flagship, historically leading institutions? Sustaining our buildings? Sustaining a canon of great works through the recording or ongoing performance of them? Sustaining very specific productions, or performance practices? Sustaining the capacity for artistic risk-taking? Sustaining a pool of talented artists who have the resources to self-produce their works, independent of major institutions? Sustaining broad and deep community engagement with “the arts,” whatever that might mean today?

The “what” is really important.

One thing that troubles me is that there seems to be an assumption embedded in the logics of foundations, government agencies, boards, donors, service organizations, and leaders of the arts and culture sector that the ‘supersystem’ we are trying to sustain and grow is the infrastructure of existing arts institutions, beginning with the oldest and largest organizations and perhaps working our way down from there.

But what if the ‘supersystem’ is the existence, the relevance, the matteringness of the arts as demonstrated by their ongoing practice and enjoyment by people in society? Or what if the ‘supersystem’ is the connection of people to each other, through the arts?

The implication would be that everything else (large, historically leading companies, smaller amateur companies, training programs, the recording and publishing industries associated with various art forms, critics and art criticism, and on and on) is part of the sub-system and, thus, must not be prevented from going through the stages of renewal.

While we seem to recognize that some deaths are inevitable, history and good sense tell us that the renewal in the sector should happen in the ongoing churn of small organizations.

That's natural.

As opposed to the collapse or 180-degree transformation of established, historically leading institutions, which we would find not only unnatural but probably truly alarming. Hence, one concludes, the strategy of the Dutch government and others. Sustain the large institutions and let the rest of the sector churn, which we presume leads to innovation, and not to a death valley and the loss of innovation from the sector.

Do you remember the origins of the word sustainability?

Sustinere (*tenere*, to hold; *sus*, up). To hold up. As I read this I smiled as I saw the paradox of sustainability embedded in the very roots of the word and the different meanings of the phrase “to hold up.”

To hold up can mean *to uphold* in the sense of to perpetuate, support, defend, carry forward. But to hold up can, of course, also mean to stop, to block, to keep in a specified state or relation. We are upholding our institutions; but as we do so I think we need to ask ourselves whether we may be holding up necessary renewal and adaptation in our sector.

We cannot ensure the ‘sustainability’ of the arts—if by that we mean meaningful engagement with and through the arts—simply by sustaining individual arts organizations. Indeed, taking the argument one step further, I would suggest that in the attempt to sustain arts organizations that are unsustainable in their current form or size, we often drive them in a direction that ultimately erodes their *raison d'être*.

They become what Meyer and Zucker call “permanently failing organizations.” This term does not refer to organizations that eternally run deficits, *per se*. It refers to organizations that stay alive despite the fact that they have reached a chronic state in which they are failing to achieve their proclaimed goals.

Away from Mission and Toward the Market, Exclusivity, or Mediocrity:

I started to think about this “failure to achieve proclaimed goals” and what this might mean in the arts. What does this failure look like? What compromises are made when arts organizations and those that love them attempt to sustain that which is not sustainable in its current size or shape?

It seems to me that unsustainable organizations evolve in one of three directions in an effort to stay alive.

#1. Towards the market: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

First, in an effort to stay alive many arts groups have begun to shift towards short-term, often market-driven, metrics of success and away from longer term and more meaningful cultural and social goals. I would characterize this response as, “If you can't beat 'em, join 'em”.

In his 2003 monograph *The Resilient Sector* Lester Salamon of Johns Hopkins addresses the evolution of the nonprofit sector in the US in the face of not only loss of subsidies and increased competition from for-profits, but a host of other pressures. He asserts that US nonprofit organizations have proven to be extremely resilient but posits that the strategies they have employed to survive and thrive have, over time, moved them in the direction of the market and, as a result, farther away from their missions.

This in a sector that, arguably, exists to support the lifelong development of artists and people's long-term, lifetime even, relationship to the arts. Box office revenues, growth in the budget, and growth of our facilities may be measures of a certain kind of success but they do not tell us how well we are fulfilling our missions. Indeed, when we pay attention to more commercial metrics they often lead us to make decisions that support financial goals today at the expense of longer term artistic or social goals.

We find that people are a little less persuaded of the intrinsic value of the arts in society and so we begin to talk and care more about economic impacts (using the language of the market) and less about stirring people's souls. And what happens? Over time the intrinsic impact arguments and impacts become less and less potent with funders and politicians and boards—and even we stop believing them and using them within our organizations because the words start to sound corny to us.

Or we notice that new works by unknown artists are becoming harder to sell and seem to yield smaller returns for the investment of time, energy, and money (relative to more mainstream fare). Rather than invest *more* resources in these productions, we justify doing the opposite saying, “These shows have the smallest audiences.” We then reduce our investments in them (fewer weeks of rehearsal, smaller production levels, less marketing support, less psychic energy from the staff and crew) and, over time, we exacerbate the problem—we invest less and less in these productions and, lo and behold, the quality and impact of the work declines, and fewer and fewer audiences show up. We think we can somehow starve these productions but expect audiences to invest in them.

The commercial turn is a problem. We're supposed to be talking *back* to the market, including our board members who may prefer to speak in business terms. We need to be *in* the world, of course. But we don't need to be *of* it. There's nothing wrong with selling lots of tickets—reaching lots of people can be brilliant. But it's not a sufficient indicator of our impact and success. It's not a substitute for our critical research and development role. It takes time for artists to mature, time to create great works of art, and time for the value of the arts to society to be realized.

Again, if we lose sight of our progress toward these longer-term and more meaningful goals, we will eventually erode our *raison d'être*. So here is another paradox embedded in this discussion of sustainability: The things we do to survive in the short term may make us less distinctive and, thus, worthy of support in the long term.

#2. Towards exclusivity: A tactical retreat into the arms of the upper middle class

The second shift is towards exclusivity. What I would characterize as a tactical retreat into the arms of the upper middle class. In his influential book, *Art Worlds*, published in 1982, Howard Becker writes:

“Though audiences are among the most fleeting participants in art worlds, devoting less time to any particular work or to works of a kind than more professionalized participants, they probably contribute most to the reconstitution of the work on a daily basis. Audiences select what will occur as an art work by giving or withholding their participation in an event or their attention to an object, and by attending selectively to what they do attend to. That gives a special importance to the audience’s contribution.”⁴

Becker conceives of the art world as an onion with professional artists and support personnel in the center and audiences who are informed being closer to the center than those that are casual attendees. The key point I take from Becker’s onion is that the audience, *whether informed or casual*, is in it. It is in the onion. It is part of the art world.

Or at least it was.

Arts organizations, whose audiences have been declining over the past three decades, now appear to be paying the price for having hitched their wagons to an upper middle class audience and, in essence, disregarded the rest of their communities. We have been losing the attention of people.

Some may think, perhaps: “Oh well, better a future with a smaller number of wealthy, well educated patrons and none of ‘the rest’ than a future with ‘the rest’ but none of our seasoned patrons.” But (another paradox) being in the inner core of the onion is only meaningful if the onion has outer layers, and vice versa. Is it a stretch to imagine that over time even our most loyal patrons will have little to do with us if we are no longer part of the larger cultural conversation—the zeitgeist, if you will—and, thus, their own social and cultural capital is not improved by associating with us?

The aesthetic and social structures that have long undergirded our sector are beginning to crumble. We have lost some of the outer layers of our onion. It is beginning to look more like a shallot. Moreover, our shallot may be rotting at the core. Being in the core of the art world today seems to have little to do with having a well developed aesthetic or a particularly profound relationship with art—it seems some organizations have sold out their art forms out by making the core a place that is accessible *only* to those with money.

The Occupy movement has generated enormous discussion over the degree to which arts organizations are dependent upon and, thus, cater to the financial elite at the expense of others.

One faction of the Occupy Movement even wrote a letter calling for the end of the Whitney Biennial, saying that it objected to the Whitney in its current form because it “upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers.” The letter ended by saying “ “We come to you at a time when corporations,

⁴ Becker, H.S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments.’ Art institutions have come to mirror that ethos.”

In response, some have pounced on allegations of elitism. Anthony Tomasini of the *New York Times* wrote in his article, “Occupy the arts, a seat at a time”:

“As we try to grasp what the committed Occupy Wall Street activists are saying to the performing arts, can we all agree to put aside at last the charge of elitism? Especially, I would say from my partisan perspective, regarding classical music? At least in New York and in many other American cities, as well as most college towns, there are abundant opportunities to attend free or very affordable concerts and operas.”⁵⁵

True. Very true.

However, to my mind, Tomasini and others like him miss the point. What arouses allegations that fine arts organizations are elitist is not (primarily) that their ticket prices are sometimes too high, but rather that they are (more often than not) governed by a select group of (generally wealthy, well-educated, and white) people whose beliefs and tastes are presumed to be “the best” and, therefore, good for society as a whole. Many fine arts organizations are perceived as elitist because they seem to cater to the needs, capacities, and desires of this select group of people rather than serving their communities-at-large. Communities in which, a growing number of people are not white and where a distressing number of people are actually quite poor.

Russell Willis Taylor at National Arts Strategies was the first person to draw to my attention this year to the fact that the most recent US census shows that 1 in 2 people in the US are living at the poverty or low income level. Evidently they’ve now corrected that figure to closer to 1 in 3. Either way, it’s egregious.

And yet, attending a fine arts event in the US one often steps into a world that seems to be (and often is) *completely out of touch with the reality of that census statistic* ... The arts *could* do something in response to the poverty and growing diversity in cities and town across the US.

Too many of us are not. We have been paying attention to the needs and preferences of longtime patrons, at the expense of others in the community. We have been holding onto tried and true practices and cherished beliefs about art—who makes it, how it’s made, who it’s for, and how it’s delivered—practices and beliefs that, to some degree, are not just *unsuitable* to today’s environment but, at times, *offensive* given the realities of the world we live in (hence the Occupy backlash).

It is not our duty to simply reach out to these diverse voices, or offer them our programs and services. It is incumbent upon us to give them agency, to bring them into our institutions.

⁵⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/arts/music/balcony-seats-can-help-economic-inequalities-in-arts.html?pagewanted=all>

They are the future.

They are the present.

They are the past. They have been here with us from the very beginning; but too many of us have failed to see them.

There is a growing financial, artistic, and psychic gap between the “nonprofit fine arts world” in the US and the “rest of the US.” Some of us have been trying to bridge this gap with duct tape (aka, friends with money) for at least 30 years. I would suggest that it’s time to tear off the duct tape, see what holds, and start building something better.

#3. Towards mediocrity: “nonprofit arts zombies”

The third shift is toward mediocrity. What my very smart friend Brian Newman calls “nonprofit arts zombies.” Denial, head in the sand, and hoping no one will notice that you had your best days 20 years ago. In his chapter in a book called *20Under40*, Newman writes:

“Unfortunately, it’s not a stretch to say the nonprofit arts sector looks like a field of zombies—undead, potentially harmful shells of their former selves, haunting the landscape, unable to live or to die. Quite simply, funders, board members, and leaders in the arts need to take a hard look at reality and make some painful decisions. Even those organizations that are healthy enough to survive will need to consider downsizing their costs and refocusing their energies as the dwindling support for the cultural sector is likely a permanent shift away from robust public, foundation, and individual financing of the arts.”⁶

I suggested that there are underperforming arts organizations that are not sustainable but that appear to go on living. This is what I’m talking about. Organizations that value persistence over performance.

Given an overabundance of product and seats to fill on any given night in many communities (relative to current “demand”) and (sorry to say) the poor quality of much the so-called professional work that is produced and presented in the US, it seems that more than a few overleveraged and underperforming professional nonprofit arts organizations need to both better differentiate themselves and hold themselves to higher artistic standards; to right-size their institutions; and to provide more time, attention, and resources to artists and to the development, production, and thoughtful promotion of artistic works.

Too much of the capacity building in the arts sector has been (1) aimed primarily at securing the *administrative futures* of arts organizations and (2) resulting in an erosion of quality and distinction in artistic processes and experiences, *today*.

⁶ Newman, B. (2010). In E. Clapp (Ed.), *20Under40* (pp. 3-19). Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2010. P. 5.

It is not in the interest of the sector as a whole for underperforming arts organizations to be sustained. We may need to let some organizations die in order to allow for something more vibrant to arise from their ashes. Furthermore, underperforming arts organizations siphon away funds from higher performing ones and contribute to the declining impact and importance of the art forms that we care about.

We tend to think of a sustainable state for the arts and culture sector as being one in which existing arts organizations have achieved equilibrium and can crank along in perpetuity. This is wrongheaded: even if we could achieve a state in which all existing organizations could secure adequate resources to keep running year-after-year, the lack of creative destruction in the sector would eventually lead to its stultification.

So the three directions of unsustainable arts organizations: towards the market, towards exclusivity, and towards mediocrity. If you see your organization trending in one of these three directions I would suggest that it may be time to stop and earnestly assess what you are doing, and why.

Conclusion:

In outlining these shifts, I am suggesting that we may have spent the past few decades trying to sustain arts organizations at the expense of their missions and at the expense of broader engagement with the arts. It begs a question: What might we have done differently? What would the opposite have looked like?

I have two thoughts on that, to start. I'm sure with time we could think of others.

Here's the first.

Arts participation rates have been trending downwards across most of the fine arts forms in the US since 1982 according to a report from the National Endowment for the Arts. Many have suggested that declining arts participation rates in the US are directly related to the decline in arts education and participation opportunities for children. Indeed, a relatively new report from the NEA indicates a significant correlation between taking an arts course as a child and adult participation.⁷

Recognizing this trend what if, instead of continuing to invest arts sector resources almost exclusively in the exponential growth in the number and size of professional arts organizations over the past three decades we had taken the path of Slow Food Movement, which made Taste Education one of its cornerstone strategies? What if we had made the choice, as a sector, to take our educational missions seriously? What if 25 years ago (in 1985) we had redirected, say, 50 percent of sector resources to supporting hands-on, experiential, vibrant, social opportunities for young people to explore and learn about the arts in cooperation with public schools, community colleges, and universities?

⁷ National Endowment for the Arts (2011). *Arts education in America: What the declines mean for arts participation*. Available at <http://www.nea.gov/research/2008-SPPA-ArtsLearning.pdf>.

I'd wager we would be looking at a much brighter present than the one we face today.

But we didn't see ourselves as responsible for addressing that gap because we were looking out for our institutions rather than looking *outside* our institutions and doing what we could to improve the environment for art, to improve the arts ecosystem as a whole. We needed to have started a Slow Arts Movement around the same time Slow Food was created to push back against the Fast Food industries.

Here's the second thought.

What if funders, donors, and boards had never encouraged growth in the staffs and budgets of individual organizations? What if instead of incentivizing administrative growth they had rewarded nonprofits that put the majority of their resources into the art and tried to stay as administratively lean, flexible, art-focused, and community-focused as possible? Yes, of course, it's phenomenal to have the Metropolitan Art Museum, the Kennedy Center, and the LA Philharmonic. We need some large flagship institutions, particularly in some markets. But what if most of us had been rewarded *not* for trying to be smaller versions of the Met, or the Kennedy Center, or the LA Philharmonic, but for being something akin to the boutique Jazz label, Pi?

Pi, if you haven't heard of them, is bucking trends in the music industry.⁸ It is managing to keep its head above water at a time when many music labels are struggling, and it is having tremendous impact despite being a relatively small Jazz label focused on the leading edge of its artform. Here are a few keys to Pi's success (which I gleaned from an article in the *New York Times*):

(1) Unlike many labels that flood the market with product (often as a hedge against the uncertainty of not knowing which will succeed or not), Pi releases a handful of albums per year and is highly selective in choosing which artists to get behind. Virtually everything it releases meets with critical acclaim. Because it has earned a reputation for consistently putting out great albums and has a very clear niche, it has a devoted (and growing) fan base.

(2) Given its limited release schedule, and the limited revenue potential of each of its releases (these are not mainstream artists), Pi keeps its overhead low. Its owners are pragmatic and disciplined. For many years they worked day jobs to support their work at the label. By staying small they have been able to maintain artistic integrity.

(3) Pi has a long courtship with an artist before it makes a commitment. Once in, however, Pi invests deeply in the development of its artists and ensures that each receives sufficient resources, attention, and support from the label. This is a critical factor in the label's remarkable track record and reputation.

In principle, in spirit, Pi could have been a nonprofit. Pi's strategies are serving both its *artists* and its *fans*. Pi may or may not last another 50 years (much less beyond the lives

⁸ Last year, I came across a [New York Times article](#) on *ArtsJournal* examining the remarkable success of the indie Jazz label, [Pi](#).

of its owners/founders). But while it exists, it is having positive cultural and social impact.

Here's the good news: we could start today and improve our ecosystem (and prospects for survival) in ten to twenty years, or beyond.

Sustaining existing infrastructure will not ensure the relevance (and thus sustainability) of opera, theater, modern dance, ballet, classical music, and contemporary art. The vitality of these art forms can only be achieved by allowing renewal within our institutions and sector to occur.

So where does this leave us? Where do we go from here?

Am I suggesting that you should all be preparing to close your doors? Not at all! I believe the world needs what each of you has the *capacity* of doing within your organizations.

However, I *am* suggesting that putting on concerts or plays or exhibitions may not be a sufficient role for your organizations in the 21st century. I am asking you to trust that if we focus our time and efforts towards improving the environment and achieving sustainability of the arts that we will, in fact, increase the likelihood of our own survival as organizations, albeit, perhaps, in an evolved form.

I am asking those who may have wanted to dismiss the true fan singing in the shower, or the amateur theater company, or the children's chorus, or the *Hallelujah* flashmob at Macy's department store, or the experimental artist collective, or Twittertheater, or the YouTube Orchestra, to understand that these are as vital as your organization to our larger goal of sustaining the arts in America. I would suggest that you need to be actively promoting, encouraging, and supporting such manifestations and celebrations of your art forms.

I am suggesting that you may need to expand your concept of what constitutes a legitimate arts experience and ask yourself whether you have become institution as *obstacle* between people and the arts, and if so, if you are willing to make some changes to become institution as *enabler* of a meaningful relationship between people and the arts. (For more on the idea of institution as obstacle you should watch the Clay Shirky TED talk *Institutions versus Collaboration*.)

We've spent decades building exclusionary, professional, hierarchical institutions. I am asking you to consider that perhaps it's time to start moving to a cooperative infrastructure model (something Shirky talks about) and releasing control of at least parts of our institutions to artists, community members, and other stakeholders.

I am asking you to focus not on holding up your institutions but on upholding your commitment to the development of artists, the preservation and development of your art forms, and the capacity for every citizen in your community to find meaningful connection to and through the arts.

I am asking you to consider the following questions:

- If governance largely means board members and executives looking out for the future of their own institutions, then who is looking out for the interests of the community-at-large?
- Who is able to recognize when we may be trying to sustain one arts institution at the expense of another, or many others?
- Or trying to sustain an arts sector at the expense of other amenities or social services?
- Or trying to sustain opera companies, orchestras, theaters, and dance companies at the expense of sustaining artists, creativity, culture, and broad and deep engagement with the arts?

We must all take responsibility for asking these questions and answering them.

Please know, I understand your impulse to preserve your institutions. You are guardians of a social and artistic mission. But I urge you not to conflate being the guardians of a social purpose with being the guardians of an institution and your status and place within it.

In conclusion, a final paradox:

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor E. Frankl asserts that the path to self actualization is self transcendence. He says one cannot aim for self actualization any more than one can aim for happiness or success. Indeed, aiming for them may make them all the more elusive. Rather, they are side effects, not goals to be pursued directly. Likewise, I would suggest that relevance (or meaningful existence) is not a goal that arts institutions can pursue directly; rather, it is a side effect of transcending the need to be appreciated, preserved, and sustained in perpetuity and focusing instead on serving society through the arts, today.

We may be trading *experience* goods, but we're not *Disneyland*—as nonprofits we're not here to simply give people a momentary diversion from the reality of their lives—television can do that, Broadway revivals can do that, pop culture can do that. We are here to say, “We see you. We see this community. We see that for every one person that's doing OK one person in this community is suffering. We do not exist exclusively for those that are doing OK. We exist for everyone. We exist for *you*.”

We are here to foster empathy, understanding of self, and understanding of other. We are here to gently, or not-so-gently, open people's eyes to truths they cannot see or choose not to see: suffering and ugliness and their opposites love and beauty.

These are not corny words. These words represent why you are here. They give you purpose. Embrace them.

“Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future.”

Existence is more than breathing.

It's more than functioning.

It's mattering.

Go forth and matter to the world.

Thank you for your kind attention.