

This talk, *Transformation or Bust: When Hustling Tickets and Contributions Just Isn't Cutting it Anymore*, was written by [Diane Ragsdale](#) for the 2016 Creative New Zealand Conference: *The Big Conversation*. If you choose to redistribute or quote the talk, please be sure to include this attribution. You may also access a video of the talk on the Creative New Zealand Website.



Good Morning. I am sincerely grateful to Andrew, Helen, Cath, and everyone at Creative New Zealand for the invitation to join you for *The Big Conversation*. It is a privilege and a pleasure to be back in this soulful place and at this particular convening. I have such extraordinary memories of my first visit here in 2008 for the very first 21<sup>st</sup> Century Arts Conference.

So the last time I was here I gave a talk called [Surviving the Culture Change](#), the thrust of which was that no organization can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on its past achievements, the permanence of its building, or the size of its budget—and that to exist, to thrive, arts organizations need to respond to the changes in their environment.

Since I was here, of course, this environment, this place, was devastated by a natural disaster—whose aftershocks continue to be felt both literally and metaphorically. Talk about survival ... this is when it gets real. What do we do when our whole world *literally* comes tumbling down around us?

I lived in New York City before I moved to the Netherlands. New Yorkers will tell you that after the planes hit the world trade center the city was a different place. The shared sense of vulnerability resulted in an amazing humanity that manifested itself in many ways—and that you could feel when you passed people on the street and caught their eye.

I recently read the book [Tribe](#) by Sebastian Junger, who introduces the research of a man named Charles Fritz to explain why this is. Fritz asserts “that disasters thrust people into a more ancient, organic way of relating.” ... “As people come together to face a threat,” Fritz says, “class differences are temporarily erased, income disparities become irrelevant, race is overlooked, and individuals are assessed simply by what they are willing to do for the group.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes a crisis can even catalyze more enduring transformation that can last years or decades even. Unfortunately, such long-term transformation doesn't seem to be the most likely scenario arising out of a crisis. Take, for example, the most recent global economic crisis. When the Great Recession was in full bloom in the US in late 2008, NYU scholar Paul Light wrote an [article](#) in which he asked, essentially, *What's going to happen to the US social sectors as a result of the recession—to health care, education, social services, the arts?*

At the time he hypothesized four possible scenarios for us:

- **Rescue Fantasy**, the scenario in which we are saved by significant increases in contributions;
- **Withering Winterland**, the scenario in which we starve ourselves into a weakened state;

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Junger, *Tribe*, p. 53-54.

- **Arbitrary Winnowing**, the scenario in which only the largest, oldest, wealthiest, and best connected organizations survive; and
- **Transformation**, the scenario in which we redesign ourselves to be stronger, more vibrant, more sustainable, and more impactful.

Professor Light dismissed Rescue Fantasy arguing that it was highly unlikely to happen. And he argued that the benefits of Transformation could be reaped only by deliberate choice and action. He cautioned that if we let the future take its course it would naturally result in a Withering Winterland or Arbitrary Winnowing.

We need to ask ourselves a question—Is this the future we want for the arts sector? If not, then we cannot let the future take its course. We need to choose Transformation. Why?

Because the fact of the matter is the economic downturn is only one crisis facing the arts, and arguably not the greatest one. At least in the US, our sector has been slowly walking toward a precipice for at least three decades. And, yes, I’m referring to dwindling and aging audiences but I’m also referring to something even more troubling.

In a relatively short period of time in the US, the UK, and parts of Europe the *justification* for the arts has shifted from culture for the culture’s sake ... to culture for the sake of solving social problems ... to culture for the economy’s sake. John Holden characterizes this as a “[crisis of legitimacy](#),” writing:

*Somehow, over a period of decades, politics [has] mislaid the essence of culture, and policy [has] lost sight of the real meaning of culture in people’s lives and in the formation of their identities.*<sup>2</sup>

We seem to be experiencing what Chip Ward calls the “tyranny of the quantifiable,”<sup>3</sup> and what Dougald Hine calls “a crisis of measurement.”<sup>4</sup> In the US and the UK, it’s not hard to find evidence of this crisis:

- The arts increasingly are expected to pay their way or contribute to economic growth;
- Risk is approached as a problem to be managed rather than as inherent to the process of creativity;
- Arts organizations must continually justify their worth and account for funds in advance of spending them;
- There is interest in our numbers but not really in our content;
- Donors want to put their names on our buildings but have little attention for sustaining the art and culture inside them;
- The largest organizations are invariably seen as the most valuable in the arts ecosystem; and
- Arts groups are expected to use business jargon and to see their communities as potential markets, their fellow citizens as potential customers, and the culture as an exploitable product.

I’m curious which of these symptoms you may also recognize in New Zealand?

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<sup>2</sup> John Holden, Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> I first heard reference to this in an interview between Krista Tippett and Rebecca Solnit on the NPR program, On Being. Here is the interview transcript: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/rebecca-solnit-falling-together/transcript/8695>

<sup>4</sup> I encountered this term in a talk by Dougald Hine called, “A Storm is Blowing in from Paradise,” available on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNZ3jW0Srpl>

As institutions that exist, ostensibly, to foster such things as beauty, meaning-making, understanding, empathy, and social cohesion I think we need to care very much about this economic rationalization of what we do.

Of course the arts are not alone in this crisis. We have witnessed this retooling in almost every area of social life. That, in any event, is the thesis of Harvard political philosopher, Michael Sandel, who argues in his book [What Money Can't Buy](#), that we have shifted from “having a market economy to becoming a market society”—in which, as he puts it, market relations and market incentives and market values come to dominate all aspects of life.

As Sandel asks: *Is this the way we want to live?*

Put another way: Are we going to let ourselves get dragged along with this retooling and embrace the market? Or are we going to resist and embrace a different value system?

That word, *embrace*, is of course consciously chosen as this conference is a quest for, a call for, embracing arts and embracing audiences. And I love this word because it's so visceral. When I hear the word embrace I think of arms wide open ... letting down one's guard ... heart meeting heart. I think of that scene at the end of the film *Love, Actually* with the shots of people meeting their loved ones at Heathrow Airport. I think of the difference between an embrace that is polite but half-hearted and an embrace that is fueled by love—and how terrible the first kind can feel.

This is a talk aimed at inspiring you to let down your organizational guards in order to achieve what Doug Borwick calls [transformative engagement](#)—meaning engagement with the community that changes the way your organization thinks and what it does.

This is not a talk about marketing strategies and practices; it's a talk about relevance ... about matteringness.

So, without further ado, I humbly share five ways to foster transformative engagement.

## 1. Let the community back in.



For the past half century there has been a working assumption that professionalization in the arts has been an unqualified good thing. But I think we need to seriously question this idea and acknowledge what has been lost in the name of professionalization. When we professionalized, not only did we

revoke in some cases the opportunity for citizens to express themselves as creators and makers—but more generally, we abandoned the possibility of becoming fully and completely communal organizations.

One pathway to transformative engagement: design programs to let the community back in.

In the US the hands-down poster-child for leading this sort of organizational transformation is [The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History](#), run by the visionary Nina Simon. Here she is giving a [Ted Talk](#). Simon is a former engineer who has deployed her human-centered design skills to turn a traditional object-oriented museum into what she calls a *participatory* museum. If you've never read her blog, Museum 2.0, it has a wealth of information on how to do this. And she has a new book coming out in a couple weeks called the *Art of Relevance* – and I highly recommend it.

Briefly, here are a few other examples:

The **Baltimore Symphony Orchestra** has created a program called [Rusty Musicians](#) which invites hundreds of amateur instrumentalists to play alongside its professional musicians. One amateur characterized his experience as “life-changing.” Likewise, here's a photo of 200 citizens performing alongside professionals in *The Tempest*, as part of a new program of the **Public Theater** in New York City, called [Public Works](#).

And in 2007 the **Houston Grand Opera** made an extraordinary commitment to commission and produce one new opera every year, based on stories of the people and by the people of its region. The most recent project, called [After the Storm](#), tells the story of two massive hurricanes that hit the region 100 years apart, one of which killed more than 6,000 people. Alongside producing the opera, HGO also hosted an open mic night at a local speakeasy. Local poets, storytellers, and musicians performed their hurricane tales as did members of the public.

These are three examples of world-class institutions designing programs to invite the community back in—after decades of keeping them out *in the name of professionalization*.

[Nina Simon says](#) there is a question she asks herself anytime she's working on something with a participatory intent. Here it is:

*How can I invite people—staff, volunteers, community members—to help make this project better?*

By all accounts, Simon's efforts have paid off. Since she became executive director of her museum, attendance has tripled, membership has increased by 50 percent, and more than 4,000 local artists and community groups have collaborated on exhibitions and cultural events. The museum has gone from five years in the red to three years of significant budget growth and surpluses. Simon has led an institutional turnaround based on creative risk-taking, grassroots participation, and unexpected community partnerships. This is *social enterprise* at its best.

Imagine what could happen if you asked Nina's question of every project, every initiative, every aspect of your organization?

## 2. Practice radical hospitality.



Photo: Philadelphia Orchestra, 1916

“Time and again, research reveals that the biggest barriers for a disinclined audience are indifference and low familiarity, often coupled with a perception of the organization as elitist”—according to a [report](#) by the Wallace Foundation in the US, which has for years funded research on audience engagement.<sup>5</sup>

It’s not hard to understand why some people feel this way if we reflect on the fact that in the US and Europe we have perpetuated the notion that the *fine* or *high* arts are a certain kind of fare for a certain kind of people. If we want to reach non-traditional audiences, then I believe we need to consciously practice radical hospitality in four areas: where the art happens, what’s programmed, how much we charge, and how we approach people to tell them about our work.

I first encountered the term *radical hospitality* on the [website of the theater company, Mixed Blood](#), which uses the term to describe the philosophy underpinning its new *pricing* policy, which is this: *anyone* can get a free admission to any Mixed Blood show any day of the week. As with other organizations that have dramatically lowered their prices (if not to free than to a price that is much more affordable), Mixed Blood has experienced an increase in attendance, an increase in donations, and a dramatic shift in its audience demographics—attracting those who are younger and more diverse.<sup>6</sup>

**National Theatre of Scotland** is just one of several great examples of practicing radical hospitality with *place*. It formed as a “Theatre Without Walls” because it didn’t want to limit its reach to those who lived in Glasgow or had the time and resources to travel there. Arts organizations are increasingly leaving their venues to produce events throughout their communities; designing their spaces to be more social, interactive, or family friendly; inviting the public to attend rehearsals; and putting both performances and behind-the-scenes content online.

One of my favorite examples of radical hospitality in *programming* comes from **Center Stage** theater in Baltimore. When artistic direct Irene Lewis joined Center Stage in the 1990s the theater was largely producing plays by white playwrights performed by white actors. The city of Baltimore, however, is 67% African American. Lewis felt that the theater was basically ignoring two-thirds of her community

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace Foundation, *The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> You may also be interested in this discussion of Mixed Blood’s Radical Hospitality program: <http://howround.com/the-business-case-for-radical-hospitality-at-mixed-blood-theatre>

and so she began producing two or three plays each year (out of six total) that were by African American playwrights or that featured African American stories or characters. When the change was made the theater initially lost many of its White subscribers. However, Center Stage persevered and eventually replaced those lost subscribers with new patrons who embraced the new programming philosophy and values of the theater.

Notably, a key to Center Stage's success was that it didn't simply change the programming. It also changed its promotional materials to include images of African Americans attending the theater, which brings me to *promotions/communications*. Radical hospitality means we also need to think carefully about the values we stand for and how these are being consistently communicated.



What do I mean by that? Here's a brochure by an opera company in the US: What do I notice? For one, everyone in this picture is wearing fancy clothing. ... What else? The word "insiders"... So, it's all well and good that the tickets are not very expensive. What does this photo tell us about who is, or isn't, part of the opera? And what values are we triggering in the people receiving this brochure? Inclusivity? Or its opposite?

Are the images and text that we use to appeal to people further perpetuating cultural divides by signaling to some members of the community that they would not belong?

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UK author and arts leader, Julia Rowntree, once commented to me:

*Arts organizations are one of the few places that have the capacity to bring people together across divides on equal terms.*

Her comment stopped me in my tracks. And this was my very next thought:

*So isn't it radically important that we do this?*

I think it is.

### 3. Be the kitchen table. Be the campfire.



Russell Willis Taylor, who ran for years the leadership organization **National Arts Strategies**, gave a talk last year and a comment she made has stayed with me. She said:

*A community isn't just an audience ... a community talks back and it criticizes and it challenges and it questions and it reshapes our organizations to fit its needs or it walks away if we will not listen.*

Russell is, of course, absolutely right. A community isn't just an audience. And if we don't want the community to walk away then I believe we need to be the campfire, be the kitchen table that can hold the space for an ongoing conversation by and with the community. And I want to give a couple examples of arts organizations that are doing just that.

Led by Melanie Joseph for two decades, the **Foundry Theatre** in New York has produced some of the most exquisite theatrical experiences I have ever taken part in. Parallel to producing great theater, the Foundry also hosts an ongoing dialogue series that brings together artists and other citizens to discuss [important social issues](#) like Water, Gentrification, and Hunger. Melanie Joseph is not torn between doing beautiful art and being an activist working to disrupt the *status quo*. She is both. She is an activist-aesthete.

Second, a few moments ago I mentioned **Center Stage** theater in Baltimore. Director Kwame Kwei-Armah replaced Irene Lewis when she left. When Kwame came to the US in 2011 (from Britain), he asked 50 writers to write him a monologue about America entitled 'My America.' When he recently repeated the exercise, issues around *Black Lives Matter* emerged as a theme. So Kwame commissioned six new plays, each written in direct response to recent police killings in cities across America. Each play was filmed in the location of one of the killings and each took place around a metaphorical kitchen table. Kwame is [quoted in the newspaper](#) saying: "The uniting element, the American 'kitchen table,' is a place where honest discussion [can] happen." That was also the aim of an event that Center Stage hosted. Baltimore citizens gathered to discuss the six plays, which were livestreamed on YouTube, and to engage in a discussion about the topic: *Black Lives Matter*.<sup>7</sup>

I love these initiatives because they are built around the understanding that the arts have a fundamental role to play in drawing people together not only to spectate, but to reflect, discuss, debate, and imagine.

Now, of course, not every conversation needs to be political and focused on the big issues of our time. Sometimes the conversation we need to foster is more intimate, more lighthearted, more like hanging around a campfire. When the **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum** in Philadelphia decided it wanted to do a better job of reaching young professionals 18-34, who had never visited the museum, it created an evening event built around the idea of a salon. They had brief gallery talks, social games that encouraged visitors to explore the museum's collection and share their observations with each other, a bar, and live music. The [After Hours](#) events now regularly attract capacity crowds of 800 young adults per month, 90 percent of whom visit the galleries and say it is their favorite part of the evening.

What I particularly like about this program is the focus on keeping the art at the center of a social experience—making it a catalyst for a connection between people

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<sup>7</sup> You might also be interested to read this article: <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/12/22/my-america-too-is-theatre-for-the-new-civil-rights-movement/>

Deborah Cullinan, the executive director of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, recently wrote a blog post titled: [What if arts centers existed to ignite radical citizenship?](#) I love this question and the vision it promotes.

We need to create the space for conversation about the ideas that matter to those in our community. Why? In a time of uncertainty—marked by environmental, economic, and geo-political vulnerability, the conversation enables artists and other community members to come together—to share their stories, fears, hopes, values, and knowledge; and to imagine and create a more beautiful future together. The conversation is what shifts us from having a transaction to having an interaction. The conversation is what connects us between ticketed arts events. The conversation is what connects us even when the art event itself, or other things in the world, divide us. The conversation is what creates community.

#### **4. Focus on impact rather than size. Form covenants rather than contracts.**

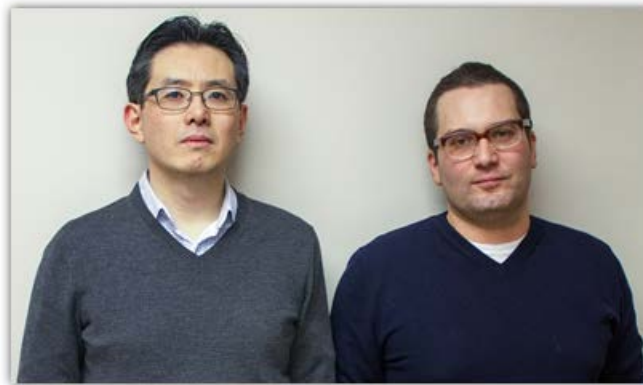


Photo: Promo Photo published on All About Jazz

So who, you may be asking yourself, are these two serious-looking guys with their V-neck sweaters and rather geeky eye-wear? Their names are Yulun Wang and Seth Rosner. And about five years ago I read a [New York Times article](#) examining the remarkable success of their avant-garde Jazz label, [Pi](#). The story caught my attention because, at the time many music labels were struggling but Pi was having great success. How did they do it? Four lessons I gleaned from the article:

1. Pi only works with artists it loves and gives every artist ample resources, attention, time, and support to make great work.
2. Pi releases only a handful of albums per year and virtually everything it releases meets with critical acclaim. It has a great reputation, a clear niche, and (because of these) a devoted, growing fan base.
3. Given the small number of albums it releases and the limited market for avant-garde Jazz, Pi keeps its overhead very low. By staying small they have been able to maintain artistic integrity.
4. Pi measures its success based not on the size of its market but on whether it is keeping its Jazz fans happy and gradually developing new Jazz listeners.



These four mutually reinforcing aspects of Pi combine to create a sustainable model. Put another way, Pi's success reminds us why small can be beautiful, why small can be better.

Rather counter-intuitively, in the nonprofit arts and culture sector, we seem to have a bias against small organizations. But in a world where agility is needed to respond to a rapidly changing environment, and where technology has made it possible for people to organize without having to form large, formal, geographically based organizations, maybe it is time to recognize the strengths of having a sector made up of hundreds of small enterprises, each with a clear focus and base of fans.

Here's another example of a small, niche arts organization—this one focused on the classical canon—that has survived a *long* time by cultivating a loyal patron base. The **Bach Choir of Bethlehem** is a nonprofit festival that has been operating continuously since 1912 and that has a unique patronage model. Since its inception the choir has employed a system of “Guarantees” which give patrons the opportunity to book tickets and choose seats according to the number of years in a row that they have supported the choir with an annual minimum pledge. While the pledge is made in advance of the Festival it is not payable until after the Festival.

Here's the really interesting aspect of this model from my perspective. At the end of the season, guarantors are rarely asked to pay the full amount they pledged. Most years, they are asked to pay only a portion of their pledge—an amount based on what the choir needs to balance its budget. In other words, the Bach Choir of Bethlehem controls its expenses and then offers to [redistribute any surpluses to its fans](#). It uses only what it needs for now, trusting that its fans will be back the following year to again provide support. By doing this, the Choir is continually earning, strengthening, and reciprocating the *trust* of its patrons.

A key lesson of both Pi and Bach Theater of Bethlehem is this:

*Fans don't want to be treated like customers*—as the owners of the Liverpool football team recently learned.

(Many thanks to Andrew McIntyre for sharing these photos with me.)



The first (which reads: Transforming fans into customers) shows the ambitions of the managers and owners of the team ...



The second is the response from the fans: “Supporters not customers.”

I would characterize the relationship that Bach Choir of Bethlehem has to its Guarantors and Pi has to its fans as a “covenant” rather than a “contract”.

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks [wrote a couple months back](#):

*A contract protects interests ... but a covenant protects relationships. ... People in a contract provide one another services, but people in a covenant delight in offering gifts.*

If we want to matter more to people we need to make covenants with them.

As Andrew McIntyre recently commented:<sup>8</sup>

*It's hard to love, support, belong to, donate to, volunteer or advocate for an organization that only wants you as a customer. When our audience has more ambition for us than we have for ourselves, we are truly through the commercial looking glass.*

We begin to treat our fans like customers when we become more interested in the money they represent than in the gift of their presence. Be cautious of growing so large that you are forced to demand more from your true fans or the community-at-large than they feel willing to give you. To be sustained, relationships need to be good for both parties—which brings me to the last recommendation.

### 5. Create scaffolds of meaning-making rather than money-making.



This is a graphic published by Target Resource Group. Here's how TRG describes the goal of increasing patron loyalty on [its blog](#):

*We love loyal patrons. Why? Simply put, they make money for arts organizations, and they make arts managers' jobs easier.*

This graphic is what I mean by a scaffold of money-making.

As the last section tried to convey, we have got things entirely upside down if we love our patrons, first and foremost, because we love their money. How does it feel if you think about being the patron in this scenario? Do you feel loved? Or do you feel a bit objectified? Exploited? Dehumanized, even? Not only is there something much more valuable that we need from our patrons than their money, this sort of philosophy upheld over time will invariably orient an organization toward caring more about those who can buy more tickets and donate more money.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew McIntyre helped curate the 2016 Creative New Zealand conference and is a principal at Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. Andrew made this comment in conjunction with our preparations for the 2016 conference.

So what might we do instead? Here's an example from the **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** in California, which instituted a new program several years ago now called [YBCA: You](#).<sup>9</sup>

The program began with three goals: to increase frequency of attendance, expand the diversity of experiences for participants, and build a community around art. And it has been successful on all three counts. Here's how it works:

**YBCA: YOU**



Like a gym membership, \$15/month gets you:

- Free cultural events
- Artist-led educational programs, salons, and tours
- Off-site field trips to other arts organizations
- Regular meet-ups at arts events and gallery crawls across the city with other arts lovers
- Your own personal art coach

For \$15 a month you get access to a slew of cultural and social events at YBCA and at other organizations in the city. But here's the part I love best. When you sign up with the program, you take a survey and then receive a call inviting you to come in and meet with your own personal Art Coach. This staffer does, essentially, an intake. He or she talks with you about your goals, your history with art (which may be none or extensive), gets to know you, and then helps you begin to come up with a customized cultural immersion plan for enhancing your creative life.

And here is an interesting tidbit: the staff member who designed this program came from a background in Public Health. He adapted the case management model to arts engagement.

This is a scaffold of meaning-making.

By the way, very little of YBCA's income comes from ticket sales. According to their annual report, a majority of their income comes from four sources: rental of their facility by community groups, raffle ticket sales from their own raffle, city government, and other sources of contributed income.

Investing in meaning-making does result in money-making—but in a way that reinforces the sense of YBCA as a public good. Like other examples I've given today, their model has structural integrity because there is an economic, aesthetic, and ethical logic that underpins it.

Here's another example of creating scaffold of meaning-making – but in another sector.

As some of you may know the **Slow Food** movement was launched in 1986 as a response to the emergence of McDonald's in Rome and the spread of the values and practices of the fast-food industry and big agri-business. The movement, at its heart, was about changing people's relationship to food through a range of strategies, including *Taste Education*, which is aimed at reawakening and training the senses and encouraging the study of food and its production.<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, when you shop at the local farmer's market you're not just exchanging \$10 for a hunk of cheese; you're exchanging values and knowledge. If you are a member of Slow Food you shift from being a food consumer to a co-producer—someone making choices on a daily basis that support the movement's goals.

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<sup>9</sup> You might also like to read this case study - <http://www.aiga.org/case-study-ybca-you-campaign/> and also watch this video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqKuSjZQ5qw>

<sup>10</sup> I have written a bit about Slow Food and lessons for the arts from the success of the movement. You can find more on Jumper-- <http://www.artsjournal.com/jumper/2010/12/slow-food-a-model-for-the-arts-and-culture-sector/> and also in Doug Borwick's book, *Building Communities, Not Audiences*. <http://artsengaged.com/bcnatoc>

Consider for a moment the enormous impact the Slow Food movement has had over the past three decades. How much more we think about what and how we eat, and where our food came from today than we did in the 1960s and 1970s when I was growing up. Compare that to what has happened with the arts over the same period of time.

Importantly, Slow Food is a move *back* to principles and practices that were in place before the industrial revolution. It represents an understanding that what we once called *progress* was not progress once we factored in the environmental, human, and cultural costs.

It's the same with the arts. Much of what we called progress in the arts the past 50 years was a move that took the arts out of the day-to-day lives of people and made them something precious for the cultured few. In the US, we are overdue in the arts for a movement that will fundamentally change the way our communities-at-large relate to the arts. We need to embrace some principles and practices that were in place before the professionalization and, with it, the corporatization of the arts.

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One brief, related personal anecdote: So, last year I taught a course in beauty and aesthetics to business school students. If you're wondering why a business school would say yes to someone proposing to teach a course in beauty, then you need to understand that over the past couple decades while the arts sector has been learning to become more business-like, business types have been trying to become more like us: more cultural, more communal, and more authentic.



In any event, when I designed the beauty class I actually started with two models in mind: The *YBCA: You* program and the *Slow Food* movement.

One of the experiences I assigned to the beauty class students was to visit an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art at the Chazen Art Museum. This is one of the pieces that they encountered—by artist Su Xinping. Before looking at the title of the piece one of the beauty class students observed, “Where is this guy going? He looks like he’s striding into Hell.”

I chuckled.

The piece is called **Busy People No. 1**.

And I remember thinking: *Yes and that is exactly where constant busyness—and a relentless focus on business—seem to lead us.*

Virginia Woolf writes in her book *Three Guineas*:

*...if people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses. Sight goes. They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. They lose their sense of proportion—the relations between one thing and another. Humanity goes.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1111</sup> Selected Works of Virginia Woolf, p. 835.

We have made tremendous administrative progress the past 50 years; we have learned how to hustle ticket sales and contributions and balance our budgets. But how well is this serving our longer term goals? What is this hustling doing to your organization's soul? Kristy Edmunds, the former curator of the Melbourne Festival, recently [commented in an interview](#):

*When in history did we begin to celebrate and honor “administrivia” and spreadsheets above literature, painting, dance, music, theater, sculpture—the contributions of artists to human awareness? Quite possibly when we started to place our collective institutional report cards up on the national fridge and ask for applause.*

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So, those are five ideas for how we might more meaningfully engage with our communities.

I mentioned earlier that there seemed to be two paths before arts organizations: one calling us to embrace the market, the other calling us to embrace a different value system. In a similar vein, Seth Godin says:

*There's one view of the world called the Wal-Mart view that says that what all people want is as much stuff as possible for as cheap a price as possible. ... And that's a world based on scarcity. I don't have enough stuff. How do I get more stuff?... There's a different view, which is the view based on abundance. [And] in an abundance economy the things we don't have enough of are connection ...and time.<sup>12</sup>*

Which world view has your organization embraced? Which will you embrace in the future?

The one defined by *scarcity*:

- where our audiences are relegated to spectating,
- where our marketing mix reinforces societal divides,
- where people show up every two years to consume some art,
- where what matters is how many people like your FB page or buy tickets to your shows,
- where art is a private good exchanged for cash,
- where you love your patrons in relationship to how much money you can get from them, and
- where the arts are valued because they are perceived to be an engine for the economy?

Or are you going to embrace the one defined by *abundance*:

- where the community is invited to co-create,
- where the arts fulfill their unique role of bringing people together across divides on equal terms,
- where the community gathers around the campfire to understand itself,
- where what matters is how much impact you have,
- where art is a gift exchanged between people in a relationship,
- where we are interested in being part of someone's lifetime journey with art and in making that journey a more meaningful one; and
- where the arts are seen as a common good, valued by society because they are the way we share with one another what it means to be human?

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<sup>12</sup> This is from an interview with Seth Godin on the Krista Tippett program, On Being. You can access the transcript here: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/seth-godin-art-noticing-and-then-creating/transcript/5004>

## Two World Views: **Embrace the Market** or **Embrace the Community**.

### Two World Views

Embrace the Market	Embrace the Community
Scarcity: People don't have enough stuff; we need to sell them more stuff.	Abundance: People don't have enough connection (I'm lonely); we need to help them connect.
Participation defined as spectating	Participation defined as co-creating
Programming, prices, places and promotions that reinforce societal divides	Bringing people together across divides on equal terms: radical hospitality
The arts as a private good, a place to consume some nice art, valued by society because of the magic pixie dust they sprinkle on the economy	The arts as a common good, a campfire that draws the community together, valued by society because they are how we share what it means to be human
Focus on increasing size (numbers) and doing transactions (contracts)	Focus on increasing impact (mattering) and on making covenants (relationships)
Relationship building = creating scaffolds of money-making. Love = More Money.	Relationship building = creating scaffolds of meaning-making. Love = More Meaning.

From where I sit, New Zealand, you are primed to choose the community because, at the heart of it, these are values and practices that are inherent to your society and, in particular, an indigenous worldview—and are here upheld by the Maori culture.

Sebastian Junger asserts that modern society has perfected the art of making people feel unnecessary and that tribal cultures can teach us a lot about “loyalty, belonging, and the eternal quest for meaning”—which is, at the heart of it, what I’ve been talking about today.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, you must choose to embrace the community path or else you will default to embracing the market. Why?

Because it is not just the United States that is becoming a market society—indeed, one can see evidence of it in the UK, across Europe, and, yes, in Australia and New Zealand. You, too, face growing income inequality, and pressure for the arts to contribute to economic growth, and declines in funding due to the loss of lottery funds and the threat of an increasingly winner-take-all arts sector. You can let yourself get dragged along with the larger forces or, you can resist.

Our communities *need* us to resist the market, now perhaps more than ever.

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks argues in the [column on covenants that I quoted earlier](#) that there are forces coursing through all modern societies that, while liberating the individual, are

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<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Junger, *Tribe*, p. xvii.

challenging to social cohesion ... meaning the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper together.<sup>14</sup>

Friends, this is our crisis today. And we need to wake up to it.

Who better than the arts to contribute to the fostering of community, of social cohesion? And do we understand that without this trust and cohesion that many other things—including the economy—will begin to break down?



I took this photo when I was at a Common Cause retreat. (It's in color believe it or not.) Common Cause is an organization that encourages Nonprofits to work together [to advance a common set of compassionate values](#). At this residential training we lived in eco-huts in a remote part of Wales and at the first gathering we sat in a circle and talked about why we had chosen to be there. Here's what I said:

*I'm here because I'm trying to figure out what I'm laboring for that transcends arts and culture. I'm here because I feel like I've been talking in a closed circuit and I want to join up the conversation we're having in the arts with the conversation others are having about the environment, or human rights, or education. I'm here because I don't know if I can continue to work on behalf of the arts if the arts are only interested in advancing themselves. I'm here because I'm worried about things like growing income inequality and suspect that growing income inequality may actually benefit the arts. And what are we going to do about that? I'm here because I'm worried about cultural divides and that the arts perpetuate them more than they help to bridge them.*

That realization, at that event, has inspired much of my writing and thinking the past few years, including the ideas in this talk.

I believe the arts could be a force for good, but I believe we will need to change as leaders, and as organizations, in relationship to our communities, for them to be so—particularly in the US. Let us be your cautionary tale.

Here's a question you might ponder sometime:

*What are you laboring for that transcends your organization and your position within it—what values, goals, or progress in the world? Indeed, what are we all laboring for in the arts? What's the change we want to see?*

How about less injury and more beauty in the world?

When I asked the beauty class students to write to me and tell me how, if at all, the course was changing them, one student wrote: "This course is transforming us into people who care." That's what the arts have the ability to do.

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<sup>14</sup> The four forces are global migration, economic globalization, the Internet, and a culture of autonomy

The writer Jeanette Winterson says that [art is a different value system](#) and the writer Bill Sharpe asserts in [his book](#) that art is the way we share with one another what it means to be human. Do we believe them? Are we game for *that* work? If so then that is where we need to put our attention.

Finding the resources to do what we do is *necessary*, but it's not *the point of our existence*. Our concern is relevance. Our concern is mattering. Hustling ticket sales and contributions will not get us there.

I know you are all doing extraordinary work; yet I challenge you to ask yourself, "Where can we be better?" I encourage you to let down your guards wherever you can. And to let the community in so you can co-create together.

*Thank you for your kind attention.*