

## The Disinclined: Right Where We Want Them?

Arts participation is at times a woolly topic and theories on engaging people in the arts abound. Several years ago, Jerry Yoshitomi wrote about a still-utilized arts participation framework, published in 2001 by RAND, that divides people into three categories: currently participating, inclined to participate, and disinclined to participate. Yoshitomi describes the “disinclined” as those with negative perceptions of what it means to participate in arts activities and notes that such perceptions—that they would be unlike others in attendance, or would be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the work—are based on such factors as socio-demographics, past experiences, and identity.<sup>1</sup>

One wonders if the negative perceptions of the disinclined are inaccurate if one considers that arts organizations routinely:

- Cater to and value the opinions of the intelligentsia and the critics over others;
- Through advertising and pricing give the perception that the arts are for an elite group of cultural sophisticates;
- Create large, intimidating upscale venues or dark, mysterious alternative venues and do little to make newcomers feel welcome;
- Promote artistic hierarchies (Bach is intrinsically better than Bjork, who is intrinsically better than my brother, Mickey, who plays banjo in a pro-am banjo club in St. Louis, Missouri) and (often inexplicably) value certain kinds of art and experiences (and the people who engage in them) over others;
- Underscore distinctions between those who have the “talent” to do, and those who should be content to “view”;
- Privilege “liveness” over mediated art forms and resist allowing the live arts to be distributed and modified electronically even though this might enable the arts to reach more people;
- Disregard the clear connection between making art and consuming art and strive to build patrons for their institutions without also providing validation and meaningful opportunities for people of all ages to explore their own creativity;
- Fail to provide the information, guidance, and encouragement that could help people confidently and enjoyably navigate the arts scene and derive greater meaning and pleasure therein.

This prompts the questions: How committed are arts organizations to engaging the disinclined? And if they have failed to engage the broader population is it, in part, because they are ambivalent about doing so?

The negative perceptions of the disinclined must be addressed and changed if we are to significantly increase audiences. To do this, two things must be acknowledged:

First, the determination of what is considered “art”, and who gets to call oneself “artistic” or “artist”, are key drivers of which publics are engaged, and how. If art and artistic practice are defined narrowly then audiences (their size and the nature of their participation) will be small and limited. Relevance cannot be relegated to the PR department. Arts organizations may be

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Yoshitomi, “New Fundamentals and Practices to Increase Cultural Participation and Develop Arts Audiences” available at <http://www.artspresenters.org/members/pdf/newfundamentals.pdf>: an essay in response to “A New Framework for Building Participation on the Arts,” by Kevin F. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett (RAND, 2001).

failing to engage more people because they have too narrow a viewpoint on what a legitimate artistic experience is or whom they exist to serve.

Second, creating a vast supply of art and developing the capacity for people to derive meaning, understanding, and enjoyment therein are two separate things. How does one access and make sense of an arts scene that seems to demand prerequisite information and navigational skills one gains only by being an insider? If there is a chasm between “the arts” and “society,” nonprofit arts organizations may need to create the necessary bridges and then reach across them and provide the requisite knowledge and experiences so that youth and adults can develop their tastes, expand their palettes, and enjoy the arts.

Third, while an individual organization may be able to develop a “member,” true arts participation—if defined as helping an individual develop his or her creativity and capacity to meaningfully engage with the arts—takes a village. Before competing over slices of the pie, organizations may need to work together to grow the pie.

Finally, I would like to challenge the use of the term *disinclined*, as it is not only imprecise but implies an unwillingness to participate. The so-called disinclined might be better characterized, for instance, as “uninformed” “deprived,” “uncertain,” “confused,” “intimidated,” or “skeptical.” If arts organizations were to think about non-attenders in these more precise terms, then perhaps they could develop more effective strategies for engaging them.

If people are feeling “disinclined”—mystified, unworthy, and on the outside—then the nonprofit arts have failed and need to step up. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Arts Engagement—brokering relationships between people and art(ists)—may simply require more of cultural institutions than they have been required to provide in the past.

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Her viewpoints are personal and should not be taken to be the viewpoints of the Foundation.

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