Questioning The Innovation Agenda: A Critique of Innovation In The Arts

Six essays by Andrew Horwitz
From the 2006 launch of The James Irvine Foundation’s Arts Innovation Fund to the upcoming 2013 National Innovation Summit for Arts + Culture, the Innovation Agenda in the Arts has grown exponentially, gaining ever-wider acceptance until it has become the coin of the realm of the funding world. Over the course of time, “innovation” has become the cornerstone of a sizable industry of consultants, analysts and facilitators offering their services to help guide funders in their program strategies and then implement those strategies. Consultants hired by funders enjoin arts organizations to become more innovative and encourage artist service organizations to transform artists into entrepreneurs.

But despite the best intentions of many very smart and dedicated individuals, there is little evidence to suggest that these efforts at innovation have made any impact whatsoever. Even the Arts Innovation Fund’s final report, prepared by SloverLinnett Strategies, admits that, “As of this writing, most of the Arts Innovation Fund projects appear to have limited long-term prospects.” (Though their number one recommendation is, not surprisingly, “Build third-party consulting into grant programs that support innovation and change, but give grantees choices when it comes to selecting their consultants.”)

If there is no significant quantitative data to confirm the success of the Innovation Agenda, why does it still loom so large in the landscape, why are these strategies being propagated and implemented despite no tangible proof of their impact?

We propose that the very premise of the Arts Innovation Agenda as it is currently conceived is fundamentally flawed and inherently problematic. Many of its underlying assumptions have gone unquestioned, and much of the basic terminology has been accepted without rigorous inquiry, to the detriment of artists, organizations and funders alike.

While comprehensive quantitative analysis is beyond the scope of my expertise or capacity, I hope that these essays will encourage others to take a closer look. All I can do is ask questions, propose alternatives and offer a critical perspective drawn from my lived experience of being a critic, curator, artist, administrator, producer, and even, briefly, a funder.

If there is any confusion about my use of the word “critic” I refer you to my previous essay, “Re-Framing The Critic for the 21st Century”, where I quote Daniel Mendelsohn as saying, “…the serious literary critic (or dance critic, or music critic) loves his subject above anything else…”
Questioning The Innovation Agenda

by Andy Horwitz

Questioning The Innovation Agenda is the first of a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact.

MISTAKEN ASSUMPTIONS

Because something is happening here but you don’t know what it is. Do you, Mr. Jones? (“Ballad of a Thin Man”, Bob Dylan)

Conventional wisdom holds that the arts in America are in crisis. The arts as we know it are in decline. The arts are losing cultural relevance as quickly as they are losing audience, legacy institutions are hemorrhaging money as they fail to adapt to changing social structures and demographics. All the reliable, well-known structural support for the old economic models are failing and nothing new is coming to take their place. The sky is falling!

Only it isn't.

The Arts in America are more vital and dynamic than ever. Dance, theater, music, visual art, film, new media, and an ever-increasing number of projects that exist outside of any traditional definition of discipline, are flourishing throughout the country. In fact, I would say we are in one of the most inventive moments in the arts in recent history! It’s just that none of it is happening in symphonies, operas, ballets or regional theaters. It is happening in small artist-run spaces, through community organizations and annual festivals, it is happening in Des Moines and Atlanta and Detroit and Philadelphia, it is happening at pop-up spaces and in living rooms, at informal gatherings organized by non-hierarchical organizations that are “organizations” only insofar as they are comprised of multiple individuals working together. Art is happening everywhere, and thriving everywhere, except in large arts institutions.

So when I read the foreword to the Irvine Foundation’s final report on the Arts Innovation Fund, one key flaw of the entire innovation enterprise becomes apparent:

We launched the Arts Innovation Fund in 2006 to help California’s largest cultural institutions learn how they might become more capable of adapting to widespread changes affecting their businesses. The initiative enabled these institutions to conduct projects as a type of research that would shed light on their appetite for these innovations, their capacity to produce them and the enduring impact they might achieve from new practices.

We have long partnered with major arts organizations because they are important to civic life and essential to a stable arts ecosystem. Their ability to evolve and gain relevance in today's California correlates to the quality of life in our local communities.
Major arts organizations are not the only arts structure that is important to civic life nor are they essential to a stable arts ecosystem. Civic life depends on engaged and active citizens, not institutions. A stable arts ecosystem depends on equitable economic structures and mechanisms for capital allocation; stability depends on mitigating the precarity of as many stakeholders as possible in an interdependent system.

As new technology continues to transform the everyday life of the individual, those transformations ripple outwards to influence the organizational structures of our society. Our behavior changes along with our expectations of how we interact with the world around us.

In a world where individuals come together for a project, accomplish it and move on, permanence seems archaic. In a world of autodidactic polymaths, the so-called “expert” invested with cultural authority by hegemonic institutions seems suspect. In a world of conditional hierarchies, organizational transparency, cultures of collaboration and “free”, top-down, opaque, closed-system, high-cost institutions are an affront. (If you haven’t read *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, now would be a good time to do so.)

In light of these changes, large, vertically integrated arts institutions attempting to assert cultural hegemony seem less and less relevant, less and less able to deliver on their value propositions. By virtue of their size and the necessary infrastructure required for them to exist, they are essentially resistant to adaptation.

Thus the underlying assumption that the arts in America are in crisis and in need of innovation is wrong. Major arts institutions, and the system that privileges them, are in crisis and in need of innovation. In fact, I would propose that it is less essential that major arts organizations innovate as it is crucial that the system needs to be re-imagined, but I will get to that later.

The second major flaw is the use of the term “innovation” and the belief that the pursuit of innovation unto itself, applied widely across the arts sector, will prove to be a successful strategy for creating lasting, meaningful change.

**ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES**

The other day I asked someone what time it was and they responded, “I don’t know, I don’t have my phone.”

Every time I have that conversation I reflect on how much the world has changed during my lifetime. I’m not so old, but I’m old enough to remember when that statement would have sounded like a surreal knock-knock joke. Referring to our handheld mobile digital devices as “phones” is a reflexive habit, a quaint anachronism. The landline telephone was the interface for a closed system two-way communication platform. The mobile phone was an innovation to the existing interface that allowed us to access the communication platform from anywhere. But the invention of the handheld mobile digital device, in the form of the iPhone, was a game-changing disruption that fundamentally redefined how we communicate.

The iPhone didn’t come from the telecom industry any more than the iPod came from the recording industry, because those industries don’t think the way Apple does. Before the iPhone and iPod, the telecom and recording industries had existing systems that were generating revenue, they had longstanding legacy structures in place; if they faced so-called “adaptive challenges” in the form of falling revenue or diminishing market share, they hired expert consultants to identify and “fix” them, but they weren’t in a position to fundamentally reimagine their businesses or interrogate their assumptions about the market and their role in it. Even the market-dominant software behemoth Microsoft didn’t think like Apple. Who can forget what Steve Ballmer said about the iPhone back in 2007?:

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There’s no chance that the **iPhone** is going to get any significant market share. No chance. It’s a $500 subsidized item. They may make a lot of money. But if you actually take a look at the 1.3 billion phones that get sold, I’d prefer to have our software in 60% or 70% or 80% of them, than I would to have 2% or 3%, which is what Apple might get.

And we all know how *that* worked out.

Back in 2000 I was working as an interactive producer and brand strategist at a major global ad agency when Jeff Dachis, co-founder of Razorfish, was relentlessly mocked in the mainstream media for **not being able to explain his business clearly** to senior *60 Minutes II* Correspondent Bob Simon:

What does Razorfish actually do? Dachis, who is worth about $180 million, has a little trouble with that question. "We’ve asked our clients to recontextualize their business," he said. “We’ve recontextualized what it is to be a services business.”

Which means? ”We radically transform businesses to invent and reinvent them,” he said.

These days that statement makes complete sense, but back then most people thought Dachis was being disingenuous at best, a cocksure braggart snake oil peddler at worst.

In 2011 Jeff Bezos addressed an Amazon shareholders meeting by saying:

A big piece of the story we tell ourselves about who we are is that we are willing to invent. We are willing to think long-term…. And, very importantly, we are willing to be misunderstood for long periods of time.

I believe if you don’t have that set of things in your corporate culture, then you can’t do large-scale invention. You can do incremental invention, which is critically important for any company. But it is very difficult — if you are not willing to be misunderstood. People will misunderstand you.

Any time you do something big, that’s disruptive — Kindle, AWS — there will be critics. And there will be at least two kinds of critics. There will be well-meaning critics who genuinely misunderstand what you are doing or genuinely have a different opinion. And there will be the self-interested critics that have a vested interest in not liking what you are doing and they will have reason to misunderstand. And you have to be willing to ignore both types of critics. You listen to them, because you want to see, always testing, is it possible they are right?

*But if you hold back and you say, ‘No, we believe in this vision,’ then you just stay heads down, stay focused and you build out your vision.*

Notice that Bezos doesn’t use the word innovation but, rather, **invention**: earlier I talked about the invention of the iPhone. While there are various — and always evolving — models around processes of change, many are derived from this model of the three phases of the process of Technological Change:

When we talk about creating change, innovation is only one part of a complex and dynamic process that is actually predicated on invention. And while I know Wikipedia is an unreliable source, I will quote this entry because it is apt:
Invention is often a creative process. An open and curious mind allows an inventor to see beyond what is known. Seeing a new possibility, connection, or relationship can spark an invention. Inventive thinking frequently involves combining concepts or elements from different realms that would not normally be put together.

To put it bluntly, if you spend all your time innovating the horse and buggy, you’re never going to invent the automobile. Major legacy arts organizations are the 21st century equivalents of the horse & buggy.

The profound – and real – changes in society wrought by rapidly evolving technology, domestic and global politics, economic volatility and the inevitable shifts in civic and cultural life require reinvention, not innovation alone. Innovation is, more likely, a parallel process, a byproduct even, of invention, for it is invention that drives people to create something that has been imagined but never existed, or to reveal that which has heretofore been hidden or overlooked.

Looking at it from this perspective we see that the Innovation Agenda itself suffers from several significant adaptive challenges, the first being that funders are looking for innovation in all the wrong places.

When we look at truly inventive – and disruptive – businessmen like Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos we see people who are inventors, who have the ambition to see things not as they are but as they might be, a willingness to be misunderstood for long periods of time, the vision to think long-term and the resolve to stick to that vision when things get rough. Apple, Amazon, Google, and many of the major corporations currently shaping our world, differ in many ways. But what they share is a worldview that embraces whole systems, not mere parts, and celebrates the excitement of discovery rather than mere mastery of the known.

That sounds like what artists do. So if artists invent and entrepreneurs innovate, then individuals who can do both, or organizations that can put inventors and innovators together then get out of the way, will be the most likely transformational influencers in the sector.

Unfortunately existing innovation strategies mostly seek to introduce new practices to large, unwieldy organizations and hope it will trickle down rather than going where the innovation already is (artists, small organizations, new independent initiatives and start-ups) and fostering it, allowing it to bubble up and out.

The second major adaptive challenge is that the innovation frameworks and methodologies currently deployed originate from the corporate sector, with little if any relevance to the arts sector. Management techniques and innovation strategies from the corporate sector may tangentially apply to large, legacy arts organizations, but they are almost entirely inapplicable to small and medium sized organizations, much less to artists.

These corporate frameworks and practices, mandatorily imposed on small and medium sized organizations under the rubric of “innovation”, do more harm than good, compelling these organizations to create new programs to attract funding, divert financial resources and sweat equity to administer these new programs and comply with reporting requirements. These added responsibilities increasingly divert these arts organizations from their missions and core competencies.
At the same time, the Innovation Agenda seeks to transform artists into entrepreneurs, though the very notion of the entrepreneur has itself undergone profound transformation. Nathan Heller’s recent essay in The New Yorker, “Bay Watched” proposed:

The word ‘entrepreneur’ has undergone a redefinition,” Ben Casnocha told me over lunch one day at LinkedIn’s Mountain View campus, down the road from Google. “For a while, it was like you’re either running the laundromat or the coffee shop, or you’re trying to create the next Apple. But there’s been a whole flourishing of people who are starting different kinds of businesses—who are having pride in a small business that gives them autonomy.

Increasingly what we see in the New Economy are entrepreneurs using practices usually found among artists such as collaboration, sharing, trial and error, bricolage, non-traditional organizational structures and diverse funding streams. Yet the Innovation Agenda in the Arts continues to impose corporate entrepreneurial frameworks onto artists, trying to teach them to be like corporate middle managers and businessmen, rather than looking to artists for innovative entrepreneurial strategies.

While the deleterious effects of pervasive corporate values in the arts sector is nothing new, the Innovation Agenda has provided a new and increasingly insidious challenge. The pursuit of innovation and its attendant vocabularies are incredibly effective in creating the appearance of change, of supporting our perception of ourselves as “change agents” even as we perpetuate systemic dysfunction. Thus well-meaning, thoughtful, passionate and dedicated people will take on the mantle of innovation out of a desire to create change only to find themselves frustrated, years later, to be confronted with the same questions and same problems.

We’ll discuss that in the next essay.
The Appearance of Innovation

by Andy Horwitz

October 17, 2013

The Appearance of Innovation is the second in a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact.

In the first essay of this series we asked the questions:

If there is no significant quantitative data to confirm the success of the Innovation Agenda, why does it still loom so large in the landscape, why are these strategies being propagated and implemented despite no tangible proof of their impact?

and

Why do so many well-meaning, thoughtful, passionate and dedicated people take on the mantle of innovation out of a desire to create change only to find themselves frustrated, years later, to be confronted with the same questions and same problems?

It is probably because the Innovation Agenda is incredibly seductive.

Since the Innovation Industry originates in the corporate sector, it has an exciting vocabulary borrowed from the business world, one that is prone to buzzwords and rife with marketing-speak designed to create the appearance of novelty, dynamism and action. We are told we face “adaptive challenges” and are encouraged to be “change agents” pursuing “disruptive” strategies to “redefine our business”. We are overwhelmed with a relentless onslaught of corporate jargon, and we are susceptible because we’ve been indoctrinated to believe that the businessmen and consultants are always right. We become vulnerable, lose faith. But how does jargon work, why does it work so well and how can we resist its siren song?

Central to the modern Innovation Industry – and by extension the Innovation Agenda in the Arts – is the creation, introduction and diffusion of memes, a word coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 and defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as, “an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture.” The fabrication, replication and dissemination of memes can be as much a shell game and mechanism for creating value in the Information Age as it is a legitimate component of non-hierarchical, distributive discourse; to understand the seduction of the innovation agenda, it is necessary to understand the meme as a unit of currency in what I call the “ideas economy”.

While ideas and discourse have been a part of the human experience since we first became conscious, the “ideas economy” as we currently know it probably dates back to the moment when popular guides to “self-improvement” cross-pollinated with popular guides to effective business strategies. From the early days of Dale Carnegie to today’s empire of TED, a vast marketplace of ideas has emerged, for good or ill. The good part is that there can never be too many ideas, though parsing the good ones from the bad ones still requires diligence and perspicacity. The bad part is that as ideas increasingly become marketable commodities, the
demands of the media through which they are disseminated and sold inevitably result in their simplification and diminution. Webcasts, podcasts and PowerPoint are not conducive to complexity or even, necessarily inspiring rhetoric. (My favorite demonstration of this is Peter Norvig's PowerPoint version of The Gettysburg Address).

So as ideas emerge from research and development, become productized and delivered to market, they are broken down into memes that can replicate. The faster they replicate and the further they spread, the more they increase the brand value of the meme’s originator (and subsequent memes he or she may create) while providing opportunities for “idea innovators” to modify, augment or subvert the meme to create new value. The challenge is that the creation of value often results in the destruction of meaning.

In the study of semiotics we encounter the notion of “slippage”, a condition in which distance arises between the signer and the signified, often to such an extent as to confound meaning. Memes, by virtue of their ephemerality and viral nature, are prone to slippage as they move through the unstable landscape of media and cultural discourse, morphing as they go. Thus memes in the ideas economy go viral and undergo extreme slippage, to the point where the use of these memes serves more as an expression of a desire to appear innovative than to engage with the idea that it is meant to signify.

Take, for instance, the trendy meme of “the commons”. According to Wikipedia, (which is, in fact, a commons):

| There are a number of important aspects that can be used to describe true commons. The first is that the commons cannot be commodified – if they are, they cease to be commons. The second aspect is that unlike private property, the commons are inclusive rather than exclusive — their nature is to share ownership as widely, rather than as narrowly, as possible… |

So Wikipedia, because it is massively open and participatory, inclusive and collaboratively edited, managed, operated and supported by its community, is a true Commons. However, if you build a website and receive a big grant to run it, if you get paid to be the editor, solicit content, edit that content, choose which contributors to pay and how much to pay them, by definition, this is not a commons. If all the administrative decisions on editorial policy, organizational strategy, funding initiatives and management of human and capital resources are made by leadership and not the constituency, it is not a commons. You can call it a commons until the cows come home, but you have not built a commons.

I am vehement about this because in the rush to create “commons” people often neglect one key point: if the commons is open to all and benefits everyone, then everyone must be invested in and responsible for its stewardship and care. Everyone has to be able to collectively tend to the commons, which demands universal access. The commons is both a shared benefit and responsibility; it demands cooperation and collaboration for the collective good. That’s how it works. You can’t create a unilateral commons; it is contradictory, bordering on hypocritical. (I have so much more to say on this and why this is so important, but in the interest of time I will direct you to the last two paragraphs of this article on Salon.com.)

Thus in the world of arts administration, we frequently find ourselves adrift in a sea of meaninglessness masquerading as “Big Ideas”. Usually conveyed over the course of a weekend intensive in a conference room suffused with fluorescent light, these “Big Ideas” are conveyed with urgency and conviction by corporate-trained proselytizers bearing visually enticing PowerPoint slides. Eventually you will find yourself bludgeoned into submission, no longer questioning the relentless flow of gibberish. If I had the time I would do for Innovation-Speak what artists David Levine and Alix Rule did for International Art English or maybe build an Arts Innovation Language Generator like this Corporate Gibberish Generator. Nothing says “innovation” like
“We’re exercising our under-utilized organizational muscles to develop processes to manage conflicts around the change initiatives we’ve implemented to address our adaptive challenges and build stabilizing capacity.”

I’m not just being glib. The persistent invasive creep of corporate innovation language into the arts poses an almost existential threat to our enterprise, which is, at its core, the creation of meaning. As Andrew Simonet said in his presentation to the Brooklyn Commune, we’re inundated by messages in all media – television, books, internet, phones, radio – almost all of which exist primarily to sell us something. The entire raison d’etre of 98% of everything we see, hear, read or experience is to get us to consume a product or buy a service, usually something we don’t need or even want. Nearly every image we see, sound we hear, or word we read emanating from ubiquitous on-demand entertainment platforms during the 24-hour news cycle is rigorously calibrated to maximize disorientation and unease, to create a sense of material want while stimulating inchoate psychological terror that can only be assuaged through consumption. This is by design and necessity; corporations study human behavior and develop complex systems for the creation of desire and its fulfillment, these cycles are known in video game design, for instance, as “satisfaction loops”.

The not-for-profit arts sector is the tiniest sliver of a tiny sliver of an even tinier and ever-shrinking corner of the world that is, ideally, not supposed to be about selling anything to anybody. Our entire existence is predicated on seeking meaning beyond commerce. Our endeavor is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, we are public servants attending the oft-neglected but all-too-real human need to cultivate wisdom, contemplate existence and create beauty (see Maslow). Artists are called to make the unseen visible, to bridge the unbearable existential chasm between interior isolated selves, to bring human beings together in real time to connect, to share, to learn, to grow, to co-develop more fully realized selves. If we conduct ourselves only according to the logic and values of the market, if we willingly participate in the creation of meaninglessness, or abdicate the struggle to make meaning in the face of meaninglessness, we are lost.

This may seem hyperbolic, but let’s look at an example.

In the first part of this essay I discussed memes and slippage and how ideas, as commodities, become distorted, creating the appearance of innovation when nothing underneath has actually changed. At the same time, the cumulative effect of the proliferation of memes with their aggressive viral spread and concomitant extreme slippage is one of hyperinflation: a bubble in the ideas economy that must, inevitably, burst.

One of the most hyper-inflated memes in the ideas economy of the arts is “sustainability.” Sustainability has undergone such extreme slippage that I’m not sure anyone really knows what it is supposed to mean anymore. Now, I’m not so cynical as to suggest that the sustainability bubble has burst, but from where I’m sitting it looks like it is waning, only to be supplanted by the meme of resilience. I don’t know who introduced resilience, or started aggressively replicating it (Andrew Zolli, maybe?) but it has been gaining ground.

In any case, this is problematic, because as the meme of resilience supplants the meme of sustainability, the tangible efforts to create real change become obscured by an ever-shifting set of guideposts. Taking these abstract ideas, that generally originate from very specific contexts, and translating them into new contexts is difficult under the best of circumstances. Even if the ideas deftly adapt to the new context, it is highly likely that through overuse the words will become mere signifiers for a general attitude or perspective, but not a tangible course of action. For instance words like “organic” and “artisanal” and “all-natural” become brand positioning reference points rather than indicating any actual quality of the product in question. In this way once-meaningful terms may serve to create the appearance of change, while preserving the status quo. And this is the slippery slope of the Innovation Agenda.

Even given the dangers of slippage inherent in meme propagation, I would like to propose the adoption of a relatively new meme, one that hasn’t quite fully worked its way into the ideas economy: interdependence.
If sustainability is predicated on resilience and resilience requires flexible, redundant systems, then the viability of the macro-system in aggregate is predicated on interdependence.

When we use terms like “ecology” or “ecosystem” to describe a particular culture or social structure, we are using a kind of shorthand for interdependent support systems. The social, biological, mechanical and digital worlds all require reliable interdependent systems to protect against massive macro-systemic failure.

In the first essay of this series we quoted the Irvine Foundation’s final report on the Arts Innovation Fund as saying:

We have long partnered with major arts organizations because they are important to civic life and essential to a stable arts ecosystem. Their ability to evolve and gain relevance in today’s California correlates to the quality of life in our local communities.

And responded that:

Major arts organizations are not the only arts structure that is important to civic life nor are they essential to a stable arts ecosystem. Civic life depends on engaged and active citizens, not institutions. A stable arts ecosystem depends on equitable economic structures and mechanisms for capital allocation; stability depends on mitigating the precarity of as many stakeholders as possible in an interdependent system.

And this is the key insight – that “the arts” writ large is an interdependent ecosystem where small and medium sized arts organizations, along with major legacy arts institutions, serve as a kind of circulatory system through which a diverse array of artists flow, providing essential nourishment for the body politic. If we focus solely on major arts organizations, or neglect to develop and steward circulatory systems between organizations, then we perpetuate systemic dysfunction and flirt with macro-systemic failure.

So if, for argument’s sake, we accept the prevailing definition of innovation in the arts as “instances of change that result from a shift in underlying … assumptions” then the only way the innovation agenda will succeed is to completely reframe the underlying assumptions currently held to be true. A stable arts ecosystem demands an equitable flow of resources throughout an interdependent system; it demands that we counter corporate metrics for productivity, growth and value with viable, thoughtful responses predicated on our own values, resist the seductive jargon that creates the appearance of innovation while we seek out the real and make meaning.

But in order to counter corporate metrics for productivity, growth and value with viable, thoughtful responses, we need to understand more fully what those corporate frameworks are.
Corporate Influence and the Innovation Agenda

by Andy Horwitz

*Corporate Influence and the Innovation Agenda* is the third in a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact.

It is certainly not new information that the boards and donors of major legacy arts organizations come largely from the corporate world and wield enormous influence in the priorities and managerial dynamics of those institutions. Nor is it new information that the major foundations — all foundations, actually — acquire their capital through the financial services sector and are obligated by law to disburse 5% of their assets. (This is, I’m told, a result of the Tax Reform Act of 1969 which was supposedly enacted, in part, as retribution by Republicans against the Ford Foundation’s active support of civil rights and voter enrollment organizations.)

The redirection of excess capital through philanthropy is a remarkable American invention, one often underappreciated as a means to pursue social progress and support charitable work. While in Europe central governments have historically taken on this role, America depends heavily on the private philanthropic sector and, for many years, this worked, more or less. However, an argument can be made that over the past 30 or so years — and with the rise of a particularly virulent strain of corporate capitalism — the gap between accepted corporate values and the values of a humanistic society have widened to a seemingly unbridgeable chasm. And herein lies the problem.

Because the not-for-profit sector depends on the corporate sector for support, and because we live in a society where success in business is the measure of all things, we reflexively acquiesce to the assumed expertise of our corporate patrons. However, most of the underlying assumptions of the market-driven corporate business world are fundamentally inappropriate for a cultural sector situated in a not-for-profit economy.

Not to be too obvious, but there is a reason that the arts, humanities and education, not to mention a great deal of mathematics and science — all of which are actually just different facets of the same field of endeavor — are situated in the not-for-profit sector and are funded, largely, through philanthropy. It is because they are not *for* profit. They’re for something else.

In the recent flap over the “Heart of The Matter”, a report by the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences and funded by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, one kept hearing the phrase “We need to make the case for the humanities” and I have been hearing the phrase “We need to make the case for the arts” since I first became an arts administrator in 2002.

If one is asked to “make the case” for the value of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake without concern for profitability, the necessity of leading an examined life, the longitudinal value of fostering the individual’s human development through creativity, intellectual curiosity and reasoned discourse, then one is already at a profound disadvantage. If one is asked to “make a case” for why the quality of human life matters as much as the relentless pursuit of money, then we are in dire straits indeed, as the question itself indicates an unbridgeable and irremediable bias that, in being asked, reveals the interlocutor’s assumption of your lack of value.

The not-for-profit sector’s unquestioning acceptance of corporate values as a measure of success and the near-universal assumption that the logic of business is sage and sound has created a culture gap that has only rarely been addressed publicly until recently. In his July 27 Op-Ed to the New York Times Peter Buffett wrote:
And with more business-minded folks getting into the act, business principles are trumpeted as an important element to add to the philanthropic sector. I now hear people ask, “what’s the R.O.I.?” when it comes to alleviating human suffering, as if return on investment were the only measure of success. Micro-lending and financial literacy (now I’m going to upset people who are wonderful folks and a few dear friends) — what is this really about? People will certainly learn how to integrate into our system of debt and repayment with interest. People will rise above making $2 a day to enter our world of goods and services so they can buy more. But doesn’t all this just feed the beast?

I’m really not calling for an end to capitalism; I’m calling for humanism.

Buffett’s use of the term R.O.I is significant here for many reasons. In the corporate world, particularly the financial services sector, the emphasis is almost entirely on short-term R.O.I. Slow, measured, incremental growth over time is considered old-fashioned and conservative, long-term planning and vision are almost entirely absent. The only thing that matters, we are told is “shareholder value”, or at least the appearance of creating shareholder value while lining one’s own pockets.

From an arts perspective – and that of most humanistic endeavors – there’s no such thing as short-term R.O.I. Human development is a lifelong activity and the investments we make in the arts, education, humanities and sciences (not outcome-based corporate research) yield returns on long arcs and in subtle ways. Our “shareholders” are the entirety of the human species, animals, plants and the planet itself.

If one function of the arts and culture sector is the production of social objects around which communities form, and insofar as these events create opportunities for meaningful interpersonal interactions in public space, reinforcing the social fabric and promoting social coherence, then the value is difficult to measure with existing methodologies.

It is nearly impossible to measure the increased emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing that results from habitual, communal, social, creative engagement. It is difficult to quantify the value of fostering healthy, imaginative communities and how cultural activities may mitigate the deleterious effects of social conflict or persistent socioeconomic stressors. How does one quantify the economic benefits of civil stability and correlate that to a healthy cultural ecology?

While we can point to example after example of how the adoption of corporate values has imperiled the not-for-profit sector, we must also hold ourselves accountable for our complete failure to counter corporate logic with a compelling alternative.

In Rachel Aviv’s recent New Yorker article “The Imperial Presidency” about the current president of NYU, she notes:

Craig Calhoun, the director of the London School of Economics and a sociologist who studies higher education, said that faculty members, too, have accepted the logic of the corporate world; rather than spending their careers at one university and devoting themselves to its improvement, they are often on the market, looking for a better deal. He said he wished more tenured professors would be more proactive in responding to the changing conditions of their work. “They are extremely conservative and tend to look at things in a narrow, self-interested way,” he said. “It would be a tremendous resource if they were the ones coming up with ideas about how the university can change to meet future challenges. But all they have is a defense of the status quo.”
While Aviv's area of concern is higher education, her insights could just as well be derived from a close examination of most of our cultural institutions and the philanthropic structures that support them.

The corporatization of the major legacy arts organizations has introduced to the sector a certain amount of beneficial professionalization; even in my (comparatively) short career I have seen introduced expectations of fiscal accountability, stable workplaces and management best practices that were not present when I started. At the same time, this professionalization has created a huge swath of arts administrators who have been trained in corporate management techniques that are widely inapplicable except in the largest and most well funded institutions.

What's more, these techniques are aggressively marketed down the ladder, all the way to the BoP community arts organizations. For instance, it is mandatory for recipients of Bloomberg Foundation funding to take classes with Michael Kaiser. The classes are “free” but the cost of diverting the already-limited time of senior organizational leadership and board members to learning Kaiser’s DeVos Arts Management Principles becomes a significant burden to small and mid-sized arts organizations. Not to mention that Kaiser’s approach to arts management is hardly relevant to the operas, symphonies and ballets it is meant to serve, much less small to mid-sized arts organizations.

The most present example in NYC is The BAM Professional Development Program, which by all appearances is designed to “help” small arts organizations in Brooklyn develop the fundraising capacity to self-produce at the Fisher Space at a base rental cost of $25K per week – more than half of the annual budget for many small arts organizations. How does that actually help anybody?

With large, legacy arts organizations being less-than-prone to fundamental change, and small and mid-sized arts organizations being compelled to learn Kaiser’s archaic philosophy of arts management and adopt corporately-derived frameworks for innovation; and with artists being forced to adopt entrepreneurial models more suited to MBAs in the financial services than tech start-ups in Silicon Valley, is it any surprise that we see an arts ecosystem mired in dysfunction?

While there is no argument that the cultural sector needs to innovate, nay, reinvent itself, the unique characteristics of artistic endeavor and the non-monetary value proposition of cultural engagement demand the creation of different frameworks for measuring impact, effectiveness and evaluating change.

Lest you think I'm entirely disparaging of business, let me hearken back to Peter Buffett, “I'm really not calling for an end to capitalism; I'm calling for humanism.”

A few weeks ago the New York Times ran an essay by Peter Ludlow called “The Banality of Systemic Evil”. The word “Evil” is a bit of an overstatement; so let's use the word “dysfunction” instead. Ludlow offers a quote from Robert Jackall's book Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers, which I think is relevant in light of the ongoing professionalization and corporatization of arts organizations, funders and consultants. Ludlow writes:

> The mid-level managers that he spoke with were not “evil” people in their everyday lives, but in the context of their jobs, they had a separate moral code altogether, what Jackall calls the “fundamental rules of corporate life”:

1. You never go around your boss. 2. You tell your boss what he wants to hear, even when your boss claims that he wants dissenting views. 3. If your boss wants something dropped, you drop it. 4. You are sensitive to your boss's wishes so that you anticipate what he wants; you don't force him, in other words, to act as a boss. 5. Your job is not to report something that your boss does not want reported, but rather to cover it up. You do your job and you keep your mouth shut.
Jackall went through case after case in which managers violated this code and were drummed out of a business (for example, for reporting wrongdoing in the cleanup at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant).

If we want change then it is going to take individuals in organizations of all sizes, from venues to artist service organizations to funders – who are willing to resist corporatization, stand up for humanism and responsive governance, rock the boat and advocate for change. There are lots of us on the outside, so who is on the inside, willing to reach across the divide?

It is not merely that corporate culture has subsumed the culture of the humanities; it is that the financial capital in the philanthropic sector, especially in the arts, comes from an older, more traditionally corporate cohort of funders with similarly traditional corporate boards. These funders, the older administrators who are their peers and the Ivy League arts administration programs they’ve designed, espouse pre-digital corporate structures and methodologies, not the more nimble and counterintuitive entrepreneurial practices of the tech and new media sector, where new wealth is being generated. Many of these New Economy pioneers are guided by Tim O’Reilly’s maxim, “Create more value than you capture”, a stark opposition to the narrow traditional corporate value of maximizing shareholder value above all else.

Current arts funders are guided by boards of directors in the mindset of Hewlett-Packard, General Electric & Morgan Stanley, not Apple, Google or Facebook. Thus their adoption of “innovation” is learned second-hand, it is not an intuitive practice; it is not a deeply ingrained way of thinking or being or doing business.

The corporate world is changing as quickly as the arts world, with the introduction of trends like Social Entrepreneurship and Impact Investing. Funders pursuing innovation would be better served by looking at the social, collaborative, creative strategies of artists and small arts organization, inviting them into the process of envisioning innovative solutions, rather than compelling artists to work against their natural strengths and adopt the practices of failing legacy institutions.

So what can we learn from artists and small arts organizations? We’ll discuss that in the following essay.
Seeing Value In The Arts

by Andy Horwitz

Seeing Value In the Arts is the fourth in a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact.

If one of the fundamental flaws of the Innovation Agenda is mistaken underlying assumptions, one of those assumptions is the definition of innovation itself. The current accepted definition of innovation in the arts is one developed by EmcArts:

Organizational innovations are instances of change that result from a shift in underlying organizational assumptions, are discontinuous from previous practice, and provide new pathways to creating public value.

It is no small irony that the proponents of the Innovation agenda have yet to apply this process to themselves, but more on that later. Given that this definition was created as a guidepost for the Arts Innovation Fund, I thought I’d look for earlier, pre-existing definitions of innovation.

According to Wikipedia, “Innovation is the development of new value through solutions that meet new needs, or adding value to old customers by providing new ways of maximizing their current level of productivity. It is the catalyst to growth.” And in their book Making Innovation Work: How To Manage It, Measure It and Profit From It authors Tony Davila, Marc Epstein and Robert Shelton assert that systematic programs of organizational innovation are most frequently driven by, among other things, the creation of new markets, reduced labor costs, improved production processes and reduced materials.

If innovation in business is defined as the development of new value through solutions that meet new needs or adding value to old customers by providing new ways of maximizing their current level of productivity to serve as a catalyst to growth, it behooves us to interrogate those terms and their applicability to the arts sector.

At the same time, if, per Davila, et al, “systematic programs of organizational innovation are most frequently driven by, among other things, the creation of new markets, reduced labor costs, improved production processes and reduced materials.” We ought to examine these assumptions as well.

Let’s start with productivity, since it is low hanging fruit.

We’ve known about The Baumol Effect since William Baumol first published Performing Arts, the Economic Dilemma; a Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music, and Dance in 1966. (h/t to Nick Benacerraf)

Baumol points out that you need the same number of musicians to play a Beethoven string quartet today as you needed in the 19th century – there’s no increase in productivity or efficiency. So while automobile or microprocessor manufacturing can see increased productivity spurred by technological innovation, it just won’t happen in the arts, and probably not in education, science or the humanities, either. These things just take time, a lot of time and human resources, and you can’t speed them up without unacceptable sacrifices in quality.
But it is worth questioning the corporate definition of productivity and its overvalued role in our society, particularly in relation to creativity and innovation. Science has proven, again and again, that letting the mind wander stimulates creativity. Creativity, imagination and daydreaming, reflection, introspection, unstructured mental time— all these things lead to the kind of unexpected insights that lead to invention and innovation. But in order to do those things, you need “unproductive” time, excess time. David Masciotra wrote a great piece in The Atlantic this summer about Morris Berman’s critical take on America’s “Culture of Hustling”, Spinning Straw Into Gold.

I’ll suggest that it is unlikely that the arts sector can, or should, increase productivity. Nor can it really improve production processes. The first reason for this, as I’ve previously discussed in my essay “The Politics of Cultural Production In Theater (Or, Devise This!) Part III”, is that the frameworks of industrial production are inappropriate to cultural production. You can’t make a performance on an assembly line, you can’t mechanize the production of performances or create interchangeable parts, you can’t streamline the process or maximize efficiency. Making art is a messy, intuitive, often illogical, iterative process that requires research, investigation, trial and error, and experimentation. Yes, technology can improve production, but those “improvements” tend to raise the costs and increase the production time significantly. And technology requires skilled labor to operate it; skilled labor that usually won’t work for the low wages the arts offers (See Baumol, above).

And while the arts sector is always seeking new markets, or seeking to create new markets, the effect of treating the public like a market and using the language of business to sell them arts products tends to create the opposite result from the desired outcome. The flawed underlying assumption here is that the arts are a product at all, much less one to be marketed to consumers. This framework fundamentally misconstrues the function, social processes and value proposition of the arts. (More on that in a moment).

Given the state of most of the arts sector today, it is pretty difficult to reduce labor costs because, well, most artists work for little or free as it is. Ditto materials. It’s pretty hard to reduce materials since most artists are working with nothing or whatever they can beg, borrow or steal to begin with.

But what about growth, you ask?

The corporate definition of growth is inherently exploitative; it demands the relentless identification or creation of new markets to consume products and services. The desire for ever-increasing market share and profitability are the drivers behind business growth, even when it creates a reckless culture that prizes short term ROI over sustainability.

This idea of limitless growth as a measure of success, combined with short-term thinking and a very narrow view of cultural engagement and participation led to the arts sector’s disastrous and unsustainable building boom as detailed in The University of Chicago’s Cultural Policy Center report “Set In Stone”. It is not far-fetched to think that it was the same kind of corporate logic fueling the subprime mortgage crisis and financial crash of 2008 that led to so many arts organizations overbuilding and ultimately defaulting.

Which seems like a good time to talk about the value proposition of the arts. I was curious about the origins of the phrase so I did an Internet search and found an article called “Nobody Buys A Value Proposition”, originally published on the Direct Marketing News website.
...the concept of the value proposition has been distorted and stretched well beyond its originally intended role. Given the emphasis that companies place on value propositions, you would think that they have been around since the dawn of business. Actually, a former McKinsey & Company consultant named Michael Lanning coined the term in a 1984 white paper. Lanning said that a business was a “value delivery system” and that system could be articulated in a “value proposition.” Fourteen years later, in his book Delivering Profitable Value, he defined a value proposition as:

The combination of resulting experiences, including price, which an organization delivers to a group of intended customers in some time frame, in return for those customers buying/using and otherwise doing what the organization wants rather than taking some competing alternative.

So here we are confronted with a challenge – how do we use the language and logic of business to articulate the value proposition of the arts, when the value of the arts resides almost entirely in its defiance of the market?

The arts, like places of worship, are meant to provide respite from the busy-ness and petty to-and-fro of everyday life. The arts are meant to educate and enlighten, provide time for reflection, connection and perspective. The value of the arts is their ability to widen our frame of perception, to provide encounters with the immense unknown, to place us in conversation with the imaginings of those who came before and to leave a legacy for those who will come after. The arts take us out of vernacular time and into the timeless, fill use with awe at what we can understand even in this short, limited, difficult human life. How do you put a price on that? Let’s give it a shot.

The Wikipedia definition of the value proposition includes these ideas:

- a promise of value to be delivered and a belief from the customer that value will be experienced.
- Satisfying customers is the source of sustainable value creation;[1]
- It is also a positioning of value, where Value = Benefits – Cost (cost includes economic risk).[2]

All too often we spend our time trying to demonstrate value to our funders and boards. We use economic impact studies and data projects and all kinds of schemes to create quantifiable proof of our value in demonstrable material terms that traditional corporate businessmen understand.

But if we look at the definition of the value proposition, value derives from the customer’s belief that value will be experienced, that the benefits the product delivers outweigh the associated costs, and that this will be satisfying to the customer. Our sustainability depends on our ability to reliably satisfy the customer’s expectations of value repeatedly over time, encouraging them to return regularly for pleasurable, satisfying experiences. If we can demonstrate our value to our customer, maybe it will be less difficult to demonstrate value to our shareholders/funders.

On October 6, The New York Times Magazine ran an article titled, "And Then Steve Said, ‘Let There Be An iPhone’". In the final part of the essay, this is how author Fred Vogelstein describes the iPhone launch event:

When Jobs started talking about the iPhone on Jan. 9, 2007, he said, “This is a day I have been looking forward to for two and a half years.” Then he regaled the audience with myriad tales about why consumers hated their cellphones. Then he solved all their problems — definitively.
Let’s take a moment to think about that. Jobs listened to the public, considered all the reasons that they hated their cellphones, and solved their problems.

Too many arts institutions of all shapes, sizes, styles and origins, are unable to articulate what problem they are trying to solve. Their mission and vision statements are filled with meaningless bromides and philanthropic-sounding vagaries cobbled together to create the appearance of ... what? Some unspecified “intrinsic value” that we’re supposed to accept a priori? That’s poppycock.

If we follow the logic from above, value is derived from creating a product or providing a service to solve a customer’s problem, whether they know it’s a problem or not. Fortunately for us, we don’t even have to make one up. Do you remember that book *Bowling Alone*? Well, it has only gotten worse. Have you seen this Louis CK video about kids and smartphones?

Now I love my smartphone, I do. But I also resent it, because I grew up before the Internet and I remember being able to pay attention for long periods of time. I remember reading books without pictures and listening to music without videos and just sitting around thinking in long, uninterrupted arcs of lazy, unproductive meditation. I remember talking to friends in cafes and heated debates at family dinners, leading song circles in Jewish youth group and all kinds of things that, as far as I can tell, are going the way of the Dodo.

I’m not a Luddite, if anything just the opposite, but in a hyper-mediated world we need to remember what it is to just be in real time, with real people, sharing an experience. The arts can do that.

In that routine Louis CK says, “I’m not raising — the children, I’m raising the grown-ups that they’re going to be. I have to raise them with the tools to get through ... life.” One of those tools is empathy and another is the “ability to just be yourself and not be doing something.”

If we think about all the things that people complain about in their lives, which ones can the arts help solve? Here are ten I just dashed off:

1. They can help you turn down the volume and find peace and quiet.
2. They can help you learn new things about yourself so you’ll be happier and be a positive role model for your children.
3. They can help you take time off from work and spend it with friends and family.
4. They can help you meet new friends and people you might not normally meet.
5. They can help you build social bonds and combat isolation.
6. They can help you articulate and share the quiet concerns that people don’t normally talk about, either with loved ones or strangers.
7. They can help you remember there are things more important than keeping up with the Joneses.
8. They can help you retain a sense of wonder, activate your imagination and practice freeform thinking about life’s mysteries.
9. They can make you feel good about yourself and the world around you and provide you with some tools to create meaning.
10. They can help you feel like you’re a part of something bigger than just you, that you play a special role in life’s rich pageant and that you can make a difference in the world around you.

The arts can help us build community, learn to be around each other and ultimately change our lives. Do you think that’s just hippie crap? I beg to differ.
Not too long ago, Atul Gawande wrote an essay in The New Yorker called *Slow Ideas*, about why some innovations spread swiftly and others slowly. It made the rounds of the arts & culture punditsphere and, predictably, the focus of those articles was the paragraph where Gawande relates a drug salesman’s strategy called “the rule of seven touches” where one must “personally ‘touch’ the doctors seven times, and they will come to know you; if they know you, they might trust you; and, if they trust you, they will change.” – meaning buy drugs.

The arts pundits suggested that this was an important lesson for arts marketers, that if you want to sell someone your arts product, you must touch them seven times and build trust.

The more salient point that the pundits seemed to overlook was in the preceding paragraphs:

> To create new norms, you have to understand people’s existing norms and barriers to change. You have to understand what’s getting in their way...

> In the era of the iPhone, Facebook, and Twitter, we’ve become enamored of ideas that spread as effortlessly as ether. We want frictionless, “turnkey” solutions to the major difficulties of the world—hunger, disease, poverty. We prefer instructional videos to teachers, drones to troops, incentives to institutions. People and institutions can feel messy and anachronistic. They introduce, as the engineers put it, uncontrolled variability.

> But technology and incentive programs are not enough. “Diffusion is essentially a social process through which people talking to people spread an innovation,” wrote Everett Rogers, the great scholar of how new ideas are communicated and spread. Mass media can introduce a new idea to people. But, Rogers showed, people follow the lead of other people they know and trust when they decide whether to take it up. Every change requires effort, and the decision to make that effort is a social process.

As I’ve proposed earlier, a live performance, in particular, can be seen as a dynamic and ever-shifting interdependent social ecology comprised of complex, conditional relationships between artists, audience and institution. The creation and presentation of live performance is a social process, it is the construction of social objects; it is not mere one-directional “presentation”, it is multidimensional engagement; even spectatorship is participatory; it is not a business transaction, it is an ongoing relationship that requires stewardship and mutual respect, not manipulative sales tactics.

The value proposition of the arts is that it is *fundamentally not business*. We offer our “customers” a service they desperately need but may not know it: humanity.

And let’s not forget that artists themselves are part of the value proposition! They are the ones that know how to create these social processes, who have developed intuitive, innovative and idiosyncratic systems for producing meaningful transformative experiences in an environment of scarcity.

Artists keep being told they need to learn to be entrepreneurs, when really it is entrepreneurs who need to learn to think more like artists.

I’ve worked in the corporate world and the not-for-profit world and I can tell you that artists are actually amazing “entrepreneurial” super geniuses. Andrew Simonet (one of my arts rock star superheroes!) made this point vividly in his presentation at Brooklyn Commune (soon to be a book):

> *This is the Big Myth.*
It started because artists, unlike much of the world, are not primarily motivated or controlled by money.

Artists are actually amazing with money. We usually don’t have enough of it.

In the for-profit world, someone gives you a project and 100% of the budget needed to complete it. If you deliver the project on time, you are a
genius
a brilliant manager
and have a job for life

In the arts, you have a project and somewhere between 0% and 50% of the budget needed, and you still deliver the project on time.

That makes you a double genius.

Making art with the limited resources artists have requires incredible financial skill.

If the corporate consultants and funders so set on “innovating the arts” would try to see artists as “different but equal”, try to see what artists do, see their resilient economies and inventiveness, their collaborative creative processes, and ability to create real value, real change, real transformation out of scarcity, they’d learn a lot. It seems as if legacy arts organizations and funders are unable to see the innovation and value right in front of them while the consultants entrusted with implementing the innovation agenda are more invested in creating the appearance of innovation while conducting business as usual.
Business As Usual In The Innovation Industry

by Andy Horwitz

Business As Usual In The Innovation Industry is the fifth in a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact.

BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT

In 2009 I was invited by HERE Arts Center to join their team for EmcArts’ Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts and spend five days at the luxurious Airlie Center for an intense, immersive innovation experience. We started early each morning, got caffeinated, locked ourselves in our meeting rooms and dug in for hour after hour of brainstorming, ideation exercises and heated debates about adaptive challenges.

I still remember the incredible high I got coming out of it: the buzz, the excitement at all the innovation energy we generated and all the cool new words I learned to describe our “out of the box” big ideas and BHAGs. For the week or so after I was super pumped. So I know the thrill, the energy, the passion of being a change agent, a soldier in the innovation army bringing the magic back to my musty old arts organization to maximize its under-realized potential. But over time the excitement faded, and I have come to believe that the whole process was a hugely expensive, labor-intensive participatory dog and pony show just so HERE could build a decent website.

I remained skeptical until my persistent, desperate need for funding compelled me to prepare an application for the eight round of the Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts. After a lengthy phone call with Liz Dreyer and much conversation with my potential collaborators, I chose not to submit my proposal. Try as I might, I couldn’t twist myself into an appropriately dysfunctional knot to fit the criteria. I don’t have an adaptive challenge, I don’t need to question my underlying assumptions; I’m already inventing, innovating and creating change; I’m not broken, I don’t need fixing, I just need money and, maybe, a start-up incubator environment.

I swore I’d never do it again, but under the grueling strain of my unrelenting fiscal precarity, a friend convinced me to enter the ArtsFwrd Business Unusual Challenge. Once again I spent over an hour on the phone, this time with Karina Mangu-Ward, trying to twist myself into an appropriate knot. Karina was extremely generous, helpful and enthusiastic, but I should have known better than to continue. If you have to try that hard to fit in, you’re probably applying to the wrong club. But my desperation for money drove me to continue.

I was chosen as a competitor and, shortly after the Challenge launched, realized that I was being asked to spam everyone I knew requesting that they vote for me daily, just to get to the next round of finalists, which would lead to another round of “crowdsourcing”, that would maybe, eight months later, result in a small grant. I withdrew from the competition both on principle and out of practicality.

When I first articulated my misgivings, some people thought I should give the whole thing the benefit of the doubt. But increasingly as I talked to the many, many individuals in my extensive social network who have been through these programs, I realized it wasn’t just me! Casual conversations led to other conversations until colleagues were actively seeking my counsel. “Is it just me?” they would ask, “or does everyone feel like this Kafkaesque exercise in self-justification to get funding is really just another incomprehensible layer of complication making our lives harder?” And that’s when I began to see the light.

THE FIRST STEP IS ADMITTING YOU HAVE A PROBLEM
As I stated in this series’ first essay, “...the underlying assumption that the arts in America are in crisis and in need of innovation is wrong.” The Arts Innovation Program was originally developed for major legacy arts institutions like symphonies, operas, and ballets, many of whom do, in fact, face significant adaptive challenges and require new thinking. But the vast majority of small and mid-sized arts organizations are not broken so much as they are in a constant state of precarity that could largely be addressed by reliable funding streams to support general operations and less onerous grant application processes that would allow them to focus more on delivering services and less on raising money.

When small and mid-sized arts organizations behave in dysfunctional ways, it is often because they are trying to survive as rational actors in a dysfunctional system. And yet how do you call out a dysfunctional system when you are dependent on that system for your survival?

Even EmcArts’ own literature suggests that the problem is systemic, not merely particular. They propose to address the following concerns through their innovation strategies:

1. Engaging audiences, and the wider community, in new ways
2. Rethinking program formats, venues and approaches
3. Involving the public in co-creating arts activities
4. Using technology and the Web to create and engage with artistic experiences
5. Reconsidering the role of the creative artist in the organization
6. Restructuring the organization for new demands and new ways of doing business
7. Partnering or merging with other organizations for greater reach and impact

The “innovation activities” listed above are proposed without identifying the problems they are meant to address. So let’s do a little restructuring to reveal the inferred problems:

1. Engaging audiences, and the wider community, in new ways
   1. Declining audiences for established arts organizations operating within the recognized boundaries of “the arts”
   2. Audience dissatisfaction with relationship to organizations
   3. Audience dissatisfaction with program content, formats and venues

2. Using technology and the Web to create and engage with artistic experiences
   1. Sector wide misunderstanding of new technology
   2. Sector wide lag in adopting new technology and adapting to new cultural landscape
   3. Sector wide misunderstanding of vocabularies associated with new technology
   4. Sector wide misunderstanding about strategic and effective implementation of new technology

3. Restructuring organization for new demands and new ways of doing business
   1. Reconsidering the role of the creative artist in the organization
   2. Reconsidering the relationship between organization, artist and audience
   3. Partnering or merging with other organizations for greater reach and impact
   4. Reconsidering the meaning of “not-for-profit” and “mission-driven”
A rigorous **root cause analysis** would probably be useful here, but given the circumstances, I'll leave that for someone else. Looking at the problems in aggregate, we see a theme emerge: a profound disconnect between the expectations of audiences, artists and organizations that no longer share a common language, vision or sense of purpose. (We’ve briefly addressed this disconnect in the fourth essay of this series, “Seeing Value in the Arts”.

That disconnect is the source of the systemic dysfunction and it is not one that any organization can solve solely for itself or on its own. Real change would require that the onus of systemic innovation be placed not solely on arts organizations, but on *all* stakeholders in an interdependent system, particularly those stakeholders who have the most influence over resource allocation and policy.

So why are the other stakeholders in the system so eager to “fix” organizations and so reluctant to look at themselves? What is preventing them from seeing their own participation in this cycle of dysfunction?

**DENIAL IS NOT JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT**

The EmcArts’ Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts RFP posits that, “The evolution of breakthrough strategies is often represented as having three stages” the first being “The emergence of ‘big ideas’ from a background of no ideas”.

To the first point, I’m usually skeptical of anyone who comes out of the gate with a “big idea” – my experience has been that ideas only reveal themselves as Big Ideas after the fact. The Big Idea is usually the result of one or two theories and small changes in the way we think, ideas that iterate and propagate over time, transforming our behavior until eventually we realize *everything* has changed. As Ernest Hemingway is purported to have said, “Change happens slowly...then all at once.”

To the second point, I’ve never been in an arts organization that had no ideas. My life in the arts has exposed me to more artists and small arts organizations with amazing ideas than I could possibly have time or resources to write about, much less implement. **There is no shortage of ideas!!**

As we are confirming through our work at Brooklyn Commune, and I have found through my own lived experience, artists and small arts organizations are *always* inventing and innovating; always coming up with unexpected, creative solutions to *real* challenges, not “adaptive” challenges; there is absolutely *not* a shortage of good ideas. What there is, is a lack of infrastructure or capacity to bring funders’ attention to their work and a proliferation of barriers to access for resources and support to do the amazing things they’re already doing.

So why does everyone keep insisting that it is only the organizations and artists that are broken and need fixing?

Implicit in the assumption that an arts organization needs a consultant’s services to experience “breakthrough” organizational innovation is the understanding that those services are, unto themselves, innovative. But let’s take a closer look.

Requiring individual arts organizations to reframe their need for resources in terms of “innovation” is not innovative; it is really just asking them to find new language for the same requests. It doesn't seem like an effective way to encourage arts organizations to engage in rigorous introspection about their values and processes or to actually re-think their relationship to capital, the correlation between mission, structure and program implementation, audience engagement, community building and the arts.
Brooklyn Commune has also made it eminently clear that one of the most important and positively disruptive innovations we see on the ground, outside of formal organizations, is collaboration. Here on the outside, artists and small organizations have to collaborate to survive, we have to share resources and knowledge, and through those collaborations disparate voices come together in surprising ways, invention and innovation abound.

Yet all participating organizations in EmcArts programs are “selected on a competitive basis” and the ArtsFwd Business Unusual Challenge went even further by pitting 14 very different organizations against each other to become one of five finalists to compete against each other yet again in a “winner take all” scenario. This byzantine and unnecessarily competitive framework creates even more opposition between arts organizations — and artists — vying for limited resources, thus perpetuating widely accepted previous practices that are regressive and exclusionary. In what way is propagating a culture of scarcity that expressly inhibits creativity and sustainable growth innovative?

In reality, the “innovation” agenda as currently practiced benefits the consultants more than it helps organizations or artists.

MEET THE NEW BOSS, SAME AS THE OLD BOSS

EmcArts claims to be “recognized as the leading nonprofit provider of innovation services to the arts sector nationwide.” But for an organization that claims to “exist to strengthen the capacities and effectiveness of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations, serving their needs in the design and management of innovative change”, their programs are disappointingly counter-innovative.

An innovative — or at least strategic — approach towards creating meaningful, lasting change in the arts sector would be to actively seek out organizations, initiatives and projects that already demonstrating impact, support them, study them and introduce their practices and frameworks into less innovative contexts. (That’s what good curators do, btw). But all of EmcArts’ programs have onerous application procedures that implicitly exclude not only the stakeholders most likely to be innovative, but also vast swaths of people who actually need support, like individual artists or companies operating without a 501c3, small arts organizations who can’t spend hours and hours on an application with almost no likelihood of success. Not to mention all the small-to-medium sized organizations that will require even more time and resources to develop an application with stakeholder buy-in, meaning senior management and board members, along with key members of development, finance and administrative staff will end up spending, cumulatively, a week’s worth of work to create a new program and craft an application with no real indicator of the eventual success of the proposal or the program.

Just look at the lengthy Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts application which consists of a 9 bullet-point cover sheet, a four page narrative and organizational information including audit/financial sheets, as itemized in this checklist:

[To review in its entirety, download PDF of RFP here]

And check out the Business Unusual Challenge The Adaptive Challenge worksheet here, or to see the scope of the entire convoluted program and application process, download the Business Unusual press release here.
While both the Innovation Lab and The ArtsFwd Business Unusual Challenge deploy industry standard proposal processes that implicitly reinforce systemic disenfranchisement of wide swaths of the arts sector, The Business Unusual challenge puts EmcArts’ regressive practices into stark relief.

Conceived by EmcArts as an innovative program “to crowdsource bright minds in and outside the arts sector to tackle the most significant challenges facing organizations today” close examination reveals it to be nothing of the sort. Let’s deconstruct the program design and implementation:

**Phase 1**, “a national call for adaptive challenges”, is flawed from the outset in its pursuit of adaptive challenges rather than existing innovative practices. But leaving that aside, we don’t know the reach of the call for proposals. If the program is meant “to crowdsource bright minds in and outside the arts sector” what constituencies or organizations outside the arts sector did they target for proposals and how was the program designed to facilitate non-arts stakeholder engagement? Was there any strategy? Was it about STEM to STEAM or some specific cross-disciplinary conversation? Did they talk to the NEA about the Federal Interagency Task Force?

There’s a lot of work being done right now to reach across sectors and introduce the arts into other conversations. So how is EmcArts leveraging that work and those connections to identify, aggregate and engage “bright minds in and outside the arts sector” in a thoughtful, strategic way?

Not only is the reach of the call for proposals unclear, what is the reach of ArtsFwd website itself? Who are its readers and what are its traffic numbers? It appears to be primarily a trade publication for mainstream arts administrators – and by extension a marketing platform for EmcArts innovation services – so it seems unlikely that they would reach the “margins” of the arts sector (where innovation happens?) much less connect with potential innovators from “outside the arts sector”.

**Phase 2** disingenuously proposes that “ArtsFwd readers will vote to determine the top five Finalists”, when by “ArtsFwd readers” they really mean “the online social networks of the competing arts organizations.”

Notwithstanding that the voting platform crashed within hours of its launch, thus invalidating the entire voting process, one must question the logic of turning arts organizations into spammers. The ArtsFwd Business Unusual Challenge essentially asked the eleven competitors to relentlessly message their constituencies via email, Twitter and Facebook imploring them to visit the ArtsFwd website and vote once a day, every day, for their favorite organization, all in a desperate attempt to win $15K in cash and $20K of consulting services donated in-kind. Just contemplating that fantastic abuse of trust and goodwill, not to mention the squandering of these organizations’ already scarce resources, makes me shudder in sorrow and disbelief. Is this merely poor program design or is it an intentional mechanism for gathering constituent email addresses via voter opt-in, thus expanding ArtsFwd’s reach and promoting its agenda?

Furthermore, it seems counterintuitive to pit an organization like The WaterFire Festival with a civic mission, an audience base that includes the entire city of Providence, RI and 38,280 likes on its Facebook page (as of the challenge launch) against smaller organizations like HowlRound or GlobalFest. And more importantly, what makes having a large and engaged social network a relevant factor in the selection process or, for that matter, a likely predictor of successful innovation? Dance New Amsterdam had a large network, made it into the competition and subsequently went bankrupt.
The premise that having a large and actively engaged online social network is an indicator of likely success in innovation is not only wrong, it is clearly biased, and making it integral to the competitive process starkly reveals a mistaken underlying assumption.

In a recent blog post on the HBR blog network, Whitney Johnson, co-founder of Clayton M. Christensen’s investment firm Rose Park Advisors (and former music major!) wrote, “Innovation happens when we cultivate diversity and cross-disciplinary collaboration, when we play in the in-between.”

We know that the national arts ecosystem has deeply rooted “adaptive challenges” in supporting groups from disadvantaged communities that frequently include constituencies from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We suffer from unequal resource allocation to those communities and vastly disparate levels of support, even by region.

At the NPN Conference in Philadelphia in December 2012 I met administrators from places like Alaska who were creating innovation and change in very small communities with extremely limited resources and seemingly insurmountable challenges. I met people whose constituencies had very limited access to the Internet or had a significant older population that is not Internet savvy. There are many communities throughout the country with significant populations of immigrants, people for whom English is a second, or even third, language. Throughout the country, at all levels, there are artists and small arts organizations serving vital roles in communities that are not represented online; that don’t live on Facebook and Twitter and email but nonetheless are doing essential, innovative work that merits support.

So I think it is valid to question the bias of the Business Unusual competition towards organizations with “highly engaged” online communities. The ArtsFwd Business Unusual Challenge is exactly the opposite of what it proclaims, it is entirely Business As Usual, in that it privileges organizations with the resources to develop competitive proposals and aggressivly excludes small arts organizations and organizations serving disadvantaged communities, immigrant communities, diverse cultural organizations existing outside the mainstream of “the arts”, older populations and anyone who, for one reason or another, has little to no social media reach. Are none of those organizations capable of innovation? Are none of those organizations worthy of $15K in cash and $20K of in-kind support?

Phase 3, proposes that “Big thinkers, specialists in the field, and ArtsFwd readers will be invited to contribute inspirations and ideas in response to the challenges articulated by the five finalists.” Once again, what are the criteria for “big thinkers” or “specialists” and how do those voices serve the goals as proposed in Phase 2 of reaching outside the arts sector? With no discernable strategy in place, this seems suspect at best. But more glaringly problematic is the use of “crowdsourcing” as a technique, which, as I suggested above, reveals EmcArts’ mistaken underlying assumptions or at least misunderstanding of social ideation processes facilitated by new technology.

Crowdsourcing, much like “the commons”, (see Essay 2), is a term that is mostly misunderstood and widely abused, both in discourse and in practice.

For crowdsourcing to work as a tool for innovation – or anything – you first and foremost need a crowd - a really big crowd. If we accept that innovation happens in the margins and “when we cultivate diversity and cross-disciplinary collaboration, when we play in the in-between”, then a process of crowdsourcing requires a crowd big enough, diverse enough and cross-discipline enough to create the possibility of the unexpected, of incongruity, of actual disruption. You also have to be prepared to actually see things in a new way when presented with ideas or evidence that contradict widely held beliefs. So whether it is the ArtsFwd challenge or a Dinnertainment you need to actually stop playing insider baseball and build a massively available, open and participatory platform with significant reach. But the ArtsFwd challenge did no such thing. To illustrate, let me use a real life imaginary example from recent political events.
Let’s say Congressman Bill Cassidy from Louisiana’s 6th District decided to crowdsource his position on Obamacare. He might build a website, use his email list and online social networks, he may do a direct mail campaign or even deploy volunteers on the ground to traverse the district and gather opinions. Sure looks like crowdsourcing to me! Except for the fact that his district was redrawn in 2010 due to Republican gerrymandering efforts and its white majority increased from 60 to 74%, which led to Cassidy being elected in 2012 with a nearly 70% margin of victory. 70%!!! So the odds of him getting some kind of innovative, out of the box, new idea on Obamacare (or integration or civil rights or the role of government generally) from the process of crowdsourcing is unlikely at best.

The ArtsFwd Business Unusual Challenge crowdsourcing strategy is not any different or more effective than the theoretical example cited above. If you crowdsource in an echo chamber, you’re not going to find new ideas.

Which brings us to **Phase Four**, where “a panel of outsiders and EmcArts staff will determine one Winner.” Who are these outsiders, where have they been for the entire process up to this point and what qualifies them to make these decisions? Are they disinterested outsiders from other sectors or are they sector stakeholders who were “outside” the process? And, as noted before when talking about “the commons” and “crowdsourcing”, how does reinforcing the inside/outside paradigm in the arts sector actually move us towards any kind of new insight or knowledge or behavior? If this whole arduous drawn-out process ultimately ends with EmcArts making the decision, why didn’t they just make the decision in the first place months ago? Why perpetuate this charade? Why coerce these organizations and their participating stakeholders into this nightmarish competitive process? To what end – and *cui bono*?

I’m serious when I ask this, because the finalists all have very different proposals with very different desired outcomes and it is unclear what the ArtsFwd challenge was meant to accomplish in the bigger picture. Some competitors are, at the most fundamental level, trying to get funds for artist fees, to do what they are already doing, while other competitors devised entirely new programs that haven’t even been prototyped. So what was ArtsFwd thinking by including a pre-beta early-concept program next to an established music festival, an imperiled dance presenter and a youth choir? How is the program, overall, designed to engage meaningfully with innovative thinking from outside the sector and introduce new ideas?

**PAY NO ATTENTION TO THAT MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN**

Between its inception in 2006 up to today, the Innovation Agenda in the arts has been productized and marketed as a solution to the sector’s problems without being subjected to rigorous inquiry. And now in 2013 we are presented with the National Innovation Summit for Arts + Culture where we are invited to “join the virtual summit” and “experience all 27 powerful talks … via livestream from anywhere in the world.” These “powerful” talks by “bold” leaders will highlight the “remarkable and mostly untold stories” of innovation in the arts across the country. *Mmmkay.* Even if the transparently sales-driven overuse of Hollywood/Madison Ave-style maximum strength adjectives describing the content doesn’t give it away, it’s pretty clear where this whole thing’s going, or what it aspires to.

Sources say that speakers at EmcArts’ Arts Innovation Summit are being compelled to take mandatory speech coaching so the presentations look more like TED talks – professional, corporate, dynamic, exciting. Fortunately I don’t have to deconstruct the whole TED thing, *Thomas Frank did it just a few days ago on Salon.com*, but the last thing the arts needs is a slick wannabe TED-style ideas marketplace creating the illusion of innovation and change, trumpeting “creativity” when it benefits consultants, senior administrators and large institutions but never artists, inventors, start-ups and outliers.
For that matter, sources tell me that these speakers, culled from the ranks of “innovation success stories” are not only unpaid, but are required to sign five page contracts favorable to EmcArts. So is this conference about creating real change in and for the arts and arts organizations – or is it about, yet again, getting free labor from arts workers to perform their gratitude to consultants while marketing EmcArts’ innovation services to the funders from all over the country who will be in attendance?

But the virtual summit is available for free online and you can even participate! Surely that is open, transparent and good for the sector at large? Not really.

The virtual summit invites you to “join the conversation online” while you watch from home, “using the Twitter hashtag #ArtsFwd.” You are assured that “your comments and questions will be actively integrated into the discussion following each group of Talks and shared with the on-site speakers.”

Tweeting while watching other people talk is not joining a conversation, and it is not terribly difficult to see how this is merely a performance of participation, as removed from actual participation as voting via text message for your favorite American Idol singer, perhaps even less so. As I wrote in a previous essay:

> Twitter ‘conversations’, however well-intentioned, are doomed to failure simply because the medium is not conducive to actual conversation. It is like using a teaspoon to carve a turkey. Or fortune cookie fortunes to write a novel.

At 140 characters per message, Twitter is an insufficient platform for proposing thoughtful questions, much less sustaining meaningful discourse. In fact, its name was chosen specifically because the founders liked the dictionary definition of Twitter as, “a short burst of inconsequential information.”

“Your comments and questions will be actively integrated into the discussion” implicitly discloses that some comments and questions will be chosen, others left out. This means the discussion will be constructed by the moderator’s editorial decisions in real time, giving him or her ultimate control over the narrative, both as it happens and in the “official” archived version made available online after the fact. This is no different than TED or, for that matter, an interview with Oprah on television. Media, by definition, mediates, and whoever controls the editing process controls the narrative. This structure is fundamentally old media, business as usual, top down decision making and narrative control gussied up to look like something new, shiny and innovative.

There is an aphorism that has stuck with me for years and though it is kind of cheesy, it has stood the test of time: “How you do anything is how you do everything”. If the way you develop and implement your innovation programs is not innovative, it seems unlikely that true innovation will be your result. To quote that great American artist-innovator George Burns, “Acting is all about honesty. If you can fake that, you’ve got it made.”

Creating the illusion of transparency is not the same as actually being transparent, performing participation is not the same as actually inviting and facilitating real participation where stakeholders have agency to dissent, to criticize and to offer real alternatives. When we look at the Innovation Agenda and the upcoming summit brimming with “success stories”, all the buzzwords are there – “crowdsourcing”, “big ideas”, “adaptive challenges”, “breakthrough thinking” – but none of the behavior. You can use all the buzzwords you want to create the appearance of change, but it is not enough; one must actually change. And real change is hard.

This reminds me of an article called “6 Harsh Truths That Will Make You A Better Person”, (on Cracked.com of all places!) by humorist David Wong:
...that's the step that gets skipped — it's always “How can I get a job?” and not “How can I become the type of person employers want?” It's “How can I get pretty girls to like me?” instead of “How can I become the type of person that pretty girls like?” See, because that second one could very well require giving up many of your favorite hobbies and paying more attention to your appearance, and God knows what else. You might even have to change your personality.

I think back to 2009 and the awesome contact high I got from attending the Innovation Retreat at Airlie. I described it earlier as “the thrill, the energy, the passion of being a change agent, a soldier in the innovation army.…” And then I think about friends who return from a weekend at a Landmark Forum Retreat or worked at Lululemon and then quit because it is cult-y and weird. I think about that amazing scene from the movie Safe, where Julianne Moore tries to use all the self-help language she’s acquired during her retreat to recover from a chemical sensitivity syndrome that may or may not be real. I think of Laura Dern’s character on the now-cancelled Enlightened and how human beings can convince ourselves of almost anything. That feeling of being transformed is intense and gratifying, it is a quick hit of power and confidence, it is the feeling that we are, once again, in control of our lives and our destiny and we are, inevitably, working towards the good. But then you have to do the work of actually changing yourself and more often than not you just find new language to mask the same behaviors.

The Innovation Industry has become strikingly adept at creating the illusion of innovation, of collaboration, transparency, openness and inclusion while engaging in and perpetuating the same counterproductive behavior at the root of the ongoing systemic dysfunction. When we look closely at the Innovation Industry we see it for what it is – an elaborate sleight of hand in which very intelligent, well-intentioned people have come to accept as true many fundamentally flawed underlying assumptions. A number of very intelligent, experienced, well-intentioned, passionate, committed people are working incredibly hard to create change that they desperately – and understandably – want to see, but aren’t clearly seeing the very real changes that are happening all around them in the moment.

Real change isn’t going to happen by doing business as usual and calling it innovation, by fostering competition and a cultural of scarcity, by creating ever increasing complications and barriers and propping up unsustainable structures. Real change isn’t going to happen by doing things the same old way but using new words. It will require truly discontinuous behavior. It will require action. So how might we create real change?
Invention, Innovation & Creating Real Change

by Andy Horwitz

Invention, Innovation & Creating Real Change is the last in a series of six essays taking a critical look at innovation culture, its assumptions, influences and impact. Some of the ideas proposed here are derived from research conducted as part of The Brooklyn Commune Project and will be examined in more detail in a report to be released in January 2014. All six essays, including this one, can be downloaded as a single PDF here.

CHANGE HAPPENS SLOWLY...THEN ALL AT ONCE

The Performing Arts in a New Era, a 2001 RAND report written by Kevin McCarthy, Arthur Brooks, Julia Lowell, and Laura Zakaras and funded with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, when viewed in retrospect, is remarkably prescient. The research brief presages many cultural shifts among audiences, artists and arts organizations. It is remarkable that twelve years later the sector as a whole is still wrestling with these issues as if they were new conditions and has made little progress despite the efforts of the innovation agenda.

As to audience, the report indicates “a number of sociodemographic trends that are likely to further dampen future demand for live performances. Although education levels are expected to rise — a trend that should create more demand for the arts — Americans are placing an increasing premium on flexibility in their leisure activities. They favor art experiences that allow them to choose what they want to do, when and where they want to do it. (This preference helps explain record levels of attendance at art museums.)"

As to artists, the report indicates that between 1970 and 1990 the number of self-proclaimed professional artists double to 1.6 million about 261,000 of whom are performing artists. The report goes on to say that “there are also more amateur performing artists — those who pursue their craft as an avocation with no expectation of being paid for it — and they are estimated to outnumber professionals by 20 or 30 to 1."

This trend shows no sign of abating, in fact, “performing artists continue to dedicate themselves to their art even though their pay and job security have scarcely improved since the 1970s. On average, performing artists earn considerably less, work fewer weeks per year, and face higher unemployment than other professionals with comparable education levels."

At the same time, “the presence of superstars continues to tilt the arts market toward a select few.”

And as for arts organizations, we have previously noted that the past 30 or more years have seen not only a proliferation of arts organizations but also an unsustainable building boom in the performing arts. The report tells us that “most of these organizations are tax-exempt, and many receive strong financial support from local governments. Many theaters, symphony halls, and all-purpose performing arts centers, for example, are financed by community development block grants. It is not clear, however, who will use these facilities or whether their day-to-day operations will be affordable to many performing groups.

So we have an audience that is increasingly disinclined to choose arts activities that adhere to the conventions of the performing arts (season subscriptions, reserved seating, set curtain times, etc.); a population of self-identified artists that has grown by orders of magnitude yet are increasingly divided between unknowns and a select few superstars; and a glut of buildings draining civic dollars (or being defunded as local governments lose revenue) with no-one to fill the seats and no content providers (artist) able to afford the costs of self-presenting.
It seems like we need to go back to the drawing board and question all of our assumptions. If this seems daunting and impossible, look at recent changes in the museum world, prompted in part by Harold Skramstad’s seminal 1999 article “An Agenda for American Museums In the 21st Century” (published online here). It is an incredibly thoughtful and powerful article and deeply influential in the current trends in the museum world’s rediscovery of performance. In the conclusion of his essay Skramstad writes:

The great age of collection building in museums is over. Now is the time for the next great agenda of museum development in America. This agenda needs to take as its mission nothing less than to engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives. We have many practical institutions to help us work through our day-to-day problems. We have enough educational institutions that focus on training us to master the skills we need to graduate from school and get a job. Yet we have too few institutions that have as their goal to inspire and change us. American museums need to take this up as their new challenge. Up to now much of their time has been devoted to building their collections and sharing them through “outreach” to the larger world. Now they must help us create the new world of “inreach,” in which people, young and old alike, can “reach in” to museums though experiences that will help give value and meaning to their own lives and at the same time stretch and enlarge their perceptions of the world.

So what we have, then, is a wholesale re-imagining of the purpose and function of the art museum. The performing arts as a sector—presenters, producers, organizations, institutions and funders—should do the same. Ironically, the mission that Skramstad spells out for museums is the same mission that, theoretically, performing arts organizations have been pursuing for years. Before we cede ground once and for all to the museums, can we discover how the performing arts have lost their way and work to recover?

To begin, it is helpful to remember that the vast symphony halls, regional theaters and civic cultural institutions that are assumed to characterize “the arts” in every city across the country are a relatively recent phenomenon. It was really during the post- WWII era that America, reveling in its role as the unquestioned dominant world power, felt compelled to demonstrate its cultural equivalence to the Old World it had just saved. At the same time a robust economy, technological advances like air conditioning, infrastructural projects like the highway system and a larger educated middle class population (thanks to the GI Bill) created a large, aspirational audience for the arts.

Most of the arts infrastructure that we’ve inherited is still predicated on the postwar model of large, civic institutions intended to serve a (mostly fictional) general audience presumed to be culturally homogeneous or assimilated into the traditions of European culture. The cultural changes of the 1960’s may have introduced some programmatic shifts to include greater diversity or more “popular” culture, but the economic assumptions underlying the arts ecology remained largely unquestioned.

However, as mentioned in a previous essay, “Change happens slowly...then all at once”. Gradual demographic and socioeconomic changes have reached a tipping point, rendering the old models obsolete and drastically changed the game with no new systems in place to support the failure of the legacy system.

One of the misunderstandings of the legacy system was that the multiple subcategories of the arts were discrete enterprises rather than an integrated whole. Another fatal (but understandable) mistaken assumption was that the U.S. would continue to produce an educated, aspirational, upwardly mobile middle class that would be the audience for symphonies, operas and ballets.
Recognizing that “The Arts” writ large is an interdependent system, we must undertake a project of strategic integration to maximize resilience and achieve sustainability. With the arts ecology so fatally atomized, how can we support the development of a more integrative system?

**CONCEPTUAL CHANGE**

A colleague once pointed out that all art is “culturally specific”. Symphonies, operas and ballets are culturally specific to Western Europe. Considering that America is a country of immigrants (most by choice, some by compulsion) and, theoretically, a representative democracy, the arts in America should support a similar diversity of voices. We should intentionally **expand our horizons** and create a bigger tent, using thoughtful programming to place seemingly disparate voices in juxtaposition.

An argument can be made, at least in NYC, that this kind of programming is common, especially when we look at the music world. (Basically anywhere Bill Bragin has ever left his mark). But outside of world music it is rare to see programming that reflects both a diversity of cultural voices and a diversity of socioeconomic levels. Theater and dance, especially, remain tragically segregated in cultural, regional and socioeconomic diversity.

As I have discussed extensively in previous essays, we need to **shift our frame** from being “arts presenters” to being “experience providers”. If, as mentioned early, we **view ourselves as creators of social objects**, we see that the performance is merely a single, specific moment in a long arc of engagement. We are called to move from a short-term event-based transactional relationship with “the audience” predicated on ticket sales and move towards developing life-long relationships with our communities as providers of meaningful, transformative experiences.

In making this shift, we have to widen our area of endeavor beyond mere presenting and into contextualization and meaning-making. In addition to supporting the creation, presentation and distribution of live performances, we must also support thoughtful, creative intercultural initiatives where the arts functions as an engagement platform for negotiating cultural difference, identifying likeness where possible and confronting the unassimilable where necessary. It is not enough to present performances, it is necessary to **cultivate lively, candid and meaningful discourse**.

This, of course, has been central to our efforts at Culturebot.org since the beginning, as expressed most recently in my essay on 21st century criticism and the rise of citizen criticism.

That means **adjusting our funding to provide more meaningful support for artists and organizations at all levels and in all communities**. Rather than trying to “diversify” audiences for legacy institutions and attract wider audiences to symphonies, operas, ballets and regional theaters, we should support the arts initiatives indigenous to communities, providing the necessary resources and professional development opportunities need to build vital, engaged local culture.

Rather than the Kaiser model as proposed by the BAM Professional Development Program, where community organizations are indoctrinated with corporate management models, we should rather look to meet people where they are, support them within their communities and existing systems. Yes, provide access to professional development opportunities, but create curricula that address their conditions, not impose the failed frameworks of Big Culture from the postwar 20th century.
I really can’t emphasize this enough. We have seen time and again that Kaiser’s philosophy amounts to a form of “blame the victim” regressive taxation on economically disenfranchised arts communities that are disproportionately of color. Arts organizations in resource-scarce environments rely heavily on government support because they don’t have access to an individual donor base, much less the kind of cultural approbation that comes from privilege and is required to develop meaningful relationships with white shoe funders. Yet he castigates them for this reliance. This is the kind of misguided logic Peter Buffett called out in his recent op-ed in the NY Times:

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**Microlending and financial literacy (now I’m going to upset people who are wonderful folks and a few dear friends) — what is this really about? People will certainly learn how to integrate into our system of debt and repayment with interest. People will rise above making $2 a day to enter our world of goods and services so they can buy more. But doesn’t all this just feed the beast?**

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I propose that more meaningful and substantial general operational support for small and midsized arts organizations and individual artists, especially if they are BoP in a wider sense, will create a virtuous cycle of arts engagement.

Currently the arts sector pursues a “trickle down” theory of arts engagement by concentrating a disproportionate share of its resources in the large, legacy major arts organizations. As ticket prices continue to rise and traditional audiences age, new audiences are harder to attract. The harder audiences are to attract, the more money and resources are poured into “innovation” efforts to try and market these old institutions to new audiences. You might as well just burn the money.

Rather than trying to market legacy institutions to disinterested audiences, we could redirect those resources to increasing arts participation through the support of numerous smaller organizations with wider and more diverse reach. Since we know that the most loyal audiences are those people who have participated in the arts themselves, supporting small and mid-sized organizations and independent artists will help provide increased access points to more people.

If we do the work of strategically contextualizing the arts in a way that favorably links “high art” with “culturally specific” art and “community-based” art, we provide a tangible link between arts participation at the community level, at the pro-am level and at the “professional” level. Shifting the frame to one of inclusion will help counter the implicit (and aggressive) exclusionary cultural position of large, legacy arts organizations and help build a wider, diversified base of stakeholders invested in the system at large.

Another significant conceptual change would be to aggressively encourage the sector to face outward. We are already seeing this conceptual shift through the NEA’s Federal Interagency Task Force, ArtPlace, STEM to STEAM and other initiatives. This is a promising trend and one that must be aggressively pursued.

The general public largely perceives “the arts” as distinct and separate from everyday life. Though art practice is present in almost everyone’s daily activities – dancing, singing, telling stories, playing music – participation in professionalized forms of these practices is diminishing largely due to the arts sector siloing itself off. A conceptual shift is required on the parts of arts organizations, artists and funders alike to realize that the value proposition of the arts becomes most visible when artistic imagination is placed in conversation with other, wider, concerns. While arts lovers may see the value of “art for art’s sake”, that is a somewhat rarefied position and, frankly, not an easy case to make.

If we truly believe that art is a way of knowing and being in the world, a lens through which we examine our lives, then we need to both bring art out from the institutions and into the world and find the art that is being created everywhere, all the time, outside the institution.
STRUCTURAL CHANGE

We propose that the only way that conceptual changes will result in lasting behavioral changes is through incentivization. Incentives for behavioral change must be built into the system through structural changes that reward collaboration, encourage entrepreneurship and ingenuity, reduce barriers to participation and, generally, create positive beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders in the system.

If we look at artists as entrepreneurs, small business owners running content creation organizations, we have to create favorable conditions for them to thrive. The first step is to de-link institutional funding and project funding.

The current system, by placing an already-beleaguered institution in an intermediary position, is prone to inefficient resource allocation dangerously susceptible to financial instability. The institution must divert a significant proportion of project funding to its general operating expenses, with the result being less money in the hands of the content provider (artist). At the same time, the number of projects an institution must take on to amass the necessary resources for general operating expenses means they don’t have the capacity to provide adequate support to the content provider (artist) for the development and presentation of the work.

Thus the costs of content creation are increasingly passed on to the artist, along with the responsibility for identifying the usually substantial additional income needed to deliver the content and rarely with any expectation of real revenue either from ticket sales, future bookings or other, related, collateral income streams.

At the moment programmers and curators control access to both their venues and project creation funds. They also tend to be the ones on funding panels to decide how and to whom resources are allocated. This not only creates a conflict of interest – they will allocate funds to artists whose work they intend to present in order to mitigate institutional expenses – but inhibits creative innovation. Artists are incentivized to adhere to production timelines predicated on grant cycles, and may become risk-averse for fear of losing funding and presentation opportunities.

A healthy system would fund bricks and mortar institutions for general operating expenses including education, marketing, outreach, audience development, community engagement, etc. so they can focus on creating a welcoming, dynamic and supportive environment or “container” for the content. The content creator and provider (artist) should not be dependent on the institution for funding of their work. The work should be funded on its own merits and adjudicated by a diverse group of stakeholders, including peers, who are not subject to the same conflicts of interest.

In this scenario programmers and curators would be able to choose from a wider variety of content and shoulder less investment risk while the artist has more autonomy to pursue their creative vision. This type of structural change would allow institutions streamline their operations and focus on their core competencies.

If bricks and mortar institutions choose to participate in the development and creation of content that they intend to present, then commissioning institutions should provide the entirety, or a substantial amount, of the costs associated with developing the product up front. At the same time systems need to be developed where the content creators (artists) have an equitable stake in the project, its outcomes and any value generated.

We needn’t reinvent the wheel. We could look at legacy models from television and film as well as current trends in content creation and delivery such as Hulu, Netflix, AppleTV and Roku and extrapolate customized models appropriate for live performance.
For institutions this shift would require streamlining and simplifying, for content creators it would require the creation of a more stable development environment that is at once agile and dependable. As the cultural sector – and the economy as a whole – moves towards an entrepreneurial economy of freelancers and independent contractors, new support structures must be created to make the system viable.

My experience in the field suggests a desperate need for skilled independent creative producers who know how to work outside the institution. Arts administration masters train people for working in large institutions, not in the entrepreneurial skills needed to work in the free market. At the same time while the economic volatility and changes in the funding climate of the past thirty years have created a need for this role, no structures have been developed to make this a viable and sustainable position.

More problematic is that since this role is still marginal, there are no mechanisms for evaluation of competency and character. Artists seeking independent creative producers have little more than word of mouth to go on when choosing from a mere handful of independent producers who vary widely in their approaches, competencies and ethics.

**Brooklyn Commune** has been conducting interviews and research into this and Culturebot has been developing a very program for training creative producers drawn from practical experience and predicated on ideas proposed about criticism as a creative practice comprised of dramaturgy, advocacy and engagement, and the development of 21st century production models originating in the tech sector.

Through our current **workshops**, Culturebot is prototyping a framework for creating communities of practice for peer learning and knowledge sharing, and developing a pedagogy rooted partially in Ranciere’s notion of “The Ignorant Schoolmaster”. Not only are we advocating for a vision of producing as a creative practice as part of a collaborative process, but we hope to encourage the creation of shared best practices and standards that is as much about values as it is about competency and skill-building.

Rather than creating yet another intermediary between funders and artists, another organization serving as a gateway for knowledge and resources, we propose an open system, a platform to facilitate peer-learning and interdependent systems of mutual support.

A more agile, dynamic and creative content development ecosystem will require similarly responsive and entrepreneurial funding streams. A recent article on Philanthropy.com reminded us that responsive philanthropy is not new and has proven effective in the past:

> Almost all of America’s social movements were started with ideas developed by grassroots charities, not by foundation leaders. To their credit, grant makers large and small recognized the importance of the work of such groups and gave them the money they needed to grow. But today that money would be harder for grass-roots groups to find.

What sort of structural changes would it take to free up foundations to seek out innovation in progress, rather than try and jumpstart innovation in large legacy institutions?

In an earlier essay on Jewish philanthropy we proposed that:

> Maybe the big corporate funders can look to their for-profit brethren and create smaller, more agile and nimble divisions or foster incubated entities that are accountable to the parent foundation but have enough autonomy to be proactive and responsive, who can jumpstart new projects, facilitate rapid prototyping and direct more resources directly to creative development.
We also proposed that we actively seek out and engage NextGen donors to create a parallel funding stream less influenced by the more corporate funders:

It is increasingly less common that someone possesses both the vision to see as an artist and the resources to realize those visions. But what if the more fortunate artists and administrators among us came out of the trust fund closet and created a Slingshot Fund for the arts? What if they, knowing what it’s like to be an artist, knowing what it’s like from the other side of the fence, to be looking in from the outside, joined together and leveraged their collective influence access to capital and the kinds of people who manage capital, to build a new kind of foundation, (or network of foundations) that was truly transparent, innovative, responsive and new?

It is trendy to reference the VC model here, but that is perhaps imprudent – remember that 3 out of 4 start-ups fail. If for-profit businesses were subjected to the kind of scrutiny and judgment by their shareholders as not-for-profits are by their funders, the world would be a much different place. So rather than creating a false equivalence to the VC model and creating conditions for almost assured failure, let’s propose developing an appropriate framework for what “success” looks like for content creators in the arts. And let’s build structures that enhance the likelihood of successful outcomes.

The key to this is resource sharing and collaboration, building frameworks instead of institutions and organizations. For instance, it’s too early to discuss yet publicly but ART/NY has supported an initiative by Guy Yarden, developed with Sarah Maxfield, David Sheingold and Max Dana, called ArtsPool, that is, basically, about creating shared infrastructure for administration. It is still in development, but I predict this is going to be a major game-changer.

It might also allow the possibility for devising new organizational structures that are project-based, obviating the need for the constant creation of new companies that are so labor-intensive to maintain that they redirect resources from artistic production to administration. If a project-based model were developed using a shared administrative back end that is financially compliant with funders guidelines yet less onerous than a 501c3, then we might finally put an end to fiscal sponsorship, which is yet another instance of regressive taxation of the artist.

My previous essay on Jewish philanthropy explored the relationship of the legacy Federated system and the newly emerged Jewish Funders Network, which offers a clear contrast between hierarchical vertically integrated structures and more horizontal, conditional networked structures:

An argument can be made that many social conditions such as hunger, poverty and disease, require the kind of scale and stability provided by a large, vertically integrated philanthropic infrastructure, while other conditions are shorter term and situational, better served through temporary alliances and smaller, more nimble and responsive actors. In all likelihood, what is needed is a hybrid model.

In Jewish Philanthropy the innovation strategy was to direct resources at a wide array of smaller, “start-up” organizations and initiatives through the network structure. When innovations take hold, they then grow and may feed value back into the larger, legacy system. In a way this is merely systematizing the natural process of cultural change, where new ideas emerge on the margins, gradually gaining acceptance until they enter the wider vernacular.
We can look at this model as well for inspiration in systematizing the organic processes of creative development and diffusion, while incentivizing intra-sector collaboration by optimizing distribution strategies and delivery systems for content both up and down the pyramid.

When we expand our horizons to embrace an inclusive view of an interdependent arts ecology, we open ourselves up to all kinds of extraordinary new possibilities.

In the second essay of this series, “The Appearance of Innovation” I proposed:

…this is the key insight – that “the arts” writ large is an interdependent ecosystem where small and medium sized arts organizations, along with major legacy arts institutions, serve as a kind of circulatory system through which a diverse array of artists flow, providing essential nourishment for the body politic. If we focus solely on major arts organizations, or neglect to develop and steward circulatory systems between organizations, then we perpetuate systemic dysfunction and flirt with macro-systemic failure.

By examining the relationship structures of this complicated interdependent system we can diagnose the circulatory disorders and seek to appropriate remedies. A strategically designed and optimized system of content development, creation and distribution works in support of the goal of facing outward, of introducing the arts more fully into the culture at large, widening audience and deepening participation.

At the same time, a more comprehensive understanding of the system’s complex interdependencies will lead to a strategy for prudent, managed growth. Not all arts institutions or organizations must or should grow; in fact a healthy ecology must include rich loam to fecundate flowering plants and mighty tall trees. (Hippie Dippy Metaphor Alert!).

Steve Jobs said, “creativity is just connecting things,” and he’s not alone in attributing true creativity to a combination of the ability to make surprising connections between seemingly unrelated things and then working really, really hard for a long time on the same thing. So we need to get creative in reinventing the performing arts.

A thoughtful redesign of inherited (and dysfunctional) arts structures, predicated on conceptual change, could lead to system-wide behavioral change, creating maximum benefit for all stakeholders.

**BEHAVIORAL CHANGE**

Inspired in part by artist/writer Amy Whitaker’s notion of “economics as a collective creative design problem” we started The Brooklyn Commune as a project for artists to research their own economic dilemmas and to bring the artistic imagination into the process of redesigning the economics of cultural production. One interesting and unexpected result has been the discovery of vast troves of forgotten knowledge from Baumol and Bowen’s classic *Performing Arts – The Economic Dilemma*, to the *Poor Dancer’s Almanac* to the aforementioned 2001 RAND study, *The Performing Arts in a New Era*. It has been enlightening and a little startling to realize how much work has come before and how little of that knowledge has been transmitted.

The original impetus for Culturebot back in 2003 was community engagement and knowledge management. Working at *Performance Space 122* day in and day out, I realized that there was almost no publicly available writing on the work we were presenting or what had come before. Artists were making work without deep knowledge of their historical and aesthetic forebears and audiences had even less information than that. What little writing that existed was buried deep in the Ivory Tower and was written mostly in impenetrable academic jargon.
So I decided to make a living archive, a constantly updated dynamic platform for discourse that would make public the conversations we were having inside the institution; to build a shareable, ever-evolving knowledge base for the field. At the time I went to all of my peer arts organizations and invited them to collaborate. “What is a blog?” they asked me, and demurred, saying they had postcards to print and mailings to prepare and no time for the Internet.

I am still gutted by the complete failure of our sector to engage in any kind of meaningful program of knowledge management, of building a shared history, of taking control of our narrative and telling the story as we have lived it, as opposed to outsourcing our legacy to newspaper reviews and “slice of life” feature articles.

And it is not just our histories, our narrative legacy and the stories we are telling future generations. It is the data itself. Every few years the arts does another data project – “we don’t have enough data!” everyone cries. As if any amount of data will ever prove the value of the arts to a business culture predisposed to dismiss a priori any not-for-profit humanistic endeavor.

At the moment the Cultural Data Project is the industry standard. But will it go the way of the Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive or the long-defunct Center for Arts & Culture? What ever happened to the Initiative for Sustainable Arts in America, which seems to have stalled out before even getting off the ground? What about all the valuable research conducted by Leveraging Investments in Creativity? Will no one connect the dots? And if they do, how will they do it?

SMU seems to be taking the lead on this, but frankly I’m dubious that the right questions are even being asked. The privileged cultural position of the data gatherers may well bias their inquiry in ways that are difficult to parse. And even then, how does this data become actionable and what is the right action to take?

The point is that all of these issues are, fundamentally, about behavior. It’s about competition rather than collaboration; it’s about hoarding rather than sharing; it’s about selfishness versus generosity, it’s about ego and territoriality and pride and privilege and all kinds of deeply ingrained behaviors that drive us to act in ways counter to our collective best interests. But we are all in this together and it is time we started acting like it.

The Brooklyn Commune “about” statement includes the following:

Members of The Brooklyn Commune will model the behaviors we are asking others to adopt: openness, transparency, inclusivity, responsibility, respect & rigor. And we hold ourselves accountable for our behavior as we work to establish a culture of mutual trust, respect and cooperation.

We would like to propose that these are humanistic values worth embracing and worth encoding into our systems and practices.

We believe that artists, audiences, funders, institutions and organizations small, medium and large are all in this together and share a desired outcome: a healthy, vibrant and sustainable arts ecology in America. We envision a diverse and inclusive arts ecology that values all of its stakeholders, that provides opportunities for advancement and facilitates meaningful discourse in the culture at large.

In order for us to collectively achieve this goal, we need to be able to come to the table together respectfully and hear each other, acknowledge our differences, identify our particular challenges and collaboratemeaningfully towards our shared goal.

That would be the most innovative agenda of all.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Horwitz is a critic, curator and creative producer with over twenty years of experience in the for-profit and not-for-profit creative sectors. He is the founder of Culturebot Arts & Media, Inc., publisher and Editor-In-Chief of Culturebot.org.

From 2011 – 2013 he curated and produced Manhattan’s free, outdoor, multidisciplinary arts festival, The River To River Festival, for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council where he was previously the Director of Public Programs. As Director of Public programs he worked with neighborhood stakeholders such as American Express, Goldman Sachs, The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey, the Alliance for Downtown New York and the New York City Economic Development Corporation to develop and implement cultural strategies for the continued revitalization of Lower Manhattan.

In 2003 he launched Culturebot.org, NYC’s first website devoted exclusively to contemporary performance: dance, theater, live art, visual art performance, media, new music performance and more. It has grown into the most respected, thought leading publication in the sector, a platform for the most exciting new ideas in arts and culture.

From 2002 – 2004 he was the Marketing Director at Performance Space 122, one of NYC’s most prestigious venues for contemporary performance. Here he developed organizational strategy and rebranded the institution, repositioning it in the national cultural landscape, revitalizing the brand and growing audience. In 2005 he became Performance Space 122’s first full-time producer where he introduced new programs and produced international festivals including Buenos Aires In Translation, Norway in New York and PS122’s programs for Act French.

From 2007-2009 he was a co-curator of the PRELUDE Festival of contemporary theater and performance at the Martin E. Segal Theater Center at the Graduate Center at CUNY. With his colleagues he grew the festival into one of New York City’s most highly regarded festivals of new work and works-in-progress; PRELUDE is now a significant opportunity for artists and curators alike to get a preview of the upcoming season, to share knowledge and best practices and build community.

Andrew has advised countless artists and served on numerous panels for arts organizations and funders including the Mellon Foundation, United States Artists, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage’s Philadelphia Music Project, New Music USA, The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists, the National Performance Network, The MAP Fund, Here Arts Center, Dixon Place and more.

Prior to becoming an arts administrator in 2002, Andrew worked as an interactive producer and brand strategist at ad agencies such as Fallon Worldwide (NYC office), iDeutsch and Margeotes,Fertitta + Partners, working on such accounts as ABC Sports, About.com, And1 Shoes, Bank One, Brink’s Home Security, Comedy Central, CondeNet, Domino’s, Georgia-Pacific, MTV Networks, Timberland, Time Magazine, Stolichnaya, Sotheby’s and Zyrtec.

Even prior to that Andy was a writer & performance maker. He has performed at PS122, HERE, Dixon Place, the Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe, The Knitting Factory, CBGB and countless other venues in NYC and nationally. From 1990-1995 he lived in Seattle where his work as a spoken word performer and activist led to his involvement with the artist-run women’s self-defense collective Home Alive. His spoken word piece “4th of July” was released on the Epic CD Home Alive: The Art of Self-Defense alongside such rock luminaries as Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Jello Biafra and Lydia Lunch. In 2005 he ran for Mayor of New York City – AndyForMayor.org – a performance project documented in the film The Promise of New York, by director Raul Barcelona. In 2006 he appeared as a Demon Tour Guide in Les Freres Corbusiers’ production of Hell House at St. Ann’s Warehouse, directed by Alex Timbers. His writing has been published on Nerve.com, Seattle’s The Stranger, Heeb Magazine and various anthologies.

Andrew has a B.S. in Speech from Northwestern University.

www.culturebot.org
ABOUT CULTUREBOT ARTS & MEDIA

Culturebot Arts & Media, Inc., is a new kind of arts organization for the 21st Century. It began as Culturebot.org, an arts and culture website launched in 2003 by founder Andrew Horwitz as a blog for Performance Space 122 and has operated independently since 2007.

Culturebot.org serves as the online hub for Culturebot Arts & Media, Inc., the center of its activities in support of community building, developing of frameworks for peer-led knowledge and resource sharing and collaborative creative practice.

Culturebot has presented performances and convened conversations, supported artists, been a critical partner to festivals, hosted parties, offered workshops and more. We’ve grown both conceptually and programmatically over the past ten years, evolving into an important and well-regarded thought-leader. Our ideas on performance, criticism, art and culture at large are widely discussed, taught at universities and debated amongst colleagues.

We believe that art is a way of being in the world and live performance of all kinds is a necessary and vital element of the cultural ecology.

We aspire to be deeply knowledgeable and widely accessible, we believe that criticism is a creative practice and critical discourse is essential for a vibrant and engaged citizenry.

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