



CREATE  
COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

## *Excellence and Community Engagement* *Equity and Respect*

Conversations about excellence and community engagement in the arts are difficult because they have to consider the cultural context of the works in question as well as acknowledge the broad range of types of “quality” that should be considered. (See “Excellence and Community Engagement.”) In addition, for effective work in community engagement, awareness of historical inequities and respect for our communities are essential; these factors then also have an impact on how we understand excellence in this work.

The arts of the European aristocratic cultural tradition have benefited for centuries from financial support for infrastructure, education, and presentation that has been totally unavailable to the arts of other cultures. One result is that gatekeepers in the arts who are products of this system are largely unaware of the arts of other cultures and so continue to make assumptions about excellence that favor the art they know. This is but one reason for the profound funding inequities that exist in the industry today.

A more practical result of the access to resources is that visual and performing artists working in these European traditions have been provided time to hone their technique in ways not possible for artists whose work is rooted in other cultures. It is patently unfair to compare levels of technical excellence in Eurocentric presentation with that of other cultures. This is especially true with respect to arts organizations. The fact that many individual artists are on a par with their Western peers in technical proficiency in their native styles and forms is a testament to the hold that the arts have on them.

Unfortunately, discussions of excellence in the arts are sometimes clouded by an undercurrent of dismissiveness about the ability of people (the “unwashed masses”) to appreciate great art. The issue of cultural traditions is important here. On a personal note, I have some understanding of Indian classical music—ragas, rhythmic practices, and musical structure—but I can’t say that it speaks to me. That does not make me lesser nor does it demean Indian music. It’s just that I don’t make a point of attending concerts. That, I am sure, is largely due to the fact that I am not a product of the culture of the subcontinent of India; and it demonstrates why it can be difficult to grow an arts organization by attempting to connect with people who do not share the culture of the art presented. People whose cultural background is not tied to the European aristocratic tradition can hardly be faulted for a disinclination to participate in arts experiences derived from it.

Concerning the more general issue of capacity, some in the nonprofit arts industry hold that a lack of interest in our art demonstrates that “those people” lack a basic depth of feeling or understanding. (If, reading this, your reaction is that no one believes that, trust me. I’ve had these conversations.) The inherent arrogance of this perspective should be self-evident. Most people on this planet have passionate attachments to home and family, to their god, and sometimes to their region or country. When they have the time and luxury of thinking about things other than basic necessities (and this is a key issue) they *are* concerned about the big questions of their place in the universe and the meaning of life. To believe otherwise, consciously or not, is simply indefensible.

There is a related view that the success of mass culture proves that people are incapable of reflective experience. To be sure, there is much in mass culture that is superficial and easy, but there are also many examples of extremely popular works providing profound insight—the songs of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, television shows like *The West Wing* or *Breaking Bad*, movies like *Sophie’s Choice*, and the cultural phenomenon of *Hamilton*—to name a few. In addition, frankly, there is absolutely nothing wrong with some entertainment being easy. (For more on this, see <https://www.artsjournal.com/engage/reflective-art-visceral-art/>.)

Finally, to address a negative assumption that some people make about community engagement, community engagement is not “giving them what (we think) they want.” Polling people about what works they want presented does not make sense when they have little or no awareness of what works exists. Rather, effective community engagement demands learning enough about communities to know what works will be meaningful to them and then programming that with them.

It is the nonprofit arts industry that has the most direct, practical vested interest in the success of our organizations. Connecting more broadly with more communities is essential for survival, let alone for prospering. People who have not had access to arts education or experiences cannot be held to account for that lack. It is not their responsibility to come to us. It is the organizations’ job to figure out how to become more meaningful to them.

If it were true (and unalterable) that many are incapable of appreciating reflective art, that would be devastating for the future of arts organizations. Fortunately, that is not the case. For the health of the industry, widespread relevance is an important goal. Indeed, relevance may not be sufficient in an era of conflicting priorities. Achieving recognized indispensability may be vital. ([\*Engage Now! A Guide to Making the Arts Indispensable\*](#).) Finding appropriate ways to be meaningful to greater numbers of people is the key to our future.

*Doug Borwick*

*For further information:*

Engaging Matters <http://www.artsjournal.com/engage>

Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States [<http://www.artsengaged.com/bcna>]

Engage Now! A Guide to Making the Arts Indispensable [<http://artsengaged.com/engage-now>]

Community Engagement Training [<http://www.artsengaged.com/cet>]

Email: [info@artsengaged.com](mailto:info@artsengaged.com)

ArtsEngaged is a division of Outfitters4, Inc.  
328 N. Spring St./Winston-Salem, NC 27101  
[www.artsengaged.com](http://www.artsengaged.com) / [www.outfitters4.com](http://www.outfitters4.com)