



CREATE
COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Excellence and Community Engagement

Advocates for community engagement in the arts often get pushback from people who assume that concern for the interests of our communities necessitates a “lowering of standards.” This is an attempt to address that issue. It is almost exclusively geared toward arts organizations; artists should be perfectly free to approach their art in whatever way seems best to them. However, if they are interested in relevance or reaching more of the public, there may be things here of value.

Excellence is a goal for many, if not most, categories of work. For the arts, dealing with basic questions of human existence and well-being, it is essential. However, objectively evaluating excellence is extremely difficult.

First, the arts are culturally specific. One need only put a Shakespearean tragedy next to a Noh drama to see the truth of this. It is almost impossible to evaluate the excellence of art that is the product of an unfamiliar culture. Related to this, cultures emphasize different elements in their arts. Music of the European aristocratic cultural tradition emphasizes harmony and counterpoint. The great works provide dazzling displays of both. But the music is also based on some of the simplest rhythmic structures among world cultures. African and Japanese drumming and Indian ragas, for example, demand feats of counting and the ability to play cross-rhythms that would befuddle the professional musician who plays in an orchestra devoted primarily to European masterworks.

Second, there are many types of excellence. Arts of the European aristocratic cultural tradition have generally focused on two things in assessing artistic quality. Technical excellence, the mastery of the elements of an art form, is one. But all critics acknowledge that technical excellence by itself, while impressive, is insufficient for greatness. The art must also be “expressive,” bringing forth the human feeling or experience associated with and undergirding the work. Both are essential. Great expressiveness without technical excellence is simply messy. The technical flaws distract from and diminish the experience.

But there are other categories in which excellence could be important for the arts. In a time of skyrocketing costs and shrinking (or at least not vigorously expanding) audiences, expanding “reach” is a survival issue for the industry. The capacity to craft participatory experiences for adults (counteracting decades of neglect of the arts in public education) as well as to develop and provide experiences that individuals and communities identify as

important to them may be as significant as technical and expressive excellence.¹ To be clear, these are not “merely” means of ensuring the health of our organizations, they are ways of making real our conviction that the arts are truly for everyone.

We need to avoid the mental trap of thinking that the art with which we are familiar is great, and that art with which we are not is somehow inferior. Excellence in an art form is important within its local, cultural context, but it is not superior to the same level of artistic excellence in work from another culture. It is also important to recognize that there are kinds of excellence, some of which may not be familiar to us, that are important to the future of the arts.

To be clear, we are not talking here about “giving people what they want,” since many in our audiences may have little awareness of the range of works that exist. What we *can* commit to is learning enough about communities to determine what works of the international cultural canon will be meaningful to them and then, with input from community members, present those works.

While it takes education, effort, and experience to appreciate great art, it is our responsibility to frame the works we offer so that audience members with all levels of understanding can have meaningful, enjoyable experiences. It is not the responsibility of others to come to us. It is our job to figure out how to frame our art so that it can be seen as valuable by many more people of diverse backgrounds. This is the key to our future.

There are many categories of excellence. No individual or organization can be excellent in all things. The need for ever greater relevance is critical to the future of the nonprofit arts industry. There is no question that technical and expressive excellence in art of the European cultural tradition will be a central goal for many arts organizations, but by themselves they may no longer be enough. Organizations can and should make choices about how to focus their efforts and choose the areas of excellence they want to highlight, but this should be done with full understanding of the impact of those choices on the path to sustainability.

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.artsenaged.com/bcna>]

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

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

Email: info@artsenaged.com

ArtsEngaged is a division of Outfitters4, Inc.
328 N. Spring St./Winston-Salem, NC 27101
www.artsenaged.com / www.outfitters4.com

¹ Nina Simon, a leading advocate for community engagement in the museum world has suggested a range of categories that could be considered in assessing excellence. “But What About Quality?” (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2014/09/but-what-about-quality.html>), 2014

AESTHETIC: is it beautiful?

TECHNICAL: is it masterful?

INNOVATIVE: is it cutting edge?

INTERPRETATIVE: can people understand it?

EDUCATIONAL: can people learn from it?

RELEVANT: can people relate to it?

PARTICIPATORY: can people get involved or contribute to it?

ACADEMIC: does it produce new research or knowledge?

BRIDGING: does it spark unexpected connections?

IGNITING: does it inspire people to action?