



Whose Revolution Is It?

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Marian A. Godfrey
Senior Director, Culture Initiatives
The Pew Charitable Trusts

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here in Philadelphia and speak with you all today. I am especially honored to have been invited by Wendy Luke to give the Stephen E. Weil Lecture this year. I am one of the very many people who are privileged to have known Steve and to have benefited from his wise advice and mentorship, especially in his role as Chair of the Advisory Board of the Museum Loan Network, which The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation jointly developed and supported from 1995 through 2002. Steve's intellect was formidable, and his knowledge not only of museums, but of the world at large was astonishing in its breadth and depth; and his vision for what museums and their role in human society might—and should—be was inspiring and demanding. He often spoke to the museum world as the loyal opposition, challenging those of us who care about museums and their collections to care more about people as well.

He could be very intimidating. But he was also a wonderful teacher who clearly took enormous pleasure in supporting and encouraging younger colleagues, and he was delightful to spend social time with. I miss him. I want to thank Wendy Luke very much for inviting me to give this lecture that carries his name.

I want to say up front that I am not an expert on museums, and so I will offer a more general look at what I see happening in museums, in the arts and culture sector and in arts philanthropy. The best of my museum knowledge comes from Steve, in fact, and from a cadre, if I may use that revolutionary word, of extraordinary women, the “Go Girls,” who have been leading innovation and change in museums for the last generation. Several of them generously sent me articles and speeches from which I have cribbed liberally for this lecture. In my examples of developing practices related to participation, I focus on art museums, but innovators are applying them across all types of museums.

What Revolution Is It?

Revolution is in the air. This conference's theme, Revolutionizing Museums, reflects a deep anxiety that has invaded the thinking of those of us who run institutions and who support and care about the sector. I, as many others, have been making speeches for years about the changing cultural context: we talk about demographic shifts, the impact of new technologies and social networks on individuals' engagement with arts and cultural institutions, and generational leadership transitions, to name the three harbingers of change on which we focus most intensely.

Although the anxiety and the accompanying rhetoric about the times of turbulent and disruptive change we are in have been made more urgent by the economic crash, we have been feeling and talking about the ground shifting under our feet for at least ten years. Revolution as a theme—not only of this meeting, but of others, including this past summer’s League of American Orchestras conference—expresses a burgeoning awareness that not only will our world not be returning to any past normality, but we are as yet unable to forecast where we and our world will end up. As futurist Clay Shirky says in his new book, *Cognitive Surplus*, “If a change in society were immediately easy to understand, it wouldn’t be a revolution.”¹

If we are indeed in the midst of a revolution, we need to get an intellectual grasp on what kind of revolution we are having. We panic about the arts being in crisis during every economic downturn. What exactly is it that makes this one different? If we are talking about deep and transformative changes in our society, what are the sources of those changes?

Clearly, one is the “digital revolution,” though the debate is still open as to whether it will actually modify human behavior—for example, by creating a new generation of social activists—or merely provide new and better tools for accomplishing our present goals. The impact of new digital technologies on both cultural organizations’ programming and management and audience participation is currently the predominant concern of organizations and funders worried about structural, rather than cyclical, change. But I want to recognize as equally important the demographic transformation of the nation into one in which no race or ethnicity makes up the dominant population. This change will happen over the next 30 years, so much of its impact is still in the future. But in the end I believe it will be at least as important as the new technologies, if not more so, to the reshaping of our society.

So I want to be cautious about claims for revolution. I think we are seeing true transformations in both the creation of knowledge and the ability to disseminate it and use it, in the sciences as well as in the arts, but we don’t know yet how social behavior will change as a result.

I strongly believe revolutions are made by individuals, not institutions, and this is one of the key points I want to make. We may truly be in a time of transformation, but cultural institutions are not in the vanguard. Indeed, for reasons I will discuss later in my talk, I believe it is difficult, if not impossible, for institutions, including museums, to foment revolutions.

I’ll get to the soup can later.

Re-imagining Museums

Meanwhile, the challenge for institutions is to understand and participate in, as best we can, the revolution that is swirling around us. That said, the museum world is blessed by having some terrific individuals who are leading change in the field:

- by thinking about stewardship as a responsibility toward both people and objects;
- by experimenting with what it means to be a museum and exploring how individuals might engage most satisfyingly with museums in the era of digital technology and social networking; and
- by pursuing innovative approaches to museum education.

My first mentor in the museum world, even before I met Steve Weil, was Bonnie Pitman, whom I met when she was chairing the American Association of Museums committee that wrote “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums.”²

Bonnie, now the director of the [Dallas Museum of Art](#), has extensive training and experience as a museum educator, and was the person from whom I learned that believing museum visitors are as important and central to museums’ missions as the objects in their care is both a deeply controversial concept, and essential if these institutions are to fulfill their public trust. At the same time, Bonnie’s deep reverence for and delight in great art objects, and her belief that it is possible to connect objects and people with powerful results, gave me permission to explore and enjoy my own aesthetic responses when I was starting out to attempt to understand museums.

In Dallas, Bonnie’s programming—including late-night programs for insomniacs as well as the Center for Creative Connections, an interactive learning environment for children and adults—makes the museum a real place for the community. Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has described her thus: “Bonnie represents the leading edge of this growing awareness that in order for museums to be sustainable in the future, they really have to listen to their visitors and take them into account in designing their programs.”³

Mr. Govan’s formulation is actually quite conservative in relation to the most advanced current thinking and practice by those committed to creating truly outward-facing institutions, places that treat their visitors as co-creators rather than receivers of programming.

Elaine Gurian, like Steve Weil, has made a career of challenging our received notions of museums and insisting that we think deeply about the true nature of museums' responsibility to the public trust, as well as about leadership, governance, exhibitions and programming. In a paper she sent me for this lecture she proposes the following way to understand museums, which I am condensing and probably oversimplifying:

The tone and direction of a museum [is] not... based on the subject matter of the collections but rather on the philosophy of the director, staff and board... Users could intuit the direction of the museum if they knew the answer to two fundamental questions—‘Which does the museum value more—visitors or objects?’ And ‘Is the museum primarily an instructor to or a collaborator with its audience?’... usually one or the other of these tendencies predominates when placed on a continuum.”⁴

I am going to call out just a few examples of innovative approaches to visitor engagement, which I believe is the side of the continuum that yields most opportunities for revolution, or at least for incremental change. I have had the pleasure of learning about these examples in preparing this lecture, but I have no doubt that each of you has many of your own.

First, here is an example close to home: the [First Person Museum](#), which will open in November at the Painted Bride Art Center here in Philadelphia. It is a project of an organization called First Person Arts and its First Person Festival of Memoir and Documentary Art. This project is being guest curated by Kathleen McLean, one of that revolutionary cadre of leaders who are working to expand the very idea of what a museum can be.

The First Person Museum is an on-line gallery where participants can post images of objects of great personal importance to them, along with stories about their relationships to those objects. The people, stories and objects will also be captured on film and video, and recorded by the producers of NPR's "Radio Diaries." Through this exhibition and related programs, Kathleen McLean and First Person Arts explore the questions "what is a museum" and "who is an expert?", and propose an alternative idea about who owns museums. The First Person Museum incarnates the notion of the DIY—do it yourself—artist.

This past summer, the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage invited Adam Lerner and Mark Allen to participate in a [curatorial roundtable on audience engagement](#). As the Director and Chief Animator in the Department of Structures and Fictions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver (MCA Denver), Adam Lerner has engaged the Denver community with [programming](#) such as "Mixed Taste," a series of tag-team lectures from experts on seemingly unrelated

subjects, based on the concept of serendipitous discovery through mash-ups, as well as socially engaged programs, including Feminism and Co. and the Teen Council.

I especially like the idea of “Art Fitness Training,” three-day workshops that provide basic principles of observation and encourage close looking, and “Art Meets Beast,” a sort of exploded version of Mixed Taste in which over a three-day period art encounters western foodways, including a bison butchering workshop and a culminating bison feast. This is audacious programming, and appears to be creating a brand for the MCA Denver as a place where artists and visitors can jointly rethink what happens in museums.

Mark Allen is the founder and Executive Director of [Machine Project](#) in Los Angeles. This nonprofit community space investigates art, technology, natural history, science, music, literature and food, producing events, workshops and site-specific installations using hands-on engagement to make rarefied knowledge accessible. This year Allen is the first “artist innovator” in residence as part of the [Hammer Museum’s](#) expanded artist in residence program.

In August, Allen organized, among other events, a month’s vacation for museum visitors’ houseplants, including cultural activities, “to ensure that their time away from home while their owners themselves [were] on vacation [was] relaxing, rejuvenating and enjoyable.”⁵

I quote from an interview with Allen on Southern California Public Radio about this project: “Over the course of the month we’ll have different kinds of programming for the plants. We’ll have poetry...we’ll have musical performances... [and] we [will] have plant psychics coming to heal the plants’ psychic energy.”⁶

The California Public Radio continues describing the program:

The exhibit even has a phone system set up so that moms, dads, aunts or any plant relative can talk to their plants while they’re away. A speaker system planted within a rock allows the calls to be automatically broadcast to the room of plants. Allen and the museum have compiled a collection of readings they think may interest houseplants, including everything from contemporary poetry to ‘19th century historical accounts of botanical exploration.’ Plant parents and museum visitors can stop by and see the plants, play ping-pong for the plants, or partake in the cultural activity of the day. Musical events and performances are every Saturday from 1-4 p.m. The plants will be on vacation until August 28th. ”⁷

This project, a homage to and send-up of museum programs designed to make visitors feel more welcome and enhance participation, lets the participants “in on the act” while providing welcome relief from the

kind of earnestness that seems to overtake both cultural institutions and cultural funders when we are busy defending our worthiness and value.

These two visionary curators and museum animators look to artists as their key partners in the “interventions” that engage the museums with their communities. During the curatorial roundtable at the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Adam Lerner remarked, “The art world [is] very, very forgiving in its definition of what an artist is, but extremely unforgiving and conservative in the definition of what a [museum] is.”⁸

Both Lerner and Allen work with artists as metaphorical bomb-throwers—and I mean that in the nicest possible way—whose activities blow up the conservatism of their museums by using humor both to critique museum practices and to make those practices more transparent to visitors.

Patterson (Patty) Williams is a master teacher of Asian art and textiles at the Denver Art Museum (DAM). I am sure she is well known to many of you, not only as a pioneer in developing innovative practices in museum education, but also as a powerful force for raising the status of education within museums and building partnerships between educators and curators. Compared to the Denver MCA, the art museum is like a super-tanker, with far greater resources and constraints, which dictate a different approach from the gleeful crockery-breaking of Lerner and Allen.

For the Weil Lecture, Patty sent me an article that appeared this summer in the museum journal *Curator*, titled “Redefining Successful Interpretation in Art Museums.” This article, a collective conversation among DAM educators, documents the ways in which Patty and her team are still consistently breaking new ground after many years of work. I see the Denver Art Museum and its education department as an exemplar of a major cultural institution that pursues not the romance of revolution, but persistent, determined and powerful incremental change over a long period of time. To call out just a few of the key themes of their current work: participants in the conversation spoke of the centrality of “redefining success in terms of what works for museum visitors,” and stated that “serving visitors with choices has become a primary goal. More choices lead to more active participation in museum experiences for visitors and more of a facilitative role for museum staff members.”⁹ One of the museum’s strategies to engage adult visitors has been to create dedicated spaces for visitors to pursue their own creative activities such as writing poetry, and to rethink and redesign these spaces iteratively to enhance their success.

The Denver Art Museum has moved along a continuum from “one-way communication to dialog and co-constructed content,” as Sonnet Hanson notes in the article. “Unless museums begin to embrace two-way

communication and co-creation, they will become increasingly irrelevant as the young adult audience ages.”¹⁰ This construct for museum engagement is similar to that framed by Nina Simon in her book *The Participatory Museum*, and her prolific [blogs](#) on the subject of Museum 2.0.¹¹

Denver is pursuing two additional approaches to interpretation that I find powerful and moving: First, as part of reinstalling their American Indian collection, they will place more emphasis on individual artists. Says Master Teacher for Western American Art at Denver Art Museum Lisa Steffen: “Visitors to American Indian collections often see the objects as having been made by cultures as opposed to individual artists, so it was crucial to us, whenever possible, to emphasize named artists as creators of American Indian art.”¹²

The disconnect between art works, which the general public is prepared to respect and sometimes revere, and artists, about whom the public generally has either low or no opinions, according to the Urban Institute study *Investing in Creativity*, is one of the most persistent and disturbing conundrums I have observed in my time as an arts administrator and grant maker.¹³ I think this disconnect is an important source of the confusion and distrust that people, including many policy-makers, have about the cultural sector. So I am glad to see the Denver Art Museum’s commitment to more emphatically linking artists with objects. I am guessing that this may be a broader movement in art museums, and I hope that is so.

Second, over years of pursuing, and attending to the results of, an “experiment-evaluate-iterate” approach to museum education, Patty Williams and her colleagues have come to place a greater premium not just on learning by visitors, but also on personal experience. As Patty says:

We now realize that making sure folks gain knowledge can get in the way of... personal experience. Shifting to the word ‘experience’ has helped us to redefine success for much of our work. I hope that the next years will help us continue to articulate the human gain that happens when people have personal experiences with works of art.¹⁴

As a lay visitor to museums I want to take this idea farther, perhaps, than Patty had in mind, and point out that “experience” is an abstract word for what can really be the heart of an encounter with an artwork, which is elation, or fear, or anger, or a sense of transcendence or transformation, or laughter, or just sheer delight. Even negative feelings can be explored safely within the context of art in any of its forms—look at storytelling, for example—and as such can be experienced with pleasure.

And yet, for all sorts of reasons, we resist admitting that the fundamental reason people repeatedly seek out encounters with art is for the sake of the visceral and imaginative pleasures they provide. I worry about the exigencies of making the case for cultural institutions in a social policy context whose focus is

on correcting social ills, rather than strengthening social benefits. I think that has forced us to talk about the arts, and about cultural institutions, in ways that are misaligned with their fundamental realities.

The question of misalignment leads me to the glass-half-empty part of my talk. One reason we feel that what we really need is a revolution is that so many nonprofit culture organizations are out of alignment, internally and with their communities, that it appears the sector as a whole is dysfunctional. This is true in part because of historical circumstances and present social changes, in part because of how difficult it is for cultural organizations to change, and in part because the funders of cultural organizations, including both individual and institutional donors, are unwilling to support change or unsure how to do so.

All our rhetoric over the past decade or so, and all of the programmatic innovations and individual leadership that I have been speaking about, have not yet led to significant or widespread transformation in the structure and behaviors of the nonprofit culture sector. Otherwise, why are we still talking about the need for revolution? Somehow the need for change is not yet perceived as urgent or salient enough to overcome the difficulties involved. I would argue that the projects I have discussed that seek to make museums more relevant to their current and potential audiences, and the many more experiments that are now being conducted in the performing arts as well as museum world, are so far just chipping away at the margins. Research and data analysis from multiple sources demonstrates this, so I am going to shift gears and talk about data.

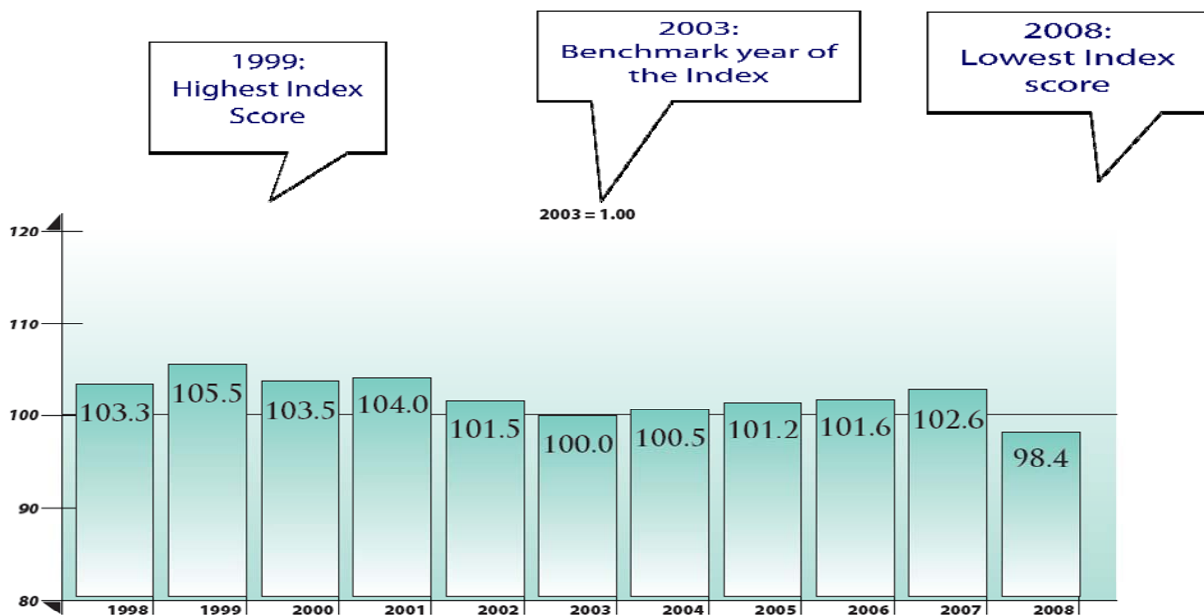
The Changing Face of Cultural Participation

Data used to be hard to come by. It is welcome now because it creates a platform of facts and information on which we can stand, even when the news it brings is negative or confusing, as it is in this case.

Here are some findings from the National Arts Index, created by Americans for the Arts, which annually compiles 76 indicators of cultural vitality in four broad categories—financial flows, capacity indicators, arts participation, and competitiveness:

Figure 1: National Arts Index: 1998-2008

(2003=100)¹⁵



1. **The arts follow the business cycle.** The arts respond to the booms and busts of the nation's economy. Based on past patterns, the report estimates that an arts rebound will begin in 2011. No surprise here; just a ratification of historical experience.
2. **Demand for the arts lags supply.** Between 1998 and 2008, there was a steady increase in the number of artists, arts organizations and arts-related employment. Nonprofit arts organizations alone grew in number from 73,000 to 104,000 during this span of time.¹⁶ That one out of three failed to achieve a balanced budget even during the strongest economic years of this decade suggests that sustaining this capacity is a growing challenge, and that capitalization has not kept up with growth for a long time, if ever.

Figure 2: Capacity Indicators

Growth in Number of Artists, Organizations, & Businesses¹⁷

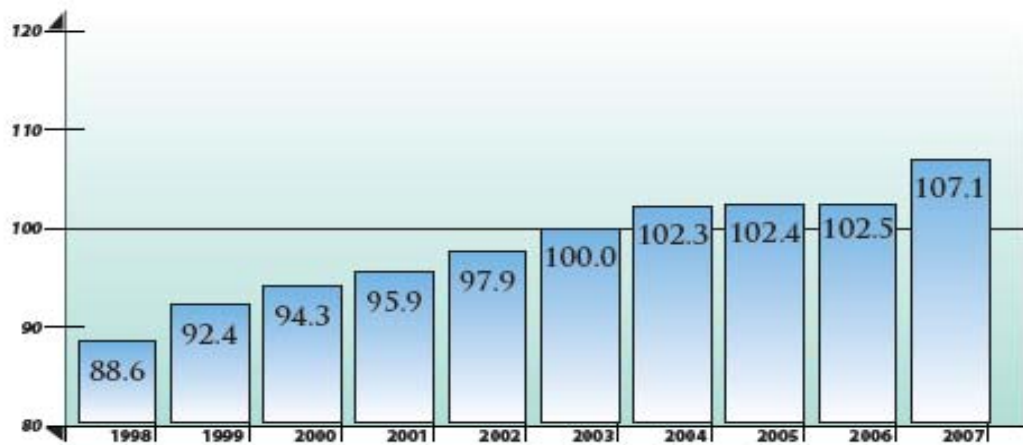
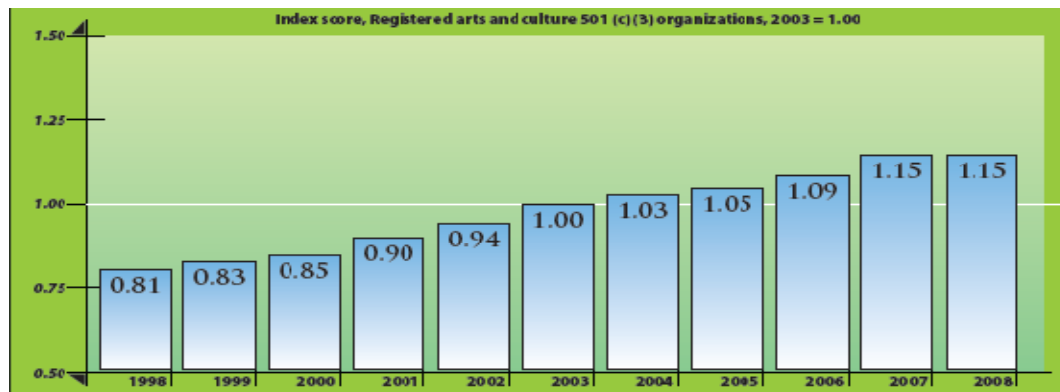


Figure 3: Registered 501(c)(3) Arts Organizations¹⁸



3. **How the public participates in and consumes the arts is expanding.** Tens of millions of people attend concerts, plays, opera, and museum exhibitions, yet the percentage of the U.S. population attending these arts events is shrinking and the decline is noticeable.

Figure 4: Percentage of U.S. Populations Attending Live Arts Events, 2003 – 2008¹⁹

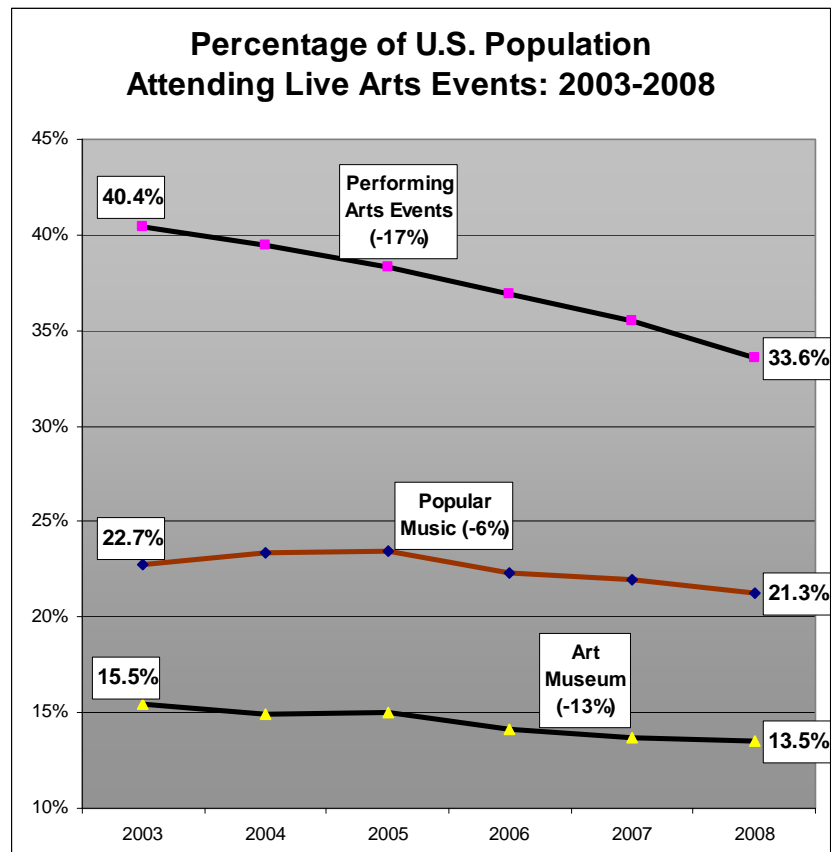
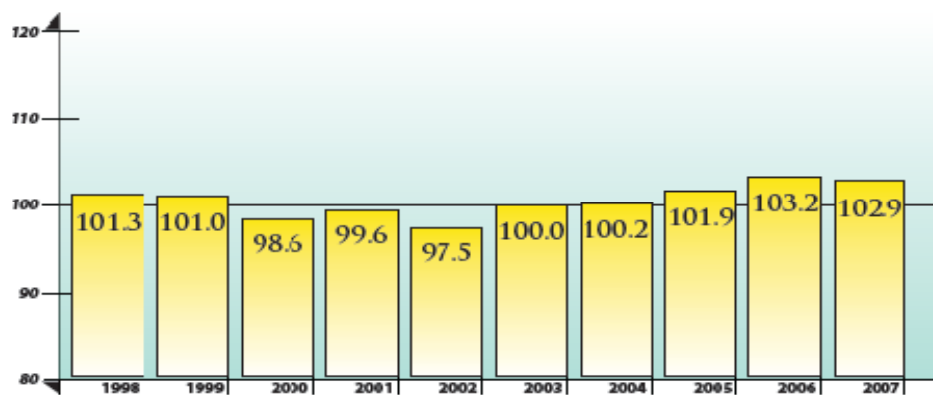
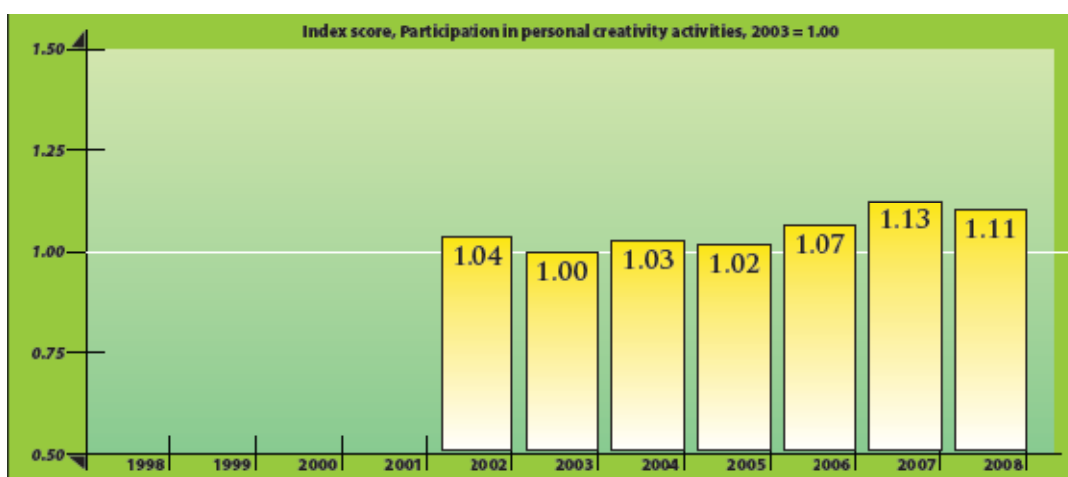


Figure 5: Participation Measure²⁰



On the increase, however, is the percentage of the American public personally creating art (e.g., music making and drawing).

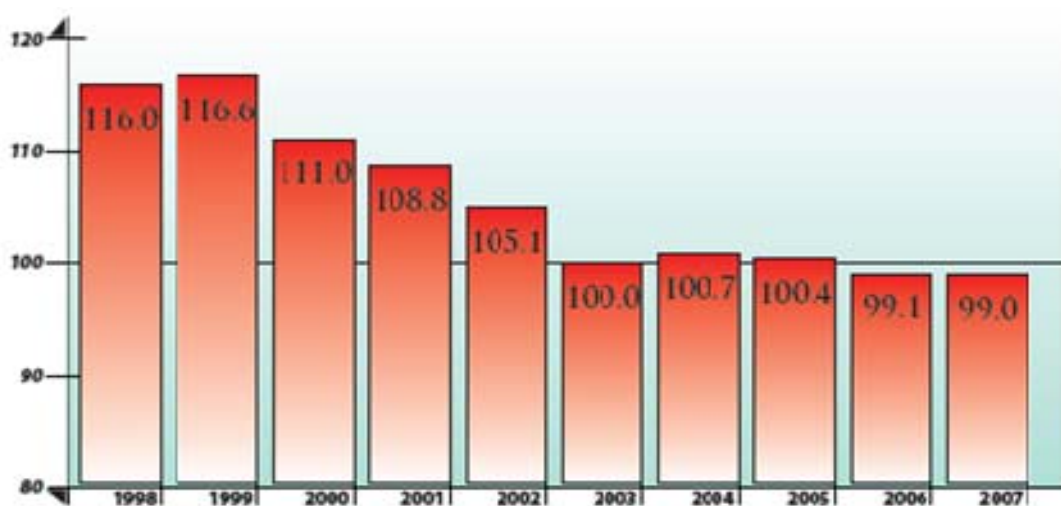
Figure 6: Personal Creation²¹



Technology is changing how Americans experience the arts, and consumption via technology and social media is also up. (More on this later.)

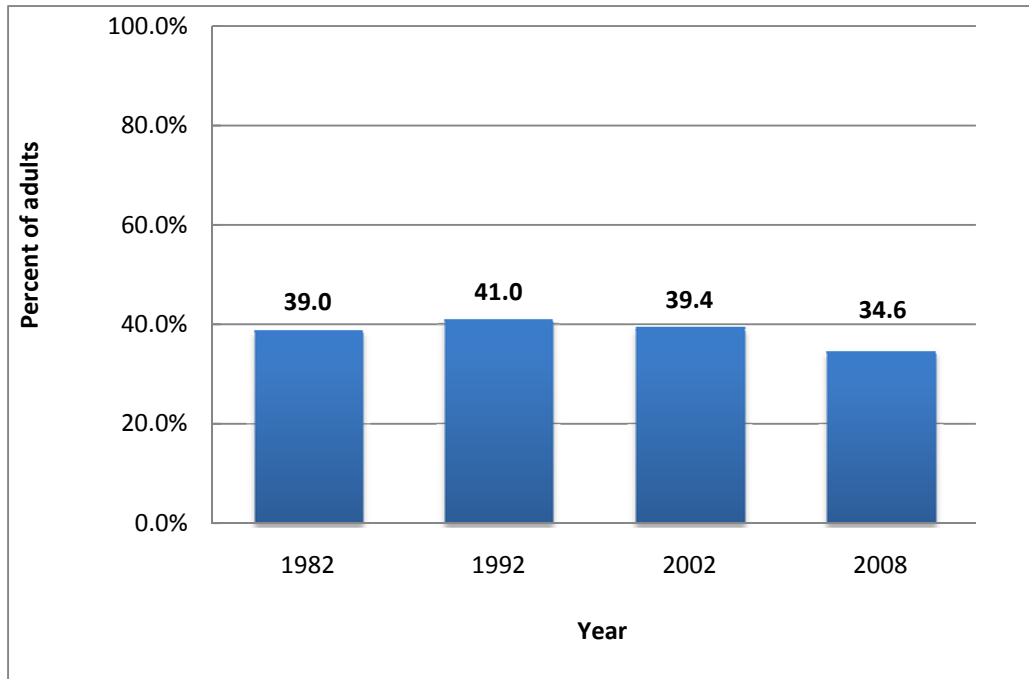
4. **The competitiveness of the arts is slipping.** The arts, in many ways, are not stacking up well against other uses of audience members' time, donor and funder commitment, or spending when compared to non-arts sectors.²²

Figure 7: Competitiveness Measure²³



As you know, the National Endowment for the Arts also published in late 2009 its most recent Study of Public Participation in the Arts, whose findings confirm those of the National Arts Index.

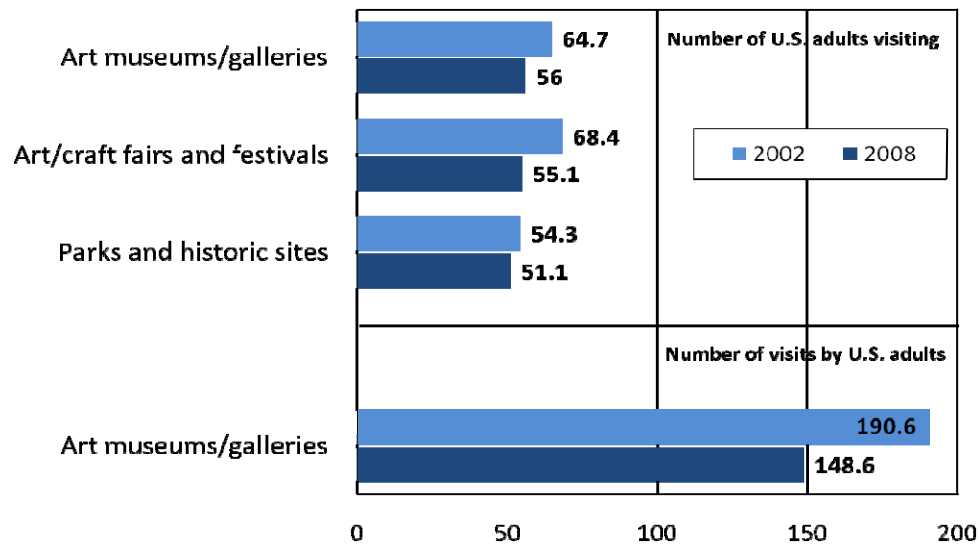
Figure 8: Percentage of U.S. adults attending a benchmark arts activity at least once in the past 12 months: 1982, 1992, 2002, and 2008



Note: Benchmark activities tracked since 1982 are attendance at jazz, classical music, opera, musical plays, non musical plays, and ballet performances, and visits to art museums or art galleries. (Source: "2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," NEA, 2010. Data Source: 1982, 1992, 2002 and 2008 Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts)

Participation in the NEA's 'benchmark' art live art disciplines was down significantly, and fell for the first time below participation rates in 1982 when these studies were first initiated.²⁴

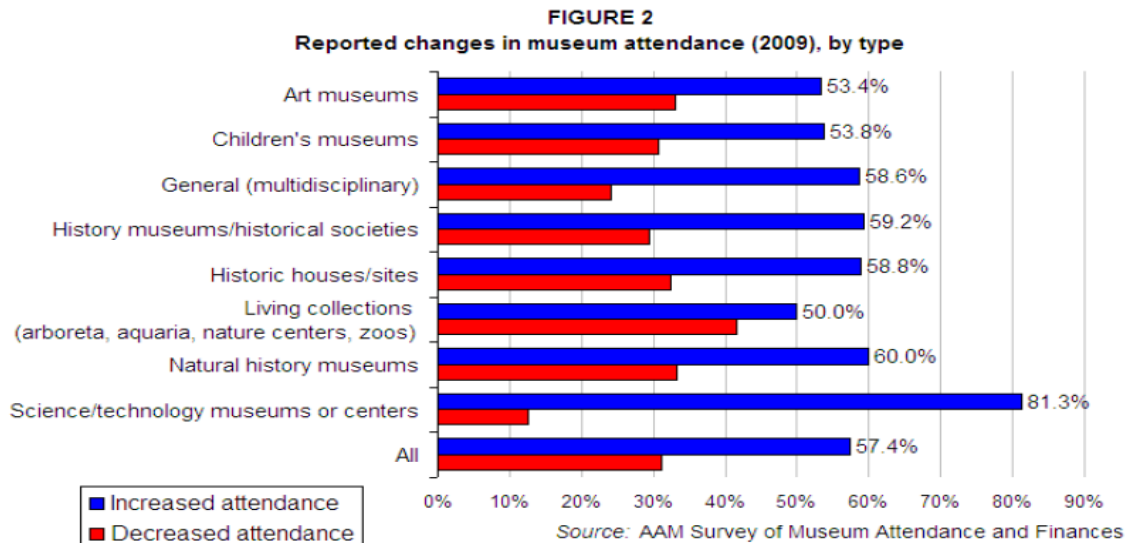
Figure 9: Number (in millions) of U.S. adults visiting art museums/galleries, art/craft fairs and festivals, and parks and historic sites in 2002 and 2008, and art museums in the past 12 months



Note: The undercount in adult population in the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts means that the number of attendees and visits are also underestimated. The actual decrease in number of attendees and visits between 2002 and 2008 may be larger than shown. (Source: "2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," NEA, 2010. Data Source: 2002 and 2008 Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts.)

Visits to museums and historic sites were also down significantly in 2008, although recent American Association of Museums data shows an upturn in 2009.²⁵

Figure 10: Is the recession helping museums recover audience?



It is not just that the supply curve keeps going up while the demand curve goes down. That is true for urban areas, but rural arts grantmakers will tell you that access to cultural resources and experiences is still severely constrained in many parts of the country outside of the major cities. I believe that demand is not so much shrinking as shifting to places where cultural experiences are relevant to the interests and values of visitors and audiences. And oftentimes that is away from well-established nonprofit cultural institutions and towards other opportunities for engagement.

Demand for the arts has historically been driven primarily by population growth—that is, the arts have attracted a fairly stable fraction of a growing market base. Even that stability is now in question: as we saw in the data the portion of the population participating in nonprofit, professional arts and cultural activity has begun to decline recently. But increased cultural activity, or supply, is only partially in response to actual increases in potential audiences.

The chronic undercapitalization of cultural organizations is owed in part, as well, to a related factor. Not only do we behave as if supply begets more demand than it actually does, but we also respond to the artificial “demand” created by grants from funders by further expanding supply.. As a result, as any fundraiser knows, and as Waldemar Nielson, a scholar and critic of philanthropy and its behaviors, said in a New York Times article in 1980—thirty years ago!—“funding for the... arts will never be ‘adequate.’” As Nielson noted, “The more money available, the more troupes and theaters and companies will be

formed. This Malthusian, or rabbits-and-lettuce, phenomenon is a considerable element in the... present crisis of the arts....”²⁶

From a historical perspective, the arguments for building the supply of and access to cultural experiences have been grounded in a set of cultural policy assumptions put forth during the 1960s, and predicated on the belief that in most parts of the country there was a serious dearth in access to the arts, particularly the performing arts, that should be corrected through major investments of public funds to build the cultural infrastructure. During that period there was relatively little access to the fine and performing arts for audiences outside of the major metropolitan areas.

It is not coincidental that the National Endowment for the Arts and the networks of state and local arts agencies developed beginning in the 1960s, and that this same period saw the peak in a remarkable, decades-long investment of many millions of dollars by the Ford Foundation in the capitalization of major cultural institutions throughout the country. Ironically, with all the growth in cultural supply over the past 40 to 50 years, we have created a state of overabundance in the cities while still failing to correct problems of equitable access outside the cities.

I believe that part of the misalignment of our current nonprofit cultural sector is due to the legacy of a cultural policy framework that was powerful in its day, and that continues to drive our advocacy arguments for support of the arts, but whose usefulness and relevance have diminished since the mid-twentieth century. The assumption that policy makers and the public will easily agree with cultural advocates that the arts are a public good, that we need more of them than we have and that government as well as patrons should invest in them no longer holds currency. But we have not developed new policy frameworks and arguments based in today’s realities.

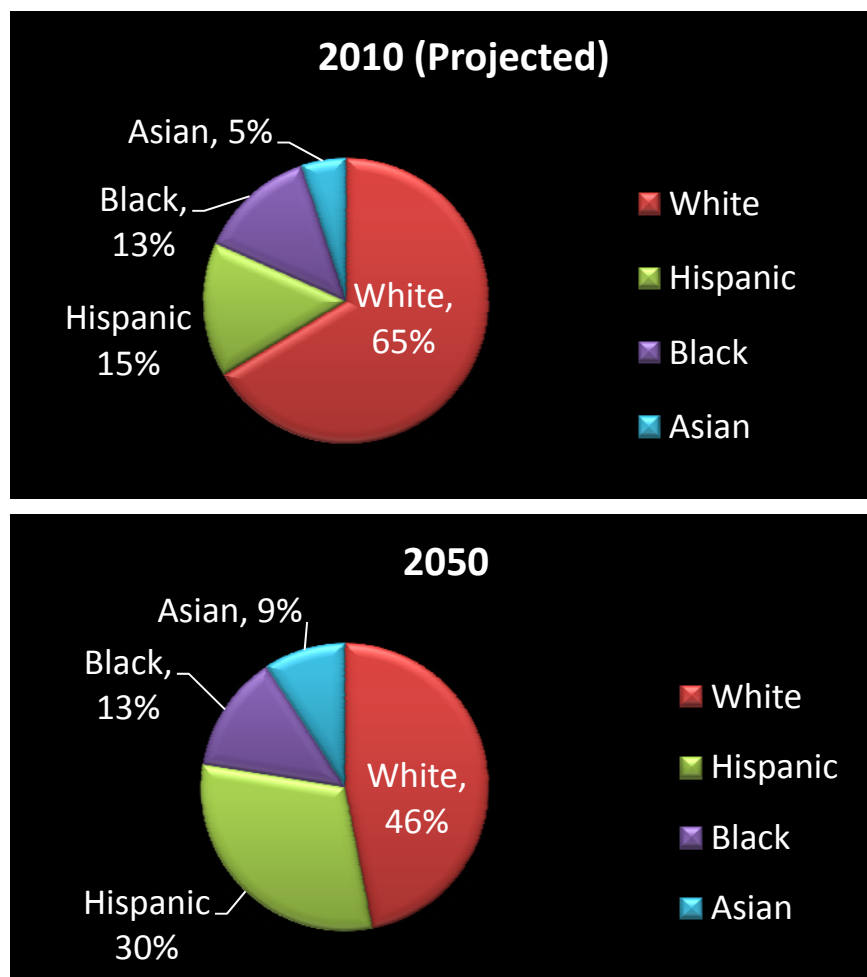
There are a lot of reasons why we are in this bind, but I want to focus on the one that is most closely related to my argument for today. Our advocacy efforts continue to be focused narrowly on the needs of nonprofit cultural organizations, and to a much lesser extent, artists—that is, on the supply side. But it is individual members of our communities, especially taxpayers and voters, who are the subjects of policy development and the objects of desire of politicians. And cultural organizations do not necessarily align their offerings and services to the interests and needs of the individuals in their communities. That is to say, neither the rabbits (cultural institutions) nor the lettuce (cultural support) drive the priorities of either voters/citizens or policy makers.

Demographics and Race

So, let's look at those individuals, whether we call them consumers or engaged participants. Who are they, how is their cultural context changing and how are they experiencing the arts and engaging in creative activities?

Demographic change, as I previously noted, is a slow-motion tsunami that many anticipate will ultimately overwhelm our current cultural system. The shift in the racial and ethnic composition of the United States' population that demographers have been predicting is inevitable while relatively slow compared to the development of the digital world; but ultimately it will drive a revolution in cultural expectations and participation. Speaking from a lay perspective, it seems to me that the following pie chart depicts the potential constituency of the cultural sector, right now as well as in the future. For any cultural organization to remain relevant, it needs to understand that and to program to that constituency now, not later.

Figures 11 and 12: Racial and Ethnic Composition of the United States today and in 40 years²⁷



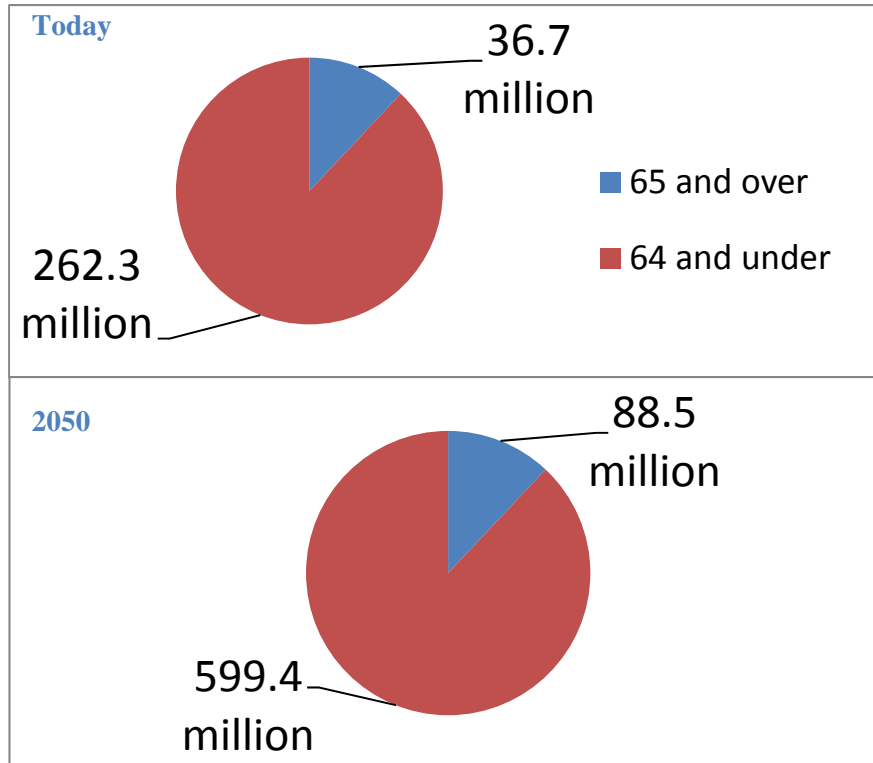
I understand that cultural organizations, especially museums, can have intellectual and aesthetic constituencies that are international in scope. However—for now at least—cultural organizations, like most other mission-driven organizations, are significantly place-based. I see the demographic profile of one's place as being a pretty serious proxy for the constituency that one should be serving. Indeed, the argument for the arts as “place-makers” that can revitalize communities is an emergent policy argument that is being made by, among other people, NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman.

There are splendid examples of museums that were created specifically to serve an identified community, such as the [Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience](#) in Seattle, Washington. Wing Luke co-creates all its exhibitions and programming with members of its community, and has put in place rigorous training and leadership development processes so that its staff can succeed in facilitating these partnerships. While it is very difficult, if not impossible, for an object-based institution to transform itself into such a highly successful and thoroughly community-focused one, I think we will see many new organizations being created in the future that are designed specifically to serve their communities, whatever those communities may be. If there is to be a revolution in the museum world, it will be through new leaders forming such new organizations.

A Nation of Elders

Age demographics offer an equally challenging and complex picture. People over 65 constitute 12 percent of the U.S. population today, and that figure will rise to 20 percent in 2050.^{28, 29} On the one hand, those of us born during the baby boom will drive a significant expansion over the next 20 years in the cohort of people of retirement age, who have historically been high cultural consumers and who may be fairly set in their ways about what they want to experience. On the other hand, our interests and preferences are likely to diverge increasingly from those of young people. Museums and other cultural organizations will need to struggle with finding ways to satisfy the divergent interests of these and other segments of their audiences. An additional implication of this trend relates to the aging of the current leadership in the culture sector. Willy-nilly, we senior citizens will be replaced by younger people with newer ideas, 21st Century citizens who might be the best news we can predict for the culture sector.

Figures 13 and 14: U.S. Population Composition by Age, Today and in 2050³⁰



A Brave New On-line World

Meanwhile, competition for the attention of both existing and new audiences is fierce, is growing rapidly and is coming from digital realms with which it is hard for cultural organizations to compete. For example, World of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) that as of October, 2010 had captured more than 60 percent of the global market for such games.³¹ A couple of years ago, my then 17-year-old nephew, who is now a talented photographer and a commercial pilot, played this game as much as eight hours a day, every day, for years. It didn't seem to deter him from either advanced academic achievement or a productive life infused with aesthetic considerations.

Since then, I have often speculated about the potential for computer games to become truly artistic creations. I discovered recently that this idea is being seriously explored by practitioners, academics and critics, and is also deeply controversial, especially among the critics. I believe that this form, which includes storytelling, visual and design production values, music and sound tracks, will have, once it gets better at character development, the same structural characteristics as that quintessential 19th century

gesamkunstwerk, the Wagnerian opera. When you consider how artists of all stripes will always spot an aesthetic vacuum and seek to fill it, it is hard to argue that there will not soon be video games that must be taken seriously as works of art. This year there was a Conference on the Art History of Games in Atlanta, Georgia, so if an art history for games is already being claimed, can reality be far behind?

Matthew Barney, among other artists, has taken a video game, in his case Donkey Kong, as inspiration for his work in [Cremaster 3](#) of his five-part film cycle. Indeed, the art world has appropriated video games into its discourse, but as far as I can tell, it is resistant to the notion that video games can appropriate the work of artists or become artworks themselves.

However, the gaming industry has in fact begun appropriating the art world. In preparing for this talk I searched YouTube for “museum.” The first entry that came up was “Museum Modern Warfare 2,” and when I clicked on that I got a list of hundreds of videos based on the game credited as, “An Evening with Infinity Ward, Modern Warfare Gallery Exhibit, Encino, California.”

The “museum level” of Modern Warfare 2 appears to be the highest (that is, most difficult) of four levels of this first person shooter game. The player walks into a gallery with vitrines down the middle from which s/he selects various weapons, and dioramas along the sides with scenes of men in uniform interacting with one another in a variety of settings and poses. The play begins when the player circles around to a big desk with “Information” on the front and a big red button that says “do not press.” When the player presses the button, the soldiers jump out of the dioramas and the battle begins. Once the player has killed all the adversaries in the gallery, he can move down a corridor into the next gallery which has a higher level of difficulty (and larger and more powerful weapons in the vitrines).

This use of traditional museum elements—the information desk, apparently inviting but also intimidating; the vitrines, both presenting and sealing off charismatic objects; the dioramas with their hokey reenactments of human behaviors; and the signal, represented by the big red button, that all this material is not lawfully to be released and empowered by the intruder from outside the institution; is casually exploitative rather than ironic. The pressing of the red button and the releasing of the violence contained within the displays comes across as the ultimate transgression against the authority of museum display. It draws the player into an emotional state entirely alien to the traditional museum experience.

Creative Citizens

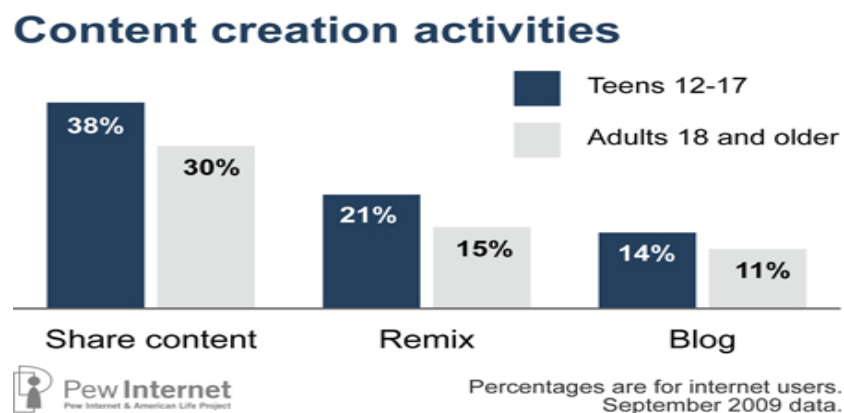
Meanwhile, the global denizens of YouTube continue to make their own DIY art, downloading millions upon millions of new videos each day. As Virginia Heffernan said in a recent New York Times article,

people are developing their own micro-genres designed specifically around the capacities and limitations of YouTube, and are creating what can only be called a new art scene, which she refers to as “a home for the vernacular avant-garde.”³² Yet according to Roberta Smith’s review of the Guggenheim’s YouTube Play contest and exhibition, in which 25 polished and professional-looking video clips were selected for display from a total of 23,000 applicants, that museum has not yet gotten the hang of the low-tech, DIY aesthetic embodied by this remarkable new cultural venue.³³

Of course, YouTube is not the only virtual space where individuals, especially teenagers and young adults, are sharing content they create or curate themselves. Use of social networking websites such as Facebook has also exploded. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that:

- 93 percent of American teens and young adults are on-line;
- 73% of wired teens now use social networking websites;
- And 72% of online 18-29 year olds use SN sites.³⁴

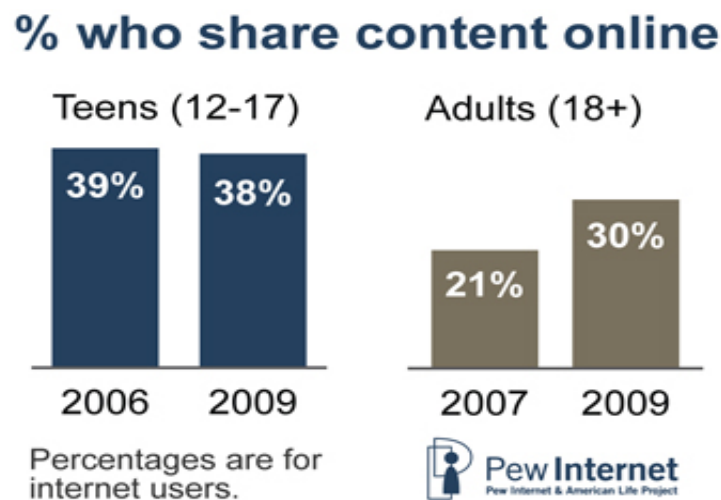
Figure 15: Content Creation Activities Among Teen and Adult Internet Users



Not Just the Kids

And as suggested by both the Pew Internet program and the National Arts Index, a growing number of digital citizens are sharing their own created content. Interestingly, adults have increased their participation in these activities at a far greater rate in the past two years than teens. The message here is that culture is being democratized by people whether or not they are being supported in doing so by the arts and culture sector.³⁵

Figure 16: Percentage of Teens and Adults Who Share Content Online



Something's Gotta Give: But What?

So, is the nonprofit cultural sector as we know it destined to be consigned to the ash-heap of history? Perhaps, in another fifty or one hundred years—but I would never underestimate the tenacity of a cultural organization. Meanwhile, there is reason to hope, based on the efforts and discoveries of visionary leaders and artists of whom I have been able to mention only a handful. We can turn as well to a growing body of knowledge in fields ranging from cognitive neuroscience, to the sociology of fandom, to increasingly sophisticated market research, all of which can provide guides to more intelligent thinking about how to make common cause with our audiences, if we only choose to do so.

I will focus on some findings and recommendations that emerged from the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance's *Engage 2020* project, which has set out to double cultural participation by the year 2020. The Cultural Alliance was brave in choosing to define the baseline for participation, in the year 2008, in far broader terms than the nonprofit cultural sector has been comfortable doing in the past. A baseline study

included measures of both participation in commercial and popular culture, as well as in the nonprofit arts, and personal creative practice.

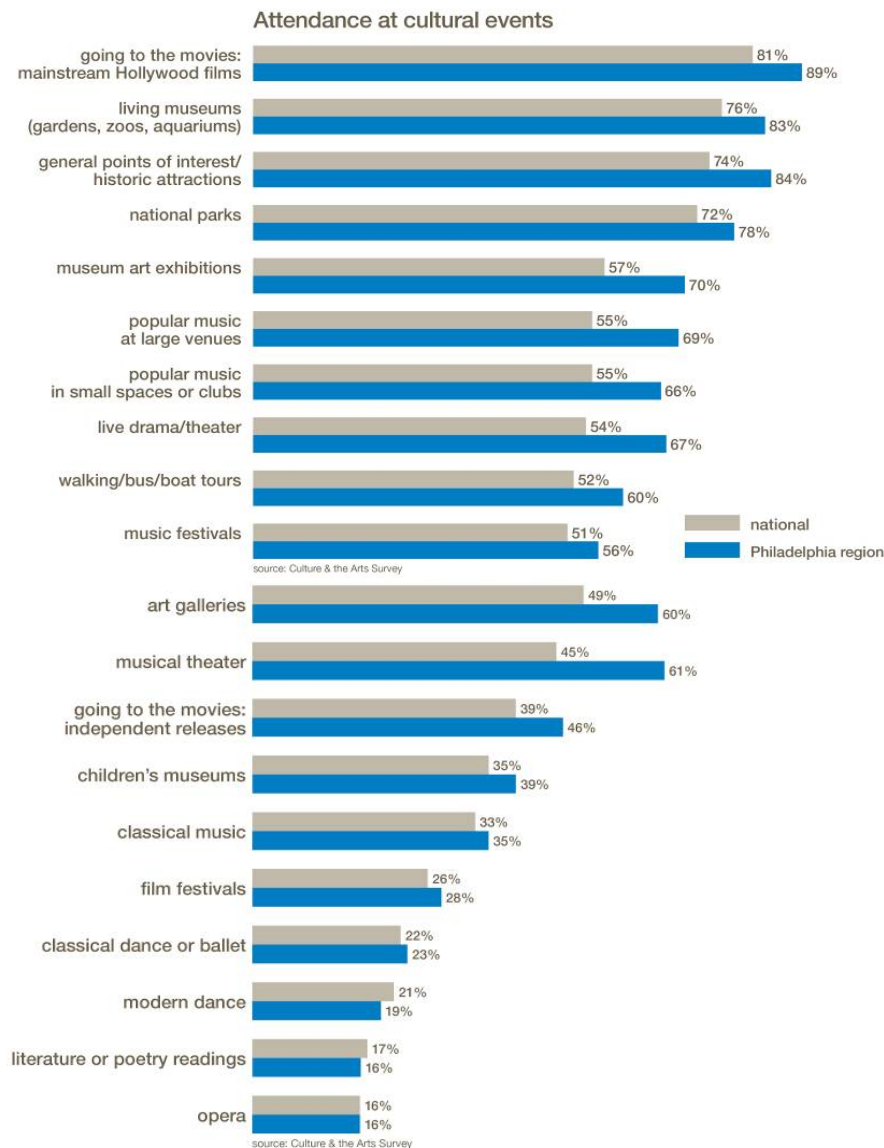
Figure 17: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance’s *Engage 2020* report, “Research into Action”³⁶



The report “Research into Action” documented and amalgamated the findings of five separate studies: the creation of a Cultural Engagement Index, which established the baseline measure for cultural participation at the start of the project; a study on Demographic Trends and Forecasts in the Philadelphia Region; a Culture and the Arts Survey of attitudes and behaviors of cultural audiences; a Paid Patronage Study; and Engage 2020 Focus Groups. Here are some of the findings.

On the one hand, cultural participation is still robust in this region and nationally.

Figures 17 and 18: Philly Scores Well in Attendance at Cultural Events³⁷

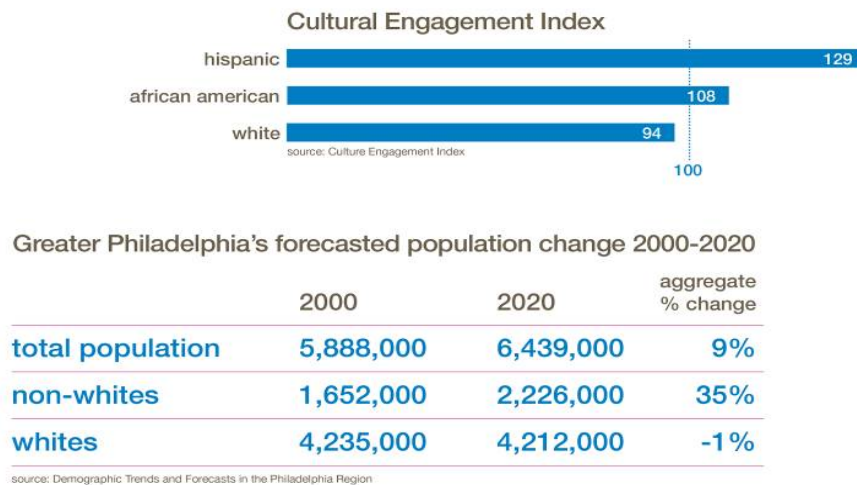


On the other hand, patron data showed that over a period of five years, in 17 major cultural organizations, two out of three patrons who attended one event at any of the organizations did not return within three years to any of the organizations.³⁸ This is churn with a vengeance and suggests that programming in these and other organizations is either irrelevant or otherwise unsatisfactory to many patrons.

The good news is that individuals who pursue their own creative practices are far more likely to attend cultural events than others; they are a close-in and potentially extremely loyal fan base for organizations.

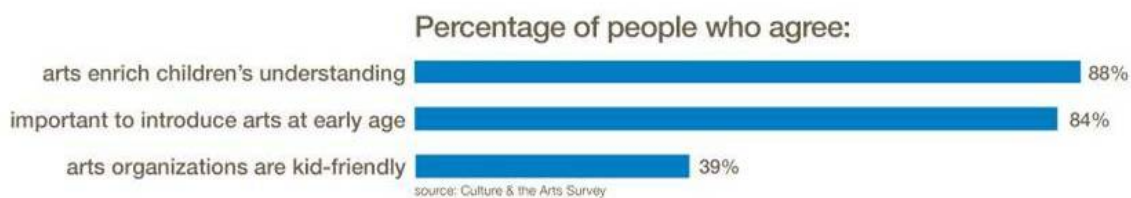
In case I didn't sufficiently make the case earlier, African Americans and Latinos are more culturally engaged than white audiences, and growth in these populations is the only population growth Philadelphia, at least, is expected to see in the coming years.³⁹

Figure 19: Greater Philadelphia Area Cultural Engagement Among Ethnic Populations⁴⁰



Folks want arts experiences for their children and consider access to them very important, but they do not feel that their children are made welcome enough by cultural organizations. Some museums do well in this area, but there is clearly an enormous amount of unfulfilled opportunity here.

Figure 20: Arts and Kids⁴¹



In marketing as in general these days, there is no such thing as one cultural authority—people look in many places for information about the arts.

Figure 21: Marketing is Multi-Channel⁴²

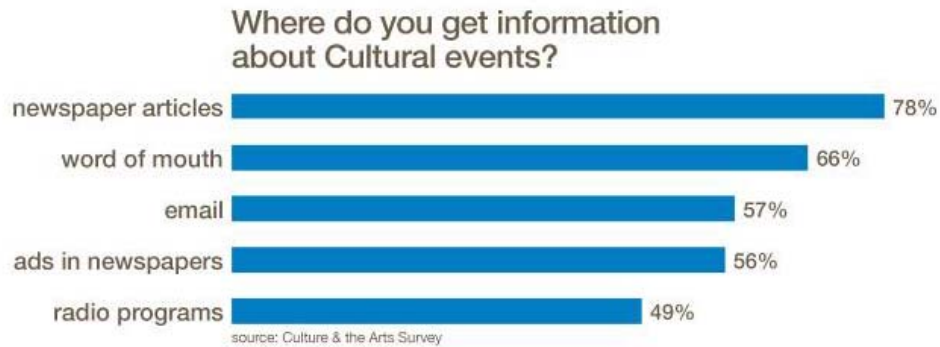
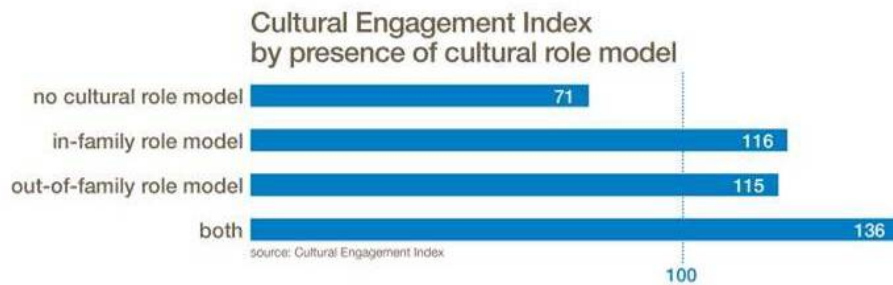


Figure 22: Role Models are Key⁴³



Expectations for excellent programming have not been diluted by the expansion of ideas about what excellence consists of.

Figure 23: Product Matters⁴⁴

Top five motivations to participate in cultural activities

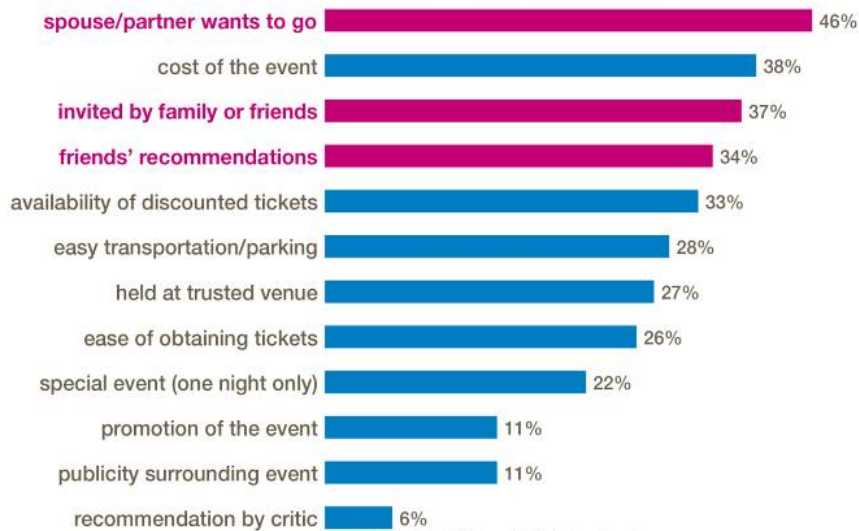
interest in particular exhibition or performance	75%
interest in the genre/period/style of the event	64%
convenient time or location	62%
cost of admission	55%
educational experience	50%

source: Culture & the Arts Survey; Philadelphia region only

Social engagement is every bit as important as program excellence.

Figures 24 and 25: Social Connection Is Huge⁴⁵

Things that are very influential in deciding to attend cultural activities and events



source: Culture & the Arts Survey; Philadelphia region only

Service is central. Cultural organizations must face outward to respect and respond to the interests of their participants with commitment and integrity if they are to sustain success.

Figure 26: Service Is Central⁴⁶

product artistry + logistics competence =
quality experiences



- Info gathering
- Ticket purchase
- Duration
- Time of day
- Customer service
- Parking
- Transit
- Safety
- Post-event gathering

You may have been wondering what that Campbell’s soup can has to do with this discussion. It has to do with new ways of thinking about things, with how new knowledge can generate new metaphors—and finally with how metaphors can express the ambiguity of information. Back in the 1960s Warhol made Campbell’s Soup cans that both were and were not Campbell’s Soup cans, thereby changing the way we think about art. Also how we think about Campbell’s soup. So, for 50 years we have had a kind of binocular view of soup cans.

But today we have the Campbell’s soup can, the Warhol soup can, and a third soup can, a kind of astrophysical soup can. It is envisioned by Juan Maldacena of the Institute for Advanced Study. According to a recent *New York Times* article about evolving theories of gravity, “Black holes, in effect, are holograms.... All the information about what has been lost inside them is encoded on their surfaces....”⁴⁷ Prof. Maldacena constructed a mathematical model of a holographic universe as a soup can, where what happened inside the can, including gravity, is encoded in the label on the outside of the can.⁴⁸ Perhaps we can think of the museum as a metaphorical black hole, where information is lost inside, but which can be transformed into a soup can, in which the information and experience that were lost will migrate to the surface, facing outward, where they can be found by those who are seeking for them. Now that would be a revolution.

Notes

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