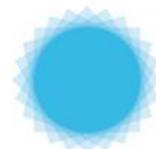


Engaging the Every-Day Artist: Non-profit Arts in the Participatory Culture

Alan Brown, Principal, WolfBrown

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Note to the Reader from the CPAF Secretariat

Please note that the following document was presented at the Canadian Public Arts Funders (CPAF) Annual General Meeting, Future Directions in Public Arts Funding: What Are The Shifts Required?, on November 16-18, 2011, in Whitehorse, Yukon and was intended to serve as information for a discussion on the theme of the meeting.

The views expressed by the author(s) are based on their interpretations from a variety of sources of information and do not necessarily represent all points of view, or the current program structures and policies of the membership of CPAF.

The reader is invited to provide feedback to this report by contacting Melanie Yugo, Partnership and Networks Officer, CPAF Secretariat, at melanie.yugo@canadacouncil.ca or 1 800 263 5588 ext 5144.

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[Alan Brown](#), Principal, WolfBrown

This paper is adapted from a longer paper prepared by WolfBrown for The James Irvine Foundation, [Getting In On the Act: How arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation](#).

Arts groups in Canada and around the world are responding to the changing landscape of arts participation with innovative programs that actively engage the public in myriad ways. Our research for The James Irvine Foundation uncovered a wide range of participatory programs and activities, some recurring, some ephemeral, sponsored by a wide range of arts organizations, large and small, across all artistic disciplines. Extraordinarily diverse in nature, scale and scope, these practices defy clear categorization. Yet, their underlying purposes and structures provide clues to an emerging conceptual model for participatory arts practice.

At the core of participatory arts practice is the nature and extent of the audience member's involvement in the artistic experience. The Audience Involvement Spectrum, illustrated in the figure below, provides a simple depiction of five overlapping stages of involvement.¹

As active forms of participation gain legitimacy and become culturally ingrained, the values that were so much a part of the twentieth century conversations about cultural vitality – economic impact, professionalism and virtuosity, to name a few – have receded and a different conversation is taking hold. The value of the arts in this participatory culture is their ability to connect people through shared experiences and to contribute to vibrant, livable communities. Participatory arts practices, whether technology-based or physical, are integrating art into the fabric of peoples' everyday lives, their neighborhoods and their value systems.

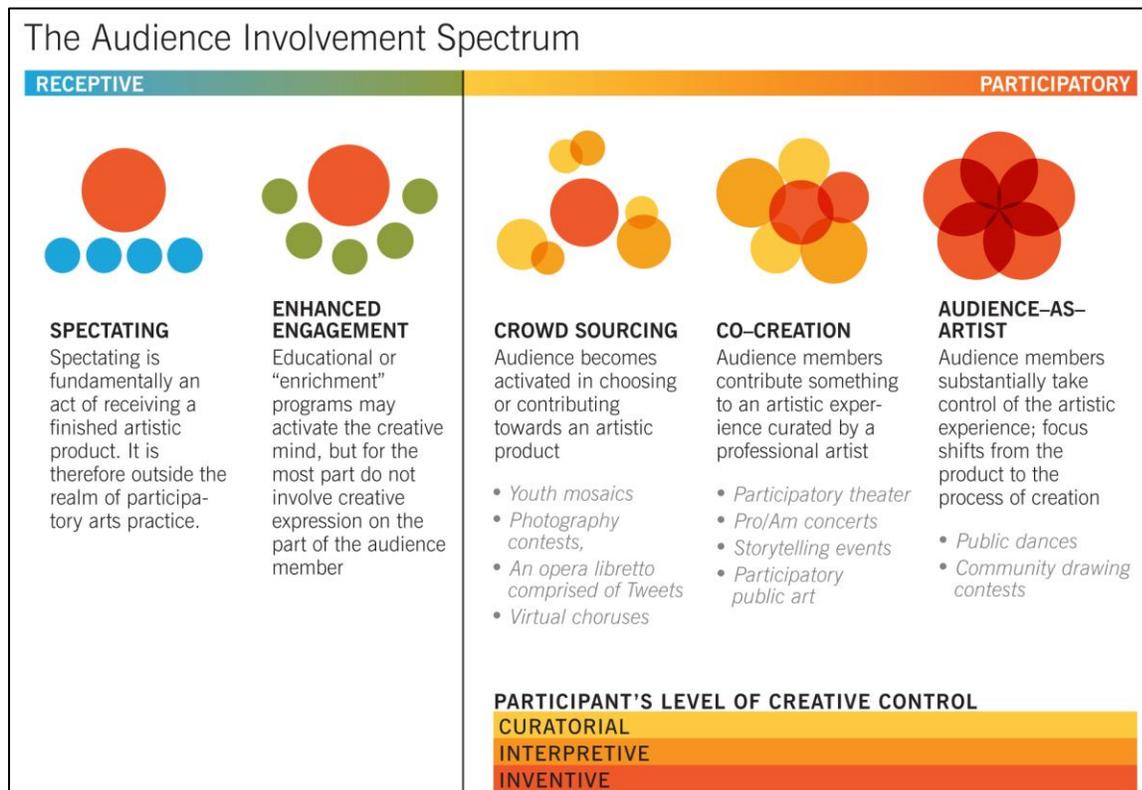
Gaining an “ecological view” of arts participation is, perhaps, the greatest challenge and most urgent need facing the arts sector. Every community has a different ecology – different providers, different publics and different resources. Arts institutions must assess their current place in the ecology and adapt to meet the changing needs of their communities. Participatory arts practice is alive and well in every community, though it is often under the radar of foundation funders and wealthy donors. As public interest in participatory arts practice gains critical mass, it will rise to become more of a political priority for policymakers attuned to meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse voter base. Arts funders who overlook this robust layer of the ecology will miss an important opportunity to engage a broad and diverse cross-section of the public.

A growing body of data illustrates the interconnectedness of participatory arts practice and attendance at live events. General population studies of arts participation consistently find that active participants are more likely to be audience members. For example, the 2011 [Ontario Arts Engagement Study](#) commissioned by Ontario Arts Council (OAC) found that adults who engage in participatory music activities attend concerts by professional musicians at a rate that is two to three times higher than those who do not. Ontarians who dance socially are about 60% more likely than those who do not dance socially to attend professional dance, and Ontarians who

¹ For this research, we chose not to focus on the rich landscape of self-directed participatory arts practice, but rather on participatory programs and activities offered by professionally managed arts organizations.

'take photographs with artistic intentions' visit art museums or art galleries twice as often as those who do not.

Similar correlations were found between media-based engagement and attendance. For example, those who watch dance on television at least once a week attend professional dance performances at more than twice the rate of those who never watch dance on TV. The strong association between media-based consumption and attendance is further evidence of the important role that media plays in the overall arts ecology, both as a delivery channel and as a means of increasing awareness, encouraging attendance at live programs, and building and sustaining interest in the art forms.



North American audience studies conducted over the past several years provide further evidence that large percentages of ticket buyers have some personal involvement in the art form, past or present. The 2010 [National Survey of Dance Audiences](#) of over 7,000 American dance ticket buyers (both contemporary and ballet) found that a majority are *currently* dancing themselves, either socially or more formally.

The relationship between participatory arts practice and attendance takes on added importance in regards to younger adults, who are much more likely than older adults to be involved in participatory activities, according to the OAC and other studies.

Some arts groups see active arts programs as a means of gaining a more favorable profile in the community, or as a long-term investment in audience development. Others use active arts programming to cultivate donors. The association between participatory arts practice and increased attendance is positive, but it is a *byproduct* of a fulfilling expressive experience, not a

direct result. While any number of secondary benefits may accrue to the institution, participatory arts programs are intrinsically worthwhile, and essential to a healthy ecosystem.

A great reconciliation between art and audiences is underway, characterized by a period of fitful innovation, bankruptcies and a generational shift in leadership. With the decline in arts education, fewer young adults are arriving on the professional arts scene with the knowledge and experience that their parents had. In many communities, the arts education system is not replenishing the pool of arts-educated adults who visit art museums and buy theatre tickets. Assuming a 20-year lag between cause and effect, it is likely that we are just beginning to see the results of disinvestment in arts education.

In this challenging environment, flexibility and creativity in programming will become paramount to the survival of arts organizations. Artists, curators and administrators must quickly embrace the diversity of preferences, settings and formats that will engage the next generation, and the one after that. And funders, historically reluctant to meddle in the artistic affairs of their grantees, will need to figure out how to spur a higher level of creativity in programming without getting inappropriately involved in artistic decisions.

Implications for Public Arts Funders

As you prepare for your annual convening, I'd like to offer a few summary thoughts:

- Think of arts engagement as a three-legged stool, comprised of attendance-based activity, media-based activity, and arts creation activities. A healthy ecosystem has good availability of programs in all three of these areas, although the balance will vary from community to community. A more holistic view of the ecology is necessary in order to make intelligent funding decisions.
- In designing funding programs, consider the variety of ways in which the people enjoy the arts, and think about new ways of building bridges between different parts of the arts ecology, particularly the media sphere (including online engagement). For example, how can museums tap into the deep vein of public interest in taking photographs and making videos? How can dance organizations tap into high levels of interest in social dancing? How might theatre organizations get involved in community story-telling?
- Audiences can be involved in arts presentations in many ways, as illustrated in the diagram. What incentives would stimulate arts groups to experiment with some of the newer modalities of engagement such as crowdsourcing and co-creation?
- Framing audience development as a marketing problem is not helpful. Instead, funders might reconsider how they can focus arts providers on *programming* as a lever for cultivating new audiences. While programming for new audiences (including participatory and media-based programs) may be less interesting to a seasoned curator, it is absolutely essential to the health of the ecosystem. Looking across a community, what are the pathways into the arts?
- The question of “where” arts participation happens, and how much emphasis should be given to informal vs. formal settings (including the home) is an essential conversation for funders, because different people are attracted to different settings. The settings where arts programs occur serve as filter on participation.

- Arts programs can play a key role in social bridging and bonding, which are both critical to a healthy arts ecology. What incentives might motivate arts organizations and other community partners to respond creatively to specific community needs for social bridging and bonding?