

PERMEABLE MEMBRANE: THE EVOLUTION OF ARTS ORGANIZATIONS IN THE STRUGGLE TO ENGAGE YOUNG ADULT AUDIENCE

by Felicia Gonzalez

The Washington State Arts Commission, supported by The Wallace Foundation, is presenting a series of public forums exploring arts participation, the arts and changing demographics, and the use of technology to increase audiences. Seattle writer Felicia Gonzalez provides her personal reflections after a recent forum and workshops attended by arts organizations and arts funders in our region. The event referenced was held May 25, 2011, at Seattle Center. For more information about the Arts Participation Leadership Initiative, see www.arts.wa.gov or Facebook "Washington Arts"

As I entered the Seattle International Film Festival's screening room at McCaw Hall (officially know as the Nesholm Lecture Hall) before 10:00am on May 25, the sizeable crowd told me a lot of people in the Puget Sound region care deeply about the arts. This was part of a series of forums and workshops convened under the Arts Participation Leadership Initiative, a four-year effort co-sponsored by the Washington State Arts Commission and The Wallace Foundation. Representatives from the major arts organizations in the region, the marketing director from Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, along with a few independent artists, appeared determined to tackle the topic of getting more people age 21 to 35, which includes a portion of those termed the Millennial Generation (18 to 29 year olds), into the audience at the ballet, opera, theatre, symphony, and through the doors at art museums.

Kris Tucker, director of the Washington State Arts Commission welcomed participants and provided a brief legislative update. In Washington, as in states across the nation, the arts have been subject to severe budget cuts, and the room welcomed a bit of good news. Kris then turned over the

proceedings to the day's moderator, Jerry Yoshitomi of MeaningMatters, a consulting firm based in Los Angeles. Jerry asked each of us to think about a personally meaningful arts experience and jot details on the blue index cards we'd been handed at the registration table. Jerry wanted us to dig through our memory banks to find that pivotal point in which we had looked at a sculpture, listened to a symphony, or watched an actor on stage and lost track of time. The work seized you, but it's hard to describe how it happened. Kind of like the interviews with couples in Nora Ephron's "When Harry Met Sally," but for the arts set. We were then to introduce ourselves through these details.

Schraepfer Harvey turned from his seat in the row directly in front of me, excitedly recalling how, as a volunteer usher for Earshot Jazz Festival in October 2005, hearing a solo by Chicago saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell "was a moment that changed everything." More than five years later, the impact of this performance is still evident in Schraepfer's voice. I ask if I can keep the blue index card; these words in his neat handwriting are as powerful as a haiku. Schraepfer doesn't need to say any more because the fact that today he is an assistant editor at Earshot Jazz as well as coordinator of volunteers and production manager, demonstrates how life-changing the experience was.

As a fundraising professional, I've worked with museums, theatre companies, literary arts organizations and dozens of individual artists. I've also published poetry, and about four years ago began writing short stories. My own "moment" with art came as a teenager in Washington, DC, discovering the Vermeers in The National Gallery. These paintings of stillness and reflected light portrayed a vastly different world from my Cuban immigrant family. Another geography. Because the museum was free and only a short Metrorail ride away, I visited *A Lady Writing*, *Girl With A Red Hat*, *Woman Holding A Balance*, and *Girl With A Flute* nearly every week. At home I was called fidgety,

but would stand motionless in front of these paintings. I especially relished the time of year when tourists had gone from the city, and I had the museum to myself. And the paintings were mine.

How do arts organizations act as catalysts for this moment? How much of it is the price of admission, performance time, an opportunity for Q & A with the actors, the café serving wine? And when the goal is to attract 21 to 35 year olds, do we need to abandon Harry and Sally's romantic storyline and get on "The Short Bus?" These were the questions addressed during the forum by Peter Boal, artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB); Linda Garrison, marketing director of The Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago; and Ellen Walker, marketing director of Pacific Northwest Ballet. A summary of research by Sara Lee, VP for Arts & Culture, from the national marketing firm Slover Linnett Strategies, was also presented electronically. Slover Linnett is working with the Wallace Excellence Award grantees in Seattle. As an aside, I recommend reading their blog post "The Participatory Revolution is all Around" (May 30, 2011 by Peter Linnet, Chairman & Chief Idea Officer of the firm), as the experience of science museums applies to arts organizations.

I felt the timing and topic of the forum were particularly relevant in light of an April 4, 2011, *Huffington Post* piece by Michael Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, bemoaning the low culture IQ of young people "who simply do not consider attending our performances or visiting our art galleries as an option that is relevant to their lives." The post drew scores of comments from Millennials railing against the assumption they don't care about the arts and "don't get" the arts (hence the low culture IQ label); the focus on institutions that present the works of artists and the tone of "attending *our* performances or visiting *our* art galleries." Rather than calling for support of arts institutions, it feels particularly important to focus on how people of all ages can express their interest in and engage with works of art and artists. The Pew Research Center

has called Millennials “confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and receptive to new ideas and ways of living” (*Millennial: A Portrait of Generation Next*, February 2010). These sound like desirable qualities in an audience and on the boards of arts organizations. It was gratifying that the arts leaders at the forum were looking for ways to involve this demographic.

Millennial’s behavior as cultural consumers is well documented. Last year, Patricia Martin published *Tipping the Culture: How Engaging Millennials Will Change Things*, a study commissioned by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Nonprofit Finance Fund, and Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Martin underscores how this age group is attuned to the confluence of art, education, entertainment, and marketing. Young adults “thrive on information and ideas to fuel their creative self-expression.” Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf shared how from surveying and talking to their young audience members, the Theatre learned that this age group “needs a platform for participation, the ability to write another ending, add a character, play with the Theatre. They’re looking for tangible evidence that Steppenwolf values their intellect.”

[Above and below, are these the correct placement of the quotation marks?]

Slover Linnett’s report also points out that “young adult audiences want to engage with experiences that are bi-directional, that allow for their participation.” In December 2008, writing about The Wallace Foundation’s newly announced investment in Seattle, Regina Hackett, then art critic for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, offered a list of seven suggestions to “help dismantle barriers that discourage the young,” that presage Slover Linnett’s findings. This demographic is not disinterested in art, they’re disinterested in being passive consumers.

The question of how youth want to engage with art reminded me of two posts from *LA Youth* (since 1988, the newspaper by and about teens). In “Why museums suck,” Howard Hwang, age 15, of

Marshall High School laments how “museums always have that cold feeling. Very adultish and professional, it makes you uncomfortable.” Part of the discomfort is that “museums are filled with old people.” Also, the “tour guide talked like an answering machine.” Howard also points to the importance of the messages young people are given about art, “I used to ask my history teacher why art was important. She told me that it helps us understand how people expressed themselves in ancient times. I asked why we’d want to know that. She told me to stop asking stupid questions. So I’d be like, how is that a stupid question? Then I would get detention. But it’s not a stupid question, is it?” Before you dismiss Howard Hwang as a snarky teenager, know this was posted on October 14, 2001 in *Beyond the Mall—Fall Arts Guide*. Now age 25, Howard is the desired demographic and sadly, the barriers to participation he described still exist today.

Christian Santiago, a 17 year-old at University High School in West Los Angeles, posted on December 21, 2010 how he was “art struck!” by the Roman sculpture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Acknowledging “before high school I wasn’t into art. I thought museums were boring,” Santiago goes on to say how that changed after taking a photography class in ninth grade, realizing he “really liked being in the dark room.” In 11th grade, he took an AP art history class and “learned not to be so literal when I look at an art piece.” Like others in this age group, being given permission to engage from his own point of view changed everything, “I tried to figure out what the artist was saying and then came up with my own opinion. That made it more fun.” This kid is excited about art and writes about it thoughtfully.

Being exposed to art doesn’t automatically translate into an appreciation of art. It bears remembering that the practice of busloads of public school children visiting museums and attending performing arts came out of the Johnson administration’s Great Society programs, which in 1965

also established the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, precursors to today's National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This is a recent practice and current domestic policies, and the fact that schools around the nation are eliminating field trips, means arts institutions must evolve beyond counting kids. Peter Boal of PNB shares how having young choreographers create work for young dancers made it possible for this age group to literally see themselves at the Ballet.

Each of the speakers during the forum underscored that in order to be relevant to 21 to 35 year olds, arts organizations must employ social media as a networking tool, not as marketing. Providing avenues for feedback, both the good and the bad, is critical to how this age group engages. When a slide in the Slover Linnett report cautions "these are savvy consumers of marketing and know when you're trying too hard to target young audiences," guffaws erupt in the auditorium. If someone in the audience Tweets during a performance, Aubrey Bergauer, Audience Development Manager for the Seattle Opera, says they'll re-Tweet, embracing what's already happened rather than questioning its appropriateness. The only representative of this age group on the stage during the forum, Aubrey appears the most comfortable speaking about and to the subject. This is valuable to the context, and I hope when this topic is next addressed it will be with more speakers in their twenties and early thirties.

What does it look like when Millennials are in charge of the program? In early April in the back room of the Spitfire Grill in Belltown, I was introduced to Carrie Purcell's Formal Inquiry: The Sonata Undressed. Purcell performed excerpts of the sonata at what was billed as an "interdisciplinary arts happening." I had no idea a sonata was on the bill, but the twenty-somethings who'd packed the space wall-to-wall had come to hear classical music. The majority of the audience

hadn't reached the legal drinking age more than five years ago, and yet here they were, beer or cocktail in hand, giving the musicians their rapt attention. It was surprising and wonderful to encounter accomplished classical musicians in this setting.

As Purcell describes it, the project weaves chamber music, visual art and poetry into a complex exploration of the classical sonata form. Formal Inquiry's blog introduces the artists (one composer, three poets, and four visual artists), their collaborative working process, and describes how the blog supports this process. The blog also includes witty, yet thoroughly useful tutorials on the sonnet, "A Sonnet You Say?" and "What is a Sonata Anyway?"

This isn't an isolated instance. Violin virtuoso Hahn-bin, whose "Till Dawn Sunday" combines the energy of pop music and performance art, weaves together the music of twenty composers including Mozart. While the title may conjure images of emo kids or raves, "Till Dawn Sunday" is from Rilke's 1922 *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The 23 year-old Korean-born protégé of Itzhak Perlman made his debut at Carnegie Hall but also performs in churches, night clubs, and even the Louis Vuitton store during Fashion's Night Out in New York last fall. In February 2011, he played soliloquies inspired by the exhibition "Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures" at the Museum of Modern Art. Hahn-bin utilizes his web site, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook to promote the "next chapter in The Renaissance of Classical Music." In a *New York Times* interview, he referred to classical music as "the new underground genre," and explained how his performance style, which borrows heavily from the spectacle of fashion's runway, makes the music relevant to a group of young people who may have been dragged to concerts by their grandparents.

This is also not new. In 1967, a group of Italian artists strove to “break down the dichotomy between art and life” which led critic Germano Celant to coin the term Arte Povera. In addition to expressing their interest in social issues, these artists created various forms of physical interaction between the work of art and its viewer, in many instances the spectator became part of the work. Contemporary craft artist Kristin Beeler recently referred to Arte Povera in an article entitled “Beauty and Other Monsters” (Metalsmith, Vol. 31 | No. 1), noting how these artists “explored the context of art-making itself, reflecting on the relationship between art and life and inviting the viewer into the conversation.” The live performance retrospective “Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present” at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in Spring 2010 and the Guggenheim’s showcasing of performance artists, Implied Violence in March 2011 (on the heels of their first art museum exhibition organized by Seattle’s own Frye Art Museum), both drew high attendance, showing that the public has an appetite for art that invites more than spectatorship. Social media gives artists and arts organizations an opportunity to expand conversation. It’s also a tool that requires institutions to relinquish control, become permeable. As Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf Theatre mentioned, this age group is looking for an invitation to play.

During the lunch break, I had the opportunity to throw out a question to a table that included Garrison, forum facilitator Jerry Yoshitomi, and Washington State Arts Commission staff members Kris Tucker and Mayumi Tsutakawa— how did art and culture become relevant to the counter-culture generation of the 1960s? The “flower children” represent the starkest generational break, and yet this group became the “old guard” that museums, symphonies, and opera relied upon in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s. I’m curious to know what lessons this holds for arts organizations today. We chewed on this and our sandwiches. After he mentions the trend among Millennials to not be loyal to one “brand,” one arts organization, I give Jerry Yoshitomi my Coffee Disloyalty Card, which

encourages coffee hounds to patronize independent cafes in various neighborhoods, then return to their favorite for a free caffeine fix.

In typical Northwest fashion, although the convening takes place just before Memorial Day, the weather is rainy and grey. Seattle Center's iconic International Fountain is visible through the bank of windows in the Norcliffe Room during the afternoon workshops, putting on its show for an audience of none. In small groups at round tables, participants wrestle with how best to engage different segments of 21 to 35 year olds. What do parents with young children need? What's the best way to attract young professionals? People lean in to listen to one another, heads nod in agreement, hands gesture for emphasis. In the second workshop, laughter erupts when a staff member of the Village Theatre recalls that one of the members of their young professionals group had complained that "their night" had been scheduled on the same evening as "senior night," when in reality the latter is simply their average subscribers.

A young woman from Festál cultural festivals mentions how wonderful it would be to have a sponsor design a drinkable box wine specifically for theatre patrons. Mayumi Tsutakawa mentions how, for different ethnic groups, the enjoyment of food and beverage is essential to the enjoyment of a performance. The second workshop is thinking about the whole experience—the entire evening out—what this means to couples vs. families.

On my way home, I remember Thomas Frank's book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (University of Chicago Press, 1997). In it, Frank makes the case that the corporate sector, particularly advertising and menswear, survived, made an evolutionary leap if you will, not so much by co-opting symbols of the counterculture of the 1960s,

but by undergoing revolutions of their own. Anyone currently caught in the cocktail-fueled storyline of *Mad Men* will recognize the growing pains of this cultural shift. These industries were losing customers and yet were unable to move beyond the conventions they had invented for themselves. Their own “revolutions” came, according to Frank, through “vast changes in corporate practice, in productive flexibility, and especially in that intangible phenomenon known as “creativity”—and in both cases well before the counterculture appeared on the mass-media scene.” Another way of saying this is companies evolved by integrating youth and “youthful” practices. Companies changed how they did business in order to meet and then anticipate the change that was happening around them. Frank’s timeline shows this occurred several years before TV and print coverage of the “summer of love” introduced middle America to the lifestyles of the young generation. I see a parallel to what’s now happening in the arts.

One of the questions we should be asking is: how have art and culture changed in what they *mean* to 21 to 35 year olds. What stands out is that the arts must move away from institution building in order to remain relevant. Shift away from the quote by a Seattle Art Museum deputy director that closed the aforementioned article by Regina Hackett, “We need them [18 to 35 year olds] to keep our institution alive.” In order to attract this demographic, arts organizations must evolve a permeable membrane. This is difficult, as all change is. The staff and board of arts organizations must literally venture outside the museum walls, the concert halls, ballet, opera houses, and theatres. Venture beyond the comfort zone, beyond the familiar controlled environment. The data tells us Millennials are cultural omnivores, and with broad and diverse offerings this will be the next movable feast.

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