



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF STATE ARTS AGENCIES
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Changing Paradigms Discussion Summary

Executive Director Peer Session
October 17, 2013

In [past gatherings](#), Executive Director Peer Sessions have discussed how politics, economic forces and structural change are affecting state arts agencies. During this meeting, the group expanded that lens to consider additional shifts occurring in the arts landscape, including the rapid diversification of ways in which the arts are produced, presented and consumed.

The session began with a viewing of a [TED Talk by Ben Cameron](#) (program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation) exploring new media, audience trends and other changes affecting the performing arts.

Directors had many different observations to share regarding paradigm shifts and policy questions under way in individual states.

The Condition of Arts Organizations

- Large arts organizations in our state are struggling to cope with cash flow problems, leadership turnover, etc. Our state arts agency sees the solution to be community engagement and audience building. We're trying to work with nontraditional communities to build audiences for the arts in new ways.
- I don't buy that arts organizations are diminishing in relevance or competitiveness. Maybe large—or highly fossilized!—organizations are hurting, but I'm observing lots of vibrancy in the arts at the community level.

Digital versus Live Arts Participation

- The in-person arts experience is distinctive for audiences, artists and communities. It's not the same as digital means of consuming the arts. The "live" experience is different, and the resulting social capital is distinctive. Isn't that our greatest opportunity as a field?
- People too quickly dismiss new media experiences as somehow less "real" than in-person arts participation. Not true. On-line arts experiences can be just as valid and powerful as in-person attendance. Connecting via video is still connecting.
- Check out the research published by Harvard professor Anita Elberse ([Blockbusters: Hit-making, Risk-taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment](#), excerpt). On the surface, the number of songs downloaded

on-line growing from 3.9 million to 8 million makes the cultural ecosystem look alive and well. However, Elberse documents that the vast majority of songs sell just one copy. A mere .001% of the songs offered are responsible for most of the money that music retail sites bring in. In other words, the evolution of the market is *not* democratic. It's highly concentrated and consolidated, with benefits accruing to only a few artists. Doesn't that make the access and equity work of state arts agencies *more* important, not less?

- The arts have something to learn from trends in churches and synagogues, too. Young kids are leaving megachurches that have tried to "showbiz" their services and make them high-tech events. The youth who are leaving know that they can get that kind of experience on-line or in a hundred other places. What they're looking for from their faith community is something more authentic. Our ability to bring people to together to experience the arts is special in that way.

How We Relate to the Commercial Arts Scene

- The most creative work we see today isn't coming out of nonprofits or artists, but out of loosely organized, largely place based collectives. It's exciting to watch. A provocative example is the Warhol Foundation's [Precipice Fund](#), specifically designed for groups that are not 501(c)(3)s.
- Our state arts agency is creating a "big tent" that is large enough to embrace both for-profit and nonprofit arts producers. Our role is to provide tools, cultivate networks and link our constituents with small business development centers. This is the essence of creative space making, which doesn't differentiate between for-profit and nonprofit entities. Our agency's presence in all spheres—nonprofit and commercial alike—is essential.
- Counterpoint: We're proud of our agency's focus on the nonprofit arts. It's a weakness to try to be all things to all people. Are departments of transportation trying to take over the responsibilities or policy outcomes of other sectors or other state agencies? No. Our pressure as state arts councils to "be all things to all people" enriches the whole, but dilutes our resources and diminishes our ability to make a difference in the arts.
- We're grappling with expectations that somehow the nonprofit arts network should be able to solve all our cultural access problems, create a critical mass of economic opportunities or change the quality of education. Nonprofits simply can't. Nonprofits can achieve great things, but the problems we have are systemic, and too big for any one sector to solve on its own. So how do we as a state arts agency deal with that? We need to maintain a deep allegiance to the nonprofit groups we've nurtured, but they are simply not sufficient to help us solve the issues facing our states.
- One thing we can do is use our position in state government to help municipalities navigate these intersections and get more comfortable engaging with creative populations. Our state provides grant money to

localities to use vacant commercial properties in municipalities through the nonprofit arts. This is a hybrid area where the state arts agency can be an effective buffer and liaison.

Implications for State Arts Agency Grants

- Many artists and "creatives" don't understand or embrace traditional state arts agency grant programs. They want access to loans and working capital and quick-turnaround decisions. They're not necessarily 501(c)(3)s and don't want to follow that incorporation model. An upshot of this is that many emerging art movements—the new-music scene, for instance—don't see the relevance of a state arts agency to their work.
- If we adapt to these pressures—make our money easy to get, change the process, and incentivize informal or commercial work—that creates a political tension and potential new inequities. People can perceive our agency as devaluing other kinds of community based nonprofit work that took years to build and can't be cobbled together quickly or informally using text messages.
- We're trying to help artists and arts groups be self-sufficient. As a state arts agency, we're no longer in infrastructure-building mode; we've transitioned into technical assistance mode. The market needs to take care of the infrastructure from here on out.
- Grants are central to what we do as state arts agencies, but our agency doesn't lead with that in our messaging anymore. We talk first about our services—technical support, training and networking—that more closely resemble small business assistance. However, at the same time, grants are indispensable. They allow us to collect the data that elected officials want to see. We're actually allocating more money to grants, not to services, because grants allow us to put pins on the maps and show benefits. This is deeply ironic.
- The function of state arts agency grants is evolving. The intention for the National Endowment for the Arts in the early days was to identify best organizations and give them a lot of money. That was a nonstarter with Congress. That model works where a handful of majors can advocate for the agency's entire appropriation. But not all states have that. This leads to change in the purpose and function of grants being used to leverage knowledge, reward visibility or achieve specific outcomes. The money awarded is a drop in the bucket and cannot pretend to be "stabilization" as the field has evolved and matured.

Arts Participation Leadership Initiative

ArtsWA Executive Director Kris Tucker presented a summary of her agency's [Arts Participation Leadership Initiative](#), a four-year project supported by funding from The Wallace Foundation, to stimulate research, provide education and foster learning communities around arts participation. Wallace provided grant

awards to nine large organizations in Seattle, requiring extensive market and audience-development research from each. ArtsWA's role was to extend the learning from this research to the larger Washington community statewide.

[Video overview](#)

[Attracting younger audiences](#)

[Integrating social and digital media](#)

[Engaging diverse groups](#)

Kris observed that innovation and experimentation need to become part and parcel of how state arts agencies do their jobs. Executive director peer sessions at NASAA gatherings, especially, should be a place where we can talk about things that don't work, lessons learned, unexpected insights and ideas for the future.