

A R L E N E G O L D B A R D
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REFRAMING ART'S PUBLIC PURPOSE: AN INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP

AT THE CROSSROADS: A COMMUNITY ARTS & DEVELOPMENT CONVENING

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For too long, advocates have been trying (and failing) to justify art's public purpose with weak secondary effects: art boosts tax revenues through the economic multiplier effect, playing in the school orchestra raises students' test scores, and so on. The net result is a 30-year decline in arts allocations; for instance, the NEA has lost nearly half the real value of its budget since Ronald Reagan took office.

These advocacy strategies are too confining and too narrowly conceived to excite public support. As cognitive science has been demonstrating, decisions about social issues are based on reasoning that includes emotions, metaphors, stories and other kinds of information, and often these factors are more determinative than numeric data. Advocates need to connect to resonant emotional themes and images that can really engage people.

The aim of this workshop is to expand our thinking, creating new containers that are big and strong enough to convey the real and awesome power of human creative expression. We'll try out different ways of seeing, freeing ourselves from outworn ideas and searching together for new solutions that shine. Reframing and renewal have to be grounded in exploring the way people actually think about art's public purpose, and the larger context in which their thinking unfolds. We'll briefly explore a range of relevant questions, then work in small groups to brainstorm promising new ideas.

Doing justice to this task will take much longer than ninety minutes. This workshop should equip you to engage others in this creative effort. I encourage you to have many future conversations about art's public purpose, taking all the time and including all the people you need to obtain the best insights and spark the best ideas.

KEY QUESTIONS

This sequence of questions is designed to come at the issue from many angles, building a composite picture of the way it is currently being perceived and understood.

From your perspective, what is the issue?

Here are some of the ways community artists have explained it:

Nonprofit arts support hasn't grown proportionately with the need for community artists' work. Public and private arts budgets have been cut (or remained static at best). Education and

social programs that sometimes support community artists have been hit hard too. Artists and administrators focus on keeping afloat, spending large amounts of time raising money, often through short-term grants. Many make sacrifices to keep their work going. There's widespread frustration when people can't find the resources to do what they know will make a difference in their communities. Often, there's pain and frustration, the feeling that not enough people care or understand.

How is the issue seen by other people?

The view from outside the field is probably very different from inside, among people who have arts expertise. What have you heard other people say about public support for artists and arts projects? How do your friends, family, and neighbors see it? People who take part in community arts programs? People who haven't yet taken part?

Many people use focus groups or other forms of research to learn the answers to such questions. In this workshop, we'll draw on what we already know. But if you want to take this inquiry further, involving people who can speak for themselves is important.

How is the issue seen by the media?

What arts-related stories or issues are covered in the media? How are they treated? Are different art forms or organization types viewed and treated differently? Do the mass media depict a public interest in art, and if so, what is it?

What frames are being used to understand the issue?

Language provides useful cues to how a subject is understood by people who aren't experts. For example, some people see the economy as a human body: is it ailing? Is it robust? The human-body frame suggests that it has independent life: it's out there somewhere, and things just happen to it. In contrast, you could see the economy as a garden, an ecology that responds to many different inputs, with public and private interests providing nourishment and reaping the benefits.

What frames do people use for art? Is it a business? An exclusive club? A form of play? Something else?

What is the larger context for the public interest in art?

Who are the players? How do the actions of government, foundations, individual donors, and patrons shape it? How do the consumer cultural industries affect it?

What political views have an impact? Do different ideologies see art differently? How do politicians use art-related issues?

How do social institutions have an impact? Major cultural institutions? Schools, universities and education policy-makers? Broadcasting and other communications institutions and policy-makers? Other arts producing and presenting organizations? Independent artists?

How do people who have no special arts expertise or social position shape the issue?

What are the personal and social dimensions?

How does this issue affect people personally? Are there individual choices that matter here? Individual stories that can have impact? Are there underlying structures or themes that connect these individual stories?

How is the public interest in art seen as a social issue? What could be accomplished by a change in social policy or collective action—a change in laws, policies or systems—versus individual choices?

Who benefits from the existing situation and how? Who loses and how?

APPROACHES

This sequence of questions is designed to identify important functional aspects of reframing art's public purpose, such as whom to influence and how.

Whom do you want to reach?

Given the landscape of influences you've identified, who can affect the way the public interest in art is perceived? Do you want to target policy-makers? Resource-providers? Constituent groups like parents who are concerned about opportunity and education for their kids? People who care about beautifying communities? About breaking down cultural barriers? People with loved ones in prisons, hospitals and other social institutions? People who care about cultural equity and representation? Others?

One message probably won't fit all. Which groups are most critical to reach? Which groups can have the greatest impact on changing things?

What deeply held values resonate with the public interest in art?

Issues almost always include a moral or value dimension, with people responding to those values they attach to mostly deeply. For instance, reproductive choice pits individual liberty and autonomy against the sanctity of life; environmental issues pit property rights against caring for nature; international alliances pit national pride against teamwork.

What values are associated with the public interest in art? Pride? Empathy? Understanding? Equality? Inclusion? Creativity? Others?

Which ones have the most positive associations for the people you want to reach?

What metaphors express these values in support of art's public purpose?

Strategic communicators say that people will grasp issues best through metaphors that effectively sum up their essence, making them easy to comprehend and communicate. Environmentalists often depict the earth as a Garden of Eden; another common concept is that the body is a temple, to be treated as sacred and kept pure; the Disney corporation (and many others) use the metaphor of a tree of life to depict the interrelatedness of species and systems.

What metaphors express the public interest in art? Family? Body? Garden? Sanctuary? Others?

ASSIGNMENT

Now try to use this knowledge to shape a way of communicating art's public purpose that can excite and engage people who don't already feel that way.

The example we'll use is coming up with a campaign for a new WPA for the arts, a new public service employment program that puts artists to work in schools, communities and other social institutions creating visual art, theater, dance, teaching, writing and publishing, and doing other work that helps cultivate imagination, empathy and community life.

- (1) Pick a target audience for your campaign. Whom do you want to influence and involve, and how?
- (2) Then pick at least one of the values you've listed, one that appeals most strongly to that group.
- (3) Then pick at least one of the metaphors you've listed—again, one most likely to resonate with that group.
- (4) With those components, devise a slogan, a public event, a written message, a video PSA—whatever method of communication suits your target audience—that helps people see that art and culture are more than individual preferences, they are public trusts.

When you're done, we'll share our ideas.