Notes from the Artplex: Research Issues in Arts Administration

JOAN JEFFRI

The year is 2087. Weng-Li is playing on a beachhead on Mars when he discovers our time capsule marked "The Arts of North America, 1980-2000." The capsule is only about three feet high and cannot contain much, so representations are included as well as instructions in a variety of languages including Chinese, which Weng-Li speaks. He reads the following translation:

We, the artists of North America, collectivized only for the purpose of establishing the appropriate contents of this capsule (and demanding 10 percent royalty rights should this capsule or its contents be reproduced in any way or sold in museums, libraries, space stations, or other as-yet-uncreated sales shops on or away from Earth), enclose representative objects that we feel identify our time and place and the values and systems under which we operate.

Joan Jeffri is director of the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University and is an executive editor of The Journal of Arts Management and Law. This paper was presented at the Association of Arts Administration Educators annual meeting, spring 1987.

© Copyright 1987 Joan Jeffri. All rights reserved.

Spring 1988
Weng-Li removes the top of the capsule with his Swiss Army space knife and begins to extract the contents. The first item is a thin sliver of pink marble from a building owned and managed by developer Donald Trump with a note, “Special rates for developing branch museums in space, 20,000 square space feet at upwardly mobile prices. If I am unavailable, call the mayor of New York, Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park, or any office building in midtown Manhattan.”

Weng-Li continues. He finds a package of filter-tip cigarettes, a flip-top can of soda, and a box of sugar-coated cereal with the note, “In the 1980s and 1990s, corporations supported the arts to such a degree that these objects were frequently included at opening night galas, benefits, and in corporate advertising. While these items and their packaging do not reflect this artistic support, the public’s consumption of addictive substances helped in the support and continuation of the arts in North America.”

A mini-micro computer the size of a wristwatch falls out on the ground. Weng-Li pushes a button and hears the following.

I hold all the knowledge of an average seven-year-old child in the late twentieth century. My electrical connections allow me to perform all necessary skills in order to function in society. My microchip includes all combinations of learning far into the future.

While my physical presence has forced me to give up jogging, aerobics, and working with my hands, I have the capacity to contemplate physical activity in an infinite number of permutations and combinations. I hold all the names and dates of paintings and drawings from Andy Warhol to the present. Another computer stores pre-Warhol data.

Weng-Li pushes a second button and hears a message from the arts administrators.

At the time this message was encapsulated, there were arts councils in every state, province, and locality in North America. Their major concerns at the time were political interface, broad policy issues, and tax reform. Artists joined the homeless at this time as they awaited policy decisions that might allow them to earn a living at their art. The country was characterized by two populations—those who waited for bread, and those who painted pictures of waiting for bread.

At the time of this capsule’s incarceration in space, three quarters of the arts institutions in North America were recovering from a massive direct mail blizzard, in which they received the unexpected return rate on their annual subscription drives of 35 percent. They were last seen digging their way out of an avalanche of North American zip codes.

Let us now return to the present, where we still have a chance to preserve a culture that is not completely drowned in Coke bottles and
Notes from the Artplex

jingo-ese. What do we find? We find author and critic Martin Esslin crying for “a gradual raising of the level of sophistication of the masses.”1 Reminiscent of the old days when elitism was not a dirty word, Esslin recalls a middle European, mainly white aesthetic.

The cry for the past is strong—and for a certain kind of past. Critic Samuel Lipman describes the arts in America today as being “in a condition of public opulence and private cecropiude” and describes the same tradition to which Esslin refers as “the continuing reality of distinct cultures: one for the millions and another for those with the millions.”2

In a May 1986 article in The New Criterion, Lipman goes on to describe the arts on public television as illustrative of what has happened on the trip from the past to the present: a trivialization of the past, the present, and just possibly the future.

In the theatre, Shakespeare and schlock, both archly delivered, from England; in music, the warhorses of the European classics and American pop, both in routinized performances; in opera, the safest repertory imaginable, handled with kid gloves; in dance, only a smattering of the new developments which have made America the capital of the dance world; in the visual arts, blockbuster programs rich in glib judgments and expensive travel shots. Of the history of the modern arts in America there is almost nothing; of the arts of our great literature, nothing; of the arts and the humanities for small but highly educated audiences, nothing; of arts education, nothing.3

The argument, it seems to me, is not between elitism and accessibility but between accessibility and excellence. Caught in the middle ground, arts managers keep trying to find ways to dispense funds, help artists, foster art, preserve tradition, and find personal satisfaction as well. We cite the copyright system and try to chide or massage it into a form that will allow artists to make a living through its use. In order to make that living, however, there needs to be some connection with the marketplace—royalty payments, after all, do not exist for works that never sell or resell. So we try to help artists enter that marketplace through institutions, workshops, technical assistance, education, management, and aid, only to come up against a group of artists who do not wish to be defined by that system, who in fact reject that system entirely (some would argue that this occurs after or because that system rejects them first). These artists have values that depend on self-defined goals and objectives, on educational training, on peer evaluation. Excellence is not a group decision.

But we need to make art available, we cry, especially if we speak from a government post. We need to have it there for all the people, all the time, a twenty-four hour fast-food emporium filled with peak experiences and fries.

Spring 1988

7
Let us look at the subject of excellence for a moment and the modern pursuit of such. In Search of Excellence, In Pursuit of Excellence (followed, no doubt, by Excellence Lost and Excellence Regained) are titles that illustrate that we are in the “Age of Instant Excellence.” Add hot water and genius, mix it, package it, and send it out. Along with instant excellence comes instant expertise—The One Minute Manager, How to Negotiate Practically Anything.

It is curious that no one has added The One Minute Artist to the list of modern best-sellers. And, although the above-cited management and marketing counterparts depend heavily on the vocabulary of the arts—creativity, teamwork, entrepreneurship, risk taking, sensitivity—the time and process so inherent to art perhaps have given even the journalists pause.

Since the 1950s, the arts have become not only “goods” but “good for”—good for business, good for economic development, good for the real estate market, good for advertising, sports, recreation. With segmented markets and audience by zip code, interest, or income—we have leisure time with a vengeance. Take, for example, the newest form of cause-related marketing—the give-while-you-charge credit card. A nonprofit organization lends its name and its mailing list to a bank. The bank then issues a credit card under Mastercard or Visa, for example, adding the name and logo of the nonprofit organization. Each time a sale is made and charged to the card, the nonprofit organization receives a royalty payment. Royalties are currently non-taxable passive forms of income. So Brown University, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the National Network of Women’s Funds are taking part in what has been described as “painless philanthropy.”

So we arrive in the 1980s, filled with the arts as a vehicle for other kinds of needs, to a place where philanthropy has been designated appropriately “painless,” and the arts are a means to some other end. And it has gone further than this. Business, always interested in the bottom line first and the chorus line later, has begun to form partnerships with the schools. Under rubrics such as the “school-business partnership,” corporations host selected classes in their plants offering the use of new chemical processing equipment, or they make a high school classroom a “living lab” in which to test a new product.

At first, there is a sigh of relief—Daddy Big Bucks has arrived, bringing new equipment, technical knowledge, retraining for teachers—and all of this is true. Equally true, however, is the more insidious infiltration of corporate values into the school system. Will the high school juniors who are testing a new perfume discuss the physical and environmental dangers of the red and yellow dyes being used in the prod-
uct? Will the class visiting the chemical plant discuss, as they cross the billion dollar aisles, the moral and ethical ramifications of the corporation's activities alongside its practical and scientific ones? And will we, before we have realized it, become co-opted by the words of our colleagues and some of our leaders at the highest levels, by the power and plenty of corporate control? If we do, we will have relinquished the values of American education to dictatorship by the corporate sector—a thought that makes some people's blood run cold.

In the age described by social critic Debora Silverman as the “anti-ethics of the '80s,” we have gone beyond the arts institution as corporate partner to the arts institution as major advertiser, where the 1984 Metropolitan Museum of Art show entitled “Man and the Horse” was really a vehicle for the man, Ralph Lauren, and his designer line, Polo—“Man and His Clothes,” if you will. This example, in which fashion erases context, is the institutional manifestation of eroding history. Like Alice down the rabbit hole growing bigger and bigger, the “cultural cannibals” of the 1980s search for “luxury without responsibility” with a set of cosmic blinders.

This, when thousands of homeless line the underground passageways of our cities, when the new plague—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS—creates a class of the “instantly poor,” and Edwin Meese obliterates all of them with the quintessential verbal magic trick—if he cannot see them, they must not be there.

There are grave implications here for artists and their institutions. Invisible in the corridors of consumption are those artists who will not—and some say who cannot—assimilate into a system where everything about the artist including the artist himself is a “product,” where Andy Warhol’s dire prediction comes true, and everyone is “famous for fifteen minutes.” In this Age of Acquisition, the Age of Anti-Ethics, the 1980s, the corridors of culture and the corridors of consumption have often become indistinguishable—we see the Van Gogh show, but we see it five deep, and charge-card charity is the extent of our involvement in giving to the arts.

It is in this age, in this context, in the midst of this reality that I speak about research issues in the field. To speak about such issues means to speak about the field itself and to address the problems of a discipline, “arts administration” or “arts management,” which is about twenty-five years young in its academic residency. The discipline is still a kind of hybrid, albeit a healthy hybrid in the best of cases, between arts and business, sometimes law, economics, and sociology. It is still decried by some historians and academicians for being soft, undisciplined, not rigorous enough.

Spring 1988
The Journal of Arts Management and Law

Between the first programs in the 1960s and today, we have made a beginning. We are now able to teach courses where the bibliography is not totally based on articles from *Art News* and the *Wall Street Journal*. We have begun to collect people as well as materials—sociologists with an interest in the artist in society, mathematicians who delight in crunching numbers that relate to demographic and economic trends, economists who parallel investing in the stock market with investing in the art market, business professors who have thrown themselves into arts marketing, arts management, and nonprofit organizational behavior, statisticians who have helped organize our information, and attorneys who dispute the ethics of museums, the rights of artists, and the endless ramifications of the new tax law. This is an exciting, promising group of people, aided by a growing body of students who are eager, interested, experienced, and willing to learn.

But there are still major problems. Most programs have a core group of courses taught by the same person who runs the arts administration program; the meat of many of the other arts- or arts-management-related courses is taught through the kindness and generosity of adjunct, part-time, semi-permanent, or outside lecturers for whom such work is tangential, sometimes accidental, too frequently anecdotal, and often soft and flabby, just as our accusers claim.

Additionally, although things are better than they were, we have a dearth of good writing in the field, by our faculty as well as our students. This leads to the area I wish to address: research.

First, I suggest that the major "research issue" in the field is *not* how to do research; it is *not* how or where or when to have an adequate research facility; it is *not* how much is or is not published or where or when. It is how to conceptualize problems. At the behest of students who (realistically) want to find jobs when they emerge from our institutions, we have created programs that teach people how to be specialists. Of course, a specialist's skills are important; it *is* important to sell oneself in the marketplace as a marketing person or a development officer. Nevertheless, we may have answered the specialist's need at the expense of imparting the appropriate overview for the generalist.

When I refer to a generalist, I do not mean the soft, flabby thinker who knows a little bit about a lot of things. Rather, I mean the person for whom the "quest" is not part of one's job but part of one's life. Pragmatists and managers—those who run our arts institutions—are not allowed the single greatest prerogative shared by both the academicians and the student—the time for reflection and the environment for feedback for such reflection. The generalist, then, is one who knows how to think and to keep thinking, who reads and acts on, who writes, studies,
and talks, who is disturbed as much as occasionally gratified, and who has an overview that becomes broader and deeper daily. It is our personal responsibility to pass this on, to engender as much of this as we can in our students.

The ability to conceptualize problems is the province of the person who can synthesize and then interpret. I am not recommending a return to ivory towerism so much as an encouragement of the very best that arts management people have to offer—a highly articulate sense of what it takes to develop, nurture, and manage the artistic process, a highly entrepreneurial desire to translate that process to an audience—plus some old-fashioned academic rigor.

Related to this are the problems of the field itself. Myriad though they are, I will enumerate a few:

- the plethora of arts service organizations—often duplicative, often surviving past their stated missions, some created in the heyday of local excitement and exuberant funding;
- the tendency for “hot issues”—some of them false—that grab both media attention and the programmatic attention of our institutions in their search for status, celebrity, and survival;
- the temptation still to respond to money before program, especially when the money is substantial enough to blind the acolytes into submission;
- the distressing state of many of our public funding agencies, which have become powerful and positioned enough to disregard mandates of fairness and review; and
- the more insidious forms of self-censorship some of our institutions have perpetrated for corporate and other kinds of support in the trade of safe programs for large amounts of money.

There are also more formalized research issues in which work is currently being done:

- work-related benefits for artists;
- artists’ rights, integrity of work, public art;
- copyright issues;
- bargaining and negotiating—for the institution, for the individual;
- policy issues in a country where no one can agree on a definition of public policy; and
- the lack of comparability of our systems—accounting systems across institutions, reporting procedures from funding agency to funding agency, basic bookkeeping.

*Spring 1988*
And there are the more global issues—arts policy we have mentioned, but there are also arts education, teacher training in the arts, ethnic populations, demographic changes, marketplace values, and the whole not-for-profit structure. Then, too, there are the very personal issues: What can we do? How can we help? What can we learn and pass on?

Weng-Li shakes the time capsule to make sure nothing is left. Out drops a tiny charm composed of three silver circles, each bisecting the other two. Along the flattened edge of one of them is a word: OLYMPICS.

He ponders. Was this the era of naked men throwing a flat round circle or a long spear far off into the air? Was this the age when music and rhyme and poets and playwrights and song were at their height? The Golden Age? He turns the charm over only to see another inscription... “Brought to you by Coors Beer.” Oh, thinks Weng-Li. Those Olympics.

A small note flutters through the air, the last message from the time capsule. Weng-Li reads:

In the year 2000, cultural reality was finally manifested in the decision to abolish all forms of public funding for the arts. A National Endowment for Sports and Recreation was created and with it a plethora of sports museums, sports discos, and academies for marching band music, funded jointly by the departments of commerce and defense. Corporations followed suit, sponsoring annual three-legged walkathons (Nike), long-distance spitting contests (Colgate Palmolive), alligator wrestling (Bally of Switzerland), and aerobic eating (Stouffer’s Lean Cuisine).

Artists could be identified only by their weatherbeaten walking shoes and occasionally by the fact that they were seen reading books on the bleachers of various home games. And even that was chancy. A fellow from the government named Edwin Meese had devised a methodology whereby he lumped artists in with the abject poor and decided, as a matter of public policy, that if you couldn’t see them, they weren’t actually there.

And it was signed... “But we know they were.”

NOTES

3. Ibid., 10.
6. Ibid., 18.