Training the New Philanthropists

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That we are alive and well in the great age of hype astounds no one. This is the era in which Julian Schnabel can attach broken dinner plates to velvet and become an internationally famous artist within the space of a few years; when Keith Haring can turn the ultimate contemporary visual statement—graffiti—from illegal act into art object and command tens of thousands of dollars for doing so; when Bruce Springsteen can do more to resuscitate the image of New Jersey than its Port Authority or its governor. As the generation that grew up on television and Andy Warhol comes of age, we arrive at a place Descartes would not even recognize. J'achète, donc je suis—I buy, therefore I am.

The financial realities of this landscape cannot be overlooked or minimized, nor can the increasingly symbiotic relationship between the profit and the not-for-profit sectors be ignored.

1. The commercial theatre frequently rapes the not-for-profit world, and not always without invitation and consent. Resident theatres, nonprofit experimental groups, off-loop theatres, and off-off-Broadway

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companies provide a constantly increasing supply of work for the Broadway stage, the national tour, and international exchange.

2. Visual artists (who have always been interested in more than canvases) have been designing sets, costumes, and special effects for the three-dimensional rectangle of the stage, for music television, and for computer technology.

3. Composers from rock groups such as David Byrne's Talking Heads are writing for newly mainstreamed choreographers, such as Twyla Tharp, while Tharp is choreographing Broadway's Singin' in the Rain and the movies Hair and Amadeus.

4. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is banned in certain public schools in the midwestern United States and reappears simultaneously as the show Big River, one of the most expensive family entertainments on Broadway with a top ticket price of over $45.

5. Ballet companies and museums are surviving through what sociologist Paul DiMaggio calls "Nutcrackers and Blockbusters," those gala, big-league, boldly packaged events that bring in crowds and income. In fact, according to a recent Dance USA data survey, in 1984, revenue earned from performances of The Nutcracker in thirteen ballet companies across America represented between 30 and 64 percent of their total earned income.1

6. Profits from the Schnables and the Springsteens are even more substantial. According to DiMaggio, in 1983 alone, the income derived from Michael Jackson's pop record album Thriller exceeded the entire annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.2 All of this is occurring at the end of two decades that began with intense arguments in the arts community over populism and elitism; two decades that began with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts; two decades in which the arts have been forced to justify their existence in terms of social good, dissemination of product, economic viability, and art for the community's sake, for the audience's sake, and even for its own sake.

Like it or not, the arts have been dragged kicking and screaming into a market economy. Not all the participants are kicking and screaming; some are stimulated by the stakes. Some get satisfaction from manipulating the system. Others are confused about the method of exchange. If art is experience, as John Dewey once told us, how do you evaluate experience? How do you price it? Market it? Include it in subscription sales? If you don't like what you get, how do you arrange for its return?

Not everyone survives in a market economy—that is part of the purpose of the system. Survival of the marketably fittest, however, has taken the third sector unaware. Uncomfortable with the world of high

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rollers, organizations whose personnel cannot articulate their purposes and projects in perfectly phrased advertising lingo are the ones that used to be identified according to their missions and their contributions to society. Indeed, those organizations that receive federal tax exemption from the U.S. government are simply continuing the bargain struck with the English crown—the exchange of certain prerogatives to organizations that attend to the public welfare in ways that the government itself does not wish to attend.3 These are our “charitable” causes, and, even in a market economy, they continue to appeal to “philanthropy” for sustenance, either publicly through government agencies or privately through foundations, corporations, and individuals.

The philanthropists have begun to change the rules, however. Organizations whose scientific, literary, or educational purposes were once enough to attract contributions and donations on what seemed to be their merits have been forced to learn how to market their missions, earn extra income, and present their projects in a terse, lucid, and easily consumable form.

If contemporary American society cannot compete historically with the Italian church or French royalty for pomp and ostentation, it has arrived nevertheless at the Golden Age of Acquisition—the age in which every third museum show has the word “gold” in its title, and the front page of the New York Times compares the resale price of $1 million for Jasper Johns’ Three Flags to its original selling price of $900 less than thirty years ago. If Richard III would have traded his kingdom for a horse, those of us who, as managers and educators, are concerned with the continuance of our arts and cultural institutions might trade our kingdoms for the salad days of philanthropy in America. As patronage in the United States moves from its childhood through a stormy adolescence, we wonder if—when it reaches adulthood—we will know it as our own.

Private patronage, individual entrepreneurship, and voluntary societies all supported the early days of arts and cultural growth in the United States, and, as in any free market economy, there were always exploiters among the supporters, such as the producer metaphorically twirling his mustache, counting his profits, and leaving his actors somewhere on the road. Private patrons built our earliest and most famous institutions. Civic pride begot the major symphony orchestras and museums in the United States, and patrons were even responsible for the objects in the museums themselves, transporting personal collections and purchases from Europe and around the world. While bursting with civic and other kinds of pride, these early patrons began a legacy that brought us not only great works of art, but certain occupational hazards as well—collections that contained some great works and many mediocre ones,

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some of them even fakes and frauds; bequests that required that the works be kept forever, shown together, or permanently installed or stored; and patrons who felt that, in return for writing the annual check to finance our major cultural institutions, they should be guaranteed a fixed and permanent influence on the governance and management of these organizations and a literal seat on the board to pass on to their heirs.

While inheritance and income tax legislation allowed arts and cultural organizations to broaden this base of private patronage from the exclusive province of the very rich in the early part of this century, art in American society underwent a major change from what W. McNeil Lowry describes as "an indispensable element in a democracy, serving both to elevate public taste and to celebrate the free atmosphere of the new United States." Jefferson's ideals and John Adams' well-known plea for us to study science and mathematics so that our children could study poetry and architecture both embodied this stance, which has changed so drastically that we can barely make sense of politicians' statements that tell us that money for military marching bands justifiably robs dollars from federal appropriations for the National Endowment for the Arts. At best, we have a mixed heritage.

This thumbnail overview of arts philanthropy is intimately connected to what has become the newest trend in catchall arts phraseology—public policy for the arts. This term, as far as I can tell, has received no widely agreed-upon definition in the United States, and it has emphases in other countries that reflect a wide range of interests and activities. Examples include the recently curtailed subsidy of individual artists by the Netherlands; Canada's Art Bank; and the French subsidy of an Englishman, Peter Brook, with an international company speaking over ten native tongues, performing a several-day-long work based on the great traditional literature of India. (Notice the popularization of India on the American and international scene—another impoverished country made to look exotic and glamorous through the mega-exhibition.)

The "policies" of "funding"—certainly one emphasis of those who speak of "public" policy—are continually unclear. Public and private funding agencies rush to fund "primary institutions," but they cannot find a reasonable stance toward the avant-garde. In European countries, museums and opera houses are being designated national treasures, while in America we rush fiercely about trying to designate landmarks in the hope of avoiding the demolition of theaters to make way for high-rise hotels. Always, there is the unease in the bureaucracy about those companies and events, groups and individuals that do not fit neatly into the bureaucratic machine. In America, many public and private funding agencies have not coalesced in their feelings about those loosely organ-
ized, grassroots, interdisciplinary groups that provide the experimental, the indigenous, or simply the new.

A few examples will illustrate the point. In its brief history, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has put dollars and energy into such programs in a number of ways—through the Expansion Arts Program (a perfect target for those who claim that the NEA is a glorified welfare program for artists), through the Interarts Program (a late but needed answer to the needs of the field, expressed most tellingly the year an artists’ space called The Kitchen was forced to apply to the NEA in twenty-eight separate categories), and through the Institutional Advancement Program (a challenge grant program for small-to-medium-sized arts groups that acts as a mega-technical assistance program). Such programs in a government agency like the NEA, which has many masters to serve, are traditionally unpopular, especially among staff people. They have at their roots, perhaps, what Ellen McCulloch Lovell calls the protection of “the minority from the tyranny of the majority.”

This is not only a question of the intersection of art with the marketplace, or of what Michael Conforti of Minneapolis’ Institute of Arts calls the arts institution’s “aesthetic expectation” versus its “civic responsibility.” The confluence of increased public interest and awareness, of education and even social enlightenment with “mere commerce” is not new, even in this country. As any good curator who works with period rooms knows, in major northeastern cities during the early twentieth century, the museum competed with department stores and world’s fairs that had similar “period displays.” What has been referred to as “Hoving-ism” at our major museums and cultural institutions reminds us all too readily of Macbeth’s admonition to his dagger—“Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going.”

Perhaps we are discussing a question of masters. The old theatre adage that said that what you needed to make a theatre were “two boards, two players, and a passion” has become “two boards, two players, and a passion; three grants and a manager; marketing and publicity; the audience; and thou beside me buying tickets in the metropolis.” While arts groups are serving multiple masters, philanthropists may be serving just as many. The corporate contributions officer in the for-profit company may have one relationship to the chief executive officer, another to the shareholders, and still another to the staff. His audience is not the theatre’s or the orchestra’s couple in Row BB but the consumer of his company’s product—the buyer of gasoline, the person who shops for soda, cigarettes, or soap. Having gone from the sale of Liberty Bonds to the sale of the lady herself, there is indeed the question of whether corporate philanthropy can even exist without implicit contradictory purposes. In
fact, a wide range of exchanges has developed where the corporate dollar does not result in philanthropy but in a highly specific trade—for promotion and advertising, cause-related marketing, and even actual services (employee “perks,” like free passes to the local museum).

The government agency as philanthropist has legislators, Congressmen, local politicians, and voters on one hand and artists, arts institutions, and service groups on the other. It fights for dollars and press and privilege against poverty, mental illness, nuclear war, and missing children and for social welfare, religion, education, and health care. In this competition of sorrows—when it is the arts or orphans—the arts are going to lose.

We arrive where we began, as T. S. Eliot would say. We are back to the individual patron, philanthropy through the private foundation, the singular human being, and personal taste, but with a major difference. The Fords, Rockefellers, and Mellons have forged their major stakes in the arts; it is unlikely that they will approach their past beneficence in any way. While the multiplicity of funding sources and the U.S. tax law (thus far) have broadened the landscape to include numerous private foundations that give to the arts, development personnel have had to acquire skills of bits-and-pieces fundraising. An informal survey of several of the most significantly involved arts families of two generations ago yielded the information that the grandchildren of the Morgans and the Fricks stay involved in the arts—if at all—only to maintain the family monument.

Arts philanthropy has lost the sense of the personal expression (and personal control) of its forebears. Some of the philanthropic duties will, and should, pass on to those young urban professionals that sociologist Mark Lilla calls the “new brows”—those who consume culture regularly, who want to understand the difficult in contemporary art, and who want to be up-to-date about it.

There are many possible explanations and motivations for the new brows’ involvement in philanthropy. We must not forget that we are in the age of equal—or at least more equal than before—opportunity. The generation that embraced Ronald Reagan is a generation in which women have risen higher on the executive corporate ladder than ever before (paving the way, some say, for similar escalation by certain ethnic and sexual minorities). These new brows, new libertarians, neoliberals, neoconservatives, or yuppies, have moved toward power-driven strata of society, where the old symbols and the old dues are insufficient, where the “losers” in a marketplace that requires advanced degrees in business, finance, or law may have as many credentials as the “winners.” While they may be wisely skeptical of their employers and their institutions, the people who are just turning forty probably devote longer hours and more
constant attention to white-collar work than any previous generation. These people get high on work; and the competition and challenge of that work, of the current marketplace, and of what some people call the real world, have left the world of leisure time or free time (in which the arts have always operated) in a very different position.

The new audience members that fit this rough description may have no free time at all. To them, time—as to most people who spend a good deal of their energy in management functions—is money. Money, as any good manager knows, is also money. It follows in perfectly logical fashion that the places in which at least some of the art is targeted to these people are the places in which time and money are at a premium—in the lobbies of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, Champion International Paper, and Philip Morris, where the Whitney Museum has set up shop; in the transformed Soho branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank, which is indistinguishable from a gallery except for the sound of money changing hands. (In the years since its reopening in March 1985, the branch’s popularity, according to the bank’s national ratings, jumped from 185th to 18th place.)

Here is art as accompaniment, art as you go, fast-food art, art for the quichoisse. As Robert Hughes states in his article “On Art and Money,” “The size of this sector of the new art audience, the gratifying uniformity of its taste, and its insecure obsession with mutually recognizable signs of status, produce many consequences for artists.” Not the least of these is dealing with the “creation of confidence” that the art market has pushed forward by convincing major financial investors from a multitude of countries that art is worth the investment—in clearly more than aesthetic terms.

In terms of live art, this is also the generation for whom the rectangle of the television screen is a more standard basis for judgment than either the picture frame or the stage. With its artists as well as its audiences deeply immersed in fashion as well as hype, in what Robert Hughes describes as “the crammed pantheon of the briefly new,” this generation adds another seemingly insurmountable problem to those already identified by arts organizations involved in the performance or presentation of art—the culture of reproduction. Even as we come to grips with the new philanthropists, the marketplace shifts beneath our feet. Technology, the media, sculptural reproductions even in quality cases such as the Rockefeller collection, prints, lithographs, computer art, laser holography, art as a multiple, art in a box, art you can take home with your quiche and your snow peas to consume by the light of the microwave—all of these issues place us squarely in the growing chasm between accessibility and falsifying art’s history.

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The people I am describing are not uneducated or poor. Unlike their forebears, many are not self-made, either. They came into the world with the promise of pedigree, position, and power through money, education, and acquisition; along the way, through the “Me Generation” (which had ideas but did not pay), they arrived at the “More Generation.” They are neither stupid nor naïve, however, and somewhere in their backgrounds many of them have had some grounding in one or several of the arts. They know the arts are a “should”—something you should attend, should support, should pass on to your kids—maybe not a “must,” but at least a major “should.” Because they are tenacious and determined in their work and committed to that work, if we can learn how to translate just a particle of the energy they devote to their work to our work in the arts, we will be on our way to training the new philanthropists.

Can we do it without compromises? Can we retain our integrity while we reel them in? Is it such a terrible thing to involve people who are already with us, but not really of us, to join us in what we feel is the most important, seminal, and valuable experience in our lives? Can we get their money? Can we get more than their money—can we get them, and their children, and their corporations, and their law firms, to contribute, to care, and to come? Can we do all this and not lose sight of our art, our product, and our quality goods and services?

Perhaps it is wise to stop for a moment and think about civic pride. Surely the town hall, the church, and the symphony have given way to the mixed-use development, the downtown artists’ district, and the apartment above the museum. Even these arrangements enter the realm of the pragmatic when H. Ross Perot rides into New York with his metaphoric Stetson and his very real money to save the Museum of the American Indian by bringing it from New York City down to Dallas.¹³

If there are those who think that in the few short decades it has taken the United States to go from Rockefeller Center to Baltimore’s Harborplace we have moved from the sublime to the ridiculous, there are others who see the growth pattern differently. To them, what we have gained is accessibility, and what we have lost is snob appeal. If our increasingly consumer-oriented society has given us a plethora of marketplaces, it has also placed our most entrenched elite institutions into a critically narrowing niche. Some of these elite institutions have become popular as well as solvent through merchandising, marketing, and mail order. Some have accepted sponsorship and contributions from the corporate sector, where more bang for the buck results in a kind of cultural legitimacy for the makers and distributors of highly questionable, even offensively dangerous, products. A kind of Faustian parallel begins to emerge.

If scholarship and research have received short shrift, we must ad-
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mit that more people are coming to the arts. In fact, in many cases, we have become enslaved to those numbers. Samuel Lipman does well to ponder the reaction of a Congressman, upon hearing a plan for doing operas in the Superdome, as, “Isn’t this wonderful? We’re going to have as many people watching Bohème as watch the Dallas Cowboys!” So our civic pride becomes divided between a traditional value system and what certain cultural economists like to refer to as the “ah ha!” syndrome—the element of surprise, the teaser, the incentive, the hook. More Nutcrackers and Blockbusters. Bohème in the Superdome.

Yet, there are still some private patrons struggling to survive as independent, entrepreneurial, individual givers-who-make-a-difference. Brooke Astor helps to turn the New York Public Library into a showplace and is honored by David Rockefeller for doing it; the Sacklers and the Lehmans add whole wings to museums; Pierre Cardin personally backs the Pilobolus Dance Company. They are fading fast, however, and with them the tradition of anonymous philanthropy—once considered the highest form of giving—is fast becoming a cultural relic. It is possible that their heirs, like the heirs of Frick and Morgan, will contribute to the arts in the future only to maintain the family monument, the cultural manifestation of the family’s success. Perhaps they will not contribute at all, and we will be left with those new philanthropists who make us uneasy, not because they are so different, but because they have certain very recognizable characteristics. As an old Pogo cartoon in the Baltimore Sun stated several decades ago, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

How do we teach them? How do we know them? How do we make connections so that our arts institutions will not survive as empty corridors to meaningless experience but as central, personal, immediate concerns? First, we need to know who they are. The fact is, we know next to nothing. Forty years of museum studies later, we know that so many people come X times a year to Y museum, that 4 percent of the U.S. population comes to the arts, that a Louis Harris poll contends that a majority of Americans would spend more time on arts and recreational activities (including sports arenas, golf courses, and other types of organizations that make a meaningful and useful assessment impossible).

We need to begin to study our audiences to see, first, who comes, and, second, who does not come. We also need to know why. We need to stop assuming that the community does not like Beethoven when poor parking or a shortage of babysitters is the real issue. We need to stop assuming that a family does not go to arts events because it chooses cable television over the local ballet company. We need to know what kinds of arts-related activities occur in whole family units, what kinds of arts-related products are bought, and how often. We need to know about

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households and attendance patterns that are affected by a family of four with two small children versus a family of two in their early thirties. We need to look at how all these factors and patterns affect contributions to the arts.

While we are studying the behavior of households, we would be wise to pay particular attention to the children in those households because they are the next philanthropists. With all the studies and pilot projects, the seed money, and the development potential over the last several decades, in national terms we have made little headway. Not only have we skillfully avoided any concerted national effort to make the arts a meaningful and integrated component of education (a situation the Getty Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts finally may be addressing), for the most part we are teaching and disseminating middle-class, white, Western art, with its roots in European preciousness and the Puritan ethic—the melting pot only to a certain temperature. From the early years through the college level, the humanities go begging. If we are not committed to a core curriculum that involves the arts and the humanities, how are we to explain philanthropy?

Many religious and private schools teach the concepts of charity, ethics, and social responsibility. In public schools, arguments over the validity of the Lord's prayer proliferate. In our homes, we try to fill in the blanks. While television glamorizes violence and victimization of all kinds, we search for moments of the truth and beauty that we think make the difference. For us, the quality of life is not a catch phrase to attract funding; it is something we try daily to create. We speak to our children of social and human responsibility in a world increasingly controlled by machines; we speak of giving to the less fortunate in the abstract, and only occasionally in the concrete; we try to imbue our offspring with a sense of self that goes beyond mere words or lessons, so that they may learn to distinguish themselves as individuals in their own independent ways. How do we teach them to distinguish themselves through giving?

If Dallas wants New York's Museum of the American Indian for status, pleasure, or show, how many of us will care what the reason is, as long as the community attends regularly and supports its activities? If mixed-use developments are created primarily to bring the exurban and suburban populations back to the inner city, is it not in our best interest to bring them there for the arts?

If the grand old families have run out of money, largesse, and steam in terms of the arts and culture, who is to say we cannot educate the new philanthropists? But make no mistake—it will not happen on its own. We must begin to take responsibility. We, the managers and the educators, must teach the new board members what we expect; we must tell the
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corporations where to draw the line; we must observe the new audience as it grows up; we must create the corridor to culture. If the wolf at the door, dressed in a costume of deficits and debt and decline, looks as though he might be persuaded to smile, we must kiss him and teach him how to pay.

NOTES

13. In 1985, it was announced that H. Ross Perot, Texas businessman and philanthropist, had offered to assist the financially troubled Museum of the American Indian by moving it from its New York City location to Dallas. The Museum, however, is moving to Washington, DC.
15. Brooke Astor has carried on her family's long tradition of philanthropy to New York City-based institutions by becoming a major philanthropic force for the New York Public Library. In 1985, she was honored by fellow philanthropist David Rockefeller for her many contributions. Philanthropists Arthur Sackler and Herbert Lehman have both donated substantial contributions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and both have had wings named after them. For a number of years, Pierre Cardin was the major philanthropist behind the contemporary dance company, Pilobolus.