

THE SCENE IS BETTER FOR IT: ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL LIVELIHOODS

Dan Morris

The nation's biggest public source of arts and culture funding is not the National Endowment for the Arts, as many might believe. It's actually New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), boasting an annual expense budget of around \$150 million and a \$1 billion capital budget for the next five years.¹ The agency finances artistic and cultural endeavors that generate jobs, wages and tax revenue. Massive institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art tend to receive the most sizeable grants because, on the surface at least, their economic impact is correspondingly large. City Hall reads very literally analysis from the Alliance for the Arts revealing that "the operating budgets of several large organizations account for a major part of total expenditures by nonprofit arts organizations in New York City."²

Too literally, it turns out. Focusing on what happens at the top makes it easy to miss the action down below. More investment in improving how artists and cultural producers live and work—paying attention to individuals and communities, not just institutions—would yield greater returns, especially among underground influencers who start trends and build brands that profitably penetrate the mainstream. They hold far more growth and revenue potential than aging museums that simply put tradition on display and could survive on private philanthropy and still appeal to wealthy residents and tourists, which, let's be honest, is their goal. To support new talent and human capital in the creative sector, DCA must nurture unconventional careers, fostering diverse scenes and inclusive milieus capable of sustaining them.

That won't happen if the agency continues to dole out money mainly to assist leaders of prominent organizations rather than ordinary people who are struggling freelancers. Its grant-making is caught between largesse for insiders and laissez-faire for outsiders. Those who can withstand expert scrutiny and exploit credentials and connections to compete for funds are rewarded; others whose lesser reputations or eccentric ideas don't easily fit onto grant applications are left alone to succeed or fail. Neither approach benefits the many thousands of independent, unaffiliated people trying to earn a decent and interesting living based on what they create and how others enjoy their creations.

DCA staff should look beyond data on organizational expenditures and get reacquainted with *The Culture Consumers*, Alvin Toffler's strikingly relevant book from the 1960s, where he explains the inefficiency of art.³ "It's not that the production of art is becoming any less efficient than it ever was," he writes, "but that its level of efficiency is falling farther and farther behind that of the economy as a whole. Indeed, in this very difference lies much of the attractiveness and appeal of art... The farther we advance into the age of technological efficiency, the wider the disparity grows."⁴ Whereas most sectors are driven by the mass production of standardized goods and services, arts and culture offer singular performances and rare experiences, stimulating demand for limited editions and inimitable things rather than the same old commodities. The cost of creativity rises as the cost of automation lowers. That artistic products and cultural happenings are more expensive to make, and more pleasurable to consume, increases their value and worth.

As Toffler points out, each step toward "higher productivity in the economy at large pushes the arts back a step in terms of their peculiar handicraft economics."⁵ Market forces did not magically invent this disparity once upon a time. The hands of government bureaucrats are all over it. That's the important point for City Hall: just as tax loopholes and giveaways entice business to produce more efficiently, so other policies can limit the encroachment of efficient production into arts and culture. On some level, DCA must simply accept responsibility for ensuring artistic and cultural livelihoods remain viable.

With Toffler probably on his mind, contemporary Brooklyn artist Joe Scanlan has riffed on long-term, inefficient careers in which artistic and cultural producers “shape the kind of market they want to inhabit” and expand “the value system of art and, by extension, the aesthetic of what “making money” looks like—the kinds of actions it might embody and the forms it might take.”⁶ He describes how “the real growth opportunities are in obscure enterprises where competition is low and materials cheap,” and claims that “if art and independent contracting share anything it is the desire to minimize overhead costs.”⁷

Toffler thought it was easiest to preserve inefficient careers through credits and incentives for thrill-seeking patrons rather than through subsidies requiring judgment to be exercised and taste to be legislated in ways that could thwart cutting-edge projects. “To expect federal subsidies to underwrite innovation or “way out” artistic enterprises is naïve,” he reasoned, perhaps too stridently. “The same is true of city, county or state subsidies.... if we wish to encourage the spirit of experiment and risk-taking, the attitude of playfulness that is essential to art, we must enlarge the base of individual, as against collective, patronage.”⁸

For all his insight, Toffler overlooked how government can champion daring activity and not get mired in debates over excellence and quality by facilitating situations and environments—scenes and milieus—in which new markets and enterprises can be lucratively developed and explored. That’s what Elizabeth Currid reveals in her recent book, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, and Music Drive New York City*.⁹ She wins the prize for most fun had while doing research. Currid spent lots of time just hanging out with creative people, both famous and relatively unknown. She discovered that “formal institutions have not been particularly instrumental in artistic and cultural careers, even for those who have attained wide acclaim and credibility...”¹⁰ No one she encountered had ever filled out a grant application or spoken with a DCA rep.

Instead, all these folks she got to know relied upon informal settings—always some nighttime joint, never a job fair or business workshop—to gain access to tastemakers and gatekeepers who helped them get

ahead and plan their next move or learn where to find opportunities. The exchanges were unpredictable and freewheeling, like any good party. But they point to a pattern: social dynamics determine the economic behavior of people seeking artistic and cultural advancement.

In the fall of 2009, DCA announced major initiatives like expanding exhibition space in city-owned properties and increasing access to affordable performance space.¹¹ Worthwhile as these plans sound—and they are necessary—they won't get off the ground, the press release suggests, until other organizations manage the logistics and conduct outreach to artists and other designated beneficiaries.

Too often operations the agency could guide and control are effectively outsourced under the guise of empowering people to make decisions for themselves when, in fact, many artists and cultural producers are not affiliated with any particular institution or organization. Those among them who want more exhibition and performance space will still have to find it on their own. Now we come full circle: DCA staff must go out and reach people in the ephemeral settings and offbeat places where the creative economy thrives.

How about a grassroots operation in neighborhoods across the city, a fact-finding mission to grasp the latest artistic and cultural developments? Seriously: imagine enlisting eclectic purveyors of art and culture as native informants who could connect the agency directly to the concerns and interests of emerging and established creative leaders. Dialogue informed by first-hand knowledge of what's really happening in the field would open new avenues for government to respond to overlooked or misunderstood needs. Arts and culture policy would finally start to encompass more than the top-down administration of grants.

The example of indie rock promoter Todd Patrick is instructive. Anyone can get into the shows he organizes in Brooklyn and Queens in unglamorous, sometimes not fully legal, spots. The atmosphere is engaging and inviting: interactions and conversations tend to run late into the evening and almost naturally transcend the barriers of performance and spectatorship. Musicians and audience members at one show may well end up in a side outfit or new band by the next one.

Some of the biggest Brooklyn bands of the moment—Vivian Girls and Matt & Kim come to mind—cut their teeth playing these shows and remain connected to younger upstarts hoping to break through. Enough buzz and hype surround Patrick’s gatherings that promoters operating in larger clubs and bars are obliged to follow his bookings religiously. As he gets closer to opening his own official venue, he is watching what the younger, less experienced kids are doing, those who learned from him but are putting their own stamp on things. A few months ago Patrick told NPR: “The scene is better for it. It’s better now that tastemaker status and all that stuff has been kind of diluted and spread around. At the same time, I don’t feel like my star has diminished. I feel like, you know, I still do great things, other people do great things. There’s just great stuff happening.”¹²

Patrick and company do it all themselves: finding spaces, negotiating with landlords, and getting the word out. Materials are cheap, competition low, and overhead minimal. Still, it’s hard to sustain a living like this. Resourcefulness only carries you so far. A new motto, then, for DCA: here to lessen the difficulty.

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Endnotes

- 1 This is referenced in “Creative New York,” a 2005 report by the Center for an Urban Future, p. 13: http://www.nycfuture.org/images_pdfs/pdfs/creative_new_york.pdf. And DCA’s expense budget and capital budget are readily available online: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/home/home.shtml>.
- 2 “Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Impact on New York City and New York State,” a 2007 report by Alliance for the Arts, p. 32: http://www.allianceforarts.org/pdfs/ArtsIndustry_2007.pdf.
- 3 Alvin Toffler, *The Culture Consumers: Art and Affluence in America* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).
- 4 *The Culture Consumers*, pp. 183–184, 215.
- 5 *The Culture Consumers*, p. 215.
- 6 Joe Scanlan, “Modest Proposals,” *Artforum*, April 2008.