

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Pull Off the Duct Tape!

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, January 5th, 2012

In his article, [Occupy the Arts, a seat at a time](#), NY Times critic Anthony Tomasini (like others) pounced on recent allegations of ‘elitism’ in the arts (growing out of the Occupy movement), decrying that there are loads of free and affordable arts events and that even those organizations that charge \$400 per ticket also have cheap seats (and the experience is just as great from the nosebleeds, thank you very much!). Not only do Tomasini and others seem a tad defensive when they fly their Free Tickets Flag in the face of those seeking to raise a conversation about social inequalities in the arts, it seems they rather miss the point.

Tomasini writes:

“But as we try to grasp what the committed Occupy Wall Street activists are saying to the performing arts, can we all agree to put aside at last the charge of elitism? Especially, I would say from my partisan perspective, regarding classical music? At least in New York and in many other American cities, as well as most college towns, there are abundant opportunities to attend free or very affordable concerts and operas.”

What arouses allegations that fine arts organizations are elitist is not (primarily) that their ticket prices are sometimes high, but rather that they are (more often than not) governed by a select group of (generally wealthy, well-educated, and often white) people whose beliefs and tastes are presumed to be ‘the best’ and, therefore, good for society as a whole. Many fine arts organizations are perceived as elitist because they seem to cater to the needs, capacities, and desires of this select group of people rather than serving their communities-at-large.

Communities in which, evidently, a lot of people are quite poor. Russell Willis Taylor of National Arts Strategies and I were chatting the other day and she mentioned that the most recent US census shows that 1 in 2 people in the US are living at the poverty level ([Census: 1 in 2 Americans is Poor or Low Income](#)).

And yet, attending a fine arts event in the US one steps into a world that seems to be (and often is) completely out of touch with the reality of that census statistic ...

Arts organizations could do something in response to that statistic. Several years ago now, Appalshop (an arts and education center located in the Appalachian mountain region) realized there was a tremendous (and rather sobering) ‘growth market’ in its community (and the US generally) that was not being served by the arts: people who have been or are currently in prison, or those who know people who have been or are currently in prison. A staggering number of people fall into this category—enough that the good people at Appalshop felt that their perspectives and needs were worth taking seriously and that it was important to develop programming with them and for them. To read about this extraordinary program go to the [Thousand Kites homepage](#).

Oh, but wait just a darned minute! Isn’t Appalshop one of those ‘community-based’ organizations?

So that's different. They're supposed to serve the needs the community-at-large. That's their mission. As opposed to 'Arts' organizations which are supposed to serve ... ummmm ... oh, never mind.

Pffffff.

There is a growing financial, artistic, and psychic gap between the 'nonprofit fine arts world' in the US and the 'rest of the US'.

And we've been trying to bridge this gap with duct tape (aka, friends with money) for at least 30 years.

It's a new year.

What better time to tear off the duct tape, see what holds, and start building something better?

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