Beyond Excellence: Fulfilling the Promise of Civic Creative Vitality

Remarks by Alan Brown, March 14, 2013
Madison, Wisconsin

Good evening, and thank you so much for coming out tonight to reflect on Madison's cultural community.

I stand before you with immense awe and respect for artists, artistic directors and curators for the difficult and often brilliant work they do. The responsibilities they carry are enormous, and the passion and commitment they bring to their work are staggering.

In talking about artistic vibrancy and community relevance, I do not mean to offend those of you who are artistic decision-makers, or in any way suggest that Madison's arts and cultural scene is anything less than vibrant. Rather, my intention is to spark renewed commitment to the process of creative programming. I wish for all of you to reach sublime artistic heights, and for the Madison community to realize its highest ambitions of creative vitality.

As a researcher, I study audience behaviors and patterns of cultural participation in the American population. I love interviewing people about why they go out to arts events, and how they express themselves creatively. While I'm typically engaged in service of a marketing goal, the conversation with audiences and visitors inevitably comes around to programming. Time and time again, research proves that the audience is a reflection of what's on stage. Good marketing and customer service are critical, but if what people see on stage is not interesting and engaging and fulfilling on some level, they are less likely to come back. The same is true of course for museums and galleries.

To my knowledge, no one has ever studied how artistic decision-making happens in arts organizations. It's the black box of our field, the inner sanctum of creative expression, where the opposing forces of artistic license and constrained resources battle it out, and where heroic acts of

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curatorial prowess, risk management and philanthropic largess play out behind closed doors. At the very heart of every arts organization is a process of conceptualizing and curating art. It is *the* most essential process. Yet, high-level dialogue in our field about what defines artistic vibrancy is nearly absent.

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Isn't it Good Enough to be Excellent?

No, its not. More to the point, it depends on how you define "excellence."

As Ben Cameron observed in a speech almost ten years ago, we are a quality-obsessed field. Every grant program talks about quality. Quality, quality, quality. Peer review panels award grants based on artistic merit, as if we even know what that is. My favorite example is the orchestra field's practice of holding blind auditions. Nothing matters except the quality of playing. Quality, excellence and virtuosity are used interchangeably, as if they are the unassailable, unknowable gold standard of worth. But while we've been talking about quality, the rest of the country has moved on. What matters now more than quality is value. The promise of value is what motivates consumers to spend their precious time and money. And value is not always the same thing as excellence.

To strive for artistic excellence is a given, just as one strives for excellence in management and excellence in governance. Excellence is not a brand attribute, or a core value, or a strategy, because excellence is not a choice. Just as no one shows up at work and commits to mediocrity. Striving to achieve a high quality of artistry is a basic minimum commitment to ourselves and to our field, and there is really no alternative.

At conference after conference, I hear people fret about declining attendance or low levels of community support. I had a call recently from the manager of a regional orchestra. She asked me if I could help her find "more people who look exactly like the ones who are already coming." I asked her what programming she's doing to creatively engage the community and illustrate the relevance of classical music to the Hip Hop generation. There was a long silence on the phone, and then a click.

The British writer John Holden has written about the "crisis of legitimacy" in the arts. I would take it one step further and say there's a crisis of creativity in the arts. Much of the sector is frozen in formulaic programming and closed artistic planning models that do not yield either the quantity or quality of creative programming ideas that engage communities, inspire donors or attract the next generation of audiences. In many ways, this crisis is exacerbated by the surge of highly engaging and highly creative

entertainment options emerging from the commercial sector, including film, television, theme parks, and especially games.

Artistic excellence has been conflated with creativity in programming. Our attention is fixed on a mirage that keeps slipping away.

Too often, excellence is used as a defensive shield to dismiss creative programming ideas as either "off-mission" or "dumbed-down," when in fact they are neither. Attaining higher levels of creativity in programming is not about dumbing anything down, but about applying ourselves to an even higher standard than excellence.

Good marketing is absolutely strategic to the arts, but I'm no longer interested in a one-way conversation about "audience development" that focuses exclusively on marketing. Sure, we can always do a better job of marketing and communications. But audience development is not just a marketing problem. Drawing new people into the arts and replenishing the constituencies for the art forms is, first and foremost, a programming challenge.

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Hence, my desire to speak with you today about artistic vibrancy. It is, perhaps, the most important conversation we can have as a field. What swings in the balance is the creative life of Madison, and indeed the nation.

So, What is Artistic Vibrancy?

Several years ago, the Australia Council for the Arts released a series of papers on artistic vibrancy, which I highly recommend, as well as an Artistic Reflection Kit. You can find them easily by Googling "Artistic Vibrancy Australia." My thinking on this subject has been heavily influenced by the good work of the Australia Council, and I wish to thank them publicly for their outstanding work. Building on their ideas, I ask for your patience while I describe 10 aspects of "artistic vibrancy."

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First, artistically vibrant organizations have **clarity at the board level on the desired outcomes of artistic programs**. To what ends do you offer programs, and for whom? What are you hoping to accomplish with your programs? A simple enough question, but often a void of understanding. I remember presenting results of a visitor survey to the board, staff and curators of a large museum in New York City. We surveyed visitors over the course of the year, timed with changes in the exhibition schedule. And guess what? The profile of visitors changed dramatically with each exhibition, based on the

nature of the exhibition. So, I said to the curators, "You're not only curating exhibitions, you're curating the constituency of this museum." And, then I suggested to board members that defining constituency should be a policy issue, not a programming issue that should be delegated to curators. And then I left town very quickly.

Are there any board members present? [show of hands] Contrary to what you may have been told, your responsibilities are not only fiduciary, but also creative. In the end, it is up to you to set policy with respect to programming. Your role in this regard is widely misunderstood. Board members are often told to stay out of artistic affairs. And for good reason. But board members are not merely fundraising lackeys. Today, board members need to be activists, not just for their institution, but activists for freedom and diversity of artistic expression, and champions of creative expression at the community level. Of course it's not appropriate for board members to get involved in the details of artistic planning. But it's also not sufficient for boards to hire an artistic director and just pray that things work out.

That's what I call the "hire and pray" strategy. So long as tickets are selling, everyone's happy, but when things start going wrong, they go horribly wrong, and someone usually looses their job. Board members and artistic leaders need to find a way to have a high level discussion about outcomes. It's a vocabulary problem. Boards and artistic leaders both need to learn a new language in order to be able to communicate with each other about desired impacts. Do you offer programs in order to stimulate political dialogue? Do you offer programs in order to bring families closer together? Do you offer programs in order to build a greater capacity for empathy? Or, do you offer programs to support the artistic impulse of a specific artist – perhaps a founder? Why is it that you offer programs? If you're locked in a decades-old programming formula and can't remember why you produce it, maybe its time for a discussion about impacts and outcomes.

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In artistically vibrant organizations, **staff, artists and board members debate and disagree openly and regularly about how to balance artistic ideals with community relevance**. This is the central tension in every artistically-driven organization, and it should be a primary focus of debate and discussion between and amongst board members and staff. Nothing is off limits. We need to embrace, and explore, and yes, even celebrate these two opposing value systems… artistic ideals and community relevance. As with so many things in life, clarity often lies at the nexus of opposing truths, because one sheds light on the other, and together they illuminate something greater.

What do you stand for artistically? What are your artistic ambitions? This is not just a question for artistic leaders, but for board members as well. There are other, more vexing questions. What is the artistic landscape in which you operate? What is changing about the art itself? What is changing about the role of artists in society? What kinds of artists will we need in 20 or 30 years, and who is training them? What's changing about the ways in which people interact with the art? The velocity of change is breathtaking. Consider, for example, the profound influence of the reality television shows on public attitudes about dance. In a recent survey, we found that 30% of adults in central California want to take dance lessons. That's 30%, not 3%. There is a moment of unimaginable opportunity in the dance field now, but what will we make of it? What does it mean to be a professional dance artist at this moment in time, or a curator of dance presentations?

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Community relevance is another value system. In order to be effective, curators and artistic leaders need to be **diagnosticians of their communities**. This is not about asking people what they want to see, but about deep, deep listening. Recently, I had the privilege of sitting down with the artistic director of one of America's leading theatre companies. She told me that the institutional metaphor for her company was that of a public square. What a beautiful metaphor. Then I asked, how do you operationalize that metaphor? How do you bring it to life? And she basically said that she tried to pick plays that she feels will resonate with the community. And I thought to myself, that's great, but what if the artistic team, and maybe even some board members, went out into the community once a year, and interviewed parents, and school teachers, and religious leaders, and elected officials and asked them, "What issues define your life experience?" And what if they came back to the theatre and huddled together and shared what they heard, and then applied their considerable artistic talents to diagnosing need and then shaping their programming as a series of sustained conversations with their community about issues and ideas that are important to the community. Like bridging intergenerational divides. Or the role of faith in politics. Now that is a public square.

Being relevant in your community necessarily means playing the role of diagnostician. Just as a doctor does not hand a blank prescription to a patient, so an arts group can never ask the audience what it wants to see. They do not know the creative possibilities. I don't know about you, but the drugs I would prescribe myself would not be what the doctor would give me. Thank heavens for the good judgment of doctors, and thank heavens for the good judgment of curators and artistic directors who give us what we would not prescribe for ourselves. Diagnosing need takes a lot of skill, and a lifetime of experience.

What spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social and aesthetic needs can you address through your programming decisions? The role of diagnostician makes some curators really nervous. They see it as an affront to their *carte blanche* artistic license. Why, after a lifetime of studying art and producing art at the highest levels of quality, should an accomplished curator concern herself with the considerably less glamorous work of a diagnostician?

To me, there's an important difference between artists who are creators and artists who act as curators. While composers, playwrights, choreographers, writers, visual artists and other creators of artistic work need not bridle their artistic impulses with outside information in order to create brilliant work, curators have a heavier yoke to carry because they operate at the intersection of art and community. Reconciling artistic ideals with community relevance is perhaps the highest form of curation. It's not at all about dumbing anything down, but about applying your artistic knowledge and skills to a higher purpose – one that requires listening, learning, diagnosing, and making inspired creative choices in the context of community need. It is the difference between curating art and curating impact. To me, the zenith of artistic accomplishment is when a curator acts as an architect of impact.

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Artistically vibrant organizations **execute their programs with a high degree of technical proficiency, imagination and artistry**. It goes without saying. This is quality in the conventional sense of the word. But, what is the standard for quality? Quality in whose eyes, and quality at what price? Some day I'd like to do a trend study of standing ovations. Why do more people nowadays stand up and clap at the end of a live performance? My friends in the U.K. hasten to point out that this is strictly an American phenomenon. Do audiences rise to their feet because they recognize quality when they see it? Or, do they rise because they can<u>not</u> distinguish a good performance from a great performance, and instead take their cue from the first one who stands up? Or, to they stand to validate their decision to spend so much time and money on tickets?

I'm working now with 18 theatres in six cities on a project to develop a new tool for audience feedback. The 18 theatres ranges from some of the most prominent theatres in the U.S., such as Arena Stage, Berkeley Rep and the Public Theatre in New York, to the La Crosse Community Theatre in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The audience in La Crosse reported impacts as high as the impacts reported by audiences at some of the most prestigious theatres in the nation. My point is not to denigrate the role of professional quality acting, but to say that quality is relative, and high impacts are possible even when the artists are accomplished amateurs or semi-professionals. This is very provocative, because it seems to undermine the value we accord to quality. What does excellence mean in a community setting, such as a homeless shelter, or when

the audience has cognitive or emotional disabilities? What does quality mean when the stage is a subway station or an abandoned warehouse? What trade offs in quality are you willing to make in order to extend your impact?

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Artistically vibrant arts groups **have collateral impact on other arts groups and other community organizations and their constituents through programming partnerships**. In an environment where the number of nonprofit arts groups is growing rapidly but philanthropic resources are shrinking, programming partnerships are one of the few viable strategies for preserving a multiplicity of artistic voices without buckling under the weight of a bloated infrastructure. A while ago, I sat with a group of funders and consultants, talking about the supply and demand dilemma in the arts, a firestorm started by NEA chairman Rocco Landesman when he remarked that America has too many theatres. There was talk about building demand, and some productive talk about collaborative marketing. But what most of the funders wanted to talk about was reducing supply. In the course of this discussion, we invented a new word: Fundertaker.

In all seriousness, I'm pleased to see programs like the **Ford Made In America** program, a partnership with the League of American Orchestras, through which 58 different orchestras collaborate on commissioning new work from American composers. What would your report card look like if you were evaluated based not only on the impact you have on your own audiences and visitors, but also those of other arts groups and community organizations? This is truly the wave of the future.

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Artistically vibrant organizations **demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement on the part of artists and artistic staff, including receptivity to critical feedback on programming and artistry**. Any art or architecture student knows what its like to endure crits. The hallmark of a true professional is welcoming critical feedback on your work. It's never easy. But it's the only way we can learn and grow. We need better approaches to generating high quality feedback for artists and curators. A strong peer review system would be a good start.

Also, there is much, much more we can do as a field to test and refine programming ideas. Concept testing is a widely used research technique in the commercial sector, but is seldom used in the arts. Only once in 20 years has anyone asked for help with program concept testing. It was an orchestra, and they were having issues with their holiday programming. So, we designed a simple focus group process to test interest in different holiday programs. We made a little mock-up of a sales brochure with bits of copy and images for

10 programs. Five of them were actual programs currently on offer, and five of them were fictitious programs that we pulled out of thin air. Respondents were given an order form and asked to order tickets from the menu of 10 program offerings, and the rest of the focus group discussion revolved around why they made the choices they made. Sure enough, some of the fictitious programs generated more interest that the existing ones. The orchestra's reaction to this information was not surprising, and underscores the old adage, "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to." Ever since that experience, I've wondered how we, as an industry, might benefit from more feedback on programming concepts, not only from peers, but from audiences. The museum field has a long history of formative evaluation and refining exhibit design based on visitor feedback, but the performing arts lacks a similar feedback loop. The irony is that most audience members, for a cookie, would be thrilled to sit down and give you feedback on program ideas.

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Artistically vibrant organizations have **a deliberative and consultative program planning process**. We know so little how artistic decisions are made, yet this is perhaps the most essential process at work in the industry. The process employed to select programs is absolutely strategic to organizational health and sustainability, and should be a matter of board policy. I don't believe anyone has studied this, but I know anecdotally that there are many different approaches to artistic decision-making in use, some very open and deliberative, and others very closed. In some arts organizations, program selection is not dissimilar to the process used by the College of Cardinals to elect a new Pope. Behind closed doors, a cloistered group of ordained ministers fulfill their divine obligation. And with a puff of white smoke up the chimney, the season is announced.

In all seriousness, program selection can be very complicated. Many limiting factors come into play, like artist availabilities. Brilliant artistic directors can make brilliant program choices behind closed doors, without consulting with anyone, and audiences may never know the difference. But, I would argue that in the long run this is not a sustainable or optimal process. I think the optimal process is different for every organization. But I'd like to see more dialogue at the board level about what a healthy program planning process looks like. What are the inputs? Who can suggest ideas for programs? The shocking truth is that most actors, musicians, dancers and visual artists have never been asked for creative programming ideas. And the irony is, they're full of great ideas. Why is it that most working artists are seldom involved in the research and development process that is at the very core of artistry? I'm aware of a few artist-curated galleries, and certainly there's long history of artist residencies and commissions. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about inviting artists, including young artists at conservatories and art schools, into the curatorial process.

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This brings me to another aspect of artistic vibrancy, which is **a full pipeline of new programming ideas**. Show me your wish list of programs that you'd love to produce, but haven't yet been able to. There isn't a single successful manufacturer that doesn't know what its next product is going to be, and the one after that, and the one after that. Of course, they have the capacity to do R&D, and to invest millions of dollars in new product development. We don't have those kinds of resources, but that doesn't mean we can't plan ahead, or at least write down our dreams. A full pipeline of new programming ideas is the lifeblood of a creative enterprise. It is the perfume that intoxicates donors. An empty pipeline is the artistic equivalent of bankruptcy.

I wish that funders would invest not only in the production of artistic work, but also invest in the process of generating a full pipeline of creative programming ideas and works in development. Artistic excellence is not the same thing as creativity in programming. Often, the most interesting and imaginative programs come out of small and mid-sized arts groups. Creative leadership is not the domain of those with big budgets, but those with the biggest imaginations and those who know how to awaken and inspire creativity in others, and enfranchise them in a dynamic process of generating, discarding, and refining daring ideas for programs that capture the imagination of the public. Frankly, I'm fed up listening to arts groups talk endlessly about discussions and lectures when they should be talking about new product lines, new formats, and different venues. The great irony of the crisis of creativity is that the solution to the crisis is neither costly nor complex. The solution is right here, right now, in this room.

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Artistically vibrant organizations have **board-approved policies for managing artistic risk, and a pool of risk capital for financing it**. There's a major national dialogue going on right now about capitalization in the arts, led by a consortium of funders. I hope you've all downloaded the new reports from Nonprofit Finance Fund. There are two you should read, one is called *The Case for Change Capital in the Arts*, and the other is called *Financial Reporting Done Right*. Both are required reading. I won't repeat the recommendations here, except to say that artistic risk is something that can, and should, be managed proactively. If you don't have a capitalization plan, get one. Teach yourself about uses of capital and the pros and cons of restricted versus unrestricted funds. Artistic reserve funds are increasingly used to allow for risk-taking without betting the farm and jeopardizing the entire institution if something goes wrong. Even if you're a small budget organization, it's never too early to start thinking about risk capital. The

good news is that an increasing number of board members know all about risk capital, especially entrepreneurs from the technology sector.

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And finally, artistic vibrancy means **committing to the development of artists of all skill levels**. Artists, especially those who live and work in the community, are linchpins in the cultural system. They need work, and beyond that, they need to be valued as key players in the creative enterprise. Employing artists is one thing, but engaging them in the artistic life of the community is another thing entirely. The job description for artists has changed. It's no longer enough to be able to make art brilliantly. To succeed now, artists must be able to communicate effectively about their art, be vulnerable to critical feedback, be willing to collaborate, and be open to exposing their creative process. Our society needs artists who can awaken the creative voice in others, and inspire them to reach higher and higher levels of creative expression. As intermediaries in the exchange between artists and the public, each of you has a role to play not just in providing performance and exhibition opportunities for artists, but also in challenging artists to operate in this new landscape.

We are witnessing now a sea change in patterns of arts participation, characterized by a surge of interest in active forms of creative expression, and a growing value attached to digital experiences. We have a new generation of Americans who express themselves creatively by organizing, arranging, editing and select art to their own satisfaction. From organizing photos in online scrapbooks to downloading music and making playlists, Americans are being given creative choice to make. Target understands this really well. Ask people how they express themselves creatively, and you'll hear about cooking, gardening, decorating oneself, designing attractive living spaces, collecting art, writing cards, diaries and journals, etc., etc. Where is the nonprofit arts sector in this landscape of creativity? There is a vast need for programs and activities that help Americans make better creative choices. Music downloading is the dominant form of music participation for young people, but I don't know a single arts group that offers a program to help people learn how to download and organize music to a higher aesthetic standard. Who is designing arts activities for parents and caregivers to do at home with their children? Whose job is it to get a framed piece of art in every household in Madison?

Given the profound demographic shifts in the American population, the democratization of culture is inevitable. Its up to you to figure out what it means. But the train has left the station, and it's a train you need to be on. In just a few weeks, a major foundation will announce a major new focus on active forms of arts participation. It's very exciting. And it's going to make a lot of arts groups really nervous, because they don't understand <u>how</u> they

relate to other parts of the ecosystem. Not every citizen is an artist, but every citizen has a creative voice of intrinsic worth, and it is every community's obligation to awaken that voice.

In closing, I urge you to start a conversation about artistic vibrancy. Those of you who are artists, this means questioning your self-conception as an artist. For those of you who are administrators, this means inviting your colleagues – board and staff and artistic leaders – into a conversation about artistic health and creativity in programming. This is not a conversation that happens once every five years when you do a strategic plan, but a living, breathing dialogue that infuses every aspect of our work. The only unacceptable outcome is refusing to talk about it.

The larger challenge for each of you is to embrace the notion of artistic vibrancy at the community level. This is your next challenge as a community. In order for Madison to achieve its next level of creative vitality and economic prosperity, each of you must take ownership of the larger landscape in which you operate. I call it "Ecological Thinking." Ecological thinking is what will take you to the next level, both individually and collectively.

Recently, Molly Smith, the phenomenally talented Artistic Director of Arena Stage in Washington, asked me to explain what I meant by "ecological thinking." I said, imagine, Molly, if you sent a weekly message to your subscribers suggesting what drama they should watch on television that week. Or that you dropped a screen in one of your venues on Monday nights and invited people to come on down and watch Mad Men. Or Homeland. Or Glee. It's drama, baby. If we don't start owning the ecology, the public will leave us behind. The same is especially true for dance, and also music and visual arts. Why should a professional dance company care about getting people dancing at home? Why should a museum care about what hanging on the walls at home? Only through ecological thinking can we achieve our full potential and make deep, lasting connections with communities and supporters.

So, what can you do?

I was asked to make some practical suggestions.

The first concrete thing you can do is sit down with a cross section of your audiences and visitors, and ask what is meaningful to them about arts, culture and creativity. Take one or two days a year and do nothing but interview people about how they experience your art form. The insight you gain will be transformative.

Second, look at the way you select programs, and think critically about your process. Who is involved? Where do new ideas come from? If you don't have

a full pipeline of creative programming ideas, think about changing your process. Ask for help if you need it.

Next, develop a diagnostic capacity. What does your community need from you? You might disagree with what you hear. But until you listen, and really, really tune in to the aspirations and tribulations of the community, you cannot reach your full potential as a curator.

There are structural supports to artistic vibrancy at the community level. For example, where, in Madison, do artists and creative leaders meet nightly for conversation and creative exchange? Creativity needs a spark, and sparks need fuel to ignite. Every community needs a space – both literally and figuratively – where creative energies flow freely and wild and unexpected programming ideas can bubble up and take flight.

Whose job is it to get thousands of Madison residents writing poetry, or dancing in the streets? Whose job is to build a website where every man, woman and child in Madison can upload examples of their creative work, and see the work of others?

To move the big needle of cultural participation, it must be someone's job to look across the system at the larger realm of creative possibilities. I ask each of you to consider what role you can play in designing the future of your community's creative life.

Culture is an ecology. A delicate, resilient, interdependent, unpredictable latticework of creative artists, creative organizations, creative funders and creative audiences. As with any ecology, there is birth, growth and competition for resources, and regular dying and regeneration. We do a great job of birth and growth, and a lousy job of dying and regeneration.

So, ultimately, what will <u>sustain</u> the cultural ecology of Madison? Better facilities and more funding? Sure, that's important. But what will sustain the ecology in the long run is a constant infusion of new ideas and a healthy process of creative regeneration.

Thank you so much for your generous time and attention.