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Culture in crisis: Deploying metaphor in defense of art

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the public discourse around cultural organizations under threat of closing. When discussing these crises, do people cling to old metaphors or find new ways to defend the arts? We compare the use of metaphor across the field of cultural organizations from high to popular culture and nonprofit to commercial. These questions are timely, with U.S. cultural policy under strain and rising rates of closure facing orchestras and theaters. Rather than forging a new path, we ultimately find that discourse around high culture nonprofits relies on old, elitist metaphors.

1. Introduction

The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Rocco Landsman, was recently asked about the health of the nonprofit arts sector in America. "Look," he explained, "You can either increase demand or decrease supply. Demand is not going to increase. So it is time to think about decreasing supply" (quoted in Marks, 2011, p. E01). This sentiment, that we have overbuilt the nonprofit art sector, has become a frequent refrain among cultural policy leaders. Bill Ivey, Landsman's predecessor at the NEA, delivered the sobering news to arts philanthropists as early as 2004, stating, "Our policy model is forty years old. Our primary partnering strategy of matching grants to nonprofits has matured, and for the past ten years, our nonprofit refined arts have presented striking indicators of an overbuilt industry—depressed wages, lack of capital, defensive, conservative business practices. To paraphrase *Oklahoma*, **'We've gone about as far as we can go'"** (Ivey, 2005, p. B6; emphasis added).

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Declarations of crisis and imminent danger are not just hype and hyperbole. High profile closings or threatened bankruptcies have increased recently—including the St. Louis Symphony, the Brandeis Rose Museum, Coconut Grove Theater, Ballet Florida, the Museum of the Southwest, the Pasadena Playhouse, and many others (see Section 4). Explanations for the crisis facing cultural nonprofits abound: competition from other forms of entertainment and media, technological change, shifting demographics, economic recession, decreased government funding, shifts in philanthropy, overbuilt facilities with high overhead costs, and the rising cost of artistic labor (see Ivey, 2005; Tepper and Ivey, 2008; Woronkowicz et al., 2012). Apart from explaining the social and economic forces bearing down upon the nonprofit arts sector, scholars need to pay greater attention to what these moments of crisis reveal about the value and relevance of certain cultural institutions in our lives and our communities.

Cultural sociologists have focused on the macro structures that influence the rise of organizational forms in the arts, how innovation and new cultural forms relate to market forces, and how organizational forms diffuse across cultural fields (see DiMaggio, 1982; Peterson and Berger, 1975; Zolberg, 1994). Far less work has examined moments of crisis or transition when organizations, or entire fields, face the threat of extinction—e.g., when organizational forms die or specific organizations falter, threaten bankruptcy or go under altogether. Until recently, closings of high culture, nonprofit organizations (HCNPs) were few and far between because the entire sector was organized to resist closure. DiMaggio notes that arts policy in the U.S. is oriented toward "institutionalization": "nurturing arts organizations, preventing existing organizations from failing, encouraging small organizations to become larger and large organization to seek immortality" (DiMaggio, 2000, p. 56).

Organizational scholars in other fields examine organizational demise, but they focus on ecological and market forces that precipitate decline (Brüderl and Schüssler, 1990; Freeman et al., 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1977). There is little scholarship, in the arts or otherwise, focusing on the cultural work that stakeholders engage in when debating organizational closings. We argue that such cultural work—the arguments, stories, value-statements, justifications, and language deployed by supporters and critics—reveals important, often hidden, assumptions about the value and relevance of art for citizens, cities and art forms. This is particularly important because HCNPs were historically characterized by dueling conceptions and competing missions. On the one hand, they have supported the elevation of fine art as sacred and distinctive and appealing to sophisticated and enlightened patrons, while on the other hand, they have promoted access to the arts, community service, and education. Cultural nonprofits have variously positioned themselves as both *of* the people and *above* the people (see Section 2).

Liz Lerman, a MacArthur fellow and renowned choreographer, articulated this tension at a recent meeting for leaders in the nonprofit arts.[1] With one hand raised in front of her face, she pinched the end of an imaginary string; with the other hand at waist level, she pinched the other end of the string. She remarked, "This is how we have organized the arts in this country—with some of us up here (pulling on the top end of the invisible string) and some of us down here (pulling on the bottom end)." Then, she drew her two hands into a horizontal plane with the imaginary string now running from left to right. "And this is how we need to organize the arts in the future." Hierarchical to egalitarian; that was her message delivered forcefully through a metaphorical image.

Lerman's statement was powerful because she deployed a metaphor that evoked a set of related images, feelings, thoughts and perceptions. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3) have written, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." The power of metaphors comes from their capacity to influence policy and politics. Scholars who study social movements have argued that the way an issue is "framed" can make all the difference in whether it gains public and political support (Jasper, 1998; Kane, 1997; Snow and Benford, 1988). Our focus on the use of metaphor by arts organizations in crisis (1) reflects and reveals how advocates understand their value and (2) sheds light on how metaphor may shape the capacity of these organizations to survive.

We find that when HCNPs face crisis, their supporters fall back upon metaphors and frames that position the fine arts as distinctive, fragile, exceptional, and deserving of high status despite decades

[1] Witnessed by Tepper at the Spring 2004 meeting at the White Oak Conference Center, "The future of cultural policy."