

# Arts Experience Initiative

Project Brief: Arts Experience Initiative



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# Arts

Project Brief: Arts Experience Initiative

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The Heinz Endowments

O

chestnut-tree,  
great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf,  
the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music,  
O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer  
from the dance?

—"Among School Children," by William Butler Yeats

W

hen William Butler Yeats created his sublime poem about the relationship between form, function and being, he articulated an ontological question that has been a part of Western civilization at least since the beginning of our cultural self-consciousness. How can we know an object from its maker?

We can't know the dancer from the dance, of course, as Yeats makes clear. But the meaning of the poem is much bigger than the problem of differentiating between art object and art maker. For standing just outside of the artist/art object binary is the critical third party: the observer. We might extend the poem by asking, how can we know the audience from the dance? Is it ever possible to understand the meaning of a work of art as separate from the way in which we receive it?

In 2004, The Heinz Endowments' Arts & Culture Program launched an innovative, grants-based laboratory designed to test new practices for enhancing an arts event through experiences that support and expand the event itself. Under the leadership of Janet Sarbaugh, the foundation's Arts & Culture senior program director, and Lynne Conner, the consulting principal investigator, the initiative argues that what contemporary arts audiences most want—and most lack—is the opportunity to formulate responsible opinions about their experiences inside theaters and concert halls.

During the first cycle of the Arts Experience Initiative, which ran from 2004 to 2006, five participating organizations—the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Carnegie Institute Museum of Art, The Andy Warhol Museum, City Theatre and the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre—engaged in a two-year effort to create and facilitate

enrichment programming designed to encourage an audience-centered exchange of ideas and emotional responses around the meaning of the arts. The second two-year cycle got underway in January 2007 and includes seven organizations: Quantum Theatre, Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society, Silver Eye Center for Photography, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh Dance Alloy and the Society for Contemporary Craft.

The goals of this project brief are to share the theory behind the Arts Experience Initiative; to describe the project's structure and methodology; to report on the preliminary findings; and to offer a sampling of audience-centered enrichment practices for arts organizations interested in building deeper, and thus more meaningful and sustainable, relationships with their current and potential adult audiences.

PART

# one

## Project Theory

In the arts industry, it has become a kind of truism to assert that sometime during the course of the 20th century, the “high” arts lost touch with the popular or mass audience. Experts ranging from economists to market researchers have documented a shift in consumer patterns as audiences in search of live entertainment moved from the concert hall and the playhouse to the arena, coffee shop and nightclub. According to industry watchers, this shift occurred because the audience is no longer interested in—or has the intellectual capacity for or the cultural connections with—the arts. In theaters and symphony halls across America, it is reported, the audience has left the building.

The Arts Experience Initiative argues just the opposite. American audiences are just as interested in the arts as they have always been. What has changed, however, is the culture surrounding arts participation, what we label the “arts experience.” In our observation, the traditional arts industry has mostly abandoned responsibility for providing—or even acknowledging—the importance of larger opportunities for engagement with arts events, particularly those that encourage an interpretive relationship. The result is an ever-widening interest gap between passive forms of high culture, such as theater, orchestral music and concert dance, and more active types of popular entertainment, such as music

concerts, spoken word and interactive theater, which are either inherently participatory or are connected to opportunities that invite participation before and after the arts event.

### Defining the Arts Experience

Most artists and arts producers acknowledge that a meaningful definition of art acknowledges the active and engaged interplay of all constituent elements of the creative act, from creation to production to reception and beyond. This changing relationship is the calculus of the arts experience. To “experience” something implies undergoing a cognitive journey from receiver to perceiver, from a passive to an active state, from a neutral condition to an opinionated stance. But to realize the full potential of experiencing an arts event, the audience member must possess two qualities: the authority to participate in the process of co-authoring meaning and the tools to do so effectively.

We assert that what today's potential arts audiences most want out of an arts event is the opportunity to co-author meaning. They want the opportunity to participate, in an intelligent and responsible way, in telling the meaning of an arts event. Like their forebears in the amphitheaters of fifth century Athens, the 18th century concert halls of Germany and France, and the vaudeville palaces of 19th century

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America, they want a real forum—or several forums—for the interplay of ideas, experience, data and feeling that makes up the arts experience. In short, they want to retrieve sovereignty over their arts going by reclaiming the cultural right to formulate and exchange opinions that are valued by the community.

### How We Lost Contact: A Brief History of Audience Behavior

In order to support this assertion, the Arts Experience Initiative looks to the history of audience behavior and cultural participation in the Western tradition. Prior to the 20th century, most arts environments were open and unrestrained because the arts event itself was a form of community property. Western audiences of all economic classes and from a wide variety of places were expected to participate actively before, during and after an arts event. Few conceived of the arts event as existing independently of its audience—not the artists or the producers or the audiences themselves.

In fact, the historical record suggests that the audience's presence was fundamental to the very definition of the arts event. People came to the arena, the playhouse, the concert hall or the gallery, and they talked to each other—before the show began, while the show was on and after the show ended. This was because the function of interpretation was understood as a cultural duty and a cultural right; the arts event's meaning could and should only be discerned through a thorough interpretive process that by definition included the audience's perspective.

This did not imply that there was regular, or even much, consensus in the process or even the protocol of interpretation; the history of arts reception is full of vivid examples of the violent ways that artists, producers and audiences disagreed. But that is just the point—“art” did not arrive with a fixed meaning. Rather, it was received by the audience as an inherently interpretable commodity that by its very definition yielded an ever-changing number of meanings. This essential reciprocity among artist, citizen, arts event and artistic meaning guided Western culture through the end of the 19th century.

So what happened to the active, participatory ethos that defined Western audiences for more than 2,000 years?

In studies of the evolution of American culture, historians locate the emergence of the passive 20th century arts audience in several cultural, economic and technological shifts that characterize the modern era, the two most notable being the arrival of the high/low cultural binary and, interestingly, the incandescent lamp. Electrification of the stage and in the auditorium began in 1881 at the Savoy Theatre in London and spread rapidly. The benefits were myriad, from focusing attention on the actors instead of the audience—thus helping to create the illusion of reality, a deep goal of the realist movement—to making the playhouse significantly safer and more comfortable, since gas lighting caused headaches. As the audience moved into the darkness and the actors—or the dancers or the symphony musicians or the opera singers—moved into the light, the playhouse or concert hall moved from a site of active assembly ripe for public discussion and collective action to a site of quiet reception.

An equally important factor in the construction of the passive arts audience is what cultural historian Lawrence Levine refers to as the “sacralization” of the arts. Toward the end of the 19th century, the gap between popular culture and aesthetic, or high, culture widened dramatically. As Levine demonstrates in “Highbrow/Lowbrow,” this shift was the result of a deliberate effort to create a cultural hierarchy in America.

Embedded in this new construction of the arts was an altered definition of the artist's function and social position; the artist was elevated to a position of authority that could and should not be questioned.

But the inevitable problem soon revealed itself—a gap between the existing audience ethos, which assumed authority over the artist's intentions and the arts event itself, and the kind of auditorium etiquette that acknowledged this new definition of high art. Part of our evolution from a populist, mass cultural practice to segregated high, middle and low cultural practices was the necessary reeducation of American audiences in how to behave while in the presence of high cultural products. Symphony orchestras, fine arts museums and opera houses led the way in instilling American audiences with the concept of high culture and the notion that great art needed to be received with awe and respect.

It is also clear that underneath this effort to raise the overall standards of American taste was the desire among the economic elite to segregate themselves from the mass audience using the “cloak of culture.” But even if the reasons for this sacralization process were culturally complex, the public message was relatively concise: Sophisticated audiences do not interfere with great art, and unsophisticated people should confine themselves to other spaces.

By the end of the 19th century, a “well-behaved” audience was associated with the middle and upper classes attending “elite” forms of performance, like the symphony or the opera. Populist forms of performance, like vaudeville and melodrama, still allowed some audience sovereignty, such as shouts of approval, catcalls and hissing, though in time that too disappeared. The result was the eventual “quieting” of all performing arts audiences, a process that was essentially complete by the first two decades of the 20th century.

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The sacralization of the arts in America did not end with the Gilded Age, however. By the 1960s, legitimate theater, concert dance, orchestral music, art and history museums—now relabeled the “serious arts”—had become the property of the nonprofit arts industry. This significant cultural shift could have had a leveling effect on the power dynamic between arts makers and audiences. But despite the rhetoric of democracy implied by terms like “public theater” and “civic orchestra,” the high–low binary that emerged in the late 19th century was not erased, just reassigned.

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From the perspective of audience sovereignty, public funding did not desacralize the arts. Instead, the cloak of culture once worn by wealthy audience patrons was draped over the shoulders of the professionals at the helm of publicly funded institutions: the artists, arts administrators and board members. The idea of taking into account the audience’s opinions on arts events, so formative to the shaping of the Western arts tradition, morphed into a distasteful compromise of artistic integrity—“pandering” to public tastes. Curiously, although the advent of multi-culturalism and postmodernism has encouraged the arts industry to dismantle the distinctions between high, middle and low when it comes to defining appropriate content or structure for making art, there has been little correlative effort to redefine what constitutes appropriate audience behavior in the 21st century. One way or another, we are still in the business of quieting our audiences.



*Portions of the material in this section were adapted from “In and Out of the Dark: A Theory of Audience Behavior from Sophocles to Spoken Word,” by Lynne Conner in “Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life,” co-edited by Steven Tepper and William Ivey. Routledge Press, 2008.*

PART

# two

## Project Description

To date, the Arts Experience Initiative has funded projects with 12 Pittsburgh-area arts organizations representing music, dance, theater and the visual arts for two years, during which time they have been encouraged to experiment with a range of audience-centered programming that re-frames the one-way delivery model favored by traditional arts education.

*The audience appears to like changes to the concert format that stretch both the orchestra and the audience. Most of all, they appear to be pleased to have more “tools” to bring to their concert experience, as well as for the opportunity to provide input to the arts. The single biggest remark from the experience: “I love that you cared what I thought and that what I thought affected an outcome.”*

*Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Arts Experience Initiative project team\**

*People really like to be included in events that show how the craft is done. They like to be insiders. One of the barriers to art appreciation is that you worry that you won't know something. They want to be able to engage in a conversation to make sure they are getting it and to get a full understanding and to not be left out.*

*City Theatre Arts Experience Initiative project team\**

## Structure

The theory behind the Arts Experience Initiative is based on a seminar and publications by Lynne Conner, the initiative's principal investigator. Conner's work combines research into the history of audience behavior and psychology cited earlier, an analysis of current trends in the literature and practice surrounding cultural participation, and a theory about building and enhancing engagement of arts audiences through a better understanding of learning principles and strategies. All participating initiative organizations take Conner's seminar as part of the request-for-proposal process.

The Arts Experience Initiative is a laboratory, which means that grantees are encouraged to rigorously evaluate their projects on a regular basis and, if warranted, to change their program design at any point in the two-year cycle. As part of the laboratory structure, each initiative organization is required to assemble a project team made up of executive and program-level staff and at least one board member. Team members design and implement the project together. In addition, team members are required to attend periodic initiative peer convenings, hosted by the Endowments, in which they share findings with their cohort and seek or offer advice.

## Creating Meaningful Arts Experiences: Values and Characteristics

*We want to crystallize the arts experience here by allowing people to frame their own opinions. People who didn't do the interactive art project commented on how great it was that other people did do it—proof that when the museum becomes a place where commentary is valued, it becomes a place of interest to many different types of people.*

*The Andy Warhol Museum Arts Experience Initiative project team\**

## Enrichment Is Not Development

One of the guiding precepts of the Arts Experience Initiative is the declaration that audience enrichment is not to be conflated with audience development as it has been defined

Organizations committed to effective enrichment programming begin by thinking of their audiences as a collection of individual subjects who think and feel—as opposed to groupings of “demographics” who consume.

by marketing science in the not-for-profit arts industry. Many recently published quantitative studies on cultural participation rely on an assumption that the collection of good marketing information about what audiences want out of their arts experience equals the ability to create meaningful enrichment activities. But knowing who your target audience is and what kinds of engagement strategies they want does not translate into being able to build and facilitate those strategies. The goal of the Arts Experience Initiative is to provide the funding for organizations to design and implement audience-centered programming capable of actually responding to the stated needs of their audiences.

### Audiences Are Made Up of Individuals

Organizations committed to effective enrichment programming begin by thinking of their audiences as a collection of individual subjects who think and feel—as opposed to groupings of “demographics” who consume. If we start to think about adult audiences as individuals who crave an arts experience and not just an arts event, we are led directly to methodologies for creating effective enrichment activities that invite physical and/or intellectual freedom. These approaches also should provide, in tangible and socially relevant ways, opportunities for co-authoring meaning.

### Enrichment Does Not (Necessarily) Interfere With the Arts Event Itself

The Arts Experience Initiative asserts that the most significant opportunities for engagement come before and after the arts event, when audiences are invited to formulate and express an opinion in a public context. For most live arts organizations, it would not be possible or desirable to seek “engagement” in the disruptive audience behavior of the past. It is reasonable to expect a quiet auditorium during an arts event, if only because we are accustomed to this reception environment and have learned, through experience, to need silence to concentrate. Nor should building opportunities for the audience to participate in the arts event be confused with dumbing down the repertoire. Truly effective arts experiences are more likely to lead to progressive, adventurous programming because they provide audiences with the tools for looking and listening to unfamiliar art with confidence and with useful forums for co-authoring meaning.



*Portions of the material in this section were adapted from “Who Gets to Tell the Meaning?: Building Audience Enrichment,” by Lynne Conner in “Grantmakers in the Arts Reader,” Vol. 15, No. 1, Winter 2004: 11.*

PART

# Three

## Project Findings

The first cycle of the Arts Experience Initiative ran from 2004 to 2006 and yielded key findings that suggested certain practices could be particularly effective in stimulating audience participation in the arts.

### The Value of the Shared Experience

*People like it when we repurpose the space— they like seeing the “church of Carnegie” animated with activity and conversation. Creating a public space for dialogue works. We learned that participatory formats do create memorable experiences and do deepen learning and enjoyment.*

*Carnegie Institute Museum of Art Arts Experience Initiative project team\**

Audience-centered programming that is committed to the notion of co-authorship redefines the ideal of a “shared experience” in the arts. A high level of commitment to discovering how audiences learn and what kinds of tools they need in order to enhance their experience of the arts event or object is critical in moving arts organizations toward a new understanding of the artist-audience relationship. A great deal of attention, money and human resources have been poured into arts education programming for children. But it’s important to acknowledge that adult audiences also seek to learn through the arts.

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### The Importance of “Talking”

*This year, we heard a lot about enjoying the events and how much people appreciated that there was a prominent, knowledgeable person to lead the discussion. They liked that they were able to participate and that it wasn't a lecture, though. They made it clear that they want to talk.*

City Theatre Arts Experience Initiative project team\*

All the groups' projects demonstrate the Arts Experience Initiative's hypothesis that people need to talk in order to process their opinions and that, given the right environment, most audience members are willing to share their opinions in a public setting and to openly engage in the co-authoring process. Some of the organizations investigated other ways in which effective co-authoring can occur and have demonstrated through their innovative projects how fluid the context, style and point of departure for talking can be—

from creative activity in the gallery to hands-on technique workshops at the ballet to social gatherings after the play to digital conversation on the organization's Web site.

### The Necessity of Effective Mediation / Facilitation

*Our Curators' Point/Counterpoint Lecture deconstructed the traditional curator lecture format and thus allowed the participants to see themselves in the dialogue. [The curator] let the audience see her thinking through the issues and themes in real time, and that clearly had a good effect on the audience's sense that they too could think through these ideas. From looking at the survey, we could see how people were able to match lecture content to their experiences in the gallery in satisfying and immediate ways.*

Carnegie Institute Museum of Art Arts Experience Initiative project team\*

If we look closely, we see that most of our cultural functions rely heavily on the work of professional mediators to provide opportunities for enriching an experience.

To mediate—meaning literally to be in the middle—implies the process of a middle agent affecting communication. Most aspects of our society require some kind of mediation, especially those based on metaphor. What is a priest, if not the mediator of a certain system of metaphor? If we look closely, we see that most of our cultural functions rely heavily on the work of professional mediators to provide opportunities for enriching an experience. But there is an important distinction between a mediator and an expert. An effective mediator does not make the meaning and give it to an audience. An effective mediator creates the environment and the tools for artists and the audience to make the meaning together. Organizations truly committed to creating an audience-centered culture will invest in training effective mediators as part of their enrichment staff.

The environment is critical to the quality of participation, and the environment must change to suit the needs of specific programming.

### The Impact of the Programming Environment

*Special event programs that took place in the shops and the studio did not have an issue with [lack of] interaction. The environment is very important—the chance to be “backstage” and to understand and be invited into the process. During the Stage Struck program, for example, the technical director barely opened her mouth, and the questions kept on coming. Being in the middle of the creative process seemed to relax the audience.*

*Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre Arts Experience Initiative project team\**

The environment is critical to the quality of participation, and the environment must change to suit the needs of specific programming. When Pittsburgh Ballet staff brought audiences backstage or in the studio as opposed to the large auditorium, for example, people talked freely and asked many more questions of the facilitators. When City Theatre conducted a directing workshop and invited the audience to join in the process, the level of interaction and audience authority rose considerably. And when symphony staff broke the large Talkback audience into small groups and invited them to lead their own discussions, the nature of the talk changed from vague questioning to lively opinion exchange.

The organizations that rigorously invited audiences to “leave”—whether literally or figuratively—their quiet, passive seats were successful in creating an effective co-authoring environment.

### The Importance of Layered Enrichment

*One of the things we've learned or has been reinforced over the last two years is that there is no one audience— to assume that there is is a terrible mistake. The diversity of our audience in terms of levels of experience is beyond what we had imagined, and this very much affects the impact of the AEI programs.*

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Arts Experience Initiative project team\*

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Effective enrichment programming is made up of a series of small, interwoven, multi-layered experiences serving a variety of learning styles. Adults, like children, learn differently from one and another. And they process feelings and opinions in a wide variety of ways. For most, talking is crucial. But for some, the chance to slowly absorb new information helps them to experience an arts event or object more effectively. For others, creative interaction leads more directly to co-authorship than talking does. For still others, socialization combined with discussion and/or information is the best way to prepare and to enjoy an arts event. Organizations truly committed to creating an audience-centered culture will invest in a variety of enrichment styles and structures.





PART  
four  
Project Sampler

Each participating Arts Experience Initiative organization was asked to create and test a variety of enrichment programs that serve the different tastes and learning styles of its audience. The examples in this sampler, which includes at least one description from each participating organization, were selected from the more than 30 enrichment programs developed to date in order to illustrate the diversity of programming encouraged and supported by the project.

#### Brillo Boxes Interpretive Experiment

##### The Andy Warhol Museum

Over the course of eight weeks, Warhol Museum staff and an investigator from UPCLOSE — University of Pittsburgh's Center for Learning in Out-of-School Environments — conducted an experiment on the impact of interpretive signage in the Brillo Boxes exhibition space on the museum's fifth floor. When the experiment began, the exhibit had no interpretive signage. In week two, Warhol staff placed on the wall comment webs that contained five quotes by artists and art critics and wherein visitors were invited to write their responses. Between weeks three and five, slight changes were made, such as adding stools to the space one week.

During week six, Warhol staff projected a PowerPoint slideshow onto the wall that consisted of images of squared objects such as square watermelons and square hedges. In week seven, the slide show was enhanced with provocative questions and statements on the “What is art?” theme. During week eight, new PowerPoint slideshows were added, one on the historical/cultural context and the other on issues of aesthetics. Throughout the eight-week period, UPCLOSE staff conducted observations of people while in the room and interviewed others after they exited the room. This Arts Experience Initiative project experimented with the issue of interpretation by using state-of-the-art evaluative techniques for assessing and acknowledging visitor experience. The experiment tested and tracked the interpretation process and provided the Warhol staff with valuable data about how to design and display future interpretive material.

#### Point-of-View Writing Workshops

##### Silver Eye Center for Photography

Through a series of generative writing exercises, participants construct short stories related to the gallery’s current photography exhibition. Participants are lay writers— past sessions have included a nurse, a retired teacher, a marketing rep and an anthropologist—who are encouraged to experience

the photography through imaginative language. The workshops are conducted in the main public room of the gallery during public hours. Casual visitors report that they enjoy looking at the photographs and overhearing snippets of the creative writing at the same time. At the end of each three-session workshop, samples of the writing are posted on the Silver Eye Web site. This Arts Experience Initiative project experiments with the notion of artistic practice by visitors as a useful framework for learning and fostering opinion sharing. The project also demonstrates that an animated gallery space is welcoming and stimulating to casual visitors.

#### “Guide-by-cell” Technology

##### Society for Contemporary Craft

Using their cell phones, visitors are able to call a number and access a series of recorded messages relating to the exhibit, from a traditional audio guide of the show to messages from the artists. Visitors also can share their reactions by recording messages to curators and artists. This Arts Experience Initiative project invites contemporary communication technology into the museum space, thus opening up new possibilities for a style of co-authoring that is more comfortable and accessible to younger audiences.

## The Malzan Charrette and the UPCLOSE In-Museum Interview Projects

### Carnegie Museum of Art

The Malzan charrette was designed to engage participants in the processes and ideas embodied in “Michael Maltzan: Alternate Ground,” a 2005 exhibition at the Heinz Architectural Center. Charrette participants were assembled in five intergenerational teams—three high school students, two college architecture students and one professional architect from the area—and given the task of designing a building that could support two distinctly different operations: for example, a combined Laundromat and greenhouse, a combined movie theater and auto body shop, or a combined kindergarten and amphitheater. The teams worked together for six consecutive days to choose a site, discuss its problems and potential, and design a program/building to be built on that site. The whole project took place before the public inside the Carnegie Museum’s Hall of Architecture, where casual visitors to the museum were invited to observe the teams at work and to talk with them informally about their ideas.

In a complementary project, museum and UPCLOSE staffs evaluated the effect enrichment experiences had on the museum visitor’s actual experience once inside the exhibit.

Using an interview technique that followed visitors in real time as they experienced the enrichment programs and the exhibits, UPCLOSE staff members were able to track the relationship between the enrichment process and the quality of the visitors’ total arts experience. These complementary Arts Experience Initiative projects engaged different sets of audience members by using varying structures to build engagement. The charrette enabled participants to actively shape the experience and the learning they derived from it while also offering two levels of engagement to two discrete audiences: the charrette participants and the museum visitors who interacted with them in the Hall of Architecture. The in-museum interview project acknowledged the value of understanding visitors’ experience and used it to develop a qualitative evaluative technique that has the potential to yield significant information about adult learning and to influence the design of future exhibits and enrichment offerings.

### Concert Messaging

#### Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

A screen mounted on the side of the proscenium displays “factoids” of information about the music, the conductor, the composer, the hall and upcoming events. Text messages are displayed between pieces, during intermissions and before

the concert, but not while the music is playing. The orchestra staff sought audience feedback consistently during the two-year experiment, and the surprising result was that it was most appreciated by older, more established symphony patrons. This Arts Experience Initiative project intentionally disrupted the traditional concert format in order to reach out to audience members seeking more information. By sticking with the project for two years, the orchestra staff discovered that the majority of their audience appreciated the information and enjoyed the alteration of the traditional concert environment—a finding in direct opposition to the initial negative reaction reported by a few very vocal long-time subscribers.

#### Five Steps to a Healthy Dance Addiction

##### Dance Alloy Theater

This contemporary dance company is experimenting with interpretation by engaging aficionados and novices in a variety of “levels of entry” into the world of contemporary dance. The five steps include “Behind the Curtain,” a series of informal wine and cheese discussions with guest artists; “Everyone’s a Critic,” a chance for audience members to weigh in on the performance through post-show interviews; “Dance Club,” a series of discussion-provoking questions included in the program; “Dance Review Blog,” a company Web site space

dedicated to audience-centered discussion; and, finally, an expanded half-hour “European Intermission,” which offers audiences free cupcakes with a question slipped into the frosting. These “cupcake questions,” as the audience has come to refer to them, are deliberately both provocative and accessible and are designed to set audience members to thinking about what they just saw as they prepare to see more. Questions have ranged from the kinaesthetic—“What happens to the position of your body when you watch dance?”—to the aesthetic—“What do you think the clapping sequence meant to the dance?”—and well beyond. This multi-layered Arts Experience Initiative project invites audience members to engage, alone or with others, in a real-time, in-theater interpretive experience that is simultaneously light-hearted and serious-minded while also offering opportunities to comment on the concert after a period of reflection.

#### The Arts Experience Meeting Group

##### Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble

A group made up of ensemble subscribers meet during the season on non-performance nights for presentations, often by the composers, and group-led discussions in a local restaurant. The group also “meets” digitally during the off-season to engage in online conversations with New Music

Ensemble staff about artistic decision making and to share audio and video files. This Arts Experience Initiative project offers subscribers who self-identify as members of the core audience the opportunity to participate in the artistic and educational mission of the ensemble; this progressive relationship builds trust between the arts producers and the audience, and encourages a sense of shared purpose and community.

#### **“Playmate” and Girl’s Night Out**

##### **City Theatre**

“Playmate” is an expanded brochure mailed before each production to subscribers and potential ticket buyers. Because City Theatre produces new and mostly unknown products—plays that are no older than five years—the brochure is designed to provide patrons with a comfortable entryway into unknown artistic territory. “Playmate” features a brief description of the play and playwright and a short essay titled “Why City Theatre Selected This Play.”

Girl’s Night Out began as a Friday night get-together in the theater lounge during the run of the play “Bad Dates,” and featured a Tarot card reader, a seated chair masseuse, a cash bar and a sushi station. These complementary Arts

Experience Initiative projects offered the audience two ways to access a new play at City Theatre: a private, before-the-play introduction that is easy to read, informative and friendly in tone; and a public, after-the-play experience acknowledging that processing a work of art can happen in a casual, party atmosphere among friends and family.

#### **Bridges Festival Dinner Conversations and Facilitation Training**

##### **Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society**

Greg Sandow, ArtsJournal.com blogger and nationally regarded audience discussion leader for symphony orchestras, including the Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Cleveland symphonies, is leading over-dinner conversations with audience members attending the Chamber Music Society’s Bridges Festival concerts. In addition, Sandow is training members of the Chamber Music Society community—staff, board members and long-time subscribers—in effective pre- and post-show discussion facilitation techniques, so that the organization can continue to host productive, audience-centered conversations once the pilot project is completed. This Arts Experience Initiative project acknowledges the value of professional facilitation of audience-centered discussions and the importance of developing effective facilitation procedures within an arts organization.

### In the Dancers' Studio, Stagestruck and Beginning Ballet with Bob

#### Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre

These workshops and tours offered audience members an inside look at the process of creating and staging a ballet. In the Dancers' Studio, Ballet Theatre staff invited audiences to watch the company rehearse a new ballet; Stagestruck was a backstage tour and discussion with the ballet's production manager; and Beginning Ballet with Bob was a no-pressure ballet class with ballet master Robert Vickrey. This Arts Experience Initiative project acknowledged and facilitated the audience's desire to be invited inside the creative and production process.

### Board-led Circle Discussions

#### Quantum Theatre

Board members invite subscribers and single-ticket buyers to their homes for a circle discussion about the company's work. A surprising finding of this experiment has been that board members appreciate these opportunities to share their own impressions, including both pleasure and confusion, just as much as the guests do. This Arts Experience Initiative project puts board members in a position of responsibility in terms of facilitating meaningful conversation, which in turn empowers them as audience members and organizational leaders.

### Rethinking and Reframing Interpretative Materials

#### Mattress Factory

After receiving surprising feedback from a visitors' experience survey conducted by outside professionals, staff at this contemporary installation-oriented art museum recognized that simple changes to long-held practices could improve the audience's experience of the art work and the museum itself. As a result, a process of redesigning signage and interpretive materials that responds to audience-centered needs is underway. An example of a simple yet significant change involved moving the art books out of the fourth-floor resource room, where few visitors ever stopped, and putting them in the café, where many visitors enjoy looking at them while they eat and talk. This Arts Experience Initiative project recognizes that active listening to visitor feedback can provide unexpected information that requires staff and other stakeholders to rethink long-established processes.



# conclusion

Throughout the history of Western civilization many modalities of audience behavior and activity have surfaced, seen their day and disappeared, only to surface again. In the early 21st century, there is plenty of evidence that we have entered an era of arts consumption defined by audiences who are not content with sitting quietly in the dark or allowing experts to be in charge of interpreting and delivering aesthetic meaning. This new generation of “arts omnivores” is busy taking back the right to interpret the meaning and value of its cultural experiences.

In response to this changing arts ecology, since 2004 the 12 participating organizations in the Arts Experience Initiative laboratory have tested or are currently testing more than 30 different enrichment programs and strategies serving thousands of arts patrons in western Pennsylvania. These programs range dramatically in terms of scope, style and intent. Some have been quite successful, some have yielded unexpected results, some have been abandoned, some are too new to tell. Whatever the results thus far, however, it is evident that four years of experimentation and conversation have changed the way in which these organizations view their responsibility toward their audiences. Planning and implementing audience-centered programming opens channels for

real dialogue; real dialogue in turn brings new ideas and new perspectives into the organization-audience dynamic.

The Arts Experience Initiative was undertaken in the belief that cultural organizations need to re-examine their relationship with audiences in order to play a vital role in community life and in the lives of 21st century arts consumers. We hope that some of the philosophy and practice of the initiative will be useful to the broader field as we all search for ways to make the arts a relevant and powerful force in contemporary life.



*\*Comments from the various Arts Experience Initiative project teams were obtained during group interviews in 2006 on the condition of anonymity for the speakers.*

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