

## Where are the Guard Rails as you Make Decisions in the Long Now?

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Presented May 6, 2021 for the Museum Trustee Association Spring 2021 Virtual Forum. An earlier version of this talk was first presented at the League of American Orchestras Midwinter Managers Meeting on 21 January 2021.

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Good afternoon!

It is a pleasure and privilege to be here with Anne, Sanjit Sethi, and all of you. I am joining you from the Netherlands and want to acknowledge that we are using the technology of Zoom to have this conversation. Zoom is headquartered in what is now called San Jose, California – which are the traditional lands of the Ohlone and the Tamyen peoples.

As this session is addressing the topic of *resilience*, I thought that I might start with my favorite poem on the topic—although I might just as easily have quoted from the Harvard Business Review, the Stanford Social Innovation Review, or the Wall Street Journal – all of which have had articles on Resilience during the time of Covid.

The poem is called **OPTIMISM** and is by Jane Hirshfield.

*More and more I have come to admire resilience.  
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam  
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous  
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,  
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.  
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,  
mitochondria, figs — all this resinous, unretractable earth.*

The tendency for plants to grow in the direction of light, which Hirshfield references in her poem, is one of many tropisms called phototropism. An interesting question if we adopt this metaphor in our lives or organizations might be:



What is the light?

What's the substance animating us, pulling us forward—out of Covid, the climate crisis, social conflict, or whatever seems to be blocking us these days? Put another way: what's the life source that we are pursuing?

And is it OK if we end up like these plants? Alive but upside down? Or sideways of our mission?

This talk is about emerging from the current challenges facing your organization without losing your way ... your *structural integrity*.

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To delve into this topic I'd like to escape this Covid moment and transport us back to late 2017 at the launch of the #MeToo movement.

This is a photo of the comedian Louis CK, one of several individuals to be accused of sexual misconduct at the height of the #MeToo movement -- accusations the comedian later admitted were true.

In the fall 2018 I gave a talk in Pittsburgh for a gathering of the leaders of the largest performing arts centers in North America.

During the discussion after the talk, one of the participants raised a hand and addressed the room. He said:



*Louis CK's agent called me the other day and evidently he has been doing sets in small comedy clubs in NYC and he is ready to get back out on the road. So my question for this room is: When is it OK to present Louis CK again? What do we think? Because I think his audiences may be ready to see him again.*

What did others think?

A few participants weighed in with their personal opinions and then one spoke up and asked, "Doesn't the answer depend on the values of *your* institution?"

Indeed. And I would put it this way: Your answer to that question depends on the goals and limits your organization has set on three forms of value and valuation at play in all institutions:

1. **Economics:** Is there an audience ready to see him? Can we afford to present him if, for instance, audiences are weak and there are no sponsors?
2. **Aesthetics:** Can he still deliver an excellent show? Will it increase our artistic reputation to present him (or at least not harm it)?
3. **Ethics:** Given his admission of sexual misconduct, is presenting him the right thing to do? Could it harm some members of our community if we get behind him in this moment? Could it signal that we condone his behavior? Does this matter to us?

You might ask yourself: In your institution, how often does the first of these, economics, drive institutional decisions?

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In his book [Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations](#) Management Scholar Jim Phills conceptualizes the relationship between economic strategy and mission as a "funnel."

← Here's a graphic.

Phills characterizes mission as the psychological and emotional logic of the institution. It answers the question: *Why does the work we do matter?*

I tend to think of mission as also carrying the aesthetic, ethical and economic values of nonprofit arts organizations.

Ideally, mission should answer such questions as: *Why* contemporary art from Asia, Africa, Australia, South America, and the Middle East? *Why* free admission? *Why* sustained by memberships and individual contributions but not corporate sponsorship?

Phills' funnel is meant to convey that mission is established first and then sets the limits on economic strategy. When I encountered this model my first thought was – *Yeah, this is one of those places where the model is out of sync with reality.*

Like a plant bending towards a window in search of light, cultural institutions experience the bending of mission over the long arc of time in response to money with strings attached or market behavior. Institutions bend to ensure that they can survive economically.

We have a word for this particular form of resilience – *mission creep.*

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A couple years ago now I was a guest on a podcast and at the end the host asked me what question I wanted to leave with listeners—those in the arts and culture sector—and my question was:

*What's holding your feet to the fire?*

I elaborated saying: *Missions are squishy; and buildings and bottom lines are not. And judgments about art are subjective. And human beings are often self-interested. And the nonprofit form lends itself to manipulation and to serving the interests of a few rather than of the general public.*

I am essentially asserting in this brief talk that cultural institutions need aesthetic and ethical guardrails, as strong as the bottom line, in part because of these dynamics.

What do I mean by aesthetic and ethical guardrails?

Trustworthiness, fairness, respect, caring, and responsibility are some examples of ethical values.

Arguably, such behaviors could (or should) distinguish cultural nonprofits from commercial entertainment industries. Going back to the Louis CK example, nonprofits might be expected to care about harms against people more than those in the corporate sector do, for instance, and to set policies to ensure a non-hostile working environment.

Or to prioritize the safety and mental health and wellbeing of their employees and artists throughout the pandemic and as organizations re-open.

Nonprofits might also be expected to exercise moral imagination: to take the time to listen to internal and external stakeholders – to consider the impacts of their decisions on staff, artists, and the communities their institutions exist to serve.

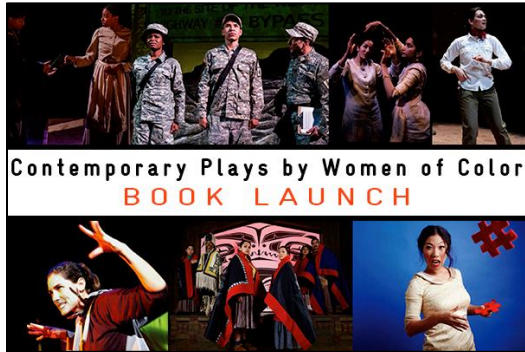
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By aesthetic values I mean what your organization deems to be beautiful, or interesting, or *excellent*. Here is a list of some aesthetic values but we could list hundreds more:

- Simplicity / complexity
- Dark / light
- Local / global
- Coherent / chaotic
- Conventional / disruptive
- Scripted / devised / improvised
- Formal / informal
- Passive / participatory
- Intimate / distant
- Resourcefulness / extravagance

One of the big shifts of the past ten years has been away from passive engagement towards participatory engagement in arts experiences. This is an example of a shift in aesthetic values.

Aesthetic values, among others, shape and are shaped by decisions about what to preserve, protect, produce, curate, and present – and what *not*.



A few years back I attended a book launch for the third edition of an anthology called *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*. One of the editors, Roberta Uno, described the efforts to compile the first edition 22 years earlier – in 1995.

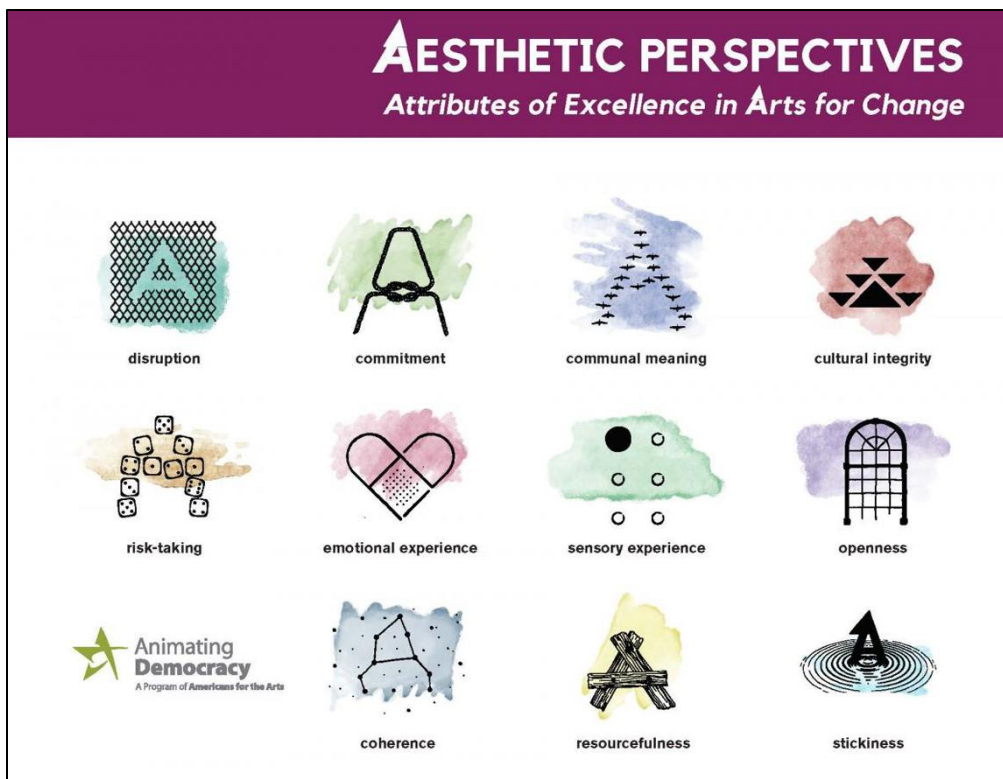
She said that when she and her collaborator first started “looking for plays it was a very difficult process.” But that they made a breakthrough as a result of a “revelation” by a colleague at the time who said, “You know there is an archive of women of color plays. Go to any theater and ask for the reject file.”

They did this. Sure enough, they began to find worthy and important plays by women of color going back decades. Rejected.

Leaving those plays in the reject file had the longer term consequence of diminishing the awareness, understanding, and value of contemporary plays by women of color over time. We look to the walls of major museums and the stages of major theaters and the recordings of symphony orchestras to tell us which works and artists matter, and which do not.

We are in a moment when predominantly or historically white cultural institutions are being challenged to acknowledge past errors in judgment and embrace an expanded set of aesthetic values and to look carefully at past works in light of present social conditions.

And clearly this work is being done, including by museums.



If you are seeking to have a conversation about aesthetic values in your institution, or how you define artistic excellence, I highly recommend this framework and toolkit by Animating Democracy. It is called [Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change](#).

Change, like resilience, is another word that one cannot escape these days. Many arts service organizations, institutions, and leaders have stated publicly that the arts cannot go back to business as usual when they re-open.

Change in the arts and culture sector is increasingly being incited by public agencies and institutional funders. My former employer, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation – the largest private funder of the arts and humanities year upon year – has announced that henceforth its resources in these areas will be directed towards social justice initiatives and goals. Others are doing the same.

There is also increasing pressure from peer organizations and workers. A massive movement called [We See You White American Theater](#) is demanding comprehensive change in the theater industry, including in the programming of theaters, to address systemic racism.

Such incentives and demands for change are happening across the arts and culture sector; and show no sign of abating.

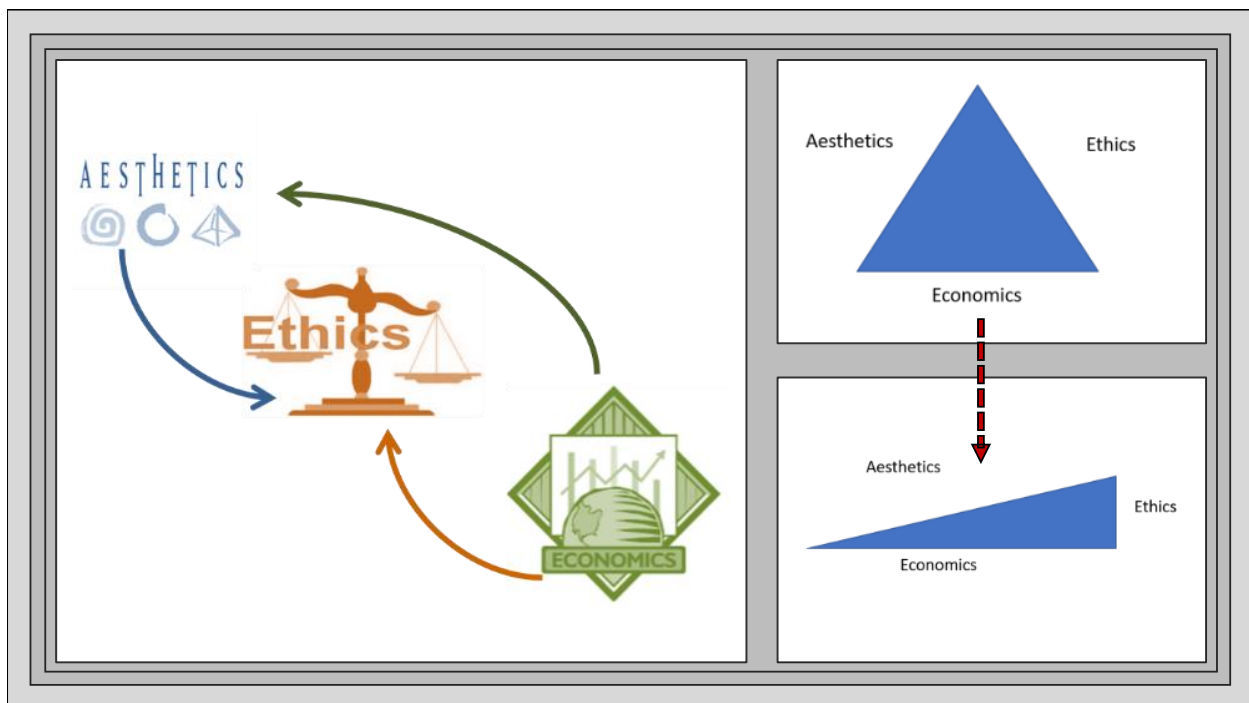
Being able to talk transparently and intelligently about the aesthetic values of your cultural institution and why changes are—or are not—being implemented is becoming a core competence all leaders must have.

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So, back to the birds-eye view.

Different from Jim Phillips, within the context of an organization’s business model I conceptualize these three forms of value and valuation -- economics, aesthetics & ethics -- as mutually interdependent.

Meaning a shift in one will necessitate a shift in the other two.



The 2020 pandemic is an interesting case in this.

The prohibitions on gathering (and therefore live attendance at cultural institutions) forced many organizations to change their conventional practice of producing live performances or exhibitions.



This screen grab shows the image and headline from a *Guardian* article that ran less than one month from when NYC shut down.

In no time at all, in place of live performances, many cultural institutions began to produce or distribute digital experiences—even if they had historically upheld “liveness” as an aesthetic value and had long eschewed such practices.

A Canadian Cultural Leader and field colleague has coined this “*panic content*.”

Many seemed to believe that if they could ensure a steady stream of content then they could continue to matter, to have purpose, to maintain the institution’s structural integrity. Regardless of the motivations for the shift, this is a decision that shifted the *aesthetic values* of cultural institutions. And with that shift, we see the other two areas are now affected.

For example, *economically*, this shift has altered such things as:

- the complexity, scale, and costs of production and distribution;
- the types of skills and knowledge needed to bring a production to the market;
- the number of people and geographic locations that can be reached by a work;
- the prices that can be charged;
- the shelf life of content; and
- the nature and number of competitors or substitutes.

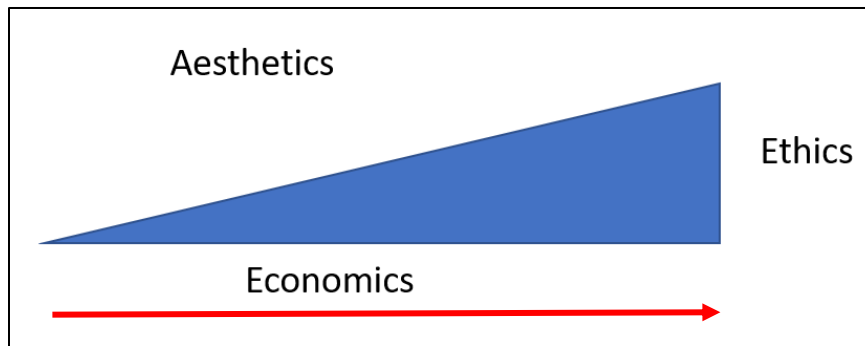
Likewise, *ethically*, this shift has raised such questions as:

- Do existing artist contracts (including rights & royalties) fairly deal with the shift from live to digital?
- When the pandemic is over should we return to practices that consumed scads of jet fuel, or are we beholden to find more climate conscious ways of engaging in cultural exchange?
- Are digital forms crowding out something vital that can only be achieved with human bodies gathered in person?
- Do nonprofit cultural institutions now have an ongoing obligation to try to provide free or low-cost digital access to experiences that are otherwise inaccessible to those without the means or physical ability to access them in person?

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I would assert that, for most cultural nonprofits in the US, economic values have long been stretching or crowding out ethical and aesthetic ones—and not only because buildings and bottom lines are firm and many missions are squishy.

Economics has been skewing the triangle, so to speak, because success by funders and others has tended to be equated with economic growth and because economics tends to get a great deal more attention from institutional leaders.



Most boards have finance and audit committees who debate and discuss the budget, establish targets, and implement policies to ensure the organization is sound financially both in the present and in the future.

On the other hand:

- How many cultural nonprofits have depth conversations at the board level to come to agreement on what is meant by artistic excellence (past, present, or future)?
- Or what it means to make the statement “we support #BlackLivesMatter” both in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and the rest of the year, as well?
- Or whether or not to embrace digital access and, if so, defining what that means and establishing some policies to guide practices over time?

Many establish core values like artistic excellence, equity, and economic sustainability but give inadequate time for deliberation, debate, and policy setting aimed at interpreting, prioritizing, and figuring out what it is going to take to fully realize such values in practice.

And let’s face it, many board members may feel more qualified and comfortable taking decisions and talking about the numbers than these other areas.

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Ideally, staffers and board members alike would have clear definitions and policies that might enable and even compel them to ask awkward questions when, for example, the season is announced at a theater whose mission is to “produce work as broad and diverse as NYC itself.” and all the writers and directors are white and all, save one, are male. Or when a pandemic hits and the decision is made within days to dismiss all freelance educators or trigger the force majeure clause in contracts with artists, rather than paying them some portion of their fees.

Getting economics out of the driver’s seat is not comfortable or easy work. This work is also not fast.

When artistic director Irene Lewis joined Baltimore Center Stage in the 1990s the theater was producing plays largely by white playwrights performed by white actors for white audiences. The city of Baltimore, however, was 67% African American.

Lewis felt that the theater was basically ignoring two-thirds of her community so she proposed a new artistic policy: each year Center Stage would commit one-third to one-half of its season to plays by black writers or featuring black characters.

When the change was made the theater lost many longtime subscribers. The organization debated and deliberated, but ultimately it persevered.

It took ten years for Center Stage to replace its lost patrons with those who shared its new values and vision, and for the new programming strategy to succeed.

And it has succeeded.

One of the lessons from Center Stage’s successful transformation is that they take *a long time*.

It took ten years for Center Stage to replace its lost subscribers with those who shared its new values and vision.

Kwame Kwei-Armah



Stephanie Ybarra



Irene Lewis



When Irene Lewis left Center Stage she was replaced by Kwame Kwei-Armah, who was eventually succeeded by Stephanie Ybarra—both leaders of color.

Today, the theater is well ahead of others in the sector in advancing cultural equity.

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Whether it is #metoo and the question of when it is OK again to present Chuck Close;  
or #blacklivesmatter and the question of whether to go forward with a Philip Guston exhibition;  
or the context of Truth and Reconciliation and concerns about white people representing Indigenous people’s stories;  
or the Climate Crisis and concerns about taking money from big oil;  
or Covid-19 and a bunch of questions:

—whether or not to deaccession works, or trigger force majeure clauses on commissions and contracts to artists, whether to hibernate and preserve cash, or continue to pay people, which people to pay and which not to pay, which policies to uphold at all costs and which policies to adapt for the moment—

I don’t need to tell you that decisions that must be made by cultural institutions in this time of extreme cultural change are incredibly complex.

Professor of Finance at CalPoly Tech, John Dobson, has argued that we are in an era that requires leaders and managers to “dwell poetically”—borrowing a phrase from Heidegger. That is, to balance between and draw upon three distinct rationalities: that of the technical universe (the financial bottom line), that of the *moral* universe, and that of the *aesthetic* universe.

I embrace the philosophy that cultural leadership is a *collective* capacity. So, building on Dobson, with whom I’ve co-presented and whose work I have admired for years, I would argue that beyond the capacity of *individual* leaders to dwell poetically, organizations need to engage in necessary debate and deliberation (with board members, staff, and community members) about these three areas.

That’s the first step. With the goal of eventually establishing some ethical and aesthetic guardrails in their business models that are as strong as their economic guardrails.

I recognize that these are exceedingly tough times to be an executive or non-executive leader for a cultural institution. I commend you all for staying in the arena, untangling hard knots and making excruciating decisions on a daily basis.

I look forward to seeing your questions and reflections in the chat. Or you can [contact me easily through my blog, Jumper](#), after today. Thank you for your kind attention.