Bridging the Divide between Art, Ethnic Culture, and Community:
A New Model for Community Arts

Bonita M. Kolb, Ph.D.
Lycoming College, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, USA 17701
570/321-4170 or kolb@lycoming.edu

The research on ethnic group attendance at the arts in both the United States and the United Kingdom finds ethnic attendance is lower than that of the majority 'white' population. (Jermyn, 2000) (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998) Unfortunately, the conclusion is then made that such groups suffer from having insufficient art in their lives. It is then believed that if they were but made aware of this lack – using marketing and promotion - they would want to correct this deficiency with more attendance at traditional arts organizations. (DiMaggio, 1992)

But this lack of attendance may result from preferences on how and where to experience art. If this is true it may time for arts organizations to considering changing their art 'product.'

The New American Community

This lack of audience diversity should be an increasingly important issue to arts organizations because the US is currently undergoing a dramatic population shift from primarily European to one with growing African-American, Hispanic and Asian percentages. An example of this shift is the census data for New York City. According to the 2000 census, the white population of New York City, which was 91% in 1950, is now down to 35%. Meanwhile the African-American has increased to 24%, the Hispanic to 27% and the Asian to 10%.

This increase in diversity and the resulting change in the socio-demographic makeup of the US is a national trend that will only increase due to continued immigration. A recent report from the Census bureau stated that in March 2002 a record high of 11.5% of the total US population was foreign born. (This is not just a phenomenon in the US. In the UK, London's population of ethnic minorities is projected to grow from 1.6 million in 1996 to 1.9 million in 2006, a 19% increase.)

This lack of interest in attendance by ethnic groups that do not trace their roots to Europe could be one of the reasons for the declining attendance at some art events – particularly arts based on European culture. A report of the current status of arts organizations and attendance released by the Rand Corporation summarizes four factors that are used by arts organizations to explain the changes in attendance patterns (McCarthy et at, 2001).

- Changes in 'practical considerations' such as accessibility of events, cost, leisure time availability;
- Changes in people's knowledge of the art form through exposure to arts education;
- Changes in taste; and
- Socio-demographic changes.

The report concludes that far too little research has been done to determine the role played by changes in socio-demographics in arts attendance - but that it is critical for arts organizations to examine this issue.

Why are there not equal levels of attendance at the arts by all ethnic groups? While attendance studies can tell us that ethnic group members are not attending the traditional arts, they can not tell us how these groups do experience art. After all, if the desire to participate in the arts is a universal need, then everyone must be experiencing art in some way. If we could know more about how ethnic group members experience art, perhaps arts organizations could better design events that would attract their attendance. Such research that does not start with a preconceived hypothesis in mind is useful when theory needs to be 'built' from the ground up. (Strauss, Corbin 1998)

What do Ethnic Groups want from the Arts: Just Ask!

Just such a study was conducted using educated, employed professionals attending an evening MBA program at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York. An ethnically diverse group of sixty-five students participated in the study. The two largest groups of participants traced their roots to Africa (49%) and the Caribbean (19%). Also represented were Asian (9%), Hispanic (5%), Middle Eastern (4%), African and Asian Indian (each 3%). The range of ethnic diversity, including recent immigrants, makes this an intriguing group to have participated in a study.

The study was qualitative and was designed to gain knowledge that could have practical application for arts organizations. Rather than just asking the participants about their attendance at traditional art forms, a different means of approaching arts participation was tried.

The respondents were asked open-ended questions about their experiences with singing, playing an instrument, dancing, acting and painting. For each art form, they were asked where they heard/saw the art form for free, bought a ticket to hear/see it and if they themselves participated. They were also asked the type of music/dance/art. The objective was to get a better explanation of how this group of educated, ethnically diverse adults experience art.

As an example the question from the survey concerning singing is given below:

Singing   .

The last place I listened to live singing for free was..... Type?

The last place I bought a ticket to listen to live singing was ….Type?

The last place I sang was.... Type?

Art is Alive and Well

The information on the participants' experiences demonstrates that far from being art deprived; their lives were almost daily enriched by art. When asked if they listened to singing for free, 90% responded positively. What is important for arts organizations is that they hear singing without entering a concert hall. At 23%, the most common venue for those who responded positively was church. In addition, 16% heard music in parks, 15% on the street or in the subway and 8% in bars or restaurants. What is significant is that these venues are places that are experienced as part of everyday life.

The variety of music was impressive. The styles ranged from gospel in church to many different types of music at the other venues including country, classical, hip-hop and jazz.

Responses to: _The last place I listened to live singing for free was…_

Singing Free	Place	Type
90%		
23%	church	gospel/religious/classical
16%	park	jazz/classical/reggae/folk/Latin
15%	street/subway	jazz/country/instrumental/R&B
8%	bar/restaurant	rock/blues/jazz/R&B
7%	attractions	reggae/gospel/Latin/opera
5%	school/college	rap/jazz/blues
4%	business/employer	piano/gospel/jazz
4%	club	blues/Latin/jazz/R&B
4%	radio/TV	reggae/R&B/hip-hop
3%	party/home	pop/rock

The respondents were willing to spend money on tickets. In fact 63% of the participants paid to hear music. But only 6% bought a ticket to hear singing at a traditional concert hall and even then it wasn't necessarily to hear classical music.

When the respondents buy a ticket to hear music, the vast majority attend a commercial venue such as Radio City Music Hall or Madison Square Garden. Cost must not be a primary concern as neither of these venues is known for inexpensive tickets. At these commercial venues they enjoy all types of music from Broadway tunes to salsa - and even a bit of classical. Now there might be some, particularly those who enjoy and support the traditional high arts who might be asking, "What does Broadway and salsa have to do with 'art'?" But it should be remembered that it is not known, just assumed, what types of cultural products are 'best' for us and that the strict boundary between high and popular culture is relatively recent. (Cowen, 1998)

Responses to: *The last place I bought a ticket to hear live singing was...*

Singing Paid	Place	Type
78%		
14%	Radio City Music Hall	R&B/Broadway/contemporary/jazz
13%	Madison Square Garden	rock/pop/R&B/reggae/salsa
6%	concert hall	soul/pop/classical
5%	Brooklyn Academy of Music	alternative/reggae/classical

The respondents were also asked about their own participation in the art form. A surprisingly strong majority (57%) also sing themselves, with almost half of this singing done in church. Other settings for song were school organizations and simply singing at parties, at home, or in the park.

Responses to: *The last place I sang was....*

I Sang	Place	Type
57%		
43%	church	gospel/African-chant/Christian
11%	school	gospel/choral/easy/pop
11%	home	gospel/pop/hip-hop/Arabic
7%	park	Latin/choral/pop

This pattern of experiencing the arts as part of everyday life continues when the responses for instrumental playing are analyzed. The participants hear instruments being played in the street/subway, parks, church, and bars/restaurants. When paying to hear instrumental music, they buy tickets to commercial venues or go to bars/cafés/clubs. The range of music they hear is striking, with everything from pop to Latin included. An impressive 33% have played instruments themselves mostly through school, church or at home. Obviously music plays a very important role in their lives.

The study found that dancing is another popular activity. Fifty-eight percent of respondents watched dancing for free with the most popular places being in the street/subway or at bars/clubs. The most popular forms of music for dancing were hip-hop, pop and salsa. When buying a ticket to see dancing, the participants go to Broadway or clubs. And they themselves enjoy dancing at bars/clubs and at parties/weddings.

Thirty-five percent of respondents reported seeing acting for free in the park and at schools. Even more - 40% - have bought tickets to see acting, most frequently on Broadway. They also report having acted themselves, at school or at church.

When asked where they see paintings for free, 47% responded they had done so at museums, school, on the street, at work, or in galleries. Only 11% had bought a ticket to see paintings at museums. A surprising 23% reported painting at home including painting glass, murals on walls and pictures.

What Can We Learn?

So the conclusion can be drawn that this ethnically diverse group of professionals experience art/culture in their lives - even though it might not be through attendance at traditional arts events. This is not surprising because decisions about which art form to attend are strongly shaped by cultural values. The importance of any art form is tied to the culture from which it originates. However not all cultural traditions approach the making and appreciating of art in the same manner. For example, in the African tradition, music making is a participatory activity in which the audience is an equal partner with the musicians. (Maultsby, 2000) It is the social use of the music that gives it importance, not the perfection of the performance or the genius of the composer of musician. This approach is the opposite of the Western classical tradition. Groups who have used music as a way of forming community through active participation are much more likely to be involved in music from their own tradition. (Love, 1995)

When this research study started, it was with the thought that there was a problem that must be fixed. The lack of ethnic attendance at the arts was viewed as a problem because it implied that that minority group members lacked sufficient art in their lives. But this research has shown that the members of these ethnic groups have lives that are full of music, dance and visual arts. Attendance at traditional arts organizations just does not play as strong a role. Can, or should, this be viewed as a problem? If the organizations are looking to truly attract a new and different audience, the answer is yes.

The Traditional Audience Development Model: The term audience development is common in arts marketing. It comes from an area of marketing theory called product strategy. This theory states that there basically are four ways to increase revenue.

- Market Penetration - Find more of the same type of customer
- Product Development -Find a new product to sell your current customers
- Market Development - Find new uses for the current product to attract different customers
- Diversification - Find a totally different product to attract different customers

Unfortunately most audience or 'market' development pursued by arts organizations is actually penetration, or trying to get more of the same type of audience member to attend the same product. If they were really to pursue development to expand exposure to their art product, they would be looking for ways to modify the product to attract a different audience. (Kolb, 2000)

But is it fair to ask art organizations to modify their art or how their art is presented to attract ethnic minorities? Ethnic groups has always brought with them their own cultural values and tastes. As a result institutions that serve ethnic groups have always found they must adapt. (Foner, 1987) A study of the assimilation of ethnic groups established that institutions such as workplaces, churches, schools and hospitals had to institute changes in the languages they used, the services they offered and in their employee staffing. But while businesses, churches, schools and hospitals have all attempted to adjust to differing needs and cultural expectations, the major art organizations have not.

Instead arts organizations have relied on a 'redemptive' quality of their art form that they believe applies to everyone. The idea that 'we' know what is best for 'them.' However such ideas are difficult to justify in a diverse, democratic society which, rather than enshrine high art, should enshrine "participatory culture – an inclusive, cosmopolitan, diverse conversation." (Jenson, 2002) In fact it is actually marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, who drive artistic innovation because their "atypical background provides ideas and aesthetics that the mainstream does not have and, initially, cannot comprehend." (Cowen, 1998)

Too often arts organizations have "enshrined" art and as a result have lost the "spirit" of art and how it should have 'direct relevance' to individual lives. (Larson, 1997) If arts organizations wish to attract more ethnic group members to their art form, they must give up the idea of 'converting' people in these groups to their view of art. Instead they must redefine the purpose of the art they provide.

A New Model of Product Adaptation - The Arts 'Experience': If the belief that art will change people is abandoned, then what is left is the idea that the experiencing of art is what is important – however it is

defined by the participant and wherever they choose to partake. The ethnically diverse respondents in the study choose to partake at places and in ways that had meaning to them - and also with people with whom they wish to associate.

If arts organizations wish to attract more ethnic group members to their art form, they must give up the idea of 'converting' people in these groups to their view of art. Instead they must redefine the purpose of the art they provide. It can be concluded from this study that for the respondents the art had two essential purposes to enrich their daily lives and to socialize with others – often through participation rather observation.

Perhaps one of the most important redeeming aspects of any arts attendance is that it simply brings people together to experience community. Often the importance of 'socialization' is looked upon as merely the importance of having 'fun.' However the importance of bringing people together should not be minimized.

After all, the desire to socialize, to be part of a crowd rather than just an individual is part of human nature. The attributes of crowds have been summarized as: a desire for growth, a feeling of equality, a love of density and a direction toward a goal. (Canetti, 1973) Unfortunately, the experience of being part of a traditional arts audience often frustrates these attributes by insisting on behavior that stresses inequality and stagnation rather than stressing commonality and direction.

Ethnic groups that do not trace their roots to Europe will increasingly affect the definition of US national cultural values, including the purpose of art. It must be acknowledged that the traditional value system associated with the some art forms is not universal but is derived from a European cultural heritage. The resulting style of performance/exhibition may not appeal to members of ethnic groups.

Instead an arts organization could be viewed not as a place of redemption but as a place for community gathering. This type of arts organization would provide the 'third place' where people can meet outside of work and family. (Oldenburg, 1999) Because of the pressures of lengthening work days and longer commutes and also the decline of the independent restaurant/store/café where local people could associate, it is harder for people to gather together to meet the human need of being part of a crowd. The primary reason for attending a concert or play or visiting a museum may be just a need to 'get together' with other like minded people. And this would be true of everyone, not only ethnic groups.

A New Form of Community Arts Organization

Historically, arts policy in the past has focused on the institutionalization of the arts. Policy – and funding – was used to prevent established organizations from failing and to encourage healthy arts organizations to grow larger. Another approach would be to fund many small arts enterprises at the local level knowing that many might fail but then to learn from those that will succeed. (Dimaggio, 2000) These organizations must learn how, where and why Americans from all types of ethnic backgrounds want their art and deliver it.

The first step in developing such a local organization would be to let the community decide their own needs by asking area residents what type of arts activities they enjoy. This study could be conducted demographically by ethnic group with basic questions: What type of arts activities do you currently enjoy? What type of activity do you believe should be more available? Where should the art be offered? How much would you be willing to pay? What would be the best means to communicate this information to you?

Because a survey of many individuals would be time consuming, another approach would be to ask community leaders these same questions about the members of their group. The groups approached could include local ethnic associations, currently existing arts organizations and groups associated with activities, such as sports, crafts, outdoor recreation, and church.

Such a study is currently underway in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Williamsport is a small city in a rural area of Pennsylvania that is proud of its tradition of supporting the arts. Because members of ethnic groups have been moving to Williamsport from nearby major urban centers, the city is experiencing a growth in ethnic diversity. But these newly arrived ethnic group members are not attending the local arts

organizations. At first there was a discussion of opening a contemporary arts center in downtown Williamsport. The issue was if the center could be established as a new model of institution that attracted people from both the established 'white' community and the new ethnic groups. But upon discussing the issue it became apparent that a more radical approach was needed.

Art can be defined as the product produced by the artist. In this case art can not happen unless the proper art product it contemplated. But it can also be defined as the quality of the experience that the viewer receives from contemplating the art of their choice. In this view it is the experience and its effect on the viewer that is important, not what produced the experience. The experience that matters is to be fully engaged mentally and emotionally, in other words – fully alive. To be fully alive means to be as aware of both ourselves and our environment as possible. Art is used to move people from interaction with the art object to "participation and communication" with each other. (Dewey, 1934)

Rather than think of the arts organization as a building to which people must come, it was decided to 'root' the arts in the community itself in the downtown area. Not only would this ensure that the art could be readily accessed, it would also help to build a sense of community and be an opportunity for economic development. (Gratz, 1998)

The 'Moveable' Arts Center: This will be an arts center without walls. The plan is to have an art 'theme' for each month of the year. These art themes will cross over art forms and between high and popular art. It is proposed that the program be run jointly by the local arts council, the downtown revitalization organization and area businesses.

As an example, the first offering for September will be "College Art." (Williamsport is home to two local colleges.) Students enrolled in art classes will be offered the opportunity to exhibit their visual art in local businesses for one month. If the student wishes the art may be available for purchase. Students can also offer performances throughout the month at local restaurant and pubs.

To add the opportunity for socialization, at the beginning of the month, tours will be given of the visual arts to special interest groups. Special events are also being planned for college students including a 'pub tour' that will take students to five different performance venues in one evening.

Ideas for other theme art months include: wildlife and outdoor activities, movies, religious experience, cinema, and local history and food. The final decision will depend on the outcome of the community research which is currently underway.

Conclusion

The benefits from this approach to art are many. People will experience the art forms they currently enjoy and experience new art forms on subjects that have meaning to them. It will also build a sense of community and help local businesses. The problem and challenge of such a form of arts 'organization' is that it does not conform to the old idea of social hierarchy in the arts world. It is much more conducive to obtaining status to form or join an organization whose mission presumes that 'we' are better than 'them.' This new form of local organization may not confer such status to its members. But it will allow people to share and encourage a true love of artistic expression in all its forms.

By examining the "problem" of ethnic arts attendance, it was learned that their preference for incorporating art into daily experience can be used to enrich everyone's life. In addition this approach provides an opportunity for all groups in the community to enjoy the "promiscuous, delicious, vital cross-overs between popular and elite, low and high, common and refined, commercial and nonprofit, which form the most striking – and unique – feature of American culture." (Marquis, 1995)

References:

Canetti, Elias (1973) *Crowds and Power*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Cowen, Tyler (1998) *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, John (1934) *Art as Experience*, New York, Perigee Books.

DiMaggio, Paul and Francie Ostrower (1992) *Race, Ethnicity, and Arts Participation*, Santa Ana, California: Seven Locks Press.

Dimaggio, Paul (2000) "Social Structure, Institutions, and Cultural Goods: The Case of the United States" in *The Politics of Culture: Policy Perspectives for Individuals, Institutions and Communities*, New York, The New Press.

Foner, Nancy (1987) *New Immigrants in New York,* edited by Nancy Foner, New York: Columbia University Press.

Jermyn, Helen and Philly Desai (2000) *Arts – what's in a word? Ethnic Minorities and the Arts,* ACE Research Report No. 20, London: Arts Council of England.

Gratz, Roberta Brandes (1998) *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtowns*, New York, Wiley Press.

Jenson, Joli (2002) *Is Art Good For us? Beliefs about High Culture in American Life*, Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, Maryland, US.

Kolb, Bonita (2000) *Marketing Cultural Organizations: New Strategies for Attracting Audiences to Classical Music, Dance, Museums, Theatre and Opera*, Dublin, Oak Tree Press.

Larson, Gary O. (1997) *American Canvas,* Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts.

Love, Jeffrey (1995) *Arts Participation and Race/Ethnicity: An Analysis of 1982, 1985 and 1992 SPPA Surveys*, Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts.

Marquis, Alice Goldfarb (1995) *Art Lessons: Learning from the Rise and Fall of Public Arts Funding*, New York, Basic Books.

McCarthy, Kevin, Arthur Brooks, Julia Lowell and Laura Zakaras (2001) *The Performing Arts in a New Era*, Washington DC: Rand Corporation.

Maultsby, P. (2000) "On Africanism" in *Music, Culture and Society: A Reader*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

National Endowment for the Arts (1998) *1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts.

Oldenburg, Ray (1999) *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of the Community*, New York: Marlowe and Company.

Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory,* New York, Sage Publishing.