

Coming changes in public arts

Terry Ray Hiller. The Futurist. Washington: Nov/Dec 2001. Vol. 35, Iss. 6; pg. 46, 6 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

Before the end of the twenty-first century, art galleries and museums will transform themselves into dynamic providers of education and entertainment worldwide. An array of trends, led by technological innovation, is already reshaping how art will be experienced. Advancing technology will drive most of the changes in the **public arts**. The first arts institutions to benefit will be the ones that value creativity over systems and that can adapt new technologies to further their missions. They will be bold enough to take calculated risks, ultimately capturing public imagination and securing private funds.

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(3548 words)

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[Headnote]

Twenty-first-century arts institutions may evolve into edutainment centers, delivering gallery tours in cyberspace and staging holographic plays. By Terry Ray Hiller

Before the end of the twenty-first century, art galleries and museums will transform themselves into dynamic providers of education and entertainment worldwide. An array of trends, led by technological innovation, is already reshaping how we will experience art.

The scenarios accompanying this article reflect profound changes in technology, organization, funding, and the role of public arts in education and entertainment. We are already beginning to see the early impact of those changes.

Advancing technology will spur us to redefine what public arts organizations will do and how they will do it over the next century. The arts community must invent new ways to attract audiences, apply new technologies, and manage the growth and funding of their evolving institutions.

The High-Tech Muse

"Virtual reality," "information superhighway" and "interactive home centers" have become cliches in an already vibrant electronic technology. Technologies that seemed unimaginable or far-distant have arrived, or are minutes away. For example, we can buy an interactive encyclopedia on DVD or CD-ROM for well under \$100. Suddenly a thousand resources are only a few keystrokes away. We can listen to music, look at art, and watch John Kennedy talk about going to the Moon. It's just the beginning.

Advancing technology will drive most of the changes in the public arts. The first arts institutions to benefit will be the ones that value creativity over systems and that can adapt new technologies to further their missions. They will be bold enough to take calculated risks, ultimately capturing public imagination and securing private funds. As a result, generations of children and adults will see these cutting-edge arts institutions not as abstract repositories of knowledge and culture, but as a vital part of their daily lives.

Computer networks, faxes, smart telephones, and computer-monitored climate control/security systems are standard equipment in most major arts organizations. As technological capability nearly doubles every two years, more innovation will eventually filter down to smaller organizations through investments, donations, or corporate partnerships.



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[Photograph]

Immersion Cinema at the Smithsonian combines entertainment and learning. Audiences at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History participate in a state-of-the-art digital interactive experience called Vital Space. Visitors take a high-definition tour of the human body and learn about body systems while seeking the cause of a strange infection.

Although some art and theater groups are more technologically advanced than some science centers, few arts organizations have been in the vanguard of applying emerging technologies. Except for the largest institutions, few arts groups are financially solvent enough to invest in state-of-the-art technology on their own. Often, they must wait for companies involved with true leading-edge technology to discard their "old stuff" as a donation, or hope that a company will want to test some new technology in their facility. Consequently, acquired technology may be months or years behind current capabilities or system needs.

A Question of Attendance

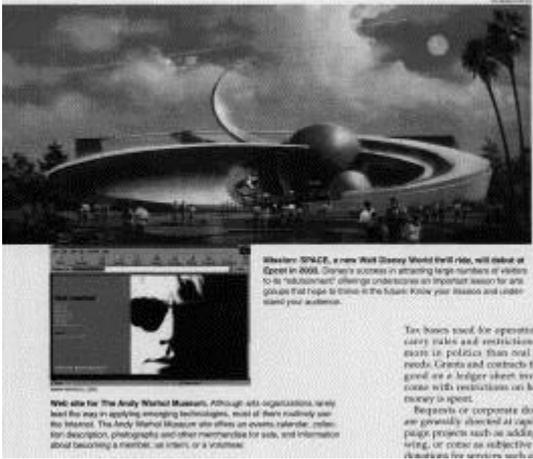
While most arts groups aggressively pursue income from many sources, many soon discover that their primary source of daily operating income comes from attendance. Tax bases used for operations may carry rules and restrictions based more in politics than real facility needs. Grants and contracts that look good on a ledger sheet invariably come with restrictions on how that money is spent.

Bequests or corporate donations are generally directed at capital campaign projects such as adding a new wing, or come as subjective in-kind donations for services such as advertising or programming. Except for performing-arts organizations-theaters, operas, and symphonies-the arts community regards attendance income as discretionary.

When attendance is high, arts groups can plan expansion programs, hire new staff, and add to collections. When attendance drops, budgets are slashed, staffers are fired, and operating hours are reduced. We see this today in well-known, historically tax-funded arts groups that are caught in the dollar crunch of dwindling fiscal resources.

Attendance will remain important to tomorrow's arts groups, but their operating income may not be as dependent on how many people actually visit the facility. Virtual visitors, not real ones, may provide most of the income.

By today's standards, some successful twenty-first-century arts organizations will appear to have no real attendance at all, despite rising world populations and economic improvement. Advanced virtual-reality technology will allow people thousands of miles away to "visit" museums or "experience" symphonies or plays without leaving their schools, businesses, or homes. For example, a San Francisco museum might create a virtual Rodin exhibit and sell copies to other arts groups or subscribers around the world, allowing millions of people to see it literally on demand. How institutions might control and profit from this new venue will be a major challenge to arts groups over the coming decades.



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[Photograph]

Web site for The Andy Warhol Museum. Although arts organizations rarely lead the way in applying emerging technologies, most of them routinely use the Internet. The Andy Warhol Museum site offers an events calendar, collection description, photographs and other merchandise for sale, and information about becoming a member, an intern, or a volunteer.

Mission: SPACE, a new Walt Disney World thrill ride, will debut at Epcot in 2003. Disney's success in attracting large numbers of visitors to its "edutainment" offerings underscores an important lesson for arts groups that hope to thrive in the future: Know your mission and understand your audience.

As events and collections become more accessible through technology, real attendance as a percentage of population will probably fall in the next century. Attendance strategies will focus on differences between "virtual" vs. "actual" experiences. The Smithsonian Institution now offers visitors "Immersion Cinema," a new interactive experience that explores the systems of the human body. In another recent move, the Smithsonian is presenting a handful of popular artifacts-including Kermit the Frog-"exclusively" online rather than in their galleries. Almost every twenty-first-century art museum buff will undoubtedly own a virtual copy of the Mona Lisa, but like today, only a few people will ever stand in the presence of the original.

The "Edutaining" Muse

The decades-old battle over museum education vs. entertainment"edutainment"-will ultimately become a matter of simple pragmatism, decided in the same marketplace that determines which soups, car models, and television shows prosper. The deciders will not be tradition-minded arts administrators, doctoral-degreed curators, or CEO-laden boards of directors. They will be working families, businesses, and individuals who support the art and cultural facilities they find most valuable.

For performance-based arts, the focus will be on developing attractive presentation mixes rather than dealing with educational issues. Museums, however, will need to create and promote compelling reasons why the public should visit or support them. "Because they are there" won't cut it anymore, as many of today's institutions have discovered.

If consumers are dissatisfied with their children's educational opportunities, successful arts groups will respond by becoming alternative educational centers, offering everything from art classes to science curricula. If those audiences are visiting because of discretionary dollars, arts groups will adopt the same strategies used by their competing, commercial cousins. That competition may be a movie, an amusement park, a sporting event, or a rock concert. Attracting and retaining consumer support will be increasingly critical to arts groups; it will require a precise understanding of what those audiences are looking for.

Arts groups will increasingly use print, broadcast, cable, or online media to attract audiences. Increasingly, we will see arts groups entering a host of cooperative ventures as they fight for a piece of the consumer pie.



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[Photograph]

Microsoft's Bill Gates poses at an exhibit of the Leicester Codex, a rare notebook of Leonardo da Vinci, in Venice, Italy, in 1995. Gates purchased the notebook from the Armand Hammer Museum for \$31.8 million and has turned the material into a CD-ROM that sells for \$30. More corporate-owned arts enterprises could compete with public museums in the future, according to author Terry Ray Hiller.



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Data Box

The stakes can be high. A live rock concert ticket may easily fetch \$100 for a single night. The average symphony ticket, on the other hand, may top out at \$40, and museum admission, \$10. Institutions catering to families and children may get no more than \$6. To capture even a fraction of these audiences and keep them returning, arts groups will either have to offer a product that is worth a higher ticket price, or one that is so attractive that visitors will flock to their real or cybernetic doors. In either case, it will mean far more attention to taking the pulse of the general public than most arts groups currently like to do.

The Art of Collaboration

Previously separate cultural organizations may seek horizontal alliances to stabilize and maximize resources, essentially fusing them together. Symphonies and performing-arts groups may join with art or history arts groups; zoos and nature centers may become entwined with science or children's arts groups. These new cultural cooperatives may be under the umbrella of the strongest of the group or part of some municipal authority, or they might create their own expanded organization.

This new collaboration will extend into outreach services. Outreach will evolve into something far more ambitious than underwriting visits or having a school assembly. It may mean establishing long- or short-term mobile sites wherever the target audience exists. These sites will function as mini-cultural centers, offering a constantly changing mix of virtual and real exhibits or activities. In addition, they will promote their parent organizations through merchandise and service offerings, and position themselves as essential resources to the local community.

The Free-Market Muse

The public perception is that most arts groups are supported by either local or federal taxes, but the fact is that there is simply not enough public largess to go around. The nineteenth-century notion of a blanket public or private arts subsidy is largely obsolete. Cash-strapped governments are less and less likely to divert dwindling infrastructure or social service tax money to support arts groups, and rich patrons are finding more personally rewarding uses for their spare dollars. Arts groups in the twenty-first century will increasingly have to pay their own way if they are to survive.

Financially successful arts groups of the future will act much like today's entrepreneurial enterprises, building active partnerships with government, school systems, and commercial businesses. Those partnerships will be based as much on mutual self-interest as on social responsibility; they will sometimes look more like a deal between Michael Jordan and Nike than an act of corporate altruism.

The Muse Earns Her Keep

New virtual technologies will create fantastic educational and economic opportunities for arts groups. Interactive classrooms and science demonstrations, real-time "field" explorations, and digitized simulations are already a part of some educational programs. Groups will merge these capabilities with their own unique talents and resources into large-scale educational ventures, becoming departments "for hire" in schools-home, private, and public.

Enhanced access through technology will also help organizations gain more members, perhaps routinely reaching international markets. More arts groups will capitalize on gaps in public education, creating alternative schools and contracted curriculum programs for educational systems. It may be common, for example, for a community college art history course in Arizona to be run by an art museum in Seattle, and for a symphony in Washington to have active members who never leave Hong Kong.

In this high-stakes environment, administrators will need to redefine and understand how and where revenues are generated in both their profit-making and their educational operations. Arts organizations will draw on a new generation of administrators who have had direct, positive sales and customer-service experience and who can appreciate the uniqueness and legitimate roles of museum shops and other visitor convenience services.

The derogatory term "gift shop" will rightfully fade from the arts lexicon. Organizational store sales will be consciously integrated into the arts educational experience and increasingly active in direct electronic shopping and outreach ventures. Ever-rising mail costs will force the end of all but a handful of printed direct-mail museum catalogs. Even then, the medium is more likely to be a compact disc instead of paper, and mailing lists may cover countries, not regions.

Most likely, the real future of many nonprofit sales will be through electronic communications. Pioneering arts groups such as the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia are taking the first steps by exploring new markets through venues such as the QVC Home Shopping Channel. The Smithsonian is touting itself as the world's first "virtual museum" on computer communication services such as America Online.

There are now thousands of Web sites that either are run by arts groups, promote arts discussions, or feature collections and services. In the years ahead we will certainly see sophisticated versions of these and similar sites operating under some electronic umbrella. This cultural network-"CulNet"-will provide customers individualized selection, ticketing, and "virtual transfer" services from its member arts groups on a global basis. Customers will be able to sample exhibits, performances, or collections from among thousands of museums and performing-arts groups around the world in minutes. CulNet visitors will be able to customize sophisticated virtual experiences based on whatever theme or interest suits their fancy-without ever leaving their homes or offices.

The Muse Restructures

Tomorrow's nonprofits will have little in common with the organizational structure of most contemporary arts groups. Mission will drive groups even more rigorously than it does now. A well-defined, proactive mission will be a strategic advantage for all institutions because it will keep organizations focused on their reason for existing.

Many of tomorrow's public arts organizations will have much smaller permanent staffs than today. More routine functions will be contracted out. Temporary agencies or outside companies will handle hiring, publicity, and

financial and technical support. Only in those creative groups that have been able to incorporate "real-time" experiences as part of their in-house offering will more contact staff be evident.

Virtualization and corresponding decreases in real visitation will have their most noticeable effect on public contact staff. We will find fewer floor personnel, cashiers, and food-services people on site. Volunteers will continue to be vital, but in the future they may live half a world away and never even see the inside of the facility they're volunteering for. What will change dramatically will be how those volunteers are recruited, trained, and put to work. A volunteer in Quebec, for example, may be host or "cyber-curator" for an online art exhibit originating in Sydney, while another volunteer in London may maintain the members list for a Brazilian symphony. Volunteer roles will be limited only by the imagination of their host facilities.

The remaining paid core staffs will work in environments organized not as departments, but as temporary work or focus groups, constantly redefined by the task and talent at hand. A museum charged with creating a new exhibit, for example, may at one time or another enlist a designer, a financial consultant, a marketing/museum sales person, a curator, a contractor, and a project coordinator.

The Muse Makes Money

Faced with dwindling fiscal resources and growing commercial competition, some of the surviving arts groups over the next century will abandon their traditional nonprofit status and enter the new cultural marketplace as for-profit ventures. In these environments, only the actual collection and necessary real estate (for those arts groups that will continue to need either) may be financially protected by a nonprofit designation; other activities will be run as taxpaying, for-profit ventures.

The transition may not be a matter of choice. Revenue-strapped governments at all levels will be increasingly eager to collect revenue from property and sales taxes wherever possible, and tomorrow's arts groups will be hard pressed to justify exemptions when they will be virtually indistinguishable from their commercial, taxpaying cousins.

Corporate-run arts groups are another possibility. Such institutions already exist elsewhere in the world, notably Japan. We may soon see General Electric or Microsoft initiate its own enterprises, either real or virtual. In an information-driven age, education is good business, and information companies are likely to either partner with tomorrow's public arts groups or compete with them.

Through ventures such as Epcot, the Walt Disney Company has proven that learning can be compatible with entertainment and profits. Some may argue that Disney's educational content is weak, or that the presentation is idealized, but no one can dispute Disney's success in attracting huge demographic populations. Tomorrow's arts groups should not try to become little Disneylands, but they should take a lesson from Disney's ability to understand its audiences.

The Muse Is Reborn

There will be other challenges in the future, some that we can't possibly imagine until they happen. It may be difficult for arts institutions to foster creativity while maintaining economic integrity. It may be possible for someone to buy a holographic play, edit it, and change the plot. A virtual visitor could sue a museum if an artifact is fraudulent. The issues of copyright protection and royalty payments for art that is electronically sold or rented are far from settled.

In order to survive and prosper, arts groups will have to reexamine not only how they do business, but why. That will require courage, vision, and a dedication to action that must transcend issues of internal politics, personal comfort, and professional prejudice.

Business consultant Tom Peters argues that tomorrow's successful businesses will survive through a process of perpetual reinvention and revolution-constantly redefining themselves, their roles, and their products and audiences. Recalling the Phoenix of mythology, they will rise from their own ashes, reborn. Like those businesses, tomorrow's successful arts groups will learn to do the same. They may always be community treasures or resources, but their personas will change with each new opportunity, market, audience-for them, the only constant will be change.

It is critical that today's arts groups move to meet these challenges. When at their greatest, public arts organizations are more than merely the sum of their real estate, instruments, collections, or exhibits; they become catalysts for imagination, inspiration, wonder, discovery, and personal growth. They affect everyone,

even those who may never see the inside of an arts center. Ultimately, that will be the continuing challenge for public arts in the twenty-first century and beyond.

[Sidebar]

5 Public Arts
Scenarios for 2072

[Sidebar]

1. Karen Murray is a 19-year-old Portland, Oregon, art student. During lunch tomorrow, she will visit studios in Milan, London, and Washington, D.C., discuss Flemish painting with three senior curators in Amsterdam, and conduct analyses of pigment deterioration on two Rembrandts in the Hermitage.
2. Pavel and Olga Ardanov of St. Petersburg are spending their after noon in a CulNet history experience, exploring 1995 New York City. Among their adventures are a Tiffany shopping spree, a Manhattan cab ride, and an accelerated performance of Cats. Twenty-five hundred people around the world are in their "group," as well as visitors from both space stations and the lunar colonies.

[Sidebar]

3. Jon Henendez "collects" theaters. He can take virtual-reality tours of all the North and South American theaters, and is halfway through the European set. His library of projectable holographic programs includes classic performances, too. His mother complains that he will have to get another case to store his collection and is threatening to cancel his subscription unless he becomes more selective.
4. Adrienne Carpenter is senior curator for the International Museum of Modern Art, part of a staff of 92 spread over six continents. She has just catalogued and transmitted a 100-piece international light sculpture collection to the museum's two million worldwide members. She likes her solitary work, but sometimes wonders what it would be like to have more people visit. Last year, barely 4,000 visitors toured the main branch. Only in the virtual halls can visitors explore the entire 300,000-piece collection, and no one needs to come to the museum to do that.

[Sidebar]

5. Mahai Singh wants to be an artist and live on the Moon. Next week, he will fly to London with his family and actually visit the British Museum, where his mother has promised he will see a real dinosaur skeleton. Mahai has never visited a museum in person-only CulNet virtuals; he will be the envy of his entire school. He is a very excited 10-year-old.

[Sidebar]

Online Resources for Exploring Public Arts

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Freeality Online Search Engine, a meta-search engine:
Museum links: www.freeality.com/museums.htm
Theater links: www.freeality.com/broadway.htm

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MuseumLand, a Web "portal" to world culture and heritage sites: www.museumland.com
Musee, a nonprofit organization linking museums, schools, and the general public:
www.musee-online.org

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Museum Stuff, links to thousands of museums, virtual exhibits, live cams, and museum shops:
www.museumstuff.com
Web Gallery of Art, links to a virtual museum and searchable database of European painting and sculpture of the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods (1150-1800):
www.kfki.hu/~arthp

[Sidebar]

Smithsonian Institution, links to the museums, research centers, archives, publications, recordings, online collections, and the Virtual Smithsonian:
www.si.edu

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Theater Mania, links to Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway show information:
www.theatermania.com/NY/shows.cfm
Broadway Online, links to Broadway shows, including selected pay-per-view performances via broadband:
www.broadwayonline.com

[Author Affiliation]

About the Author

Terry Ray Hiller is a design analyst, consultant, and museum professional, currently affiliated with CM2, a children's museum in Portland, Oregon. He was the original concept creator for the internationally

[Author Affiliation]

recognized science exhibit, "STAR TREK: Federation Science." His articles on technology, retailing, and customer psychology have appeared in numerous journals, including THE FUTURIST. His address is P.O. Box 82876, Portland, Oregon 97282. Telephone 1-503-775-1522; e-mail terryrayhillier@aol.com.

[Author Affiliation]

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