



The Highest Common Denominator

In the May/June issue of this magazine, Wendy Richmond's column, "Beware of the Phrase: 'In times like these...,'" warned readers that in an economic climate like ours, the arts too easily fall to the bottom of our list of priorities. She urged us to protect our creative needs, especially when faced with increasingly pragmatic demands.

How do we make the argument? How do we defend supporting the arts when people are struggling to feed their families? What are the reasons that art—making it, experiencing it, appreciating it—is crucial to ensuring our long-term national health?

It's a long conversation. To get started, I approached three people whose professions require a commitment to the arts, and who, each in his own domain, serve as guardians of the arts. I asked them to articulate their beliefs about the power of art and why it is vital to our society.

Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, began by talking about the unique behavior of people in museums, in particular the way they wander and follow unpredictable patterns through the galleries. He was pinpointing a critical facet of art: its permission—or perhaps its demand—that we be non-directed. The knee-jerk reaction to financial constraints is to contract and limit, to hone focus and eliminate the extraneous. But at what cost?

"In a time when circumstances are dire, we need novel and visionary solutions to real-world problems," Weinberg said. "Artists may not provide direct solutions, but they present us with a broader range of ideas, with multiple, alternative ways of considering these problems."

The same premise applies to art education. "Most education is directed toward achieving answers, more and more as people focus on the basics. But what we should be teaching our kids is how to think. That is what art does," Weinberg continued. "It reshuffles our values and scrambles things up. It suggests that there are approaches that might never have occurred to us. It expands our notion of what is, to what could be."

Bryan Doerries is associate executive director of programs at the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers that runs the annual, 86-year-old Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for grades seven through twelve. Among the 11,000 students honored this year, Doerries sees promise for our country's future.

"We have a track record of identifying potential," Doerries said. He dubbed this potential creative stem cells. "Before stem cells are differentiated, they can become anything," he explained. "The direction our winners will go is not one we can predict." Richard Avedon, he noted, won a Scholastic Award for a poem; Robert Redford won for a painting. "We don't know what these young people will do," Doerries said, "we just know that they have the capacity to contribute remarkable things."

That capacity reaches beyond artistic talent; it is born of innovative thinking, the underlying trait the Scholastic Awards recognize. "In a No Child Left Behind, test-driven atmosphere that evaluates achievement based on Scantron metrics," Doerries said, "our competition measures more esoteric qualities. We are encouraging children to pursue their creativity."

Later, he said: "The only remaining currency of the 21st century is ideas. To strip our culture of the arts is to cut off pathways to innovation in every area."

For the past year, Jay Twitchell has served as director of tele-fundraising and telemarketing at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music), the nearly 150-year-old performing and cinema arts center in Brooklyn. Despite the ailing economy, he has no qualms soliciting donors at levels from \$1,500 to \$50,000.

"Those who invest in BAM are investing in quality of life," he said. "For me, art is the highest common denominator for humanity. Yes, we must have food and shelter, but once that is provided for, you have to ask, 'What is a quality existence?'" Twitchell likened performance halls to cathedrals, "They are places people come to hoping for transformation, which is what has the most worth in our lives."

According to Twitchell, "Art is the sum total of our ideas and dreams. It upsets and inspires; it enhances the sense of self. It allows us to revalue what it means to be human. It is one of the primary ways that we share victory and suffering, and that is the number one way to bind a community, to let us stand together as a group."

Digesting these insights, a thought struck me. In the quest for a more secure future, is it so preposterous to imagine that, rather than being trimmed, the arts should be placed center stage? **CA**