

The Washington State Arts Commission, supported by The Wallace Foundation, is presenting a series of public forums exploring arts participation, the arts and changing demographics and using technology to increase audiences. Seattle writer Ron Chew provides his personal reflections after a recent forum and workshops attended by arts organizations and arts funders in our region. The event referenced was held November 18, 2010, in Seattle Center's McCaw Hall. This article was previously published in the Grantmakers for the Arts Reader. For more information about the WSAC, see www.arts.wa.gov or Facebook "Washington Arts"

Embracing Diversity in the Arts: Random Reflections on the Coming Tide of Change

By Ron Chew

Where will my two kids choose to go for their art experiences when they are no longer herded on obligatory school field trips? Where will they go when they outgrow my parent-mandated outings? Will a visit to an online gaming arcade replace the visit to the art museum or the community theater? How will they define the arts in a globally-connected world in which sensory and intellectual stimulation are instantaneous and where old disciplines and categories have been rendered obsolete?

These questions bounded around in my head as I sat recently and listened to a panel of experts speak about the swiftly changing demographics of the United States and how arts organizations might respond thoughtfully and sensitively to the altered landscape. Youth engagement wasn't the focus of the event – ethnic and cultural diversity was – but if you're a parent like me, you always gravitate to seeing issues through the lens of how they might affect your children. My kids, 15 and 13, are inheriting an America that is increasingly non-Anglo, bilingual and culturally diverse, even if certain policy-makers and fear-mongering politicians refuse to accept this obvious truth. How do we participate in this new reality? How will my children choose to participate?

Most arts thrive – as they always have – in places not reserved exclusively for the arts. Arts takes place in the home, at churches, clubs and community centers, in playgrounds and schools, in malls and coffee shops – beneath the radar of the larger public discussion of the arts. For my kids, entertainment, music, spoken word, gaming and information seeking take place in fluid motion in front of a computer monitor. They work the keyboard like a musical instrument: surfing, imagining, drifting, engaging, talking, IM-ing friends. Should we consider the time they spend at the computer an arts experience? I would say yes, even if it might be hard to break down the component parts and quantify it for data collection and analysis. The arts are imbedded in a wider on-line experience.

Consider how the world is shifting around us. At a November 18 forum at Seattle Center's McCaw Hall, Chandler Felt, demographer for King County, pointed out that almost all the recent growth in the County and the State of Washington has been among people of color, principally Asian and

Latino. This growth, he said, has largely been fueled by immigration. Over 40 percent of school age kids are now non-white, he said.

Salvador Acevedo, an authority on marketing the arts to culturally diverse audiences, noted that in a single decade, the majority of Americans under age 18 will be non-white. How, for example, do museums – whose audiences are now 88 percent white – build participation among diverse populations? The Latino community is very interested in the arts, he said, but Latinos are a complex population, not a monolithic bloc. Cultural institutions need to identify and understand “sub-segments,” recognizing that “ethnic and cultural self-identification plays a crucial role in cultural participation, but it is not the only factor.”

Vivian Phillips, a long-time arts producing and communications consultant in Seattle, echoed Acevedo’s point about recognizing the diversity within specific groups in communities of color. The experience of African Americans is very different from that of African immigrants, she said. However, she also pointed to a recalcitrant challenge: the lack of diversity in non-ethnic specific cultural organizations, especially in management, and the unwillingness of large arts organizations to make long-term investments in supporting diverse productions.

The forum was similar to many others I had participated in over the past 20 years. It was the recurring conversation among aging baby boomers agonizing over how they might strengthen their efforts to make their audiences reflect the increasing diversity of America in light of the habitual criticism that the arts are elite, unnecessary and largely white.

But while Acevedo and others were thinking ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, I was ruminating about the generational divide. As Felt, Acevedo, Phillips and others spoke, I wondered how the arts might come into sight for my kids – the generation emerging a step or two behind Gen X. Moreover, what does the younger generation consider the arts to be? Across generations, we sometimes don’t share the same vocabulary, even though we might speak some of the same words.

Several weeks ago, my 15-year-old asked me to help him with an assignment he had been dreading and avoiding. Students in his class had been told to write a short letter to the author of a favorite book. This language arts assignment was linked to a contest sponsored by the Target Corporation; the student who produced the best letter would win a \$10,000 prize. I struggled for over four hours to help him eke out a few hundred words. The next morning, as I drove him to school, I understood – in a sudden moment of clarity – his struggle. I turned to him and asked, “You don’t know what a letter is, do you?” My son looked me in the eye and said, “That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

My son had never written a letter. He had made it to age 15 without ever partaking in a form of communication that was second nature to those of us who came of age before the Internet. My son had become my personal wake-up call heralding the demise of the letter, a commonplace means of expression that, well before my time, had evolved into a highly skilled art. It was now going the way of the horse and buggy.

For a few bewildered seconds, I grieved for the loss. I still cherish the handwritten letters my friends have sent me over the years; in fact, most are neatly stacked in a box in my basement. But there's a difference, in my mind, between nostalgia and practicality. In the end, I believe in terse mourning rituals for things that no longer have use. The reality is that the Post Office – the elaborate network of processing centers devised to support the letter – has simply become a transport structure for junk mail. I've accepted that I probably won't get any more real letters.

When I was a child, I would lie awake in the bedroom and wait to be lulled to sleep by the cadenced singing of my immigrant mother in the nearby kitchen. She chanted *muk ngwee* – “wooden fish songs” – poetic fables born of the Chinese countryside. After laboring in a Pioneer Square sewing factory by day and making dinner for the family in the evening, she would indulge in her favorite arts pursuit in the wee hours while we children slept. She sang aloud from frayed booklets hungrily acquired in bookstores in Vancouver B.C.'s Chinatown. The poems spoke of epic tragedies and small daily sorrows, longing, truth, honor, loyalty and hope. The passages from the *muk ngwee* would sadden her, inspire and transport her. They spoke to something very deep in her memory and imagination. To me, the *muk ngwee* were simply my part of my cultural inheritance from immigrant parents. They hardly represented who I was as a Chinese person growing up with an American birthright.

At the time, I didn't consider what my mother did as art. *Muk ngwee* wasn't something I heard anything about in school, even though my classes were filled with kids like me, children of Chinese immigrants whose parents hailed from the same villages in Southeastern China. I couldn't describe this *thing* my mother did, but I knew it didn't bear any resemblance to the music, poetry, drama or storytelling I was learning in the classroom.

Growing up in a poor working class home, I didn't think that I had many other especially memorable childhood encounters with art. Our modest collection of visual art consisted of free calendars from Chinatown stores and restaurants that festooned the walls and closets of our Beacon Hill home. My family attended occasional Cantonese opera performances at the Chong Wa Benevolent Association hall in Chinatown, where immigrant men – my father's restaurant co-workers – would dress up in elaborate costumes and act out ancient classic tales, mixing martial arts, acrobatics and traditional Chinese musical instruments. I suppose the street performances during the Chinese New Year festival, especially the lion dance, also count as a piece of my cultural experiences, but here again, I was playing spectator to my parent's celebration of arts and culture from the old country, not exercising my own chosen cultural voice.

Although the Chinese arts of my childhood were largely unrelated to my own interests and tastes, my American diet of arts and culture – the field trips to the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle Symphony and Seattle Opera – left me feeling even less inspired. They had few connection points into my imagination or any passions I might have freely pursued as an early arts “consumer.”

As I look back now, I see the points when my imagination first began to take off. In elementary school, my older brother made me a musical instrument to take to school, fashioning it out of a few

spare pieces of wood and different lengths of rubber band. In private, I had many hours of fun discovering musical notes, although when it came time to show it off in class, I was too embarrassed to take it out of the bag because the other students had brought “real” stuff. Later, in high school, a small battery-powered transistor radio and a low-end turntable purchased at the downtown G.O. Guy drugstore provided many opportunities for in-home musical entertainment. I would play DJ, sometimes sitting alone in the living room, choosing from among the few LPs and 45s in the home collection. I even compiled lists of rotating top hits for a make-believe audience.

My real passion was writing. From age 11 to 14, I created “Think-A-Newspaper,” a publication for the exclusive delight of my little brother. Written and illustrated in pencil on loose sheets of lined paper, the newspaper contained imagined local and world news, jokes, comic strips, sports articles, scores and clip-out baseball cards. I’m not sure he always appreciated the weekly missive I foisted on him, but he dutifully played along; and I know he at least appreciated the jokes, comics and sports. My sister invented and “managed” the very small Chew public library in our basement, a collection of Scholastic titles purchased through school. Although the patrons were few – just my sister, two brothers, myself and a few neighbor kids – we were “required” to check the books out with our renewable library cards before taking them into other parts of the house.

My zeal for writing first found voice in the “Think-A-Newspaper,” but it was nourished by an eighth grade creative writing teacher who praised a humorous piece I had written, a 12th grade teacher who recognized my love of words, and a college news writing instructor who finally taught me form and clarity. I kept a secret journal. I always felt a surge of joy in being able to cobble sentences into coherent paragraphs to create a story with a beginning, middle and end. This interest in words – and the power of narrative – would eventually pilot me into a 12-year career in community journalism, where I could combine, at last, my love of news, personal stories, history and social justice.

The journalism later led to an even longer 17-year career in the arts – as executive director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum – where I joined with others to build an ethnic-specific home for arts and culture, a place where we could experiment with new community-driven programs and exhibitions that might resonate with what Acevedo describes as “the multi-dimensional audience,” people of color proud of their ethnicity, but complex in their artistic motivations and sensibilities.

At the forum, Acevedo noted that America has advanced from a “mono-cultural” assimilation model that involves replacing one’s first culture with another culture to an “acculturation” model, where one retains one’s first culture and acquires a second culture. It is now acceptable to be bi-cultural, Acevedo said. This long-overdue re-envisioning has been promoted by people of color in the arts who have felt unseen and unheard for too long, and is now buttressed by demographics that support the urgency of the need to diversify.

What does diversity look like in my children’s generation? I’m not exactly sure. My kids are half-Chinese and half-Vietnamese, living in a largely Asian inner-city neighborhood among friends who are mostly immigrant and Asian. But their circle includes kids of all ethnicities. What they share – apart from quick-fingered dexterity on the on-line highway – is a multicultural sensitivity shaped by

the understanding that develops when kids, growing up in close proximity, learn to accommodate one another's dissimilarities and find common ground from which to build sincere relationships.

In the same way that I first experienced my arts moments privately in the home and among my peers, I know that my kids and their friends are doing the same. Their arts experiences are indecipherable to most educators and arts advocates, who lag way behind in their knowledge and grasp of the traditions and practices that have found their way to American shores, only to be reinterpreted and remade in turn by the tech-savvy children of the immigrants.

I asked my older son what he thought about the mainstream arts. Did he have any interest in museums, the orchestra, dance or the theater? He shrugged. "No, that's all that classical white stuff," he said. "*None* of my friends are interested in that." It was interesting to hear him say that because some of his best friends are white. With the easing of racial segregation and the ubiquitous influence of the social web, my son's generation – Gen Y – has begun to see the world less in terms of firm categories and more as a place where boundaries can and should be traversed.

Do I worry about the survival of arts organizations? In one sense, I don't. The arts have always been more about what stirs from within, not the spectacle from without; about doing and making, not simply watching and judging; about reinterpretation and invention, not repetition and rigid adherence to the past. If you explore online blogs or social media sites like YouTube, Flickr, Myspace or Facebook, it's hard to believe originality and artistic expression are faltering. The rich digital outpouring from young people – the integrated forms of poetry and prose, music, dance, photography, design and video – reveals a lush democratic renaissance that's probably still in its gestational phase.

Last spring, my 15-year-old son and four classmates spent two days at my house, teaming up to create a short video for a freshman language arts class. Using a simple flip video camera, they decided to recreate a scene from William Golding's "Lord of the Flies," a book they were reading in class. They took great pleasure in painting their faces, writing dialogue, coaxing one another into on-camera roles, finding random props from around the house and filming in the backyard. They also enjoyed the final stage of editing and assembling the footage for the class presentation. Was this an arts experience? I think so. From my parental perch – seeing adolescent mayhem morph into a wonderful collaborative enterprise – this was participatory art at its best.

As I look back on my own growing up years, the arts were about having time for unstructured play, experimentation and chance interaction. Somehow though, the arts – in the larger public view – have been ritualized, professionalized and commercialized as some form of higher aesthetics we go to see in performance halls, theaters and galleries, not the little things that occur spontaneously within each individual, not the moments of illumination and discovery that surface within families or between friends during sharing time or simple play.

As Gen Y continues to rearrange our notions of thinking, communicating, connecting and producing, I trust that they also will draw from an arts tradition that came before them, much of which still remains undiscovered because of our blindness to our own multicultural history and our

slowness to embrace the new diversity. Empowered in this way, Gen Y can help guide us toward a future in which art has become *the* synonym for creativity and the newly unleashed creativity becomes a beacon for understanding and appreciating our shared humanity.