



# The Public Benefits and Value of Arts & Culture:

*What Have We Learned and Why Does it Matter?*

## A REPORT FOR CUYAHOGA ARTS & CULTURE

by Holly Sidford, *Helicon Collaborative* and Nick Rabkin, *reMaking Culture*

**Cuyahoga Arts & Culture (CAC) is the public funder for arts and culture in (Cleveland) Cuyahoga County, Ohio. It administers one of the largest programs of public grant support for local arts and culture in the nation.**

It is funded by an unusual source – a tax levy on cigarettes that was approved by voters in 2006. Since 2007, CAC has distributed over \$112 million in grants. In 2014 it provided nearly \$16 million to support general operations and cultural projects by 196 Cuyahoga County nonprofit organizations. In an environment of growing need, CAC stands out as an essential partner in sustaining and developing the cultural vitality of the Cleveland and Cuyahoga County area.

CAC has worked affirmatively to support qualified organizations in every corner of Cuyahoga County, and its grants support programs that have affected people in every community of the region. As a public agency, CAC has a responsibility to see that its funds generate benefits and value for residents across Cuyahoga County, and to communicate the public benefits and value its partners create through their work. It also has a responsibility to assure that the benefits of arts and culture are distributed equitably, meaningfully serving all the people of the region.

After eight years of operation, CAC board and staff want to better understand how its partners (grant recipients) generate value for the public, and how those benefits are distributed and perceived by residents of the county. To that end, in the fall of 2013, CAC commissioned Helicon Collaborative and reMaking Culture to help answer these questions:

- How do CAC's partners create public benefits and who are the beneficiaries?
- Are the partners' and the public's understanding of the value of arts and culture aligned, or do they differ?
- How do local policymakers and other grantmakers understand the public value of arts and culture?
- Can public value and benefits be enhanced by CAC and its partners?

The larger context for the study involves long-term patterns in cultural participation nationally. People participate in arts and culture in three fundamental ways: attendance at live or mediated cultural events; study and learning in and about arts and culture; and actively making cultural products as professionals or amateurs – writing, visual and performing arts, new media, the humanities.

According to National Endowment for the Arts studies, audiences for art forms predominantly practiced in the nonprofit sector have been eroding for three decades.<sup>1</sup> The proportion of adults who attended at least one of several kinds of performances or an art museum or gallery in the past year declined from 1982 to 2008 by 11.3 percent overall. The decline has been precipitous in some art forms, and more gradual in others. In the decade between 2002 to 2012, for example, ballet attendance declined 33 percent, opera attendance dropped 27 percent, and classical music attendance was down 29 percent. Over a 20-year period, between 1992 and 2012, attendance at dance events other than ballet declined 18 percent. From 1982 to 2008, attendance at non-musical plays declined 21 percent and 10 percent for musical plays. Art museums and galleries fared better than other art forms, down just one percent from 1982 to 2012.

## Demand for *active* participation in the arts is going up across demographic groups.

Demographic shifts, technological advances, changes in leisure preferences, increased competition for limited time and other broad changes in contemporary life have all contributed to this trend. But the conclusion is stark: in 2012, only one-third of American adults visited an art museum or gallery or attended at least one of various types of performing arts events, and those that did attend were older, higher income and better-educated than the population at large. In other words, two-thirds of adults nationwide did not attend an arts and culture event of the kind produced by nonprofits.

### THE CHALLENGE

To ensure that cultural organizations are relevant and engaging to their communities, and that appealing cultural programs are available and accessible to all.

### THE OPPORTUNITY

To reinvent and expand the roles that arts and culture organizations play in making our communities more vital and our lives more meaningful.

At the same time, robust cultural activity is taking place outside those nonprofit cultural institutions – at the community level, online and in public spaces of various kinds. Demand for *active* participation in the arts is going up across demographic groups. Fully half of all adults “created, performed or shared art through various methods” in 2012.<sup>2</sup> There is compelling evidence that these national patterns of cultural participation hold true in Cuyahoga County.<sup>3</sup>

The decline in audiences has disrupted the steady growth that the nonprofit cultural sector enjoyed over the last century. It has already forced some nonprofits to cut programming or even close their doors. It jeopardizes the future of many more, especially those that have difficulty appealing to a broad cross-section of audiences in their community and lack the robust financial reserves necessary to survive without growing audiences.

The decline in audiences is a great challenge to every cultural organization, but it also represents an important opportunity. The *challenge* is to ensure that cultural organizations are relevant and engaging to their communities, and that appealing cultural programs are available and accessible to all. Unless more people more highly value cultural programs and cultural organizations, the future of such cultural resources will be threatened. And continued erosion of public appreciation for arts and culture is likely to affect the sustainability of public funding, including support for levies such as the one that supports CAC. The *opportunity* is to reinvent and expand the roles that arts and culture organizations play in making our communities more vital and our lives more meaningful.

## Methods

Helicon and reMaking Culture used multiple methods to explore CAC's research questions. We reviewed relevant national and local research literature; analyzed CAC grant proposals and reports; conducted in-depth interviews with Cuyahoga County cultural leaders, civic leaders and other funders of arts and culture; did intercept interviews with attendees at selected cultural events; and facilitated focus groups in three neighborhoods (Gordon Square, University Circle and Hough) that included a diverse range of adults and some teenagers.

As investigators, we combined analysis of these data with our extensive field experience, which includes decades of work in arts and culture sector as funders, managers, researchers and consultants.

## Findings

Social science researchers have found that arts and culture can generate substantial public benefits.<sup>4</sup> Those benefits derive from cultural experiences that are meaningful, powerful and relevant to individuals, and experienced over time as people act as audience members, learners, or makers of cultural products.

**Different kinds of arts and cultural experiences are generated by different kinds of organizations, different kinds of practices and different forms of art and culture, but the benefits are most significant to those who actively participate in a sustained way. Public value is then built from the aggregated benefits to individuals, accumulated over time.**

The research literature focuses primarily on **three kinds of public benefits**, and our interviews established that cultural and civic leaders in Cuyahoga County see these benefits as well:

### INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Arts and culture are building blocks of personal agency and voice. They spur creativity and imagination; stimulate empathy and help people make meaning; enlarge tolerance for complexity; deepen cross-cultural understanding; encourage discipline and teamwork; contribute to a sense of personal mastery; and improve performance in other fields. Learning the arts, particularly learning to *make* art in any form, generates significant cognitive, emotional and social benefits, particularly for young people. So does learning and participation in the humanities and sciences. These benefits are cumulative. Isolated experiences rarely have substantial effects. One person we interviewed expressed the view we heard from many others: "Participating in the arts has changed my life. It opened the door to something I didn't know existed." Another amplified this concept: "We have seen the arts save kids' lives and give adults renewed sense of purpose. It's real."

### QUALITY OF LIFE

Arts and culture contribute to building local identity and pride of place. They aid the development of both social capital, which builds connections among people within communities, and bridging capital, which creates links between different communities. Arts and culture can improve public safety and business climate; and they can animate community spaces and neighborhood life. Arts and culture propel aspirations and pathways toward social mobility; and they contribute to communities' physical and psycho-social well-being. Referring to a youth theater program in her neighborhood, a grandmother in one of our focus groups noted, "Somalis, Italians, Chinese, African-Americans. All their kids participate and all their parents come out for performances. Nothing else brings us together like that." A woman from another neighborhood praised the effects of a public art project: "It had a galvanizing effect on the neighborhood that nothing else did; it brought everyone out, and connected us in new ways; it helps define our neighborhood. Now we have five times the number of people involved in our block parties. They have taken ownership of the neighborhood."

### ECONOMIC IMPACT

Arts and culture contribute to local and regional economies, generating jobs and spending, attracting tourists, and making places attractive to businesses and their employees. The Cleveland City Planning Commission estimates that the arts annually contribute \$1.3 billion to the regional economy and asserts that "Cleveland has an opportunity to capitalize on its enviable cultural assets as catalysts for neighborhood regeneration and community-wide economic development."<sup>5</sup> A recent study of Cleveland's music sector showed that payroll in that sector alone totaled \$85 million in 2009.<sup>6</sup> We found widespread belief that arts and culture have had positive effects in several Cuyahoga County communities. One interviewee told us, "There are quite a few neighborhoods in Cleveland that were quite dangerous and sketchy 10 or 15 years ago that are now quite appealing and lively as a result of the arts." Others noted the central role arts activity has played in the revitalization of downtown Cleveland.

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## The Views in Cuyahoga County

Cuyahoga County cultural leaders cited significant community improvements that have flowed from cultural activity in Cleveland's downtown and neighborhoods such as Collinwood, Gordon Square and Tremont. They noted that arts education programs – from Hough, another Cleveland neighborhood, to Cleveland Heights, an inner-ring suburb – have improved the social, cognitive and emotional developmental trajectories of many young people. They discussed ways some cultural organizations are empowering community residents by enabling them to tell their own stories through theater, dance and music productions, and the enthusiastic responses these programs are producing among participants and their neighbors. We heard repeatedly about neighborhood-based cultural events, open-air festivals and other activities that are building community connections and beautifying neighborhoods, burnishing Cleveland's reputation as an appealing place to live and visit.

Civic leaders and area residents also recognize the benefits of arts and culture. Our interviews with civic leaders, intercept conversations at cultural events and focus groups with residents, and public opinion polling by Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, the region's local arts research and advocacy organization, all confirmed broad public recognition that arts and culture generate substantial individual, economic and quality of life benefits in Cuyahoga County. People see the benefits of arts and culture for children especially. They value what the arts can bring to neighborhood cohesion and identity, and appreciate the added economic activity.

Arts and culture are features of all human societies, and civilizations are marked by their exceptional creativity, artistry and humanistic achievement. In addition to the three benefits noted above, some we interviewed argued that building and sustaining a legacy of outstanding artistry is, in itself, a public value, irrespective of its immediate, temporal value for the community. Preserving and sustaining the cultural gifts of the past is, they asserted, as valuable for the future as preserving and sustaining a healthy natural environment.

Others we interviewed took a different perspective. They understand that the cultural gifts of the past benefit those who use and enjoy them, but also see that these advantages are not available to people who do not have ready access to this legacy. There are barriers – perceptual as well as economic, geographic, cultural and psychological – that make access to the arts problematic for many.

One prominent obstacle to broader participation is the primacy given to art forms derived from the Western European classical tradition, and the collateral devaluing or exclusion of artistic traditions from other parts of the world. In various ways, many people we interviewed expressed the view that while they aren't interested only in artistic and cultural traditions related to their specific cultural heritage, when they rarely or never see or hear about those forms of expression in a given cultural institution, they think that institution is not for them.

Another barrier to wider access is a tendency of many institutions to emphasize just one of the three modes of cultural participation – that of being an audience member. Many nonprofit cultural organizations focus primarily on professional presentations for passive audiences, and give less time and attention to programs featuring active learning or actual art making. Genuine “access” is not just about attending professional cultural programs. The most robust benefits of arts and culture are available when attendance is balanced with the learning and making modes of participation. There is growing evidence that many people crave a better balance among the kinds of participation available to them.

## Barriers to Accessing Arts and Culture

- Focus on Western art forms
- Overemphasis on participating as an audience member
- Lack of attention to learner and maker roles

Our interviews and focus groups revealed that the public is more sensitive than many cultural leaders to the inequitable distribution of cultural resources – to who has full access, and the unevenness of opportunities to participate in and benefit from the arts. Many people we talked to simply do not believe that arts and culture, and the benefits associated with them, are broadly and fairly accessible despite a widespread public appetite for more and more relevant cultural experiences, affirmed repeatedly in our interviews and focus groups. Many people acknowledged the efforts of some cultural institutions to overcome a history of elitism, but they believe significant segments of the public still feel most mainstream non-profit cultural institutions are inaccessible and uninviting. “We don’t feel welcomed,” said one African-American woman. “When guests visit my home, I ask about their lives and express interest in their views. That doesn’t happen at cultural institutions. And we don’t see anyone else who looks like us when we’re there, so that’s a double obstacle.” Another noted, “Arts have no negative consequences for the community. But funding can have negative consequences, when it is distributed inequitably and doesn’t help the communities that need it most.”

## Many communities and neighborhoods in Cuyahoga County remain under-resourced in terms of arts and cultural organizations and programs.

A significant finding of this research is that many communities and neighborhoods in Cuyahoga County remain under-resourced in terms of arts and cultural organizations and programs. Arts education has been reduced or eliminated in many public schools, including in the county’s largest school district – Cleveland Metropolitan – and there are very limited opportunities for arts engagement for most children outside school. This is particularly true in lower-income neighborhoods and communities with large populations of people of color. A resident of Hough noted, “Participating in the arts helped my son academically and in other ways. But these kinds of programs are a very limited resource in the inner city.”

Audience data from several leading cultural organizations confirmed that their audiences remain overwhelmingly white, affluent, highly educated and older. One person spoke for many in saying, “We are still suffering from a legacy of exclusion. The most integrated and diverse cultural events in Cleveland are those that are outdoors, at convenient times, and free.”

## Looking Forward

In the six months of this research project, we saw evidence of a pattern we have observed in many other communities – the existence of two kinds of nonprofit cultural organizations. Both are dedicated to excellence, but one type focuses primarily on serving or advancing specific art forms, and the other focused on serving or advancing communities through culture.

The former – typified by major museums, symphonies, ballets and theaters – has traditionally placed priority on the highest quality professional presentation of arts and culture to appreciative audiences. The latter – rooted in the settlement house movement and other community-based cultural traditions – prioritizes participation in the arts as a process for empowering people and groups, including many who are otherwise voiceless or disadvantaged.

### TWO TYPES OF NONPROFITS

EXCELLENCE	
SERVING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CULTURE	SERVING SPECIFIC ART FORMS

Cuyahoga County continues to need both traditions – the pursuit and preservation of virtuosity in every art form, and the deployment of artistic processes to build individual and community strength and respect for our increasingly plural cultural heritages. Both are vital elements of the cultural genome of America, and in places like Cuyahoga County, they have been wound together in a kind of double helix for more than a century.



## Understanding Cleveland History

Large, world-class cultural institutions like The Cleveland Orchestra and the Cleveland Museum of Art were founded and developed during a period when the industrial economy of Cuyahoga County was ascendant, generating the enormous wealth that invested in the creation and expansion of these hallmark institutions.

The robust economy also generated tens of thousands of jobs that attracted waves of immigration from Europe and African-Americans from the U.S. South. But by the 1970s, the region's industrial economy began to hollow out. Cleveland's population peaked around 1950 and then began to decline. In the '70s and '80s, the region's population dropped precipitously as thousands of jobs disappeared. Caucasians comprised 84 percent of Cleveland's population in 1950, but less than 50 percent by 1990, and 37 percent in 2010. Close to 900,000 people lived in Cleveland in 1950, but the city's population shrank to less than half that size by 2012.

By the last Census, a majority of Cleveland residents were African-American, and 10 percent were Hispanic. Asians, while the smallest cohort, were the fastest growing ethnic group. Cleveland, and now some of its suburban communities, suffer from high levels of concentrated poverty. In fact, according to the United Way of Greater Cleveland, "Since 2000, the suburbs of Cuyahoga County outpaced Cleveland in poverty growth by a large margin."<sup>7</sup>

**The nature of authority and expertise has changed in the cultural sector, as in other fields, and people increasingly want opportunities to participate, interact and express themselves rather than simply receive experts' knowledge.**

But the larger context for arts and culture is changing, as many cultural leaders we spoke with in Cuyahoga County acknowledge. These changes put a premium on relevance and sustained efforts to engage a broad range of people in the work of cultural institutions of all kinds. New cultural attractions – live, recorded, and online – compete for people's time and attention, posing challenges to cultural organizations that want to attract visitors, members and patrons. The nature of authority and expertise has changed in the cultural sector, as in other fields, and people increasingly want opportunities to participate, interact and express *themselves* rather than simply receive experts' knowledge. The traditional lines between "fine" or "high" art and other forms have blurred, and younger audiences especially do not observe the hierarchy of aesthetic distinctions that were once so important. The costs of doing business only increase each year, and most nonprofit cultural groups operate on very thin financial margins. In addition, the demographics of our communities are changing.

The viability of many cultural organizations will depend on serving more diverse parts of the community, with dynamic, relevant programming that is as much about enabling people to make art themselves as it is about improving the audience experience.

There are positive signs that the economy of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County is adapting to a post-industrial reality, with significant investments in downtown development and growth in the population of young professionals. The medical sector is currently leading the way. But many in our interviews noted that creativity and innovation are the keys to the economy of the future. The region's cultural sector is distinguished and strong, and it is a domain in which creativity is both valued and cultivated. The contributions it is making to the revitalization of particular neighborhoods and downtown Cleveland may, in the long run, be dwarfed by the contributions it can make to the development of the creative capacities of the region's people – the ultimate drivers of economic development. Those capacities can be transferred and manifested in many other domains.

**This is not just a matter of more effective or targeted marketing; it requires a fundamental shift in the ways that cultural organizations think about their roles, the ways they conduct programs and operate in the community.**

The context for the work of cultural institutions in Cuyahoga County has changed profoundly over the past few decades, and cultural groups need to consider the impact of this change on their work. If arts and culture are going to contribute significant public value to the *whole* community of Cuyahoga County, the larger demographic, economic and technological trends need to be taken into account by cultural organizations of all kinds.

This is not just a matter of more effective or targeted marketing; it requires a fundamental shift in the ways that cultural organizations think about their roles, the ways they conduct programs and operate in the community. We saw evidence that many cultural organizations are aware of this need and that some are making serious efforts to change. But trying to truly serve the diverse communities of the region is a new kind of work for many, especially those whose historic orientation has prioritized artistic virtuosity over community engagement. It takes time to learn new approaches.

Meaningful change in the way large portions of population perceive cultural institutions and actual shifts in the people these institutions actively engage will not be achieved without a significant shift in thinking and sustained changes in behavior that signal a commitment to truly serving more of the county's residents in dynamic new ways.

This involves everyone. Cultural organizations that are rooted in the "high art" lineage have much to learn from the community-oriented tradition in American culture, particularly about programming that invites deeper participation in learning about and making art. But the changing context also requires that community-oriented cultural groups adapt as well, better articulating their vital contributions to the arts ecology and community life; strengthening their organizational operations; raising the funds and the capacity to meet their communities' strong appetite and need for relevant, meaningful programs; and appealing imaginatively to contemporary sensibilities.

**Public value and benefits are closely linked to the ways cultural institutions of all kinds engage and serve different parts of the community as audiences, learners and makers of culture. As the community changes demographically, economically and culturally, the long-term viability of all cultural institutions will depend on how well and effectively they engage and serve different publics, particularly those that are currently underserved as audience members, learners and makers of art.**

## Recommendations: Creating More Public Value

As a funder, CAC does not create public value. Its partners, the nonprofits it supports, do. Creating more public value through arts and culture can only be achieved by the concerted actions of cultural organizations and artists themselves, working individually and collectively to reach more people in more varied and meaningful ways. Even as they must sustain themselves through a period of financial challenge and tectonic shifts in their operating environment, cultural leaders and advocates in the region must also serve more Cuyahoga County residents with programs that are relevant, dynamic and impactful. Change always involves struggle and risk. But for most cultural organizations, the greater risk is in not changing to meet the needs of these times and anticipating the ones ahead.

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CAC's role in expanding the public benefits of arts and culture is that of an enabler. Its role is to support a wide spectrum of cultural endeavors, kinds of institutions and artists because sustaining a broad range of cultural endeavors in Cuyahoga County is essential if arts and culture are to serve a diverse public and continue to strengthen the vitality of the region. **CAC also has a special role to play in helping the cultural enterprises that are working affirmatively to be more relevant to the full spectrum of the county's population, including lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color.** Over more than a century, cultural organizations and funders have developed practices and dispositions that favor the "high art" strand of cultural production more than the "community" strand, and accord greater value to the audience mode of participation more than to the learning or the making culture modes.

**As the region's public arts agency, CAC has a unique role to play in supporting those organizations placing public value at the center of their practice, and actively learning how to do that effectively and with impact.**



Our research in Cuyahoga County and our analysis of national trends make it clear that boosting the public benefits of arts and culture is essential to the future of the cultural sector as a whole. Cultural organizations of all types, as well as artists, need to strengthen the value and meaning of arts and culture to the broad cross-section of community resident.

Public funders, like CAC, have a special responsibility to enhance public benefits, and we think CAC is placing appropriate emphasis on public value in its grant making.

Moving forward, we recommend that CAC pursue three additional strategies to advance the public value of the arts:

- 1 Make public value a prominent feature of CAC's communications strategy and its various reports on arts and cultural organizations' contributions to Cuyahoga County.
- 2 Stimulate broad-based discussions about the various modes of participation and pathways to creating public value in the arts and, informed by those discussions, enhance the capacity of arts and cultural organizations and artists to actually generate it.
- 3 In partnership with the cultural sector and diverse residents of the county, continue exploring and refining the best use of CAC's resources in supporting arts and culture in the public interest in the rapidly changing context of the 21st century Cuyahoga County.

## Conclusion

Given the creativity, ingenuity and commitment of the CAC and its cultural partners, these strategies – pursued imaginatively and in combination – can significantly expand the public benefits of arts and culture to the region, and deepen residents' understanding of the essential contributions of arts and culture to their lives and communities.

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## Footnotes

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