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How arts organizations rose to meet the challenge of turbulent times

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Before taking over as the SF Ballet's interim executive director this June, Danielle St. Germain-Gordon spent three years as its chief development officer, giving her a broad perspective on how the company's business operations and staff underpin its artistic endeavors.

"Our job was to ensure that artists and staff were employed," she said. "And it was about partnering with the community, and then creating and presenting works."

The importance of keeping staff employed and engaged with the community is echoed among leadership at Bay Area museums and performing arts nonprofits as they emerge from the most challenging and turbulent year most have ever known.

The shelter-in-place order in March 2020 closed cultural institutions abruptly. Their revenue streams from performances and



LIPO CHING | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

Exploratorium Senior Manager,
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exhibitions evaporated almost overnight. With no ticket sales — and no end to the pandemic in sight — the future looked foreboding.

Shortly after, the national racial reckoning touched off by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black men and women at the hands of police prompted arts organizations to reflect on how their programming and internal cultures needed to change to respond to the urgency of the moment — all while the economic ravages of Covid continued.

How could they keep their audiences engaged and staff employed, and do so remotely? And how could they re-envision their business models quickly enough to stay afloat?

For most, three strategies stand out: Developing and delivering robust digital programming; amplifying the social justice issues that directly impacted their communities; and leaning on corporate partnerships, both old and new, like never before.

The hard times and tough lessons of the past year did not come without real benefits. Forced by circumstance to innovate, many arts nonprofits are not just re-opening. They are re-centered around new programming, priorities and channels for interacting with their public.

Digital programming

The pandemic forced organizations to go digital to an extent few had the resources for – or inclination to – in the past. When cultural institutions closed their physical doors, digital platforms took center stage.

The Exploratorium already had a strong digital presence. It was one of the first websites on the internet, receiving about 8 million online visitors per year, with a majority accessing educational content. Immediately after the shelter-in-place order, staff built a webpage called the “Learning Toolbox” — providing resources for families and educators to learn about science-based topics. Their goal was to keep educational experiences free.

Estelle Davis, senior manager of corporate engagement at the Exploratorium, expressed a profound sense of fear when the

museum closed in March of 2020. But it reinforced the importance of their mission.

“We asked what can we as a science-driven institution do at this moment? There was this incredible momentum and energy by staff to educate audiences on basic science surrounding viruses,” she said.

When the Children’s Creativity Museum closed its doors, they had to show some creativity of their own, Katharine Greenbaum, its director of philanthropy and strategic initiatives, told me. Its partnership with the Yerba Buena Gardens Conservancy allowed it to reimagine programming, culminating in its Create@Home initiative. That program provides families with digital content — video tutorials, instruction guides and coloring sheets — that could be accessed through its website and social media. It also offered outdoor, in-person programming.

“These programs and activities allowed us to focus on our San Francisco-based neighbors and partners, strengthening our local ecosystem where residents, businesses and nonprofits could once again start to thrive together,” Greenbaum said.

The pandemic also flipped the script for arts nonprofits. Digital programming had been seen as secondary to the on-site experience, a ranking reflected in the funding and staffing it received. Once shelter-in-place went into they had to rush to re-orient their organizations to get content online as quickly as possible.

“Prior to the pandemic, we were working on launching a digital platform of archival concerts, on demand concerts, education activities and other programs. The pandemic brought the launch date up by many months,” Marshall Lamm, spokesperson for SFJazz noted. “SFJazz Education transformed the in-school curriculum to digital delivery for more than 20,000 students and launched new online programming, including The Breakdown, a series that explores the cultural links from jazz to hip hop and other contemporary music.”

Amplifying social justice

As institutions across society from business to sports to media were called to account for the roles they had long played in perpetuating racial inequality, Bay Area arts organizations doubled down on their advocacy and put action to words.

Lori Fogarty, director and CEO of the Oakland Museum of California, took measure of what it really means to be in service to their community: "We see ourselves as a community centered institution looking at the most urgent topical issues facing Oakland and the Bay Area, and that's the starting place for our content and programmatic development."

One of the ways they used their expertise was around saving the Oakland artwork generated in association with the protests last year.

"We were called upon by elected officials and community members to be part of the effort around preserving the protest art that was on the plywood windows downtown, and we have been part of a coalition called Art For the Movement. It wasn't about doing an exhibition or acquiring these works for our collection. We wanted to support this effort and utilize this artwork as a platform for dialogue around truth and reconciliation, and that was a profound partnership because it was not about serving the museum's needs. It was the museum being in service with the skills and resources that we have to support the issue."

Beyond making public statements in support of Black Lives Matter and opposing violence against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, some institutions looked inside of the systems in which they operate in order to become anti-racist organizations.

In June 2020, both the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the de Young and Legion of Honor) as well as the Exploratorium separately announced commitments to becoming anti-racist institutions. Both organizations underwent considerable self-examination that included their programming and exhibitions and hiring practices.

At the Exploratorium, Davis highlighted the importance of forging lasting partnerships. "As we evolve our museum, we are working to identify ways to make our galleries and visitor experience more inclusive, welcoming and engaging to all people," she said. "In our

work with educators, we are increasing efforts to help professionals inspire students in topics of science with the most equitable practices possible. As we collaborate around the world, we prioritize learning from our partnerships with diverse cultures and engage with humility. We continue to highlight Black and other underrepresented scientists, scholars, artists and community members in programs and exhibitions. And we are excited to create relationships with new partners who are interested in supporting our anti-racist trajectory.”

Monetta White, executive director of the Museum of the African Diaspora, also acknowledged the mission-driven work at her museum: “MoAD has always served as a platform for igniting challenging conversations and inspiring learning through the lens of the African Diaspora. 2020 made our work that much more imperative as America confronted difficult conversations about race and social justice. Our online programming during the pandemic, especially our community resilience programs, fostered dialogue about difficult issues, provided resources for assistance and action, and amplified voices in the community.”

Corporate partnerships

Though arts nonprofits had significantly reduced revenue while their doors were closed, private donations, foundations and government funding helped them to keep creating digital resources that are accessible to international audiences.

Greenbaum told me that the Children’s Creativity Museum’s corporate partners, Adobe and Capital One, migrated their restricted grants to operating support in those first months of the pandemic, which supported their work at such a critical time.

Lamm at SFJazz stressed the importance of choosing partners that have similar values: “With Covid accelerating our digital transformation, we have the opportunity to reach out to a larger audience and corporations are interested in our demographic, member base and global reach. But it’s important to partner with companies that are in alignment with our Racial Equity and Action statement and that are committed to improving the lives of their communities,” he said.

Corporate partners have traditionally preferred to fund programs, exhibitions or performances to which their name is attached. Yet the pandemic has reinforced the importance of funding daily operations.

“Corporations are looking for creative ways to support arts institutions,” Fogarty said. “One of the challenges with corporate giving is that it’s marketing driven. We did see some corporate donors become flexible and say we’re going to convert this to operating rather than program support, which was so helpful.”

Through digital programs, taking a stand on social justice issues and reinvigorating corporate partners, Bay Area arts nonprofit have emerged out of the pandemic with renewed visions and stronger than ever.

The prolonged period of isolation has indeed taken its toll on all of us, but in addition to the longing to see family and friends in a nonvirtual context, I missed seeing art in the flesh. Being able to tune in digitally through online programs and social media sustained me during this time, but I look forward again to the entire art experience of being physically in a space with performers and their work.

REFLECTING THE TIMES

Arts organizations are adding program to respond to the movement for racial justice. Here are some that have been added by Bay Area organizations:

- "Dancers United Against Racism" — SF Ballet

This powerful minute and a half video is emblematic of the outreach, stories and advocacy that local arts nonprofits have produced following the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black men and women at the hands of police over the past 15 months.

- “Art For the Movement” — Oakland Museum of California

This initiative was organized by the Black Cultural Zone along with other Black-led organizations and artists. The Oakland Museum of

California offered their staff's expertise in cataloguing, preservation, and documentation to preserve the works of art created in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

- "Community Resilience" Virtual Programming — Museum of African Diaspora

This online programming during the pandemic fostered dialogue about difficult issues, provided concrete resources for assistance and action and helped to amplify the voice of the community. The programs to present, interpret and encourage dialogue through the artistic expression of people of African descent and are more essential than ever.

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