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Why the arts matter and deserve support -- especially in bleak times

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Two South Florida dance companies closed recently. West Palm Beach's lively, lovely Ballet Florida filed for bankruptcy two weeks ago, and Miami-Dade's gallant Ballet Gamonet, after months of financial struggle, suspended performances in March and seems unlikely to return.

Meanwhile, *American Idol* host Ryan Seacrest will get \$45 million to stay with the show for another three years, and Goldman Sachs made \$4.3 billion in profits from April to June. Presumably, both Goldman execs and Seacrest feel like dancing, though it's doubtful the rest of us would want to watch.

These events may not seem connected, but they are. We've always been a society that values profitability and celebrity above almost all other qualities. That emphasis reached delirious levels in the boom years, even as Ponzi-inspired finance firms shafted the economy and our pop star-obsessed media fed a culture of celebrity sucking stupidity.

Those attitudes increasingly left the non-pop performing, visual and literary arts scrabbling on the margins of our society and our esteem, except for the tiny percentage that can claim some mass appeal and/or money-making clout. The downgraded position of the arts has been exacerbated by our desperate times, as everyone from the state of California on down tries to spend the minimum (or less) to get by, so that the arts suffer from the double whammy of being considered neither profitable nor necessary.

As communities struggle to keep going, culture is getting kicked to the curb, last on lists of nonessential items like parks, libraries, and humanity for the homeless. The state of Florida has cut arts funding from \$34 million in 2007 to \$3 million this year. The entire \$11 million that the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs receives from the county is on the chopping block, victim of our plummeting property tax revenues. There were conservative howls when \$50 million in arts funding was salvaged in the \$787 billion federal stimulus package, presumably because the jobs of musicians or dancers or actors are just frivolous time-wasters and not worth saving. Perhaps politicians think artists should go work at a foreclosure call center at one of the banks that shoveled adjustable rate mortgages down our throats.

Meanwhile, corporate arts funding has fallen victim to belt-tightening and shareholder rage over any expense that doesn't boost the bottom line. Corporate giving is one of the very few ways that companies give back to their community, albeit motivated primarily by the marketing boost of having their logo on the program. Such contributions might not have an immediate effect on the company's profitability. But they do help make those communities better places to live, which ultimately benefits everybody.

AN ESSENTIAL

I know, with jobs and homes and dreams of better lives being lost by the millions, art and culture seem like a luxury. But I would argue that they're an essential aspect of being happy and civilized. More, I would argue that thinking culture is a frill, a disposable ornament for a comfortable life, has helped get us into the mess we're in.

Take the ethical failure that led to the financial crisis, the development of a criminally selfish system where the only thing that mattered (and still matters) is how much money is made, regardless of common sense or fairness or actual value produced for anyone but a few executives at the top. You could attribute the cancerous growth of that kind of thinking, at least in part, to the disappearance of the arts from our educational system and the downgrading of culture to consumer pop culture.

After all, the arts teach us morality, humanity, the range of identity, the importance of beauty and ideas and qualities you can't quantify, the values we hold in common. Unlike *American Idol*, they teach us that there are qualities that matter more than fame. They teach us all this through miraculously pleasurable experiences that at their best are akin to spiritual revelation, and that even in their lesser occurrences are a source of delight and understanding. Why does that constantly have to be defended as worthwhile? How can you love music without appreciating that beauty and form matter? How can you be moved by the novels of Junot Diaz or Charles Dickens and not absorb a sense of morality and fairness?

GETTING THE AX

But art or music classes in schools have become an extravagance derided by the lawmakers who make the budgets. Or worse, a distraction from the important work of learning to read, write, subtract, and maybe play sports (unless of course you're in private school, where classes like music and art that have become extras in our public school system are considered a necessary advantage). For the adults, fine or medium-grade art becomes a luxury for the rich, while the mass of us get mass culture, produced for profit.

Instead of declaring the inherent value of the arts, the cultural community increasingly falls back to defending itself in economic terms. The arts provide jobs, boost other spending, help revitalize cities and neighborhoods by drawing educated young people looking for a certain quality of life. Studying music boosts math skills, and studying painting could lead to a career in commercial graphic design. All perfectly reasonable arguments. But when the economy is tanking, making dances won't make as much money as making widgets, and if economic viability is your only defense, you're going to lose.

THE MEDIA'S COLLUSION

We in the media play our role in all this. Just like the rest of the culture, the media focuses on the most dominant movies, pop music and television, because that's where the numbers and the profitable ad rates are. (Or better yet, they focus on celebrities, because it's so much easier to write about a pop star's style and love life than her talent -- or lack thereof.) But the more the media ignores the arts because they're "unimportant," the more that attitude is reinforced in the world at large. It's a nasty circle. The arts increasingly disappear from public consciousness, and so the media is further justified in ignoring them.

The disappearance of arts (as opposed to entertainment) writers has accelerated dramatically in the last couple of years with the financial squeeze on newspapers and magazines. (And we are talking about writers, because when's the last time you saw a report on a new painter or choreographer on your local news broadcast?). Take the catastrophic situation in dance criticism, for instance, which I know and practice. There is one full-time dance critic left in the country right now, Alistair Macauley of the New York Times.

The freelancers who are mostly left to fill the gap often scramble as hard to make a living as the artists they cover. Even though dance -- from ballet troupes everywhere to music videos and TV shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* to the hip-hop competition circuit to ballroom to modern to a semi-hidden treasure trove of ethnic forms -- has arguably never been more widespread in this country.

MARGINALIZED

No, a dance concert doesn't have the audience of a Harry Potter movie. But treating it as an elitist, incomprehensible, negligible activity shoves dance much further to the margins than it deserves. It also creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: We don't cover dance because nobody's interested, but the fewer people know about dance, the less likely it is that they'll be interested.

And why wouldn't we be interested? Shouldn't we be? Yes, we need to focus on lifting ourselves out of the ditch right now.

People need a place to live, enough to eat, and a job to do. But as things get better, maybe more of those jobs could have to do with teaching or making or presenting art, rather than creating still more incomprehensible and ultimately worthless investment schemes.

Goldman Sachs already has too much money, and it sure doesn't make the rest of us feel like dancing.

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