Opinion: Can art save California?

By Joe Mathews

Can the arts save California?

On every public policy challenge other than climate change regulations, the state seems stuck. We can’t transform our education system to match our diverse population’s needs, expand our universities fast enough to meet future economic demands, or build enough affordable housing. Silicon Valley, once billed as a savior, is more interested in grabbing our data and selling us ads than making society better. The vast majority of Californians don’t bother to vote, much less engage in civic life.

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The state’s arts sector is wrestling with the same challenges: invasive technology, diversifying demography, fading engagement, stagnant education, scarce economic inequality. Over the last 18 months (after being assigned to edit a series on arts and society), I embarked on a crash course in how arts organizations seek to engage people. The experience left me uncharacteristically optimistic. While the arts can mirror the state’s larger dysfunction, they also may be the part of California best positioned to lead us out of this dark time.

Today, the arts retain credibility that other human pursuits

such as mass media, politics, and business have lost. In surveys, the biggest complaint that Californians voice about the arts is that they don't have time to enjoy them.

So I'd like to propose that the arts could be the secret sauce of a revival in California's civic culture. While technology can leave us feeling isolated, the arts connect us, and provide a sense of meaning, accomplishment, and even happiness. Researchers have shown that people who participate in arts and culture are more likely to vote, belong to civic organizations, know their neighbors, and do charitable work. The arts, in short, encourage us to be sociable. And sociability is becoming a lost, and thus valuable, art.

What's the secret of the arts' success?

The answer starts with healthy self-criticism: Arts leaders express urgent concern that their organizations aren't meeting the many needs of today's communities. In response, many California organizations has been aggressively experimenting and taking risks. Take the Cornerstone Theater's six-year series of nine plays on food and equity, "The Hunger Cycle." Or witness the Oakland Museum of California's exhibit All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50, which risked criticism of cultural appropriation and of celebrating a movement associated with violence. (The risk paid off, with the exhibition drawing large—and young—audiences.)

California is home to many powerful efforts to break down walls between the arts and people. The Riverside Art Museum sends staffers to block parties and neighborhood festivals, curating work it supports and conducting surveys on local arts needs. The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History has prioritized the work of "social bridging" —intentionally bringing together people from different walks of life at exhibits and events. Museum Executive Director Nina Simon writes that this involves matching "unlikely partners—opera singers and ukulele players, welders and knitters, Guggenheim

winners and backyard artists. Our goal in doing this work is to bring people together across differences and build a more cohesive community."

When is the last time you saw institutions outside the arts promote that kind of outreach?

These days, businesses, interest groups and politicians rarely try to make converts—they instead focus their resources on turning out their core customers and monetizing their contacts. But many of California's top arts institutions make their events and exhibits free, especially for kids.

The arts could do even more for California.

So many organizations try to reach the young, but the arts actually do it; when it comes to making art, 18- to 24-year-olds are most likely to participate. And, amidst a stressful deluge of digital information, arts organizations are models of curation and filtering out distractions. (It helps that you have to silence your cellphone while attending a play.)

The arts also are a case study in the importance of giving people what they need, and the folly of giving them what they want. Scholars have shown how websites that give us what we want give us too much of the same thing, thus constraining creativity and artistry, and ultimately disappointing audiences. The arts stand as a direct rebuttal to Silicon Valley's data obsession because great art's value is undeniable but can't be quantified by audience numbers or economic studies alone.

All this asks an awful lot of the arts, particularly when President Trump seeks to zero out the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts. But our arts organizations provide us with a rare template for pulling together broad networks of people and imagining very different realities in California. We need the arts more than ever.

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