

Interview with Douglas McLennan, Editor, Arts Journal

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Q: What is the role of an arts organization and blogs? How do those intersect?

A: Arts institutions are not just about a performance or a thing. It's about a whole construct of a lot of things. It's a way of thinking about life, a way of articulating, of describing. The way in which we express that is one aspect of it.

We believe that arts education is valuable but we've uncoupled it from the arts experience itself, when in fact, I think it's all integrated. To be able to appreciate the experience of a performance, your appreciation will be enhanced the more you know about it, the more you interact with it, the more you have experience around it, the more you talk with people about it. So isn't one of the intrinsic essential aspects of the performance then all of the stuff that goes around it to help you to appreciate it? I think of things like blogs and social media and events...if it's all part of the expression of building a community around something in which the community gets to interact with it and work on it, that is an essential part of the art itself. It's not just an add-on, it's not a thing that's disconnected, it's not window dressing. It's not any of those things. It's actually all part of articulating the aesthetic that you want to articulate.

Q: What are some ideas that you have to harness the power of blogs and social media to reach not only the choir that already appreciates the aesthetic, who can then talk about it further, but to start to reach new constituents that wouldn't be interested otherwise?

A: You need to always be looking outward. The quickest way to get a blogger's attention is to link to them and say something about what they do. Right? It's absolutely guaranteed. They'll be there in a flash! [laughter] So if you see this little community over here doing something, then start paying attention to them and interacting with them. They'll come back because they want to interact with you. It's sort of like this magical, mystic thing that happens. Start writing about something and people who care about it are going to find it. So if you're writing a lot of blog posts, or you're doing something, and five people are seeing it, then it means that you have an engaged people. And if you want to engage people, you have to meet them where they are.

I do a lot work in L.A. Some people there built this great arts calendar in which you can find everything. Nobody uses it. What's wrong? Well, they had an idea that if you put everything together in one place then people will think this is our better solution. That's not the way it works. Find out how people are doing something already. Don't presume that you're going to walk in and do it better and tell them that they should abandon all these things that they're doing and come and pay attention to you. Find out what it is that they're trying to do that they can't do, or that they need help doing, or that they're struggling with, and help them solve that.

That's how you get people to interact with you. You have a relationship with them and they see value. You're all about helping, rather than taking help. If you're writing a blog post and expecting people to come, you're asking for help. You've got to flip it.

Q: We'd like to talk with you a little about Arts Journal specifically and its history. You're the founder—what was the catalyst that brought it into being?

A: It started September 13, 1999. It actually really started a week before. I was a journalist at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and I saw a story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about the Barnes collection. The story was about a month old and it was about the Barnes having difficulties. What a shock. And I thought, there are probably stories in papers all over the place that I would be interested in and I will eventually find out about, but what if I could put them all in one place? If you could actually go through hundreds of places and put the most interesting things together? Now I never imagined it as a news service. In fact, it isn't a news service. I see it as a way of provoking discussion, of provoking conversation. So I'll put up things that I don't like or that I disagree with because I think they're provocative and I think people should have a way of looking at them.

I came up with the idea and the name, I think on a Tuesday, and on Wednesday I registered the name, bought some books on HTML, and spent Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday on yellow pads—by absolute painstaking trial and error—hardcoding, because there were no content management systems in HTML. I didn't understand it, and so every time I would do something, I would f--- it up. And I launched it Monday morning, and emailed everybody I knew. About three weeks later, *The New York Times* wrote about it because it was sort of something different. I was one of the first aggregators, and certainly the first in the arts. It was something that somebody wasn't doing back then. And almost immediately, it took off. About two weeks later I went off dial-up and got broadband. [laughter] It was pretty painstaking because I didn't know anything about HTML. And then about a month later, I quit my job. I immediately started getting clients for it because that was the time when the web was kind of young, and the expression was "Content is king." If you could get content to people, then people would pay attention to you. People would pay obscene amounts of money for my content. I would make a feed, again hand done because there was no automation, and send them out every day and [clients] would put them on their sites. Then about six months later, in a space of about six weeks, every one of my clients went out of business because it was the dotcom bust. They would all have these stupid business plans—they were going to redefine human behavior through the internet. It was just not going to happen.

Anyway, it grew from there. Two years later I started adding arts blogs because I thought it would be really interesting to get other people's voices. And about that time newspapers and publications started dropping writers, so I got some really great people who were great critics and I gave them space.

Q: Did they typically come to you or did you seek them out?

A: It was a combination. In the first part I came to them. Then as people started to see the collection—we have about 67 bloggers now.

Q: Do you have any ideas going forward about what direction Arts Journal might go?

A: Well, here's the problem. There's always a problem. [laughter] The problem is that it works because it's pretty simple. It is a very simple idea. It starts with a basic value proposition: it saves you time. It brings value to you in ways that you would probably [have] if you could do it yourself, but you don't have time to. So we find things to save you time. The more you start to add, the less valuable it becomes because people start to get overwhelmed by it. My earliest competitor was a site called *Arts and Letters Daily*, which is still around, owned by the Chronicle of Higher Education, but at the time was independent—Dennis Dutton, an American living in New Zealand, a professor, started it. His idea was, he only chose three stories every day. But they weren't specifically about arts and culture, they were just things that he thought were really interesting. And his site was even simpler than mine. In the beginning, he got a much, much larger audience than me because his stuff was even more tightly curated than mine. So if I was to say I'm going to have ten stories each day in dance, and ten in theater, and so on, I would lose those people for whom that would feel overwhelming. I've also tried bringing in the audience to suggest stories, which is sort of the Digg model, and Reddit, and all of those. But the value of [*Arts Journal*] is that it reflects a sort of sense of what's interesting, which is my sense of what's interesting. But the downside of it is that it reflects *my* sense of what's interesting.

Q: It's curated, in a sense.

A: Exactly. I've had a number of people help me with it over the years. But it's been really hard to get...it takes somebody about a year to really get good at it. I've never thought that it's a particularly difficult thing to do but it turns out that it is a little bit more difficult than it seems to be. It seems like it should be really easy.

Q: Not everyone can learn HTML in four days.

A: [laughter] Yeah. Well, we also look at about 2,000 stories every day.

Q: Is there a formula for deciding?

A: It's sort of an odd combination of skills. You have to know enough to know why this is important, why this director leaving this thing over here is really big news but this other one over here nobody really cares. You want to put out combinations of stories so that...sometimes I throw things in that you might look at and go, "What the hell is that doing there?" But I tend to put things in that often telegraph where I think things are going. Maybe not now or six months from now, but a year from now. So you get these sort of odd bits of things that to me seem that they're foretelling a change in the way we think about things. And so, the things that most appeal to me are stories that change your perception of how things work. And then there's the basic nuts-and-bolts news: a new person at Lincoln Center, etc. But like, when reality TV was

first coming in, there was a very interesting cultural shift behind the whole thing, so we had a lot of stories about the phenomenon of reality TV. I did a lot of stuff thinking about what does this mean, what does this say about the audience that they're looking for, how does that change scripted work? So things like that, that I want to focus in on, wouldn't necessarily seem like they would be obvious Arts Journal stories but to me they say something about the culture that is going to effect that symphony orchestra over here or that artist over here.

Q: It provides a level of complexity to the collection of information on *Arts Journal*. It's not just a tagged keyword search because you're thinking through the concepts behind it that you would miss otherwise.

A: Right. For example, we've been really heavy in the last year and a half on neurological research. And you know what's behind it all? These moveable MRIs. Before, you used to have to sit in the machine like this. [Demonstrates] Now they have moveable ones so they can observe you while you're doing an activity or thinking about something or whatever. It's called fMRI. And so they're discovering all of these connections about if you're thinking something like this and there's this stimulus over here—I just find it fascinating. But in the larger context, it's important because it brings up all these issues about quality of art, how people pay attention to things, why they are interested in things, all of that interesting stuff.

Q: Do you have any sort of assistance [currently]?

A: I have two [assistants]. I do about half of it and then I have two assistants who do the other half. For a little while, I sort of stepped away so that I was only doing 10% or 20%. But I actually found then that I started missing it. There was a time that I was doing it all. It's two shifts a day, three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. I started at 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning and that can get a little oppressive, I've got to say. At a certain point, I was feeling burned out and I stepped away. But what it actually did for me, doing that for all those years, it gave me the opportunity to look at everything and start to make connections. You'd see a little story in a little town over here and you'd go oh, wait, these guys over here are going to be talking about that in three months. The other thing I discovered is that the issues all over the world are fairly common, but the ways in which people deal with them—the way people deal with funding in Australia is different from Canada, which is different from here. It gave me a wonderful opportunity to make these connections and to think more systematically and in more complex systems, which allow me to then put together insights into it, which then spawned this whole other thing of doing talks and consulting with arts groups.

Q: Because really you're the communications manager of the entire arts world. That's what I just heard you describe yourself as. That's what that is, isn't it? Seeing how each department is utilizing its resources and solving its problems?

A: Wow. [laughter] I'm not sure...that's very organizational of you. It's really opened up this whole career for me in thinking about this and I kind of like that. I like the eclectic.

Q: Well, and it must be incredibly stimulating intellectually.

A: Yeah. And I get to hang out with really interesting people, because they want to understand this stuff too. I came earlier this week from a meeting in upstate New York with the executive directors of half a dozen major orchestras all trying to figure out, gee, business is falling apart. What are we going to do about that? To be able to understand an industry where they're talking very candidly about the issues that they have and the unions and all the aspects of that is a privilege to be able to see. And then what I can bring to that is, hey, here's something I'm seeing in the online world that they're thinking about this and this is what's working over here. So I've made this career that's at the intersection of journalism over here and the arts over here and then most of the examples that I tend to draw on are examples that are outside both of those. So I can translate both sides but also say, hey, there's this dynamic over here and you in journalism have your heads up your asses because you're not thinking about that. And here in the arts you say you're all about community, but I'm not seeing much community behavior. In a way, I can be the perpetual outsider and that gives me the ability to make observations and connections. I feel incredibly lucky.

Q: You said that arts organizations aren't really building community, and a lot of them are looking at blogs and social media as marketing. It's always been throw what you can out there and see what sticks. But you're really advocating a totally different approach?

A: A completely reversed approach. I didn't say that arts organizations aren't building community, because they actually do have communities and they've done it for a long time. What I'm saying is that if you look at the community that you have, let's say orchestras, and the community seems to be getting smaller and smaller, or it's staying the same but the expenses are rising, where do you go with that? People are getting tired. People are getting exhausted because it's a small group of people that is carrying these things. So why not look at these communities that are massive and that pool resources and that people have huge attachment to, and figure out what it is that is the essential thing that holds them together and allows them to work in interesting ways. Let's take that and apply it. The average symphony orchestra reaches about 2.5% of the population that's in its local area. I'm sorry, that's just not enough. If it could reach even 3.5%, it changes the equation. If it could reach 10%, then you've got a completely different scale. And likewise, do you know about the whole theory of weak ties and strong ties? There was a whole debate about a year and a half ago, sparked in *The New Yorker*, where—was it Gladwell?—it said this whole social media thing is overblown. People are touting, hey, we've got 150,000 "likes." What does a "like" mean? Essentially what you've done is you've got drive-by people who have got no association with you. It's too easy to "like." We shouldn't take that as...likewise we shouldn't think that because we have 10,000 friends on Facebook that that means something because we're not actually interacting like real friends. There are those people in social media who say that's a very myopic, one-dimensional view of what this is. So what I was trying to say in the last part of my talk is that the 100% experience might be in the hall but the 20% experience might be having an interaction with an artist online. Or maybe it's a 1% experience because I "liked" something that I saw, or a 50% experience because I listened

online. There's a whole lot of different ways in which you can interact, and those likes, building a massive amount of weak ties, gives you the opportunity to connect with those people. They might not actually do something but it's almost like rings in the trees. The closer you move to the center, the more the engagement. Can you move people from that outer ring progressively toward [the center]? Which we've done when we've thought about fundraising and patronage for years, but which we haven't applied in terms of building audience.

Q: In your estimation, are there satisfactory metrics or evaluations in place to enable organizations to track that, to do that, or do you think that's a model that needs to be built?

A: I think we have to be a lot more sophisticated. If you look at Google and how they measure things, everything is constantly A-B tested. We don't really do that. I'm not sure actually that we should, in the sense that artistic choices are artistic choices. But in terms of measuring experience, I don't know. In a way, the old model—and the model that the arts mostly uses now—is still a demographic model. We want to know your gender and your geography and your age and your economic background, etc. What we do with that in traditional marketing is we throw that all together and we create profiles of people. We divide everybody up into a profile and then what do we do? We take one big, fat, flying guess. I know if you're this kind of person and you're this age and you're this ethnicity and you're this gender, if I dangle this thing in front of you, then you'll probably do it. But I have no idea. Whereas on the web, it's all about behavior demographics. I can divide you up into a number of different profiles based on how you behave, and behavior is a much stronger predictor of what you will behave in the future than just knowing who you are. So I don't really care if you're a 60-year-old white male or a 20-year-old African American woman. If you behave in a similar manner because you have common interests, that's what I want to pay attention to. And I think that most of the arts audience research I see is still demographic based. Even when you see things like the NEA's participation study—they define participation in classical music as if you bought one ticket in the last year. What happens if I listened to Pandora for ten hours every day to classical music? I don't get to be counted as a participant in classical music? By their standard measure, participation has gone down drastically. But it may be that participation has gone way up. So we need to look way more at behavior of people and be able to define upfront what is the behavior we want to measure on the backend, and then hold ourselves accountable to that. Right now we often can't define what success is, so we redefine it after the fact and that may not be right. So yeah, I think that we're really in the infancy of how we measure all of this stuff and how we influence people.

Q: That's a perfect spot to stop. That was great. Thank you.