

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Wordle: Lynn Brooks

Surveying the Arts Today: Rocky Ground

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Who engages with the arts today? And why? To answer these and other questions, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) undertook a Survey of Public Participation in the Arts ([SPPA](#)) in 2012, from which a preliminary report has been issued, with a more comprehensive analysis promised for 2014. Such surveys, in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau, allow the NEA to gauge shifts in arts engagement throughout the nation and across populations parsed by ethnicity, age, economic status, and so on. The 2012 survey included fine and performing arts, folk arts, digital arts, and books of all sorts.

The SPPA summary yields data on arts-event attendance, art making, art and electronic media, reading, and arts education. A few high (or low) points for me:

The highest percentage reported for any category of arts engagement was the 71% (167 million) of American adults who engaged with art through electronic media—TV, radio, mobile devices, Internet, DVDs, CDs, tapes, or records (yes, “records”). On the other hand, fewer than half (115 million) of American adults “attended at least one type of visual or performing arts activity,” although 59% did attend a movie. Telling is the fact that attendance at musical and non-musical theater and museums dropped from the last SPPA (2008), respectively by 9%, 12%, and 23%. Need I mention that this initial report does not address attendance at dance performances? A bit more cheering was the news that one in four “younger adults” (ages 18-24) attended an outdoor performing arts festival this time around, which is up 22% from the 2008 survey. There’s a tip for arts presenters.

The SPPA found that as “arts makers,” nearly half of American adults engage in social dancing—at weddings, clubs, or parties. Hispanics lead the demographic pack in this regard. Lots of folks also share photos, often those they take themselves. I wonder how many regard this, and their social dancing, as an “art engagement.” Fewer, but still a significant percentage, knit, crochet or play a musical instrument, sing, or make craft items. Sadly, reading for pleasure is on the decline from the last survey, now at around half of

the American adult population, and that group led by “older Americans” (aged 65+). About half of all American adults had “experienced some arts learning,” formal or informal, in the course of their lives; college graduates had done so at nearly twice the rate of those with only high-school educations. Music and visual arts were the most common areas of such arts learning.

I poked around to see if other surveys took me closer to Philadelphia or to my own arts life. Coincidentally, my alma mater, Temple University, had just sent out the call for its arts alums to participate in the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), with the objective to “provide the first national data on how artists develop in this country [and] help identify the factors needed to better connect arts training to artistic careers.” I took the survey online, but then went to the [“SNAAPshot”](#) portion of the website and found more reason for (or confirmation of) my concern. The “Occupations” page informs the reader that, of those employed “within the arts,” the lowest earners are (drumroll here)—dancers and choreographers—right down there with “craft” artists, and below photographers, musicians, fine artists, writers, designers, architects, arts administrators, and arts educators. Of those trained in the arts who fled to other fields, SNAAP tells us that some earn way more than *any* arts person, especially if they have worked themselves into “management” fields; a few dropped below even the craft- and dance-artist level when they worked in “food preparation” or “social services.” (My thought is that many of these are recent college grads, doing a convenient day job as they attempt to establish themselves as working artists.)

The “Arts Majors” page of SNAAP reveals how female-dominated are studies in music performance, theatre, dance, fine arts, media arts, creative writing, design, arts education and administration—indeed, in all arts but the areas of architecture and “music history/composition.” The map under “Locations” reports artists’ satisfaction with their city of residence as a place for artists to work. While New Yorkers rate their city high (86% “good” or “very good”), Philadelphians clock in at 77%, below Washingtonians (80%) but above Bostonians (75%). As comparisons with places beyond the Northeast, Chicago artists give their city an 83% positive rating, while Los Angeles ranks as high as New York.

The Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance in [2006](#) and again in [2012](#), studied aspects of “arts, culture, and economic prosperity” in southeastern Pennsylvania. According to recent findings, “cultural organizations and their audiences have a combined impact of \$3.3 billion on the region’s economy” (up from \$1.3 billion in 2006) and provide “44,000 full-time equivalent jobs” (4000 more than in 2006). Further, cultural tourism, according to the recent survey, “inject[s] nearly \$230 million in direct spending into the economy.” So, the arts in some form contribute to the city’s appeal and prosperity, although how much of that lands in artists’ pockets was not reported here. The “Dance” category in 2012 brought the smallest number of dollars (\$26.1 million) and jobs (800) to the local economy.

In my own informal and anecdotal “survey” of the arts, my biggest concern is attendance at and study of live arts, as opposed to digital performance or exhibition. I know I’m not alone in this anxiety. For example, [Greg Sandow](#) maintains a news feed and blog on the alarming state of the classical music world, and even renowned musicians/composers like [David Byrne](#) are sounding the alarm. As the stepsister of the arts, dance has always struggled for status. What lies ahead in this brave new world?

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