

# Why does your institution matter?

Speakers at the recent 21st Century Arts conference addressed this central question, which in turn caused **Kathryn Mitchell** to address her own thinking about the fundamentals of our sector and the relevance of what we do.

## RELEVANT QUESTIONS

The 2008 Creative New Zealand 21st Century Arts Conference posed many challenging questions for the New Zealand gallery and museum sector. The question that, for me, seemed to address one of the primary concerns relayed by the keynote speaker, Diane Ragsdale, from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York, was, "Why does your institution matter?" Ragsdale's presentation explored issues facing the sector in the USA and identified that many arts organisations were unable to communicate effectively why what they do matters. While some institutions can brag about commercial or economic success, we are asked to question whether this is what matters. Are we seeking new, contemporary facilities and abundant funding, or are we seeking to create 'meaningful impact', to engage with people, to inspire our communities and to win 'hearts and minds'?

## QUESTIONING RELEVANCE

Managing a small regional public art gallery can, perhaps in this debate, seem to be an advantage. The survival of such an institution is very much dependant on the support or 'buy in' of the local people. Galleries and museums of this scale are generally much more aware of changes in the community. However, this does not necessarily make the job of understanding your organisation and its

relevance any easier. Winning the hearts and minds of people is challenging, no matter what sector you work in, but we may have not been focusing enough on our relevance. Perhaps being too busy delivering an agreed number of exhibitions and events every year, we have forgotten to ask who has attended and how they felt about the experience. There is a real risk that we have developed tunnel vision.

Ragsdale spoke of institutions that have lost their way, whose 'mental map' tries to make reality conform to its expectations rather than seeing what is actually there. She challenged us to ask another question, "Would we rather close our doors than change what we do?" What, then, is the way forward for galleries and museums that can relate to these issues? The challenge is to make a new mental map of where you are in order to develop a vision and mission in relation to people and, "...attain, maintain, or regain..." relevance. It is vital to assess the value of your organisation and its work. Do you plan your exhibition programme in accordance with what matters to your community? Is Coca Cola doing a better job than our sector of winning the hearts and minds of the people. Ragsdale spoke of surviving the culture change. In order to do this, our organisation must first accept that things do and have changed. The social and cultural context in which we operate is not static, but continuously evolving. This environment can be difficult to navigate when many of us may feel that we simply do not have the time or resources to examine the ways in which we can better serve and understand our audience.

## LISTENING TO VISITORS

Andrew McIntyre (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, UK) believes even the smallest of institutions can proactively engage with their visitors and encourage them to comment on their experience. Based on the largest ever UK visitor study, which included 120 focus groups and 50,000 interviews, McIntyre breaks down the visitor experience into four areas: social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual. Visitors were surveyed before entering exhibitions and afterwards. It is interesting that on a number of occasions expectations did not correspond with the visitors' outcomes. For example, before visiting the British Museum's *Power and Taboo* exhibition, people's expectations were measured as a

primarily intellectual outcome, yet after their visit people communicated a primarily emotional response. So do we in the New Zealand sector understand our visitors' expectations and the outcomes of what we do? Do we organise our programmes in such a way that we deliberately target a particular visitor type or sector of our community? Do we understand, or even try to understand what the outcome of particular exhibitions may be? In many instances I would say, no, we do not. Is there, therefore, any relevance in exhibition programmes that do not actively seeking to engage people?

Although I myself have filled out my share of visitor response forms in galleries and museums, I do have a sense that this method of seeking feedback has limited effectiveness, due to the fact that only a small number of visitors may fill these out without prompting. A more proactive stance may be required in order for us to maintain strong convictions regarding our place and value to the people.

## NO TIME FOR COMPLACENCY

Alastair Carruthers (Arts Council Chair, Creative New Zealand) accurately described the start of the 21st century as a productive environment for arts, culture and heritage in New Zealand. The Government has taken the sector seriously, and we have clearly benefited from having a Prime Minister holding the Arts, Culture and Heritage Portfolio. Based on recent research, Creative New Zealand maintains that 75% of New Zealanders have high levels of support for the arts and believe these should be funded, that they define our identity, contribute positively to the economy and that their communities would not be as well off without them. This is good news, but those of us working in the sector know how quickly the external environment can turn. There is no time to rest on our laurels. Helen Bartle (Audience & Market Development, Creative New Zealand) and McIntyre proposed a way for the sector to respond to some of the challenges discussed. This is conceptualised as "Seven Pillars":

- brand-driven
- vision-led
- personalised
- interactively-engaged
- insight-guided
- outcome-orientated
- inter-disciplinary

Those who attended the conference were asked to rate their organisation from one to ten in each area, forming a 'map' of where their organisation was located. Needless to say, this was a sobering activity for many of us, indicating that there is much work still to be done. Recognising where you are, however, is a positive starting point from which to move on. Self assessment, internal discussion and measuring progress are steps along the way to ensuring your organisation rises to the challenge and asks itself, "Why does our institution matter?"

**Kathryn Mitchell** is a practicing artist and writer and has been the Manager/Curator of the Ashburton Art Gallery for just over three years. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Master of Fine Arts from the Otago School of Art, where she has taught the Professional Practices programme to fourth year students. In Dunedin she managed a contemporary arts trust and gallery space which aimed to provide emerging artists with the opportunity to engage in professional practice. She is passionate about the arts sector in New Zealand and looks forward to what the future may bring.



The research referred to in this report has now been published as:

Creative New Zealand (2009). *New Zealanders and the arts: Attitudes, attendance and participation in 2008*. Wellington: Creative New Zealand.

This report and further information on the conference can be downloaded from [www.creativenz.govt.nz](http://www.creativenz.govt.nz)