



New Orleans Performers Take the Stage

NPN/VAN's Annual Meeting is by invitation only, but anyone can attend the two nights of free performances at the Civic Theatre in New Orleans. Joining four artist/companies who were awarded Creation/Forth Fund support, are six New Orleans artists/companies: Kataalyst Alcindor, Michaela Harrison, Antonio Garza, Mondo Bizarro, Mudlark Puppeteers and Tsunami Dance.

Performances are Friday, December 13 at 6pm and Saturday, December 14 at 3:30pm.

For more information:
nnpweb.org/site/annualmeeting2013/what-to-see/

The Secret History of Love, Sean Dorsey Dance
Pictured: Juan De La Rosa and Brian Fisher; Photo: Megan Mia

Creative Capital Cites NPN

In a recent blog post, "A Page from Our Handbook: Intro to Funding for Art Projects," Creative Capital, a national leader in generating direct support for artists and their projects, referenced NPN.

Read it for yourself:
<http://blog.creative-capital.org/2013/10/a-page-from-our-handbook-intro-to-funding>

Going Free

Fusebox Festival in Austin wanted to see what would happen if they went to an entirely free Festival. So they engaged best-selling author Dan Heath (*Switch*) to help address their fears: Would people not value the free ticket? Would people reserve a free seat, then not use it? Read Ron Berry's account of Fusebox's exploration, funded by an MLI grant.

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FREE

RANGE

ART



Going Free

BY: Ron Berry

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For the past two and a half years, Fusebox Festival has been contemplating switching to a free festival model. There are obviously a host of issues and questions this decision brings up (both for our audiences and for the organization) as well as a host of emotions (from euphoria to sheer, face-melting terror). After researching various other free models around the country and talking to numerous colleagues and artists, we had our suspicions that we were onto something exciting but were still lacking some key evidence that could help cement board and donor buy-in.

Through the Mentorship and Leadership Initiative (MLI) process, we reached out to bestselling author Dan Heath to explore this potentially pivotal organizational change. Dan is a Senior Fellow at Duke University's CASE center, which supports social entrepreneurs, and is the author of three best-selling books: *Made to Stick* (a book about ideas and why certain ideas stick and other don't); *Switch* (a book about change and how it works — from changing your diet to large societal change); and his latest book *Decisive* (a book about decision-making). Dan also happens to be a longtime fan and supporter of the festival, so he had some significant context for our work, which we felt was important.

One of the first things Heath helped us understand was that we have a core audience that is very knowledgeable. So we engaged with them about this idea of “free” and gathered some real information. Specifically, one of the concerns about switching to a free model is that by making something free, it devalues it. What we found from our core audience is that price had actually very little to do with how they valued or perceived a performance. So this was encouraging — a switch to the free model would not necessarily alienate our core audience, a group we definitely want to take care of and respect.

Next, Dan suggested we figure out a way to test some of these ideas and systems before we dive all the way into a free model. In this particular case, we've actually been testing this idea for a while now, as about 1/3 of our festival has always been free. So this year, we tested price as a variable and looked at what changing ticket prices did to attendance, as well as research other pricing studies. What we learned is that there is a big difference between making something free and charging even one cent for something. We lowered ticket prices significantly this year, from an average ticket price of \$18 to \$11 and it really had no impact. We also had certain shows that were \$5. The only thing that really dramatically moved the needle (at least related to pricing) was going all the way free.

As an anecdote, a few years ago we brought in a solo, contemporary dance artist from Japan. Very few people in Austin had ever heard of him. We had a donor that wanted to foot the bill for his fees/production costs as long as the performance was free. We said sure. Over 1,200 people came out opening night to see this amazing, but very obscure dance artist who no one had ever heard of. Had we been charging for tickets, our experiences with other, similar, shows suggest that maybe 150-200 people would have attended.

Another giant question for us is how to handle reservations in a free festival model. We want to make sure that people can still make reservations and plan their festival experience if they want to — this is essential. The challenge becomes (at least this has been our own experience with our own free programming) about getting people to follow through when they make a free reservation. We found that free shows would “sell out” very quickly on paper but then a substantial portion of these reservation holders wouldn't show up. And then other people that wanted to attend the show don't bother to because they have heard that it's sold out.



We are proposing two ways to address this phenomenon. First, a percentage of the house each night will be available for advance reservation. But a percentage of seats will only be available at the door each night. This way, even when a show “sells out” ahead of time, people know that there are still seats available at the door. The second strategy pulls something from a local cinema’s playbook. The Alamo Drafthouse is a wildly popular and successful, Austin-based movie theater chain. One of the things they’ve been most successful at is creating a real culture of respect around not talking during the movies. They’ve created a very funny, but also serious campaign about it. Basically, if someone complains about you talking during a movie you’re given a warning. If it happens again, you’re kicked out without a refund. We believe there is a similar strategy we can employ in creating a culture of respect around making reservations. For example, our main ask is that if you make a reservation and then realize you can’t make the show, then let us know ahead of time. The real issue is when we continue to hold the seat. So we are contemplating a two-strike policy. If you abuse the process more than once, you will be unable to use our reservation system.

Finally, Heath helped us dig deeper into our own understanding of what it really is we do and what it is we really love about festivals. The answers to these questions pushed us closer and closer to “free.” Below are some key thoughts that arose during this exploration process. We think going free amplifies each of these ideas:

- + Everyone should have access to the art we’re presenting. Period.
- + We want to encourage people to take a chance on an artist or project that they’ve never heard of. For us this is central to the whole festival experience. It’s about discovery. Going free removes a layer of risk associated with seeing something new or unfamiliar.
- + Festivals are great (or can be great) at positioning you in the middle of a bunch of different ideas and perspectives. Festivals are not about seeing one artist — they’re about seeing multiple artists with multiple points of view. We think there’s something really powerful about this. It sparks new thinking, new possibilities, and the unexpected. So ideally, we want to encourage people to see multiple projects, otherwise they’re not really experiencing what is unique about the festival format.

- + We want to create a different sort of relationship between audience and artist. We want to re-wire the typical transaction. In fact, we don’t want it to be a transaction. We want to shift from consuming art to engaging with it.
- + We also wanted to have a conversation about the real cost of making this work. Almost every artist I know is heavily subsidizing his or her own work. The reality is that ticket sales cover only a tiny fraction of the cost of making this work, but it’s hard to have this discussion when we’re charging admission because it feels like you’re paying for it as an audience member. So we wanted to separate these things out and say, “Here’s this amazing art. We think it’s important and everyone should have access to it. But at the same time, let’s have a conversation about the actual cost of making this work. It’s not free to create.”
- + Last, we wanted to have a larger, national dialogue about the role that art and performance plays in our culture — a conversation about how we value art. How is it situated? Are there other strategies for making art more vital, more integrated into our daily lives? We wanted to have an open, transparent discussion about all of this. We’ve looked at a lot of different models and scenarios. We’ve talked to a lot of people about this idea. A lot of people are really floored by it, really excited. Other people are apprehensive. We think this is a great conversation.

Thanks for reading! We’d love your thoughts and ideas. And of course, we hope you can make it out to Fusebox this April. The dates are April 16-27, 2014. This year will mark our 10th Anniversary and we felt it was a great time to try out this idea. Accordingly, the entire festival will be free this year.

The Mentorship and Leadership Initiative, as part of the Community Fund, is made possible by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, MetLife Foundation, and American Express.



MetLife Foundation



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NPN/VAN Annual Meeting Features Group Exhibition

The Visual Artists Network has become a steady and enlivening presence at NPN's annual meetings, with group exhibitions that are free and open to the public. This year's exhibition is at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in New Orleans, now on view through January 19, 2014.

A panel discussion with Q & A will be held on Wednesday, December 11, 2013 from 5:30-7pm and a public reception on Thursday, December 12, 6-8pm.

Featured artists are Katrina Andry, New Orleans, LA; Castillo, Los Angeles, CA; and Eric Gottesman, Cambridge, MA / Washington, DC. These artists will be present for a weeklong residency during the Annual Meeting.

For information about CAC's gallery hours: www.cacno.org/about/general_info.html

Support for Music around the Globe

The State Department's American Music Abroad program, a partnership program with American Voices, is now accepting applications. The selected ensembles will conduct regional cultural exchange tours in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Central and South America, and the Middle East for approximately one month.

The application deadline for the 2014-15 season is January 6, 2014 at 5 pm PST.

For more information:
www.amvoices.org/ama/apply

Thank You!

NPN would like to thank the New Orleans Musicians' Clinic & Assistance Foundation for supporting the inclusion of musicians during the NPN/VAN 2013 Annual Meeting.

