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ARTS Action Research’s process of working has always been one of discovery more than invention, understanding more than explaining. This has probably never been more in evidence than in our 1997 report on the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York’s (A.R.T./New York) Nancy Quinn Program *Defining a New Arts Era*. Beginning in 1993, ARTS Action Research (AAR) was given the opportunity to work with a number of A.R.T./New York’s member theatres that, due to budget size, had never before had access to us nor we to them. In the course of our work with the theatres in this program we first began to develop an understanding and appreciation for the properties of self-organization, proactive adaptation – what we now refer to as *emergence* – and evolution that is stimulated and driven by individual artistic processes. In the years since issuing this report we have developed deeper understanding and built on the properties we discovered and we have written and described these properties in a variety of presentations, publications and Special Reports. Early on, and in this report, we attributed these properties to certain sizes, types and expressions of organizations as we sought some sort of categorical cause and effect relationship to explain the phenomenon. As we have since learned, there is no categorical cause and effect at work; only the inherent, deeply ingrained qualities of the self-organizing properties that are fundamental to the artistic process of all creative, producing arts organizations regardless of size, type and expression. As we continue to expand on this body of work we are pleased to share the text of this seminal report in its entirety.

Nello McDaniel
Director, ARTS Action Research
May 2012
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This report and the work from which it was born owe a great deal to the many caring and dedicated people we have had the joy of working with through the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York’s (A.R.T./New York) Nancy Quinn Fund program.

We want to express our gratitude to Ginny Louloudes, Executive Director, and the board and staff of A.R.T./New York for giving us the opportunity to be such an integral part of the Nancy Quinn Fund program. A special thanks to Mary Harpster, A.R.T./New York Deputy Director and director of the NQF for her skill and patience in planning and organizing the multitude of roundtables, meetings and follow ups.

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Finally, we express our deepest gratitude to all the arts professionals who we have had the great pleasure of working with on the Nancy Quinn Fund program. Your passion, commitment and generosity make it all possible, worthwhile and something we look forward to continuing.

Nello McDaniel and George Thorn
The Nancy Quinn Fund (NQF) of the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York (A.R.T./New York) serves theatres in New York City with annual budgets under $100,000. There are more than 200 of them and counting. This Special Report describes our experience working with more than 140 of these theatres. Significantly, we also draw upon this work to describe what we believe is a profound and pervasive shift in the arts landscape in this country.

At first we believed this would simply be a report describing a project with a specific group of theatres in a unique city. However, as we started writing, analyzing our experiences, discussing the work Ginny Louloudes, Executive Director and Mary Harpster, Deputy Director of A.R.T./New York and reflecting on other arenas of our work, it became increasingly clear that what we were learning had implications and applications far beyond the interests of A.R.T./New York’s Nancy Quinn Fund. This is not about the next generation of arts professionals finding new ways to achieve old organizational structures. Generation implies that the difference is in age and this is simply not the case. *While it may seem that we are simply passing from one generation to the next, we are really moving from one era to another.*

We believe that the ways of thinking, values and expectations, use of resources and energies, and new approaches to working that we have attempted to define in this report are having a profound impact on how art will be made, connected, and supported in the future. Regardless of the community they call home and the size, type, age, mission or intention of their organization, all arts professionals working in today’s challenging arts environment will find ideas, inspiration, validation, and resonance in this Special Report.

With the consent and the generosity of A.R.T./New York we make this Special Report available to the field. Unquestionably, our work in some other communities strongly informs our observations here. This report owes a great deal to the arts professionals and our partners in the North Carolina Arts Council’s New Realities and Professional Theatre Programs, the Atlanta Dance Initiative, and the TheatreLA/ARTS Action Research Theatre Consortium.

*While many factors contribute, change ultimately occurs when the status quo faces anomalies it can no longer reconcile.* We believe that the Nancy Quinn Fund theatres embody this kind of change. We have seen signs of it in our work with scores of arts organizations all over the country. But the size and scale of the Nancy Quinn Fund project,
and the length of time we have spent working with these theatres has helped us understand that we are now dealing with a new order of business, not anomalies.

Several things distinguish the Nancy Quinn Fund theatres. In this report we examine some of these characteristics, which include attitudes and expectations, size, shape and structures, ways of working, the diversity of the overall group, and the innate adaptive and evolving qualities of the theatres. We describe our working processes with them and offer some views of how this fast-growing, increasingly pervasive segment of the arts community might be better encouraged and supported in the future.

A significant point to make early on is how much the unique theatre environment of New York City has made it possible for these theatres to exist and thrive. All the characteristics and patterns described in this report have developed as a result of an extraordinary active, vital, and dynamic theatre community and theatre-friendly environment. Over the years, the amount of theatre produced in New York City, the sheer number of theatre devotees who frequently attend performances, and the unusually informed and activist funding community have all helped make New York the theatre center it is. Separate from these obvious characteristics, yet clearly related, is that New York trains a huge number of talented, ambitious theatre artists and pours them into the mix every year. As a major center for media, entertainment, and commerce, New York provides vast opportunities for young artists to support themselves while finding and developing their artistic voices.

None of this is to suggest that theatres like the Nancy Quinn Fund group – what we describe in this report as the arts understructure – cannot exist elsewhere. Truly they do. But the precise and accelerated way the understructure has developed in New York City has a great deal to do with the special qualities of this environment. As we observe firsthand in Los Angeles, Atlanta and in North Carolina, the unique qualities of each environment, now more than ever, help it give rise to its own arts understructure.

Stephen Jay Gould observes that some things, such as deep, recorded history, are so unknown and alien that we can only understand them metaphorically (e.g. if the history of the earth were an arms length, human presence in that history would only be the size of a fingernail clipping.) When charting unknown territory, new metaphors help provide a conceptual or experiential bridge to understanding. With new understanding come vocabulary, communication and a level of comfort and intimacy with the previously unknown.

As we explore new processes and terrain within our work, we constantly search for new metaphors. The centerpiece of our work in recent years is the artistic process as the
primary frame of reference – both as metaphor and method. Without question, the artistic process that each arts entity uses to create, produce, and present art is the most effective planning, working, problem solving, decision-making, relationship-building process we know. This is true for any arts organization regardless of size, age, discipline or location. Sadly, the artistic process has been so devalued by society over the years that it is still a challenge to get arts professionals to fully appreciate and use this extraordinary tool. But more and more arts professionals trust the process – and themselves – to lead and direct their own organizations.

On one level the artistic process is intensely individual and specific to each arts entity. However, unifying elements and patterns inevitably emerge. As we examine this mutating arts ecology, we are confronted with the need for new metaphors and frames of understanding. We need a broader vocabulary and perhaps new nomenclature to talk about how increasing numbers of arts professionals are using and applying the artistic process to all aspects of their work and operations. We are deeply grateful to the many artists who opened themselves to us and to our working process, and who have allowed us to be a part of their lives and work. Undoubtedly, we have learned as much as we have imparted.

Nello McDaniel and George Thorn
An Arts Understructure

*We continually make errors inspired by unconscious allegiance to the ladder of progress... we are virtually compelled to the stunning mistake of citing unsuccessful lineages as classic ‘textbook cases’ of ‘evolution’... we are inevitably drawn to bushes so near the brink of total annihilation that they retain only one surviving twig. We then view this twig as the acme of upward achievement, rather than the probable last gasp of a richer ancestry.*

*Stephen Jay Gould, Wonderful Life*

Because the arts industry looks at itself through institution-colored glasses, a whole segment of the community has remained undefined, if not invisible. The expansion, range, depth, vitality, and productivity of groups working in non-formal, non-institutional format is manifold and irrefutable. It is not just the 200-plus theatres who participate in the Nancy Quinn Fund program in New York City, but the members of TheatreLA in Los Angeles, more than 50 dance entities working in Atlanta, and the extraordinary community of arts entities expanding everywhere. *But this is not a community of institutional “wannabes”; this is an arts understructure: a highly diverse and complex ecology of artists- and work-centered entities, activities, and relationships.* Everything from growth to infrastructure to the wide array of support structures is different. Also different is the understanding of the true organizing and evolutionary behaviors, and the awareness of limitations. The arts understructure is both the product of and the response to the environment in which arts professionals find themselves at the beginning of the 21st century.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the arts understructure is how dramatically its members’ very existence contrasts with the general picture of health and vitality of the overall arts community. While the pall of crises and ongoing retrenchment continues to drape the field, the arts understructure is thriving if not growing. In this group, the number of arts professionals working, the amount of work produced, and the number of theatres has been increasing exponentially. Yet at the same time, substantial parts of the arts funding and institutional infrastructure remain static or are imploding. The anguish and danger confronting many arts institutions and traditional funding sources, is very real indeed.

Given this divergence of fortunes, we believe what we are seeing in the arts understructure is not the outgrowth or a linear extension of the old arts order. It is not a perpetuation of the old infrastructure. *This is new growth, different growth, something entirely original.* Science may offer a parallel phenomenon: For years scholars thought that Homo Sapiens evolved from the Neanderthal. Paleontologists now believe that the two co-existed, probably for a fairly long period. Somewhere earlier on the evolutionary tract there
was a branching from a common ancestor. This gave rise to two seemingly similar, yet very different entities. One was un-adaptable and unsuited to a changing environment and eventually fell by the way; the other evolved into modern humans. The same thing may well be reflected in the new arts understructure — but it has been hard to see, understand and value.

The difficulty in understanding and valuing the arts understructure is that traditional measures of success have never included small arts entities, non-formal or non-institutional structures as a legitimate part of arts evolution. At best, “small” has been viewed as a temporary state, a pit stop on the highway toward greater institutional growth and development. For many it has been viewed in and of itself as a dead end. Yet the supposition that an organism must evolve in a pyramid-like progression, from low to high form, from the many to the one, defies all known progressions of organic systems. In reality, a successful evolutionary process most resembles a tree in which the progression is a series of splits and offshoots, repeatedly bifurcating into numerous branches ever extending in breadth and diversity.

In fundamental ways, especially relating to the art, the arts understructure demonstrates far greater continuity than change. But the differences are distinct and deliberate and important to understand — from the inside out and from the outside in.

The Understructure: An External View

There is no single definition or set of characteristics absolutely shared by all that makes up the arts understructure. However, there are some unifying values and characteristics.

Re-Fusing Functions

One of the most obvious characteristics is in the attitude regarding artistic and administrative roles. In the old arts institutional model, a distinct line divided the functions and responsibilities of the artistic and administrative staffs. This division strongly suggested that there were not only different jobs but also different skills, abilities, sensibilities, levels of competence and confidence. A premise of this bi-polar mindset was that one’s success was contingent upon a partner’s competence in an arena in which one was a priori incompetent.

*The division and separation between artistic and administrative, as both a philosophical and a practical matter, simply does not exist within the arts understructure sensibility.* These arts professionals accept and expect that there is complete integration of roles and functions because the arts understructure is driven by human capital not financial.
Each individual is prepared to not only make and program the work but also to administer and do what is necessary to connect the work. Everyone expects to do everything.

The “Professional” and “Quality” Conundrum
Another shared value revolves around the question of defining professional and quality. There has never been an undisputed, unquestioned definition for either term. Traditionally, professional has minimally suggested that the organization provides full time salaries for the working staff. Professional status has also been defined as union scale or scale equivalent as dictated by a specific theatre or music marketplace or domain. And quality has been a funding code word for standards of taste negotiated from time to time by various funding professionals and/or their panels and juries. Little of the arts understructure experiences relates to these traditional definitions.

For those in the arts understructure, there is an inextricable link between the work and the way the audience or marketplace is defined and connects. Sometimes the marketplace is geographic, by neighborhood: Flying Bridge Community Arts makes and performs its work out of a storefront space in the Red Hook district of Brooklyn. Sometimes it is defined culturally: Macalla Theatre Company, an Irish-American theatre group, performs out of churches or other locations where their Irish-American audiences congregate in the Bronx.

In this way professional relates to the artists’ intention for the work, the intended audience and the quality and success of interaction between the two. Given the status and standards of the intended audience (marketplace), does the arts professional envision the work validating or challenging audience’s views or standards? Is the arts professional invested in the work? Further, is the arts professional invested in the audience? Is the professional committed to taking the risks—personal, creative, professional, financial, critical—associated with placing the work into the marketplace they have defined?

Therefore, with regard to quality: For any arts professional committed to professional work, quality is a given. The notion that any arts professional working outside traditional arenas in a non-formal or non-institutional format cannot produce quality work is absurd. No arts professional sets out to create mediocre or inferior work. But then, no work is intended for all audiences, even work placed in traditional theatre arenas. Not all work succeeds. Not all arts professionals are at a level of maturity or proficiency to fulfill a particular artistic challenge they have given themselves. Any arts professional intending to successfully
connect their work with an audience strives to make the work the best it can be. After all, it is the only thing over which they have real control.

All of the artists we have encountered among the arts understructure are committed to treating other arts professionals fairly and well. They have no particular expectations that they can or will make a living from the specific work they are producing. But they are committed to providing the best conditions and resources possible to create and connect the work. To the extent possible all want to honor and value their own work and that of other arts professionals with appropriate remuneration. All are committed to producing the best, highest quality work they can produce and are willing to take the attendant risks.

On Expectations
On the surface it may appear that those working in the arts understructure aspire to institutional status. For example, many of the theatres enter the NQF process claiming to want a bigger, better board or a full-time staff. But upon closer examination, most are simply using established language of the field. In truth, they want resources to make and connect their work; they don’t want the baggage, headaches or loss of personal control over their work that institutionalization brings. *One of the most valuable aspects of the NQF process is that it gives the understructure permission to stray from the traditional path of institutional growth in word or action.*

To some it almost appears that those working in the arts understructure have no expectations, but that is also incorrect. In fact, they have no delusions; they simply expect to do their work. Over the years, not-for-profit arts theory has told arts professionals to build an institution that, in turn, would support the work. Often this has meant that the artist spends ever-increasing amount of time, energy, and resources on developing an organization, with decreasing amounts of time committed to developing the work.

In recent years a couple of significant things have changed. First, the rewards for building the institution have dissipated. If anything, dis-incentives to institution building have been presented by the funding community to discourage further proliferation. Second, more and more arts professionals believe the not-for-profit arts theory is simply incompatible and inappropriate to their personal, professional and creative needs and interests. This belief as much as anything, seems to serve as a unifying element connecting much of the arts understructure.

*Those working within the arts understructure have no romanticized notions about funding. For most, traditional funding programs simply aren’t relevant or meaningful to*
getting their work done. Traditional funding, with its detached timelines, cumbersome guidelines and applications, excessive regulation and reporting, and operating and social engineering are meaningless if not distractions to the way most want to make and connect their work.

Size and Profile
While the majority of arts understructure tend to be small in budget size (particularly as measured in strictly cash terms) and operation, this is not necessarily a defining quality. Some define their budgets by annual operating activity others operate project by project. Some are incorporated not-for-profits but many simply cluster as needed under another incorporated entity’s umbrella (fiscal sponsorship). Many don’t even bother clustering. Incorporating is clearly not a given and for many not even a consideration. Anyone wanting to engage in an in-depth discussion of the relative merits of for-profit vs. not-for-profit will be met with overwhelming indifference from the arts understructure. To define, live or die by a legal structure held so dear and taken so seriously by the traditional arts infrastructure strikes many as irrelevant, if not comical.

Diversity
One of the most striking characteristics of the arts understructure is its diversity. While so many traditional arts institutions argue and posture about diversity, and funding programs continue to be created to increase or enforce diversity, the arts understructure is plainly and simply diverse. More than that, it is sub-continentally diverse. Among the NQF theatres there are not just Asian-American theatres but Chinese-American (Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America) and Philippine-American (Ma-Yi Theatre Ensemble) as well as Asian-American artists committed to classic European work (National Asian-American Theatre Company). There are not just Euro-American entries but Irish-American (Macalla Theatre Company), Italian-American (New York Italian Theatre Company) and eastern European (Yara Arts Group). Some are specific both to sub-continents but certain constituents. The Africa Arts Theatre Company is committed to producing the work of playwrights from Africa, while the New Professional Theatre supports the work of African American women playwrights.

Many within the arts understructure are committed to new work, which ranges from traditional to highly experimental work. But many are also committed to classical work of many forms. Once again, the work is not only culturally but sub-culturally specific, with a wide range of political, ecumenical, environmental and social points of view.
Some of the groups focus on rarely (if ever) addressed socio-political issues. For example, Purgatorio Ink Theatre explores the politics of the gender-stratum in a repressive post-secular fundamentalist environment in Iran; Circus Amok, a “homo-pomo” circus, explores the politics of gender prejudice in a repressive post-liberal reactionary environment in the U.S.

Some Types of Working Formats

Among the arts understructure, the focus is on producing and connecting the work. While there may not be sufficient resources to develop institutions, resources are sufficient to support the work. Form follows the internal logic particular to each entity’s own creative processes. We will explore this in more depth later. But to help with our own understanding we distinguish and characterize a number of different working approaches or formats. None are mutually exclusive or all inclusive. While sharing certain working consistencies, each entity maintains its own specific character and distinction.

There is no absolute, foolproof organizational model for any arts entity to aspire to. The days of if you build it (and build it a certain way) they will come have long passed. Each arts entity must find or develop a format of working that not only reflects the internal character of the leadership, vision, relationships and work, but is appropriately adaptable and can take best advantage of available resources. There are many different operating formats, from project and production based, to various combinations formats, to the most traditional institutional structures. None of these formats are inherently correct or incorrect, only appropriate to each individual arts entity. We believe that the appropriate format must be developed and used among arts organizations of all sizes and shapes, not just independent artists and producers. Closely linked to the development of format is the obvious need to underpin the appropriate format with the appropriate resources in an equation that is healthy and balanced.

The Not-for-Profit Project Format. The overwhelming majority of those in the arts understructure work project-by-project. Working project-by-project means the primary purpose of the entity is to create, develop, and produce projects. Unstated but clearly implied in this, is that the projects are those the artist feels compelled to do. The through-line or continuity of the entity is the artist and the base level of human and financial resources needed to plan and develop projects. When appropriate, projects are developed or mushroom out of the throughline. When the project is completed, the operation returns to
the throughline level of activity. By design it is a high yield (in terms of producing and connecting art) and low maintenance operation. Overall, little or very limited effort and resources are expended on institutional structure.

Artists in this type of project work do not think in terms of performance seasons as much as topic-specific, site-specific, sometimes audience-specific events. There is no general subscription audience for this type of work. A “5 plays-for-the-price-of-4” subscription season is senseless. But there are various groups of people who may want to attend a performance or engage in performance activity depending on the work, its relationship to their interests, and its location.

The artists make the work in a style, space and way they want, rather than running a small, undercapitalized business. The key is creating a mechanism that allows the artists to develop projects as they want and need; which takes advantage of resources available for these projects and that minimizes the amount of resources, time and personal and creative energy needed to maintain the mechanism.

This format produces the artists’ projects on an ongoing basis, maintaining itself as a low-maintenance, well-focused through-line entity. The throughline consists of little more than the artist, their information and a database. The board or community partners serve as a strategic resource group with no need for extensive maintenance or institutional fundraising.

When the artist has an idea for a project, he/she/they define it by answering questions such as:

- What process will we use to develop this piece?
- What artists and artistic resources are needed?
- What site or venue is required?
- Who is the audience for the piece?
- What time resources are needed, e.g. rehearsal time, performance run?
- What financial resources are required?
- What is the overall desired impact?
- How will we determine the success of this project, quantitatively and qualitatively?

Based on the answers to these questions, the core operation expands appropriately to animate the project and gather the necessary resources. When the project is performed and completed, the operation returns to its former core operating size and requirements.
The Not-for-Profit Production Company Format. This is the project entity writ diverse and sometimes frenzied in appearance. It is committed to projects that interest the leadership but consists of more varied, simultaneous activity. For example an artist may be interested in developing new play projects, touring shows, film and video projects, collaborations with other arts entities, etc. The primary thing the various projects have in common is the artist. Project development, time, human and financial resources, production elements and delivery may be achieved in essentially different ways for each project.

The shape of a production company might be likened to a hub and spoke system, with the artist at the center and projects extending in a number of directions. At any given time, three, four or five different projects may be running or in development. What separates each project is the distinct need for particular resources or expertise to develop the project, or the specific audience the artist seeks. The board for a production company may consist of individuals from the community certainly interested in the artists, but perhaps particularly interested in one aspect of the artist’s activity.

Combination Centers. A combination center is almost the opposite of a production company format in that a single entity serves as the center for a number of artistic activities. The combination center either has a resource such as a space that requires a minimum amount of activity or has the need (visibility, festival format or event) for more artistic activity than can be generated by the center itself. There are a number of good examples of the combination center among the Nancy Quinn theatres (HERE, Todo Con NADA, Peculiar Works Project).

Combination Formats – Integrated and Non-integrated. Combination Formats are collaborative vehicles for various artists or entities to come together around a single project or to secure a needed resource through the strength of combination. They may be integrated or non-integrated.

The integrated combination is primarily an artistic collaboration, two or more entities coming together to achieve a specific project that one working alone could not achieve. For example, Blue Heron Theatre combined with Yangtze Repertory Theatre of America to stage Between Life and Death by Gao Xingjian. New Georges Theatre combined with Women’s Project and Productions to produce The Autobiography of Aiken Fiction. We also refer to this type of combination format as a virtual company, since it exists only to achieve the production at hand; when the project is complete, the collaborators go their separate ways.
until the next project arises. It is not really as spontaneous or random as it may sound. The collaborators usually have worked together in the past. They know each other and know how to work together. One collaborator usually assumes a lead in gathering the partners around the project idea.

The non-integrated combination most often involves resources such as the generation of and sharing of human and financial resources, space and creating greater viability and impact for the artists and projects that remain separate and distinct. These collaborations exist for the purpose of achieving greater economies through shared resources. While the primary basis of collaboration is the need for a particular resource, the collaboration only works through effective relationships. This understanding and respect between the collaborating partners is the basis of trust necessary to carry out the activity.

**Site-Specific Projects.** Site-specific entities thrive in New York City, not only because of artistic interest in various non-traditional sites, but also because good usable theatre space is scarce and expensive. The use of alternative public spaces – from Grand Central Station to the Brooklyn Bridge – has offered rich possibilities for artists exploring non-traditional work and themes. As the novelty of the concept has declined, site-specific work has increasingly become more about the work than about the specific site.

The Talking Band, a theatre co-founded by Ellen Maddow, Tina Shepherd and Paul Zimet in 1974, explores an interesting example on this theme. The Talking Band has developed a production called Home Entertainment that it performs in private living rooms. The work was expressly conceived, designed and staged to adapt to typical New York City apartments or loft living rooms. The arrangement between the theatre and the homeowner is simple and consistent. The homeowner provides the living room space, determines a date with the theatre, and then delivers 20 or more friends at $15 per person. While the numbers are small, overhead and production costs are very low because of the site and cooperation with the homeowner. The Talking Band also instantly attracts new venues through those who attend Home Entertainment performances.
The Understructure: An Internal View

There are some profound differences in the way the NQF theatres work. They underscore for us how effective and elegant the artistic process is when allowed to organically operate, proliferate and interact within dynamic communities. But they challenge us to find new and more appropriate ways to describe and discuss the arts industry.

Some of the most innovative and influential thinkers in other fields draw upon artistic metaphors to achieve new understanding. Such innovators as Peter Senge, Ralph Stacey and Margaret Wheatley in business, Ilya Prigogine, Murray Gell-Mann and Mary Catherine Bateson in science and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in psychology consistently use artistic metaphors to frame new concepts and communicate their ideas. Well, turnabout is fair play, and in this instance very timely. While these thinkers have been borrowing metaphors from our field, they are also providing us with many new metaphors, transitional concepts and rich new vocabulary. As we look at the inner workings and operating dynamics of the arts understructure these ideas and vocabulary provide a helpful bridge to new understanding and dialogue.

A Study in Dynamic Balance

*How does one define stability within the arts understructure where traditional definitions are fairly meaningless? Within the arts understructure, stability is not viewed as a state of equilibrium as much as controlled and strategically manipulated dynamic balance.*

Unfortunately, stability is seen as an absolute concept in an increasingly relative and highly volatile arts environment. Over the years, funding programs of capacity building and stabilization have promoted a unified theory of stability through force of proclamation, engineered planning methodology and institutional symbolism. *For the arts understructure there are no such absolutes or symbols; rather each arts entity must define what stability means to its work and life alone.*

Consider a tightrope artist. On the tightrope, the artist is intensely aware of her/his elements of balance—the center of gravity, the weight and counter-weight, and the controlled, deliberate movement—and uses these elements to perform. As long as the artist is balanced and moving, he/she maintains stability and confidence and can do just about anything except stand absolutely still. In this respect, dynamic balance results in what scientists refer to as complex adaptive behavior where a number of separate simple elements converge as a complex response to an external situation or conditions.
Tightrope artists perform and maintain their unique form of stability through dynamic balance; so must arts organizations. Clearly, no arts organization can be healthy if it is over-extended in any of its human, financial, time or space resources. All measures of an organization’s health are in direct relationship to its environment; a healthy entity must be congruent with its environment.

Stability through dynamic balance allows an organization to create opportunities it needs and wants, take advantage of opportunities presented, and effectively address the artistic and operating challenges that endlessly arise. A number of elements frame, define and secure dynamic balance. These are (a) clearly identified, un-ambiguous leadership, (b) defined, articulated, communicated, understood and agreed-upon vision and direction, (c) quality relationships, (d) a clear and accurate understanding of the working or operating equation, and (e) a process to animate, propel and achieve the first three on a ongoing basis.

The Leadership.
Understanding the leadership role and function of the arts professional has been confusing and difficult for many. Some arts professionals have been convinced that they have to trade their power, their control and unwittingly their leadership for the resources they hope others, such as the board and certain funders, will offer in exchange. Of course, most make this trade knowing full well that, in the best interest of all concerned, it a really bad trade-off. Ironically while arts organizations are created to serve the vision and the work of our professional artistic leaders, there has been little trust or belief that those same leaders can be entrusted with the life of their organizations. Arts professionals are still seen as too emotional, irresponsible, unqualified and untrustworthy to be allowed to lead and direct their organizations (thus the notion that they need boards made up of lawyers and bankers who will make sure that the artists don’t mismanage their organizations or betray the public trust).

This historic confusion and ambivalence over leadership is largely absent within the arts understructure arena. Like arts organizations of an earlier time, most of these entities have been created and continue to be run by the founding artistic leadership. But there is a significant difference. An earlier generation of arts professionals founded organizations believing that the value and legacy of the endeavor would be the institution. So whatever had to be done to secure and preserve the institution in perpetuity, including all forms of self-(personal, professional, creative) sacrifice, was in order. Today’s arts professionals enjoy the benefit of hindsight seeing that for the large majority of arts professionals before them the gains were sadly disproportionate to the sacrifices they made.
**Vision**

Unfortunately, the term *vision* has become fused and confused with *visionary*, a person whose grand image of the future is so clear, stark, so stunning, so new, different and better, that the image alone exerts irresistible power over the present and draws everything forward. Usually the power of the image is directly proportionate to the eloquence and grandeur of the visionary’s description. Of course, anyone deemed a visionary is associated with an awe-inspiring arc of achievement of that vision. The vision quest becomes a retrospective alphabet of tidy, sequential steps moving inevitably toward a glorious conclusion—the beacon on the horizon, or as funders like to think of it, the big carrot on the three-to-five-year-long stick. The message: Just replicate these steps and you too will be visionary. In reality such grand visions only exist in revisionist retelling of experiences at conferences decades after the fact.

We have observed among those working in arts understructure, vision is not seen as an overwhelming singularity, but as a field. Field theory (in chaos science) provides a context for cause and effect relationships. "Fields are unseen structures, becoming known to us through their effects," writes Margaret Wheatley in *Leadership and the New Science*. Fields define, shape, reflect, and propel behaviors. In this respect, a vision is not a thing, but rather a complex, multi-dimensional set of views, beliefs and behaviors.

A vision field contains key philosophical points of view that are given depth and dimension by other aspects of the vision field such as aesthetic points of view, curatorial and key decision-making frames and working values that govern and propel behaviors and relationships.

One can think of the *field of vision* concept this way. Vision is not somewhere “out there” but is a product of the shared values and understanding about the work that inform the way we work every day. It is not as defined as a “guiding vision”, not a defining of exactly where we want to be; it is more chaotic. The field of vision is composed of the values, the goals and the ideals of our organizational culture. The vision does not define one path because there are many different paths and many different destinations will exist within the field of vision. In this way, we do not limit the creativity of our partners by imposing a strict set of rules within which to operate. As long as everyone understands the field of vision there will be many possible creative solutions for every problem that arises.

A vision field is dynamic, ever changing and by its nature a reflection and expression of the arts professionals involved and the environment and conditions with which they work.
Anyone invited into the arts entity to participate is being invited into the vision field which overlays that entity. It is an invitation to participate in the vision rather than pursuing one.

**Quality Relationships**

As key as leadership and vision are, there can be no collaboration or organization without quality relationships. The anatomy of relationships, beginning with the relationship of the professionals to each other, then extending to their board partners, is critical. One can understand much more about an organization by how it behaves, relates and interacts than how it looks. Within each group there is a way in which relationships are forged and grow. There are ways of working together and expectations of participation and performance. Understanding and articulating these elements is not only key to the internal functioning of an organization, but also to the nature and quality of relationships it will have with those outside the organization.

One of the most important jobs of leadership is establishing a strong basis of collaboration. What separates effective collaboration from collective chaos in the artistic process is the fact that all involved understand that the director leads and directs the collaboration. While there are as many styles of collaboration as there are directors, at the heart of any strong collaboration is an effective team with good, functioning, respectful relationships organized around a clear set of beliefs and working values. It is impossible for an organization to have good quality relationships externally if it cannot have them internally. We believe that the same consideration that goes into casting the most critical artistic roles must likewise be employed when casting all the relationships within the organization, both professional and volunteer. The same care invested in making the work meaningful to our artistic collaborators must likewise be extended to our staffs, boards and especially audience and funding relationships.

**The Equation**

No entity—whether arts organization, business or government—can be creative, productive or proactive if in debt, in crisis or if human resources are overextended and burned out. For each arts entity, there is an equation that defines the balance between what the organization needs or wants to do artistically and programmatically and the resources available to do it. Balancing the equation means aligning programs, activities, needs and expectations with reality; it means reconciling the absorption and expenditure of energy in real time.
To begin, the basic elements of infrastructure—human resources, systems and strategic support—must be appropriate, adequate and in place. Infrastructure is complex, difficult to measure, is neither fixed nor absolute; but it is a critical part of the overall operating equation. It is the silent, virtually invisible through line that must be present. Besides key staff leadership and support, each arts entity must have systems that can manage and provide information accurately and in a timely way.

Most often, infrastructure is identified as human resources alone, usually enfolding all dimensions of activity \textit{a priori} into a staff position. That is, infrastructure functions—planning, monitoring day-to-day details, management, information analysis, indeed quantum dimensions of strategic and practical support—are simplistically fused into a single person or position. Once upon a time, the demands of infrastructure were sufficiently simple and the pool of bright, eager and affordable human resources was substantial enough to meet the infrastructure needs of most arts organizations. But that time is long gone. In years past, when an organization found a healthy and balanced equation, it could expect to sustain that equation for a while, sometimes several years. Today, the equation must be defined and balanced over and over, perhaps several times in a single year. Leadership must be prepared to make appropriate adjustments and changes.

\textbf{The Working Process}

\textit{What do we mean by process in this context? We mean ways to develop responses and solutions that organically and synchronistically emerge from the open, creative interaction and collaboration of a focused, well cast and well-directed group of people.} Whether it is making a show or raising money, there are processes to envision desired results and to take calculated, deliberate steps and actions to create or alter conditions toward the desired results. No matter what internal or external challenge confronts the entity, this process can guide the leadership towards appropriate responses; however conditions change the process can be used to chart another course. Within each arts entity, and unique within each, the artistic process is the unifying principle because it addresses the “how” questions. How is a vision for this work or project conceptualized and articulated? How are key roles to be cast? How will our limited resources best be used? How will the collaborators shape the vision or the work? How will decisions be made and by whom? How do we connect an audience to this work? The working processes must be constantly informed by the creative process in terms of focus, guidance, perspective, and method. Whenever we encounter a problem in
an organization’s life, we ask leadership how they would deal with the problem if it were in rehearsal. Or, if it is a really big problem, we ask how they would make a work about it.

As the artistic process provides the focus, energy and trajectory of the leadership’s vision in producing art, it must also provide the energy for the organization’s planning, operations and resource development as it moves through volatile times and conditions. We believe that it is critical to understand the nature, anatomy and dynamics of each organization’s artistic process, however defined or manifested. The process must be articulated, communicated and effectively internalized among all collaborators and it must inform all aspects of the organization’s life.

**Self-Organizing Properties**

These elements of dynamic balance – leadership, vision, relationships, the equation and process – provide two important functions for the arts understructure. The first function is diagnostic. When any arts entity experiences stress or difficulty, the source of that stress can be traced to the absence of, or conflict or confusion within one or more of these five elements. Conflict derives from an absence of clear leadership, misunderstanding of mission/vision/direction, dysfunctional relationships, inability or unwillingness to deal with the equation, or lack of an internal, unified, understood and agreed upon processes for working, planning, decision making, problem solving or relating one’s internal reality to world reality.

The second and perhaps most significant thing these elements represent and provide are the ingredients of self-organization – or the capacity to operate as a self-organizing system. *Self-organizing systems are the most adaptable and, by their nature, evolving structures of all.* Self-organizing arts entities are, by their nature, process-intense and process-specific and most of all adaptive. They are close to their artistic processes and when we ask the arts understructure professionals to refer to their artistic processes as a framework for all they do, they quickly and easily make the connection. By using their artistic processes, they are able to quickly and effectively adapt and maintain dynamic balance. The ability to adapt is an organization’s way of learning because it allows one to benefit from acquired knowledge, information and experience to change behaviors and stay healthy, balanced and productive.

The healthiest and most productive organizations are those most able to adapt, change, even create change through processes that allow them to simultaneously absorb and expend energy, to read the changing conditions, formulate plans and actions, organize and use resources, make good, timely decisions, learn and adapt and move forward. This is
an arts organization’s complex adaptive behavior that mirrors the tight rope artist mentioned before. Those with very effective processes may even be able to anticipate and act to influence the environment and external events in positive ways. More important than any plan is a process to make a new plan as time, conditions and circumstance demand.

The strength of a self-organizing system is its ability at any time to reference itself to its changing and evolving environment. Margaret Wheatley writes in Leadership and the New Science:

*Fundamental to all self-organizing systems is self-reference. In response to environmental disturbances that signal the need for change, the system changes in a way that remains consistent with itself in that environment. The system focuses on what is required to maintain its own integrity and self-renewal. As it changes, it does so by referring to itself; whatever future form it takes will be consistent with its already established identity . . . When the environment demands a new response, there is a reference point for change.*

Self-referencing is the point of departure and return for a self-organizing system. For an arts entity, the self-reference is contained within the elements of dynamic balance—a clarity and understanding of leadership, vision, relationships, the equation and process, all in relation to one another and to the environment. Using these elements as points of reference, an arts entity identifies and maintains the memory and awareness of its evolutionary course. The system proceeds or recedes, without value judgment along this track, just like the tightrope artist. There is no good or bad, success or failure associated with proceeding or receding, only adapting and evolving toward a healthy dynamic balance.

**Open Systems – Dynamic Balance and Imbalance**

Self-organizing does not mean self-contained. In any dynamic system, there must be a free flow of energy, communication and information. Traditional thinking has held that once committed to building an institution an arts entity should grow to achieve a size and scale that can meet every personal, professional and artistic need. This is what we refer to as the castle/island mentality; every arts institution is compelled to build its own castle on its own island. There was the belief that each castle (institution) should gather and contain all the people, resources, facilities, tools and systems needed to be completely independent and self-sufficient. Yet when resources got tight, these arts professionals were told to share resources, something philosophically and pragmatically at odds with their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. Arts professionals in intense competition to build institutions create barriers, not bridges.
Today no arts organization can achieve complete self-sufficiency, and none can long endure that kind of isolation. A more appropriate mindset is achieving an "economy of combination, a culture of shared resources" as anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson characterizes in Composing a Life. An important aspect of Bateson’s thinking is that the basis of sharing resources is not the resources per se, but the openness and interactions between people that makes sharing possible.

To move forward, to evolve in state of dynamic balance, a system must be able to absorb energy from the environment and then expend it. An art entity as an open system collects and uses human, financial, time, space and audience resources (energy) and expends creative, spiritual, service, and program activity in exchange. When an entity’s equation is balanced correctly, there is a free and healthy flow of energy transformed through its working processes.

One of the most positive aspects of the arts understructure is the openness, communication and interaction among the various entities. Individual entities are open and interactive within their neighborhoods and communities, and there is great cooperation, collaboration and sharing of resources between entities, as in the combination centers and formats described earlier. This behavior is not only one of the most striking contrasts to the old order, but it is clearly integral to the understructure’s effectiveness in maintaining dynamic balance (self organizing) and evolution. Individual open systems can only thrive and survive in a larger, general open system.

Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to an arts entity in a dynamic system is arriving at a point of equilibrium in which all forces – influx and outflow – are cancelled. A system at equilibrium is not absorbing or expending energy – it cannot evolve and remain congruent with its environment. We have seen many arts organizations reach just such a point of equilibrium. They tie measures of success and self-esteem to growth and doing more. Thus they need more resources and must have an ever-enlarging equation. But at some point the resources, within their existing environment, for whatever reason, are not sufficient. What they are attempting to do simply doesn’t jibe with available external resources and realities. Rather than moving to find a dynamic balance, they refuse to do anything that seems like going backward – although a receding may be the correct thing to do (e.g. taking a step back might allow them to move forward again in different way.) Any movement backward is tantamount to admitting failure, so they settle at a point of equilibrium. At this point the organization ceases to be an open system and the entity begins feeding on itself simply to maintain the equilibrium. It depletes its internal resources and
begins to atrophy and implode artistically, spiritually and emotionally. The only way to survive is to break the deadly grip of equilibrium, open the system and move toward dynamic balance and renewed energy without value judgment.

There is no safe harbor in any state of equilibrium. The system must keep moving, responding, changing and evolving. Smart leaders recognize this fact and may even deliberately create a state of dis-equilibrium to avoid stasis. In *Managing the Unknowable*, Ralph Stacey refers to such a condition as “bounded instability” – or a planned condition of healthy dis-equilibrium that keeps the organization connected to its own internal points of reference and identity and to the environment it exists in.

The artistic process, especially the rehearsal process, is just such a study of “bounded instability”. The process is constantly moving and evolving – the director challenges the actors to dig deeper, reveal or discover more and more about the characters and the work and incorporate these discoveries into the work.

In response to this aspect of dynamic balance, Paul Zimet of the Talking Band states:

If ideally the organizational process should mirror the artistic process, I find the phrase ‘dynamic imbalance’ more useful. As an actor, I learned that one of the most valuable things I could do was to throw myself off balance, to put myself in a position where I would most likely fall on my face and trust that it was a fertile place to be. I have found this trust in the vertiginous unknown valuable for my work as a writer and director as well – although perhaps even scarier because the writer and director are expected to be in charge of the outcome.

Perhaps for an organization, the willingness to allow a degree of imbalance requires the most courage of all. An organization needs to keep questioning its goals, its ways of doing things and even its reason to exist. Joe Chaikin, for example, decided to disband the Open Theater in 1973, at the peak of its success because he felt it was in danger of becoming an institution.

While suggesting the value of ‘dynamic imbalance’ I recognize there are some areas in which an organization needs stability. For the Talking Band it is a small group of artists who have worked together a long time and trust each other. In addition we have some board members to have been part of the organization for many years and whose help and support have been invaluable.

As we all know, the singularity of the theatrical event is that it exists in the moment, it changes from performance to performance – if you weren’t there you missed it. It’s not the same experience seeing a taped or filmed version of it. Should the organization that creates theatre aspire to more permanence? What excites us most about tight-rope walkers is not only their poise, but the knowledge that at any moment they might fall.
Evolution as Strategic Imperative

In *Peripheral Visions*, Mary Catherine Bateson observes, “death and extinction are the discontinuities avoided by the capacity to change.”

- Evolution is the act of an entity changing—relating and adapting itself to its environment.
- A system seeking balance is evolving, relating itself to its environment.

The most positive evolving system is assertive and anticipatory. In fact, it is true in all systems (organic and otherwise) that the measure and quality of health and survival is the congruence of the organism to its environment.

> The arts understructure further demonstrates that the less control an entity has over its environment the more adaptable it must be, the more it must be able to manipulate and maintain congruity with the environment. In today’s world, the only absolute constant is change. As the speed and intensity of change—economic, social, technological, cultural—accelerates in the environment, the ability to adapt and evolve with it is increasingly important. Those most able to adapt and evolve are most able to be healthy, creative and productive.

A striking aspect of evolution: it does not operate in a nice, tidy, incremental, ever-improving way. Most often, evolution is characterized by periods of stasis that are abruptly ended or changed by some external force. But when evolution in a general system is triggered, the changes always begin on the fringes, not within the principal body. Eventually the principal body adapts and follows the evolutionary path laid out, or it becomes extinct.

A major advantage of the arts self-organizing properties is the ability to evolve and change in a deliberate, healthy, even strategic way. Through our experience with arts organizations that use dynamic balance and self-organizing properties to change and adapt, both willingly and forcibly, we have observed consistent characteristics of evolving systems.

First, evolution is a process, not a thing. It is not something one chooses to do when all other options are closed. An evolving entity does not move from fixed point to fixed point in a tidy, positive, linear fashion. It moves in fits and starts—sometimes characterized by significant, bewildering, negative regressions.

Second, no arts organization, business or segment of government can grow big enough to withstand or control the force and power of a dynamic, ever-changing environment. Since we are unable to predict change, the next best thing is to respond to it
quickly and fluidly. If possible, we must take advantage of the change—instead of perpetually reacting to it or trying to hold it at bay. Therefore, any arts entity, old or new, large or small, institution or other, must evolve or die. So the question is not if one is to change, but how and under what terms and conditions. How can an arts entity avoid all manner of discontinuity?
Despite its many strengths, the arts understructure still lives a precarious existence. Like the overall art community, the understructure is fighting to survive and make work in a social, political and economic environment that has gone from unpredictable to volatile to hostile to chaotic in a few short years. While the arts understructure is growing and thriving everywhere, in most cases it is without, often in spite of, the arts support network. By the arts support network we refer to arts service organizations, funding leadership, community leadership, the media and arts professionals working on the institutional level. For example, most funding programs still demand and array of symbolic institutional gestures before considering a funding request of any kind. And far too many funders continue to focus on regulating or enforcing diversity through existing arts institutions rather than recognizing where diversity naturally and logically exists, which is within the understructure.

Perhaps the most helpful thing for the arts understructure would be to be understood and valued on their own terms. The range, breadth and depth of what these groups represent is a sign of extraordinary success and good health within the arts community, not a liability or a dangerous distraction. The existence of the arts understructure should be recognized and validated; ideally, it should be widely celebrated and supported by all.

The arts understructure is helping us all better understand priorities and new, more effective ways of working. Even in our work with A.R.T./New York’s mid-level theatres, we find many characteristics and strategies of the arts understructure being applied. Sadly, they are being applied off the record, in guerilla fashion, because many of these arts professionals are still convinced that this is not the way a professional theatre is supposed to work. And if they don’t do what they are supposed to do, they will be punished in some way. What a waste. Today no amount of effort should be expended toward anything but making the work, connecting it to its audience and staying healthy.

The arts understructure should not be viewed by the arts support network as a problem but as an affirmation of the success of a healthy and growing community. Overall, the arts understructure brings far greater wealth and knowledge to the table than it takes away. It needs to be valued accordingly.
Defining A New Arts Era

ARTS Action Research believes that the challenges confronting today's arts organizations demand that arts professionals and their community partners respond more forcefully and proactively than ever before. These responses must be complex not reflex, strategic not prescriptive, systemic not situational, studied and deliberate not imitative and tentative, and most of all they must be from the inside out, not engineered from a distance. The future demands that our organizational responses be as creative, bold, entrepreneurial, clear, courageous and adaptable as the art we produce, exhibit and present. ARTS Action Research is committed to an arts community that is artist-centered — led and directed by arts professionals.

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ARTS Action Research is an arts consulting group widely recognized for its groundbreaking work in redefining the role, relationships, and operation of arts organizations in today’s challenging arts environment. The ARTS Action Research team has served hundreds of arts organizations of all sizes, disciplines and working formats nationally and internationally.

ARTS Action Research works with performing, visual, literary, presenting and service arts organizations in both single and cross discipline configurations. AAR’s Team of Associates address a range of needs from the most basic developmental to complex restructuring and repositioning of veteran arts organizations. ARTS Action Research works with organizations individually and in consortium (involving a number of organizations in a community or geographic setting.) Regardless of working format, AAR works with organizations on individually tailored planning processes and strategies that extend directly from each organization’s artistic process.

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