

Blaming the Messenger

Arts directors take the heat when trustees can't raise the funds

BY DANIEL BROWN

A clean sweep of the directors of Greater Cincinnati's major arts institutions occurred in 1993-94: Ruth Meyer from the Taft Museum, Dennis Barrie from the Contemporary Arts Center, Millard Rogers from the Cincinnati Art Museum, Ernest Britton (and then acting director Trina Walton) from the Arts Consortium, Irv Oberschmidt from the Fine Arts Fund and Roger Williams from the Art Academy of Cincinnati. The circumstances of each director's departure varied, from the agreeable retirement of Rogers to the acrimonious "you're fired/I quit" of Meyer, Barrie and Williams.

Greater Cincinnati's arts institutions have new directors: they should direct, create, orchestrate, manage and plan together. Arts institutions, in the last analysis, are about the arts.

This pattern of changing directors parallels a national trend in the arts. The average tenure for a museum director in the United States is five to seven years. Changes have occurred recently at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and its Institute for Contemporary Arts; the Institute for Contemporary Art and School of the Art Institute in Chicago; the Kimball Museum in Fort Worth, Texas; the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis; and the nearby Wexner Center and Columbus Museum of Art. The list goes on and on.

The issue in all of these situations — the grievance, if you will — is money, or the lack of it. Directors are faced with growing audiences and demands on their institutions and time and must also deal with rising fixed costs (insurance, salaries, overhead), insufficient endowment funds and decreasing national and state arts council funding. The resulting financial crisis has been exacerbated by a decline in corporate support caused by ongoing corporate downsizing and spending cutbacks.

Positions for development directors are open all over the country, but there are few takers. Directors are taking heat from their institutions' new breed of bottom-line-oriented corporate trustees.

As a result, the national trend has been toward institutions hiring directors who are primarily arts administrators with a business/development orientation. Cincinnati's new replacement directors — with the exception of the CAC's Elaine King — mirror that trend, which began in the mid-1980s with the hiring of Thomas Krens as director of the Guggenheim Museum. During his tenure, the original Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Guggenheim in New York expanded

to five satellite institutions, yet the entire group is now in near-terminal financial crisis. (All its great libraries

have been closed.) Krens became the role model of director-as-businessperson. Arts knowledge has been deemed much less important than the chase for the dollar, as if no one person could combine both skills.

Programming and exhibitions are beginning to suffer, to fray, to become marginalized. The era of the patrician private patron is over. New trustees often view their role as a reward, an addition to a resume, rather than a responsibility with historical context.

The Fine Arts Fund raises around \$8 million for our eight largest arts institutions (Symphony, Opera, Ballet, Art Museum, CAC, Taft Museum, May Festival and Playhouse in the Park). Such fund-raising is a heroic effort but a shockingly small amount, given Greater Cincinnati's population base of approximately 1.9 million people.

What, then, is the role of the trustee? As the cliché runs, a board member must "give, get or get out." If trustees are busy blaming directors for not finding dollars, then what is the purpose, the job description, the specific charge of and for an institution trustee? At the CAC, for example, annual giving figures by

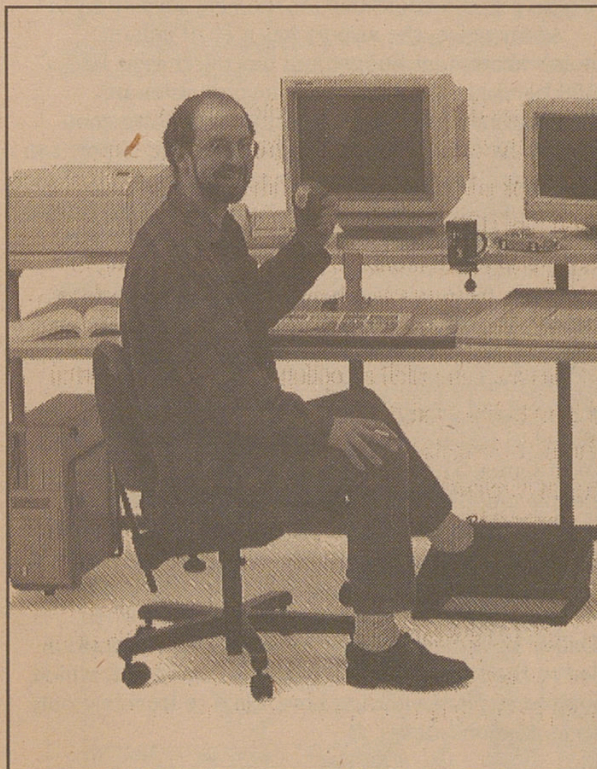
trustees have been declining. Will King be blamed? Will Toni Birckhead, director of the under-construction Aronoff Center Gallery, be pressured to raise money in competition with existing museums and galleries? Can Cincinnati afford the soon-to-open Children's Museum? Where are the corporate leaders and visionaries? Where is the overall planning?

Putting It Together

The squeeze is on. Cincinnati's FAF institutions, according to bylaws, may not fund-raise during the annual Fine Arts Fund Drive. Corporate dollars are drying up; Procter & Gamble is, by far, the region's largest corporate donor (assumptions about the Lindner empire notwithstanding). Private dollars are disappearing as well; Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, for example, has relied on the patronage of two particular local families but now seeks access to FAF support. Arts institutions must now compete with the zoo, Children's Hospital and Xavier University, among many others, in a scramble for funding that leaves directors with insufficient time to actually direct their institutions.

One solution is to hire two directors — administrative and artistic — a common practice in the performing arts. However, this idea may add more, not less, confusion and fragmentation.

Blaming directors for an overall downturn in the economy is absurd. The new wave of directors with development/business backgrounds must be able to count on a specific dollar figure from each of their trustees. A director must direct, manage, oversee all aspects of an institution. Fund-raising is an inevitable and growing part of any director's job, but an institution's financial well-being must be the primary role of its trustees. Greater Cincinnati's arts institutions have new directors: they should direct, create, orchestrate, manage and plan together. Arts institutions, in the last analysis, are about the arts. Let the trustees' primary role be giving, or getting, money with the assistance of directors and development officers. If overworked, harried directors continue to be glorified fund-raisers, another wave will depart our city. The ancient Greek myth repeats: The messenger director is killed for relaying the message to the king trustee. ©



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