

# Audience engagement as practice: From extraordinary to everyday

Engagement des Publikums als Praxis: Vom Außergewöhnlichen zum  
Alltäglichen

GORAN TOMKA\*

Faculty TIMS, Educons University, Sremska Kamenica, Serbia

## *Abstract*

This essay challenges the conventional view of audience engagement in arts and culture, arguing that it's more about habitual, everyday processes than the usually highlighted exceptional moments. Current approaches to researching and teaching audience engagement overly focus on one-off events, overlooking broader contexts and long-term habitual practices. Through a practice lens, audience engagement emerges as interconnected, routinized processes within organizations. Changing engagement requires systemic shifts, acknowledging the stability and sociability of practices. Traditional methods of audience research and education must evolve towards deeper qualitative analyses; cultural policy should prioritize meaningful engagement over superficial metrics; and cultural management needs to care for genuine engagement recognizing diverse organizational practices. The essay is a call for embracing the everyday, underreported social interactions that form the true foundation of audience engagement.

Dieser Essay stellt die konventionelle Sichtweise von Publikumsengagement in Kunst und Kultur in Frage und argumentiert, dass es sich dabei eher um gewohnheitsmäßige, alltägliche Prozesse handelt als um außergewöhnliche Momente. Aktuelle Ansätze zur Erforschung von Publikumsbeteiligung konzentrieren sich zu sehr auf einmalige Ereignisse und übersehen breitere Kontexte und langfristige gewohnheitsmäßige Praktiken. Aus der Sicht der Praxis zeigt sich das Engagement des Publikums als vernetzte, routinierte Prozesse innerhalb von Organisationen. Eine Veränderung des Engagements erfordert systemische Veränderungen, die die Stabilität und Sozialität von Praktiken anerkennen. Traditionelle Methoden der Publikumsforschung und -bildung müssen sich zu qualitativen Analysen entwickeln. Die Kulturpolitik sollte sinnvollem Engagement Vorrang vor oberflächlichen Metriken einräumen, das Kulturmanagement muss sich um echtes Engagement bemühen und dabei verschiedene organisatorische Praktiken anerkennen. Der Essay ist ein Aufruf, die alltäglichen, wenig beachteten sozialen Interaktionen als Grundlage von Publikumsengagement zu würdigen.

## *Keywords*

audience development, arts management/Kulturmanagement

\* gotomka@gmail.com

### From engagement as event...

Researchers and others reporting on audience engagement tend to view engagement with arts, culture and heritage as happening at a particular moment. In fact, a rather extraordinary, spectacular moment. In this essay I would like to argue, however, that being engaged with arts, culture and heritage has much more to do with long habitual processes than with very conscious and exceptional moments. Yes, in certain ways moments of exposure are all that people care about and remember. However, on a broader scale, what brings people in contact with arts, culture and heritage are thousands upon thousands of activities that are less than exceptional and more likely to be everyday and mundane.

On the side of the audience, going to a theatre, a cinema or a museum is a very complex practice that entails shaping one's own tastes and preferences, creating social ties with other people who attend the events, creating communication channels for being informed about future events, acquiring knowledge about artistic and cultural content that is crucial for enjoyment, understanding and engagement, attending an event in any form imaginable and finally, evaluating, commenting and sharing impressions and taking part in other communicative actions after the event itself. Most of these are parts of very long processes, some beginning in early childhood and family life and, as such, they are not necessarily taken into account as part of engagement in an event. Nevertheless, many research studies show these factors play a crucial role in shaping people's engagement with arts. In sociological work on these issues, at least since Bourdieu's *Distinction* (BOURDIEU 1984), it has become customary to consider these wider, contextual determinants of people's engagement with arts—their familial, educational, and economic background for example.

Similarly, we should be taking these wider aspects into consideration also when debating and designing audience engagement processes. Which communication channels have been built around an event? How was the program conceived and who participated in it? What is the identity and image of the venue, of an artist, and of an institution that stands behind the event? How is space arranged and how do other technological, architectural and spatial factors (like parking) influence ways of experiencing a program in the venue? What kind of culture, in terms of dressing up, talking, drinking, commenting, moving and hanging out is nurtured inside that venue? All these questions influence the way people

are attracted—or not—to a cultural event, and which people, and in what way, and for what reasons they are attracted.

Still, questions like these are rarely taken into consideration when talking about how to engage audiences. Most audience development and engagement how-to books, best practice collections and toolkits overly focus on campaigns, one-off events, workshops, festivals and similar initiatives (ARNAUD ET AL. 2015, GARIBALDI ET AL 2017, MIHALJINAC/TADIĆ 2016). The attention on focused, one-off events is understandable; such phenomena simply make for better storytelling, as the single case is easier to grasp and refer to. However, it creates a wrong impression that creating long-lasting deep engagement between audiences and cultural venues/organisations is about offering events aimed at audience engagement.

This is the goal of my intervention here—to caution that we need to look wider and deeper when searching for good practices of audience engagement. This is what I will call the practice lens. Without it, we are only seeing the most outstanding bits, which are nonetheless often marginal in the overall societal position of an organisation, while other, more important processes are obscured. Arguably, all these blind spots are precisely enduring because audience engagement is usually seen through the lens of conscious, organized, focused efforts at improving or establishing social connections. In that view, responsibility for audience engagement falls on specialised personnel who should achieve it through specialised activity aimed at very well-defined audiences. What I offer, instead, is another way to see audience engagement.

### **... towards engagement as practice**

Seen through a practice lens, all activities that fall within the category of engaging audiences are in fact networks of interconnected processes of long duration and relatively low levels of recognition and awareness. If the cultural participation of citizens is to be considered a habit that can be developed—the process of engaging audiences, run by culture producers, can also be considered a habit. Moreover, whole organizations are seen as networks of practices that are shaped by often unreflected and repeated ways of doing, which are only spotted by certain conscious and deliberative moments of change. So, changing the organization's relation to its audiences—resulting in any favourable outcome like more visitors, increased sales, wider outreach or more diverse audiences—is

surely more of a systemic change involving almost all aspects of the organization's. Here is why.

Practices are habitual ways of doing and saying, which have varying degrees of consciousness and have a certain stability over time. As Reckwitz (2002) points out, practice is "a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood" (RECKWITZ 2002: 250). Precisely, a hallmark feature of practices lies in their routinization. Routinization refers to the process by which activities become established as recurring, standardized routines within a particular context or social setting. This characteristic of practices stems from the human inclination to systematize and regularize actions to enhance efficiency, predictability, and coordination. As individuals or groups repeatedly engage in specific activities over time, they move from novel and varied actions to those more structured and predictably patterned. As a result, behaviours are ingrained through repetition, rendering them somewhat automatic and, in many cases, less consciously mediated.

This is very important precisely in the context of a call for wider and better audience engagement. Let me illustrate with one of my own field research findings (TOMKA 2016). A public youth cultural centre wants to widen their outreach with young audiences. They consciously, and in a planned manner, initiate many different promotional, educational and marketing activities including old and new media campaigns (posters, radio and Facebook), awards, discounts, workshops and so on. However, what they are not aware of is that their everyday organisational practices are very distant and even obscured from their target audiences. Reasons are numerous, but such a distant posture is the result of their countercultural attitudes, their taste cultures, their existing professional networks, their insulation from market exchanges due to public funding and so on. After years of attempts, they reach the conclusion that their target audiences are not interested in what they do and they settle for a niche position, further reinforcing their marginality and distance from their audiences.

A textbook approach would encourage them to do more promotion, more marketing, more workshops. But the totality of their organisational routines would remain intact, and so would their relation to their surroundings (including their audiences). There are several reasons for that.

One reason is stability of practices. They are not so prone to change. As I have already discussed above, practices are routinized and repeated. Their repetition requires little active attention, so there needs to be not only a

moment of reflection and questioning to start changing the practice, but also a long period of repetition of that new way of doing for it to become a new habit. And that is hard, as we all know.

Another important aspect of practices is their sociability and their embeddedness in a whole range of other practices and inter-related actors (GHERARDI 2012: 3; LAVE/WENGER 1991: 51). Practice is a “collective knowledgeable doing” (GHERARDI 2012: 3), so organisations can be understood as communities of practice (LAVE/WENGER 1991), or as networks of shared practices (CORRADI/GHERARDI/VERZELLONI 2010). If organization is defined as a field of interconnected practices, or as “*connections-in-action*” (GHERARDI 2009: 115) that are socially and historically conditioned, the entire network of practices needs to change. And this includes also the network of connected actors, inside the organization and outside it (partners, suppliers, financiers and the like), that actually shape the organisation as a field of interconnected practices.

What is particularly problematic in many organisations (such as the youth center referenced above) is the specific division of labour whereby dealing with audiences is delegated to a specialised team or department (such as marketing, sales, pedagogical team, outreach or anything similar). Such a division implies that those who are in charge of making key editorial and programme decisions are not necessarily the ones closest to audiences. And that proximity is crucial.

One of the underlying philosophies of practice theories is “entwinement” (TSOUKAS/SANDBERG 2011: 343). Entwinement questions the customary epistemological framework rooted in subject-object relationships. In Heidegger’s view, the primary mode of our engagement with the world is “being-in-the-world” (HEIDEGGER 1996/1927: 49–58). In contradiction to ontological presuppositions inherent in scientific rationality, which postulate an initial disjunction between ourselves and the world, the concept of being-in-the-world asserts that our most intrinsic essence of existence is one characterized by entwinement. We find ourselves ceaselessly interwoven with both fellow beings and the diverse constituents of distinct practice realms.

In the case of audiences of arts events and exhibitions, they are not seen as occupying the same world as cultural professionals. In the example of the youth centre, producers explaining how they developed ideas for future programmes never mentioned audiences. Instead, they converse with artists, fellow producers, and so on—in other words, those who they perceive as being-in-the-world with them.

A typical response to changing the circumstances of entwinement (or lack of) is to gather information (on audiences) in order to learn about their preferences and needs. It is also important to say, however, that there is no amount of information that can be learned that will effect a change. Learning about audiences—which is commonly suggested to cultural professionals in audience development workshops—is of a limited help. There is a particular understanding of knowledge that is very problematic here. As Geiger indicates:

knowledge is not something formal and abstract out there, waiting to be discovered through adequate scientific methods but a relational process taking place within situated practices, mutually constituted in activities of knowing and practicing. (Dewey, 1922) Being part of a practice means being part of the collective knowing of a practicing community (Brown and Duguid 1991), which makes knowledge processual, collective, situative and provisional. (GEIGER 2009:134)

Knowledge is a relation between “persons in activity” (LAVE/WENGER 1991: 51), shaped by the social setting. In other words, knowledge is what people do together. The way a curator addresses audiences is a consequence of the way of thinking and acting in museums and galleries, which includes both the conception of the audience in the cultural venue and the conception of the curator in her professional roles. However, it is again important not to view these concepts as mental content in the curators’ heads that can be taken out like a book from the library shelf and replaced by a better suited book.

This is not to say that practices are impossible to change. When they are reflected, transformed and then repeated anew over and over again in a changed social setting with other people who also share this new routine, practices of course change. In other words, the actual practice of engaging audiences is a result of both unreflected, inherited, learned ways of doing on the one hand, and myriad of situations which call for questioning and can possibly introduce change in practice (for better or for worse) on the other. These situations are therefore crucial for introducing any kind of change.

### **Breaking the norm**

For large-scale, long-term organisational change to happen, I think we need to change the way we research, educate, support and practice cultural management. As I have previously written (TOMKA 2018), change of perspective requires a change in research methodologies, with more

emphasis on ethnography and other qualitative, in-depth research designs that can map and explore these sensitive networks and recognise the larger patterns of intertwined practices. In the processes of cultural management education, we should be cautious when teaching audience engagement, marketing or development as separate fields from programming, curating and editing. Further, rather than basing instruction on single events, campaigns and other short-term performances that reinforce narrow assumptions about audience engagement the focus should be on the wider processes as discussed above. Cultural policy also has a role to play; supporting one-off spectacular events, counting numbers of exhibitions, premiers or productions and supporting countless festivals can in fact be counterproductive to organisational change in the direction of deeper and more meaningful audience engagement.

Finally, for cultural management as a profession, it is important to be aware that audience engagement is a complex endeavour spread throughout the organisational structure. New engagement practices needed or promoted as desired organisational change must become part of the knowledge system for employees in that organisation—part of their “meaningful totality” (SANDBERG/TSOUKAS 2011: 341). Since engagement is an interconnected, contingent practice and only—as such—can be either analysed or improved, a conscious change needs to take into account a whole web of organisational practices. And that is surely easier for a new organisation, or an organisation that has gone through some radical change internally or externally, because those organisations are anyway rebuilding their new fields of practices and their networks of collaborators. For well-established organisations, such deeper change needs to be somehow induced and powered by a strong will for change.

As a conclusion, cultural managers might need less talk of audience engagement as heroic, spectacular and transcending, and more stories of those numberless, every day, under-reported social processes which are true foundations of audience engagement. Examples of this include artists, producers, curators and others joining the long chatty hours in the bar after a show or during a festival; watching audiences watch an exhibition; taking part in local community meetings; helping visitors find toilets or a parking place; and reviewing feedback and comments about the organization and its offerings. What is needed is inhabiting the same world, and that is made of simple but numerous acts of being together.

## References

- ARNAUD, Lionel/GUILLON, Vincent/MARTIN, Cecile (2015): *Élargir la participation à la vie culturelle : Expériences françaises et étrangères*. Observatoire des politiques culturelles. Grenoble, France.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1984): *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- CORRADI, Gessica/GHERARDI, Silvia/VERZELLONI, Luca (2010): Through the Practice Lens: Where is the Bandwagon of Practice-Based Studies Heading? – In: *Management Learning* 41(3), 265–283.
- GEIGER, David (2009): Revisiting the Concept of Practice: Toward an Argumentative Understanding of Practicing. – In: *Management Learning* 40(2), 129–144.
- GHERARDI, Silvia (2009): Introduction: The Critical Power of the ‘Practice Lens’. – In: *Management Learning* 40(2), 115–128.
- GHERARDI, Silvia (2012): *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study: Problems and Methods*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin (1996/1927): *Being and Time*. New York: SCM.
- LAVE, Jean/WENGER, Etienne (1991): *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MIHALJINAC, Nina/TADIĆ, Dimitrije (2016): *Dobre prakse razvoja publike: Razvoj publike u Srbiji* [Best practices of audience development in Serbia]. Beograd: Desk Kreativna Evropa, Srbija.
- RECKWITZ, Andreas (2002): Toward a Theory of Social Practices A Development in Culturalist Theorizing. – In: *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(2), 243–263.
- SANDBERG, J/Tsoukas, H. (2011): Grasping the logic of practice: Theorizing through practical rationality. – In: *Academy of Management Review* 36(2), 338–360.
- TOMKA, Goran (2016): *Publika kao diskurzivna formacija sistema kulturne produkcije* [Audience as discursive formation of the field of cultural production]. Belgrade: Faculty of Dramatic Arts.
- TOMKA, Goran (2018): The Orthodoxy of Cultural Management Research and Possible Paths Beyond it. – In: Constance DeVereaux (ed.), *Arts and Cultural Management: Sense and Sensibilities in the State of the Field*. London: Routledge, 108–128.