

## THE ECOLOGY OF CULTURE: A CONVERSATION WITH MARIAN A. GODFREY

*Marian A. Godfrey is senior director of Culture Initiatives at The Pew Charitable Trust. In this interview, conducted by Edward A. Martenson with theater management students at Yale School of Drama, Marian discusses a wide range of subjects, including her views on the state of the arts and culture field, the role of foundations in the arts ecology, and cultural policy in the United States.*

*Prior to arriving at Pew in 1989, Marian had an extensive background in nonprofit arts management, handling production, administration, fund raising, and strategic planning for such organizations as Mabou Mines, Dance Theater Workshop, and La Jolla Playhouse. She produced film and video projects, including a feature-length film for Mabou Mines which aired on public television nationwide. She is a graduate of the Theater Management program at Yale School of Drama and of Radcliffe College. In 2003, she received the John Cotton Dana Award for Leadership for contributions to museum education from the American Association of Museums.*

**EDWARD A. MARTENSON:** I remember vividly a thing you said to me not too long after you went to Pew: that it was difficult to run the hallways among people who were weighted down with the responsibility of saving lives when all you cared about was how good the art was.

**MARION A. GODFREY:** I still have a lot of anguish about that, actually. Particularly now, after this last economic downturn when there are lives that so desperately need to be saved and the pressure is so much greater. Frankly, I think that I would do a less good job if I didn't continue to worry about that. I think everybody needs to worry about that. It's really hard to say, 'What am I doing that's so

important, and how the heck are we going to save that?'

**MARTENSON:** It's admirable that you internalize those conflicts, but based on the external evidence you've been successful in making arguments for maintaining a high priority on the arts. Many foundations all across the country have pulled back from major commitments to the arts.

**GODFREY:** Well, I'll take some credit for it, but it's not my doing by any means. It's really about where our board is and really has always been. I was able to make the case with them that the arts sector is one of the assets of Philadelphia—Philadelphia has

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This interview was prepared by Edward A. Martenson, Professor (Adjunct) and Chair of Theater Management, and Art Priromprinr, Managing Editor of the Theater Management Knowledge Base.

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enormous problems, but the arts are not one of them. And sure, the arts have their problems, which in your grantmaking capacity you can help to address, but I was really able to make two arguments in particular.

First is that the arts are an asset-based investment, not a deficit based one. Supporting assets and correcting deficits are two different ways of looking at what to do in a community, and as a foundation, you have to do them both. That is one of the reasons why I can hold my head up when I look at all these lives that need to be saved: those are problems that need to be solved and the arts are an asset to be supported.

Second, I persuaded our board, after being persuaded myself, that it was time to look at the arts as a sector, not just one organization at a time, and especially not just our favorites. They needed to look at the whole sector—small, middle-sized, large, all different disciplines—and they needed to invest in excellence wherever it could be found in that sector. I needed to get the board away from feeling like all they were doing was investing in a proliferation of organizations. Instead, we were starting to say, ‘We won’t invest in a roster of your favorite organizations, but we won’t invest in just anybody either, we’ll pick our spots.’ I developed programs to fit that once we picked our spots. One was focused on institutional development and sustainability, and another was focused on artistry and creativity that didn’t necessarily have to be tied to institutional behavior.

**MARTENSON:** How do you get from the support of artists and their creativity to a thing like the Cultural Management Initiative, where you’re doing professional development of managers? That’s a connection that makes perfect sense to me and to many in the arts field, but in my experience that’s a relatively sophisticated argument to make to others.

**GODFREY:** That connection works to the degree that you’re talking about artists who want to or need to be in an institutional environment. When we were trying to do this organizational, performance-based operating support program, we saw that the organizations needed a lot more help than they were getting on how to be well organized, well-managed and well-financed.

My argument in this has always been that: If you’re well managed as an organization, and you’re not constantly worrying about making payroll, then you do a better job of sustaining and supporting your artists and giving them a foundation from which they can stand and make their art. I always thought that that was a very simple argument, but it didn’t always get made.

**MARTENSON:** I suspect that the field stopped making that argument in part because we thought of it as an obvious fact. But in recent decades, I’ve heard people say, ‘Well prove that—that sounds like an unsupported assertion.’

**GODFREY:** It’s hard for me to understand why anyone would disagree with the fact that a well-run organization is in a better position to support its artists—though it had better also be an organization that has a commitment to supporting its artists, and a lot of the well-known ones don’t necessarily.

Another part of it is, though, that more and more artists, particularly younger ones, are not interested in institutional environments. For me, that doesn’t lessen the argument that if you’re a non-profit institution whose goal is to create programs and experiences that are artistically grounded, you had better be well run in order to do a good job of that. Everybody sees our operating support program as our flagship program, so we hear from a lot of people who say, ‘You’re not considering the artistry of these companies, you’re just giving them

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operating support because they're well-managed.'

In response to that, we've had to figure out how to come around and integrate our management work with our artistic support, and also how to think about all of that in a measurement-based world. How do you measure how well an organization sustains an artistic vision and artistic programs? Well, you can only do that by proxy: you have to ask about alignment, of mission and goals, constituents, and how much they pay their artists. But you can't, as somebody said to me the other day, ask 'How do you measure joy?' You can't measure everything but that doesn't mean you don't need to measure something.

### **BACKGROUND & CAREER**

**MARTENSON:** If our records are correct, you graduated from the theater management program here at Yale in 1975. What was the program like then?

**GODFREY:** The program was very much in the intellectual mold of Robert Brustein, who was a powerful presence here. Bob was very clear about what he believed, and he really gave you something to push back on. He gave theater administrators something to push back on that I radically disagreed with, which was that we were not only in service to the art form, but we were also strictly in service to the artists. We were not to have our own ultimate point of view about this enterprise that we were in. For anybody that has ambitions about working in the theater in any kind of leadership role, that's very irritating. But at the time, a lot of regional theater was set up that way.

That's probably one reason why I didn't even really try to get into the regional theater and ended up working in a company like Mabou Mines, which was structured in a completely different way. I was definitely in service to the art and the artists when I was working for Mabou Mines, but the managers there were a very powerful part of the company. You were there because you wanted to keep up with them and work with them, and that's what I did. It was exhausting but it was great. I would say that working with Mabou Mines is the other most formative experience in my career after being here at Yale.

**MARTENSON:** What was your position at Mabou Mines?

**GODFREY:** When I started, their administration was done by an intermediary that handled the management and finances for Mabou Mines and of a lot of other really great downtown artists. I came in as Mabou Mines' own dedicated fundraiser and company manager. They paid for me through a Ford Foundation grant.

Eventually, I muscled my way into a Managing Director title because I ended up doing a lot of that work anyway. When I went to work there, the artists of Mabou Mines basically auditioned me as if I were going to become a member of the company. I chose not to become a formal member of the company because I needed to make a living—if I became a member of the company then I would have had to share rations the way they did—and I think that was the first of a series of dividing decisions that I made in my life that set me up as a manager instead of as an artist. Not that I think a lot of myself as an artist anyway, but I definitively chose that path and have stayed on that path since then. I made that decision for financial reasons, but it was also a way of defining my relationship with the artists. They were so powerful that I was afraid of being subsumed by them, which I've also found to be true of other artists that I've worked with over the years.

**MARTENSON:** The Mabou Mines artists are not only incredibly talented people, they're also very powerful personalities. What was it like to manage that?

**GODFREY:** I don't think I actually managed them—I don't think I could have managed them. I think I facilitated them. I advocated for them, I negotiated between them and reality, or rather, the parts of reality that they didn't care to interact with themselves. That was also formative of my approach to doing management work. I see myself as an advocate, a facilitator, and a translator between the world of the artists and of the funder and the outside world.

**MARTENSON:** The line from Mabou Mines to Pew is an interesting one—I don't say it's strange, but it's an interesting one. Would you talk about that a

little bit?

**GODFREY:** I see it as an evolution. I would say the through-line in my career has always been advocating for artists. When Mabou Mines ran out of its Ford money, I left but continued to produce the *Dead End Kids* film for them. I realized around this time that I probably didn't have the *cojones* to be a producer or an executive director. I just wasn't tough enough, and my personality was really about being a facilitator or an advocate. At the same time, I started to work at Dance Theater Workshop as the development director. I went to DTW because I was very interested in exploring the dance world, which is even more different from the theater world than I had expected. I was very lucky at DTW because they were booking and presenting some great artists at the time. But then I had to leave DTW to finish editing the *Dead End Kids* film—I couldn't do them both at once.

While I was trying to finish the film, I started working as a consultant for AT&T, on a project called AT&T: OnStage. That gave me a foot into the funding world because AT&T: OnStage was a grantmaker. I became very interested in the way that they operated as a corporate sponsor, and I was also very interested in expanding my horizons. I went to Pew when it was reorganized under Rebecca Rimel. She wanted me to come down as a Program Director, and I thought, OK this is an opportunity to actually do something and get something out of it. I thought I'd be there for five years max, and now it's been twenty!

**MARTENSON:** How do you self-identify now? Are you still a 'professional theater manager?'

**GODFREY:** No, I don't identify myself that way anymore. I finally, reluctantly, had to let go of thinking of myself as a theater person—not even as a theater manager, but as a theater person. After the 1990s, my job at Pew morphed in a big way. I was still interested enough in theater, but because Pew supports everything—we support historic preservation and historic sites, we support museums and the visual arts, all of the performing arts and a little bit of media—I had developed so much of a generalist view at that point. While I found that very engaging, I was losing my capacity to stay in touch with theater. So I guess I haven't thought of myself as a theater person for 10 or 12

years now. It was a slow process and I struggled with it for some time.

**MARTENSON:** Was that a little traumatic?

**GODFREY:** [LAUGHTER] The trauma had happened farther back, I think. Letting go of theater was one thing that I had a lot of sentimental regret for. It was acknowledging that I had become a bureaucrat and a funder, and that my colleagues and my brain trust were other arts funders, and that I was middle management in an enterprise that deals with a broad range of enormous problems. Even though Pew has a significant commitment to the arts and a significant budget to apply to that, it is still a major institution with many policy priorities. I'm the only one that advocates for artists there—nobody above me advocates for artists. And that's true of almost all of my colleagues at other foundations well.

### THE ARTS ECOLOGY

**MARTENSON:** I want to turn to the state of play in the theater field. Without a doubt, there is a much more crowded environment. At one time, sustainability and institutionalization were viewed as synonymous. But now they're decoupled, because sustainability might mean not institutionalizing. We know that many of the regional theaters are more project based, less company oriented, more orientated towards developing plays, and the connection between the art and Broadway is as strong as it has ever been. How do you see the progress of things?

**GODFREY:** Well, in Philadelphia, we did some studies and found that there were other good signs about the vitality of the community, and the audience in general was going up. However, the audience per performance was going down. We could show with this data that we had just tipped over into being overbuilt: the number of performances was going up but the audiences weren't going up at the same rate. I don't know if the community's going to do anything about this, or how they're going to react to it—I don't even know how the funders, including us, are going to deal with it. But we invested so heavily in theater artists and artistry that there is all this great stuff happening now. It's not just because of our investment, but we might ultimately have done somewhat of a disservice by tipping the sector

towards being too big or being out of alignment with the audience. So that's a real present question for us right now.

**MARTENSON:** There's no question nationally that the population of arts organizations is growing faster than the revenues of the sector.

**GODFREY:** It's also growing faster than the audience.

**MARTENSON:** Does it follow that the sector needs to figure out a clearer way of thinking about when organizations ought to go away?

**GODFREY:** Funders have talked about this for a long time—and it's dangerous territory. You want to help an organization go away if the organization has decided that it wants to go away or has decided that it's time to go away. But you don't want to push an organization out. You don't want to put their head underwater and hold it there. That's just not philanthropic! [LAUGHTER]

I actually believe that we'll see something of a Darwinian pattern here no matter what. It's hard to orchestrate or organize how a system shrinks. You can social engineer the growing of a system, but I think we all are too good-minded and too chicken to social engineer the shrinking of a sector. There are cycles that happen, and if it was just about size, about the sector outgrowing itself, I wouldn't worry about that.

What I really worry about is that organizations are becoming less and less aligned with the world around them. And I'm not just talking about theater: I'm talking about a lot of arts enterprises. When our theater sector is almost exclusively organized by and created by artists and managers who are white making work for their culture, their audience therefore, is a white audience. In Philadelphia, more than 50% of our population is African-American: we have a very significant Latino population, we have a very significant Asian population, and those populations are not being

served, essentially, by our theater. There's just going to be a gap. For a lot of really bad reasons, organizations that grow up to serve populations of color can't get funding. There's still a lot of implicit racism out there in the funding community and these organizations can't attract the kind of money that they need to really build themselves into institutions.

**MARTENSON:** It seems to me that the thread between these things is that there aren't any marketplace forces that require arts organizations to adapt to their environment. The question that is just open and waiting out there is, if there aren't any marketplace forces, then what's the impetus for adaptation. The necessity for it is clearer and clearer all the time, but it's not happening?

**GODFREY:** Bill Ivey has written a lot about this. I think what he predicted a couple of years ago is already happening: public policy is going to simply turn its back on the existing arts sector as it becomes less and less relevant to the community. Private funders are, as you said before, doing the same thing. So what's going to happen is that you can't figure out what role these organizations have in our communities and our societies. They're going to go out of business whether they want to or not, and they're just going to stop being funded.

**MARTENSON:** Are there other reasons that you see organizations eventually closing?

**GODFREY:** A lot of them are going to close because the founding artists are going to retire or die—it's been about a 30 or 40 year cycle from when they started, so that time is coming. Somebody said to me, 'Why don't funders think about those kind of artist-led organizations as sole proprietorships, the way you think of any small business that could give very niche-oriented service?' Those businesses are run on the passion of the person who founded the organization, and when that person is done, the organization is done. That's a very reasonable idea to me, though of

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course that life cycle could be a very long arc. We're starting coming to that: the 1970s is when the big boom happened, so 40 years later, we're there.

**STUDENT:** Last summer, I interviewed the director of a small theater company in New Orleans for a case study. He said that foundations have an agenda, and that he preferred to take as little of their money as possible because he didn't want their agenda to impose on his work. What do you think a foundation's proper role is in the ecology of an arts community?

**GODFREY:** That's a really good question and I don't know that there's a single answer. Historically, not just in the arts but in general, the thought has been that foundations were entities that could support innovations. For example, the Rockefellers supported scientists who developed a different kind of rice in Southeast Asia, rice that could grow better and have better nutrition. That helped address some of the issues of famine in the region. Another model for foundation work is that foundations help test pilot an idea, and if the idea is good, the foundation expects the government to take the idea to scale.

Our arts grant-making is a really big amount of money compared to arts grantmaking by most other foundations in a single community, so I speak from experience that is not normal in that Pew is a really big funder. We in Philadelphia, along with the William Penn Foundation, are probably responsible for the fact that local government support and corporate support are under developed. We've basically pushed them out. On the one hand, I'm thrilled that I've had the opportunity to make some things happen that we made happen in Philadelphia, and it's been really good for artists, but it hasn't necessarily been the best thing for the long term sustainability of the sector except that we're still going to be there. And William Penn is still going to be there. So it sort of is what it is.

I don't think foundations ought to be in the business of indefinitely supporting the operations of the organizations we are interested in. Although these days, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the social impact advisors, and people like that look at these kinds of things and say, 'Well, yes, if you can make an operating commitment to an organization, you should make it indefinite.' I find

that an interesting challenge because, I mean, yes they're right, but then you run out of money with which to do innovation. So, I think it depends.

**STUDENT:** In talking about the environment needing to change and organizations needing to go away, what is the foundation's role in that? Or do you not play a role in that, and fund it as long as it exists?

**GODFREY:** I think that a foundation's role should include, if asked, to help an organization that you've had a relationship with prepare to shut down if they come to you and ask for it. We've done this once or twice. They present the expenses associated with shutting down, such as leaving behind an archive and finding a home for it so that there's some kind of legacy for the organization, things like that.

We have on a couple of occasions tried to convince organizations to merge, even just in their back offices, to avoid going out of business—and we were firmly rejected, told to go away and leave them alone. So I don't know what a foundation's role would be in shutting down an organization that didn't want to be shut down. We certainly take a passive role with organizations that we don't think are viable and that we don't think will to continue to exist. They may come to us and say, 'If you'll just bail me out, we'll do better next time.' We don't bail them out.

I think there's a big, underlying question of how we help organizations, and whether helping them think about shutting down is one of our legitimate roles. It's very hard for a foundation to even engender that conversation. A lot of people say that one of the things a foundation can do is to convene people around an idea, to work on development and knowledge building. But because the power relationship is so unequal, if we even say, 'OK, we're going to convene a bunch of people to talk with you and help you figure out when is it appropriate for your organization to shut down,' then the immediate impression would be that our goal would be to get a bunch of organizations to shut down. There's just no trust there, and why would there be? We would not necessarily be able to convene a productive conversation.

So the question that I have is, who *could* convene a

productive conversation that might be helpful to people, particularly to people as I said of my generation who started organizations 30, 35 or 40 years ago. Part of the problem is that these people running the organizations don't have any money to retire. I spoke to Clara Miller at Nonprofit Finance Fund and she said a big thing that needs to happen in order to lower the barriers for organizations, so that they can shut down properly when their leaders don't want to do it anymore, is to buy them a pension plan so that they can retire. That would be an incredibly costly thing. But it might be worth investigating what it would take to put together a national pension plan. I don't know if it'd be possible to get it funded, but that's the kind of thinking that needs to be brought to bear.

### **CULTURAL POLICY**

**MARTENSON:** This may be nothing more than a vocabulary question. In Europe, where many countries have a ministry of culture, it's possible to identify what the cultural policy of the country is. Do we have a cultural policy here in the United States, or does the term have no meaning here?

**GODFREY:** This whole country is built on the fact that there is no single cultural identity, so in some ways you can't have a single cultural policy. Whenever someone says that there needs to be some Cabinet-level position in the arts, well then, whose arts are we talking about? You can't centralize cultural policy that way in this country, and you won't see it centralized because nobody wants to claim a culture that is hegemonic.

In the '60s, two studies by Baumol & Bowen and the Rockefeller Foundation set the stage for an arts policy at the federal, state and local agency levels that created the National Endowment for the Arts as well as a whole network of public arts agencies.

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But now that policy has completely exhausted itself. It was based on the fact that there wasn't enough art for the people out there in the country, and the whole arts policy was to make art available and to make it accessible for people. Well now, there's too much of it—art is more than accessible except for in certain underserved communities. There is also an incredible amount of commercial culture that's accessible, and nobody is really suffering from lack of access to arts and culture experiences. We need a new arts policy, though what it should be has yet to emerge. I don't think anybody's really set up to break the crockery and start over new again.

The other story about arts and cultural policy in this country is that it's characterized by complete fragmentation among many, many agencies. We all talk about cultural policy as being about subsidy of non-profit arts institutions—historically what most people have thought about has been lobbying for more money for the NEA.

But here are the places that have a real effect on cultural policy: there is the NEA; the Institute of Museum and Library Services; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; President's Committee on the Arts & Humanities; the Smithsonian Institution; the Department of Education, with its arts education standards; the Department of Transportation's Enhancement and Rails & Trails programs, which support a lot of historic preservation; the Department of Justice; the Parks Department, which holds many collections of arts and material culture in the National Parks Service; the Department of State, where the education and cultural affairs unit is responsible for a cultural diplomacy effort; the Department of Commerce, where a lot of international cultural exchange really resides; the Federal Trade Commission, where international policy is dealt with; and the Federal

Communication Commission, especially in areas regarding internet access and net neutrality. Those last two may be fundamentally much more important policy issues for artists than any of the preceding ones. And there is also, of course, the Immigration & Naturalization Service—the people who deal with visas. Getting artists into the country is a big part of cultural exchange.

**MARTENSON:** So the cultural policy is very piecemeal, with big impacts coming from unlikely places that don't have much to do about the arts.

**GODFREY:** Yes, not only in places that don't have much to do with the arts, but by people who don't even think about the arts as part of their interest or issue. We could have a whole other conversation about getting people to think about creativity as something that is valuable to our economy—when you say creativity to the corporate world or the government world, they think of creativity in terms of sciences, technology, engineering and math. Trying to get them to think about the arts as part of creativity is going to be a very important part of the United States' competitiveness in the twenty-first century. We in the arts all take for granted that creativity is territory that the arts inhabit the center of but nobody but us thinks that.

**MARTENSON:** You talked about the impetus on the creation of the NEA in the early arts policy. But the images that were associated with that were Jackie and Jack in the White House in white tie and evening gown, with Maria Callas and Leonard Bernstein. If you used these kinds of images now they would seem ludicrous.

**GODFREY:** At the White House today you see a much more diverse group of musicians, many of whom are doing popular music. Obama is hanging a lot of contemporary artwork in the White House, much of it by African-American artists, which is fabulous. So they're doing their bit to be symbolic, but I don't know whether that's going to trickle down into policy decision making of any kind.

**STUDENT:** I'm curious about the cultural policy issue because of the question of having a cultural czar, one person separate from the NEA who would oversee cultural policy and keep track all of those departments throughout the federal government.

Do you think it would be useful to have a person to bring coherence to those things?

**GODFREY:** I can't claim any intellectual leadership on this, but I listen to a lot of my friends who think about this a lot more than I do. The general feeling seems to be that, although it may or may not be a good thing to have somebody who's an arts person at the Cabinet level, it would be really good to have somebody in a liaison role in the West Wing of the White House, as an actual member of the President's staff. The arts have always gotten relegated to the First Lady's office in the East Wing, and while there has been some talk of having an arts liaison in the West Wing of the White House—and there were some people who were being talked about in that way—that doesn't seem to have at the moment taken shape. But it's also fair to say that Obama's pretty much under the gun with a lot of other stuff, and it does get pushed to the bottom of the list.

**MARTENSON:** That sounds more like a staff-level coordinator, not a symbolic czar.

**GODFREY:** Yes, not a symbolic czar, but somebody who is actually thinking about all of the things that are happening in all of those agencies that I just mentioned, and how they need to be linked. Or, this person figures out how those agencies need to be informed about the implications for the arts when they're doing those kinds of things.

I personally think it needs to be somebody not from a traditional institution, but somebody who's younger and thinks differently. This has to be more than just having somebody in there minding the backs of the non-profit institutions. It has to be somebody who's helping the sector think about how work is getting made these days, how artists are making their way and making a living in the world, how cultural experiences are connecting us with the rest of the world.

**MARTENSON:** Is that an arts coordinating position?

**GODFREY:** Well I'd like to think about it as culture, but culture is an even more toxic word than the arts is to the public—in fact much more. We don't have a word for what it is.

**MARTENSON:** That reflects the way the country generally thinks—that culture is primarily a private matter, not a government matter.

**GODFREY:** I think a lot of people would like to see it that way. It's very interesting—mayors don't see arts and culture as a private matter. Mayors really get it that they need to have an arts and culture policy position because they see that the arts are an asset to their community. It's much harder at the state level, and as we know state budgets have been really nailed in the recent economic downturn. That disproportionately gets passed down to the state arts agencies.

If you look at culture as being an amalgam of the arts—as a broad array of organizations and activities—then the things that encompass culture can include an arboretum, historic house museums, and even cuisine or some broader set of cultural expressions and cultural heritage. Mayors understand that and local arts agencies have an ability to respond to that more broadly. State arts agencies are about arts organizations, and they have a really hard time dealing with a broader definition of culture. I think that's already part of the problem. At the federal level, it's even more exacerbated.