

I recall an anecdote about the Nobel Prize-winning poet Octavio Paz. One day, a writer came to the poet's house to review a series of poems for publication. Paz sat with him to make revisions and soon was in deep concentration. When the writer saw Paz making a change that he disagreed with, he hesitated to express his opinion in front of the great poet. Paz noticed and encouraged him to speak up, saying, "What matters here is not you nor me; what matters here is poetry." When we give excessive importance to any of the variables in the artist/public/institution equation, all of them lose. It is when we find a scenario in which all are encouraged to see and act outside their usual, prescribed selves that the result can be larger than the sum of its parts. This scenario is also the place where we can escape the outright commodification of experience through spectacle or simple consumption—and keep our minds awake and actively connected to the world and to one another.

Notes

1. This parable first appeared as a letter to participants for *The Parable Conference*, a performance project presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, New York, in 2014.
2. A more extensive argument about the evolving role of artists and curators, using the dramaturgical metaphors of Erving Goffman and Clifford Geertz, can be found in my book *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2012.

The Learning Institution

RHEI

I. THE ROLE OF SUPPORT IN ART PROJECTS

When Grand Arts asked Rhei to design and run a research project on the institution—its meaning, value, and history—a number of questions immediately surfaced about which particular aspects were most valuable to examine, and on what terms. A key objective was to generate a structural analysis of Grand Arts that would enable Rhei to create a framework or model that could be inserted into future contexts. We wanted to describe and understand Grand Arts from neither an art historical nor an art theoretical perspective, but rather from social and anthropological points of view. In designing the study, then, we selected a frame that examined and articulated the unique ways in which Grand Arts functioned as a support structure. Certainly, we could have applied or emphasized numerous other lenses (and, indeed, many others were part of our inquiry, to some degree). The specific curatorial narrative of Grand Arts, its ownership and funding model, the function of its exhibition-making activities and its gallery, its position and role in the cultural and geographic context of the Midwest—these are all aspects that, to a certain extent, influenced what the institution is and was. However, to extrapolate a piece of knowledge that would be useful as a tool—as a framework—for other institutions in the future, we chose to build the inquiry around the role of *support*.

Grand Arts was, in our view, a unique support structure. As an institution, Grand Arts lent its support to an astonishing amount of critically important works, projects, artists, and processes. It is worth dwelling on the notions of projects and processes here, as they relate to the two crucial conditions that would define the institutional position of Grand Arts in terms of support. As Grand Arts negotiated and developed its position over time, its institutional focus and logic for delivering support to artists moved from classic residency activities (supporting an artist as such), to project-specific activities (supporting the production of singular critical projects). Grand Arts delivered support and based its operations upon a curatorial premise of framing and understanding art practice in terms of *projects*. This perspective enabled the institution to customize and craft support around the individual projects it helped to produce; the result was a "total support" experience for the artists who made work there. At the same time, Grand Arts—its working methodology and logic—developed into what we have chosen to call a "learning institution"—a term that smacks of both management speak and various degrees of academic lingo but still seems the most precise way to singularly codify how Grand Arts functioned and defined