

# The Art Triangle: Artists, Publics, Institutions, and the Synergy of Experience

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## I. A PARABLE

About a century and a half ago, the city of Rosaura had a cultural golden age. These golden ages, as you know from history, occur in conjunction with a combined rise in citizens' financial wealth, education, and spare time. This was the case in Rosaura, which up to that point had received culture rather than contributed to it. This new generation of citizens, though, produced both original artists and wealthy philanthropists. The artists were fueled by a profound sense of purpose in their work; they believed that what they were doing was urgent and necessary, that it carried a message that needed to be shared with all. They felt they needed to help generate a collective consciousness. The philanthropists, for their part—moved by those artists and their artworks—generously built museums where the artists could exhibit. They had no other interests in mind but to give back to the society that had given them so much. That society saw the art and was moved.

There was now a communion between the artists and the public, successfully brokered by the museums. The artworks increased in value and were collected; as the artists aged, they became rich and successful. However, the works they produced later, though great, no longer transmitted the urgency of their earlier works. The primary purpose of their art had already been achieved.

The following generation of artists then entered this context, in which the museums had been built, the careers of those artists whose works the museums held had already mostly taken place, and a collective understanding existed regarding how and why the art that those artists had made was important. It was a hard act to follow. As a result, this new generation of artists felt it had no choice but to make art that was not about original subjects, as the previous generation's art had been, but that instead commented on that previous generation's art. This also happened with the generation that followed, and the generation that followed that. To make sense of how all of these layers of commentary worked, the museums created the role of the curator, who was trained to maintain and order this conversation.

The public was baffled by the evolution of this increasingly hermetic conversation. While people recognized that something important was being discussed, they didn't understand what that conversation was or why it was, in fact, important. Curators, whose specialty was to understand the art and not the public, thought the public was stupid and could not have cared less about their opinions. Yet Rosaura's museums had always

depended on their public, either because they functioned with public funds or because they needed the attendance revenue from visitors to keep purchasing and exhibiting art. So the museums created education departments that would help those visitors make sense of that art, and for a while this made Rosaura's museums more inviting places. But as time went by, the connection again frayed, and audiences instinctively felt that they were merely witnessing a conversation to which they had nothing to contribute.

Showing concerns about this disconnect, a few artists began making art specifically for the public of Rosaura. One would think that this would have been a positive development for the museums. But the curators, who now ran the institutions, didn't like it, finding that it displaced and sometimes altogether eliminated their curatorial roles. So they continued collecting and presenting artwork by artists who were primarily interested in talking to one another and to the previous generation of artists' art.

Attendance dwindled, and the museums entered a crisis. While museums publicly continued to reiterate their original mission statements, their first priority stopped being to carry the urgent message contained in art and turned to meeting budgetary goals. They were forced to offer art as mere entertainment—art that nobody believed in but that brought easy money and allowed curators to make the “real exhibitions” they wanted to make.

So Rosaura's museum programming became a strange mixture of mindless spectacle, which attracted a lot of people, and hermetic exhibitions that no one understood or visited. Meanwhile, the few remaining artists who were truly connecting with the public were doing so in small places and in small contexts that were, ironically, similar to the small museums initially built in Rosaura during its golden age. But the selfless philanthropists of old had now died, and their descendants were more interested in growing their own private collections and their own personal reputations through their own pet projects.

What came next is easy to imagine. Rosaura's museums finally arrived at a point where they had to compete with the entertainment and tourism industry—a battle they were not equipped to fight. One day, a successful media entertainment corporation approached one of the museums about merging. Slowly, then, entertainment companies began acquiring all of the museums, creating something like culture channels to benefit for-profit ventures.

It was also recognized that it was not necessary to depend on artists to create artworks. Artists presented a wide range of problems and objections—from their annoying insistence on maintaining copyright of their works to having a say in how their works would be reproduced, exhibited, and so forth. Museums began contracting cultural-experience design firms to conduct studies on what audiences wanted, and then made artworks that responded to those interests. This move allowed museums more flexibility, and it ultimately became advantageous to envision each museum as part of an entertainment complex—one that included convention centers, commercial movie theaters, shopping centers, spas, five-star restaurants, hotels, and casinos. Today, one even has a brothel. (Prostitution is legal in Rosaura.)

If you visit Rosaura's capital now, you can buy packages that include tickets to the museums, along with all of those other entertainment amenities. If you are curious, I have heard that you can take a taxi to the outskirts of the city, where you will find a small community of a few artists still making art the old-fashioned way, holding out the archaic, romantic notion that art is an urgent communication, a one-to-one conversation.<sup>1</sup>

## II. ARTISTS AS INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONS AS ARTISTS

This text tries to address the following questions: How should future art institutions change as they support new and evolving artistic practices? How can today's relationship shared among the institution, the artist, and the public be better conceived? What are the advantages and challenges of blurring the boundaries between the artist and the institution?

The extraordinary experiment that was Grand Arts, as well as the production models that it offered to many artists over the years, presents a great opportunity for reflection about how art practice has evolved in the past two decades and may even offer some model strategies for art institutions of the future.

To better understand the conditions and potential of the artist-institution relationship, it is important to recognize how profoundly the roles of the artist and the institution have been redefined in recent years, to recognize the interdependence of this relationship, and to see its potential moving forward. As I will try to argue, it's a relationship that has to be predicated on a certain productive tension, where neither party is at the service of the other.