LET’S GET WEIRD in 2013

LESSONS ON HOW TO INNOVATE, MOTIVATE, & TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH

FEATURING

- THE SANTA CRUZ MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY
- NEW YORK CITY’S LAUNDROMAT PROJECT
- THE PORTLAND ART MUSEUM
NOT SURE WHETHER THIS E-BOOK IS FOR YOU?
HERE’S AN EASY WAY TO TELL BEFORE DIVING IN:

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MAKING WEIRD WORK WONDERS
"Weirdness" likely isn't a foreign concept to professionals and creatives working in the arts. It's often weirdness—the unconventional—that makes experiencing the arts meaningful. It's often weirdness—a trait that characterizes so many creatives—that drives us towards the arts in the first place. And it's community-driven, out-of-the-box weirdness that is propelling some of America's most innovative cultural organizations into the 21st century and invigorating the very culture of their organizations.

It seems fitting then that "let's get weird," the phrase which inspired this e-book, was coined on the Comedy Central series "Workaholics"—the hit show that has given voice to a generation of young, unfulfilled millennials who push back against the norms and pitfalls of working life with creative corner-cutting and general debauchery. Alienated by institutional formalities, the show's characters are just one example of the kinds of audiences who could truly use the liberation and creative outlet of a great arts experience. This e-book explores three organizations who are "getting weird" and developing their audiences by taking a page from the book of the Workaholics guys—challenging expectations, challenging space, and challenging the norms that prevent the arts from innovating in a meaningful, lasting way. As Director of Activating Innovation at EmcArts, Karina Mangu-Ward has a panoramic view of the art world's shift toward unique, unconventional solutions. Mangu-Ward and her team at the ArtsFwd website share stories from an immense variety of organizations that are exploring the innovative, often weird, possibilities for developing their operations and solving big problems.

"We see art organizations shifting from seeing themselves as producers of content, to seeing themselves as platforms for engagement. This is a huge shift, one that requires a letting go of old ways of doing things and has profoundly exciting implications for organizations and the field," says Mangu-Ward. "For me, weird means being a little off center, but in a good way. I think audiences of today are embracing their own weirdness and I can imagine a future where arts organizations do too. Conformity, normality—these are 20th century values. Twenty first century arts organizations will get weird right along with their audiences by taking art out of the concert hall and into spaces where people are getting down with their weird selves."
Whether it be the Santa Cruz's Museum of Art and History’s clever crowdsourcing, New York City's Laundromat Project taking art to the cleaners, or the Portland Museum of Art's contribution to keeping Portland weird, the examples in this e-book demonstrate a new engagement model fit for our changing times. These examples reflect trends that Mangu-Ward has noticed like more arts organizations allowing audiences to "deeply connect with the arts and each other, but on their own terms...and bringing the unique assets of artists to non-arts settings."

This means getting creative, breaking down barriers, and reaching out to audiences that offer their own unique contributions to your community. It isn't always easy to take steps in a new direction, take chances, or turn your gaze from the familiar to the kooky, but this e-book aims to inspire you to do just that. The results can have a dramatic effect on cultivating passionate, engaged audiences. They may challenge the very idea of what an arts organization can achieve, but don't shy away, remember: there is lots to learn through the looking glass. Where to begin? Meet people in the middle and find common ground that can be celebrated and shared through a great arts experience. On this, Mangu-Ward offers some encouraging advice: "Get together a diverse team. Lean in to productive conflict. Embrace ambiguity. Learn from failure. Take your time. Tell your story." And remember, everyone's a little bit weird. Read on and find your inner oddness.
The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History has a reputation in the museum world. They’re a pioneer of participatory arts experiences, making strides under the leadership of Executive Director Nina Simon as she takes leaps into uncharted art world territory, all in search of the best ways to engage. In the case of Hack the Museum 2.0, one of Simon’s creations at the MAH, the program is aimed at engaging an idea rather than just an audience.

With 48 hours, 75 creative and museum professionals, 15 groups, and one goal, Simon created a space for her community to create a museum exhibition that challenges the way people think about displaying the art, history, and heart of Santa Cruz represented in these works and objects.

The result was a transformational experience for both the MAH and the participants who laughed, worked, created, and celebrated together. “We now have a painting hanging from the ceiling that you can lie under and experience in 3D. We have a gravestone with a Ouija board in front of it so you can commune with its owner. We have a sculpture in its crate/prison cell, unwrapped and unexhibited since its acquisition thirty years ago,” says Simon.

“I’ve come to realize that my biggest fear was that the projects wouldn’t be risky enough. That even when given the space and opportunity to push boundaries, most of us will settle into our traditional comfort zones of doing it ‘right,’ not ‘screwing up,’ and playing it safe.”
*Hack the Museum* is an idea that gets right to the core of the arts as transformational experiences that push personal boundaries and offer the chance to experience other people and perspectives. Simon tries to focus her programming on creating just that kind of environment for patrons at the MAH.

“As the camp director, I've spent a lot of my time thinking about what we can do to scaffold this experience to really encourage creative risk-taking. For me, this comes down to two big areas: how we create space and support for risk-taking, and how we orient the risk-taking towards work that will excite and energize visitors.” However, in order to create situations where visitors can take those creative leaps, the museum professionals crafting these experiences need to leap even farther and break down the conventions that prevent us from developing new, engaged audiences.

As a pioneer for “weird” or unusual approaches to creating arts programming and experiences, Simon has made taking creative risks and defying museum convention a priority for her team. “Our goal is to use weirdness--unexpected connections, and surprising opportunities--to welcome people into the arts in a new way. Many of the participatory projects that happen at the MAH are about us providing the space for visitors to feel comfortable making art. Many people, especially adults, feel inadequate when it comes to art-making and we like to create frameworks in which they feel confident getting past those fears.

Typically, this requires scaffolding: giving people the tools they need to be successful. We often find that disarming people's expectations with 'weird' art-making devices like drinking straws, sledgehammers, skateboards, or kale gets them out of their preconceptions and into a more open, playful, and creative space.”
As for the question of creating a space for risk-taking in your own team, Simon recommends giving your organization and your colleagues room to play. "To me, space making is really about a permissive and generous culture. If an employee has to ask for permission to do something, there's not enough space there for them to take initiative and take a risk. If a manager is open to the possibilities while being clear about priorities, magic can happen. I try to be as indulgent as possible within a rigorous framework. This means not micro-managing things that seem weird on the surface." In the words of one Hack the Museum participant:

"I like to say that if I am not afraid every day, then it is time to move on to another job. There were several moments during camp when I was felt a surge of anxiety, trepidation, self-doubt. What is amazing about being with such a great group of people is that they carry you through. By the end of this week I will probably forget the sound of the player piano, the feel of the hard floor, or the carpal tunnel setting in my fingers. But I won't forget the many individuals who were so generous and tenacious; so honest and proud. Thanks for all the memories."

The results have been staggering for the MAH and the diverse audience in Santa Cruz they constantly work towards engaging. Take one look at the MAH's Flickr stream and you'll find yourself wanting to be there snacking, crafting, and socializing with patrons from all walks of life. In those snapshots, moments of pure human joy and community are captured amidst swaths of bright colored fabrics and paints, children's smiles, and the greenery of Santa Cruz. It's an example of the creative spirit of the city and, when it comes down to it, a perfect example of how the arts can serve.
THE LAUNDROMAT PROJECT
PUBLIC ART & PLACE | ADVANCING ARTS
If you take a moment to consider the scene at your typical New York City laundromat on any given day, it's easy to see why the idea of bringing art to where the people are—their neighborhood coin-op—was so appealing to Rise Wilson, the founder and creator of our second feature, the Laundromat Project (the LP). "She recognized laundromats as a unique community gathering space in a city like New York. They're a place where people of various ages, races, and economic backgrounds gather for an intimate ritual but rarely connect beyond, 'Are you done with that dryer?'” says Kemi Ilesanmi, Executive Director at the LP.

This idea of the laundromat as a space for amplifying the existing culture of the people in a certain community and as a frontier for shared art experiences between wash cycles is central to the LP staff's mission of inclusiveness and unconventionality. "What's really amazing about using [the laundromat] as a classroom, studio, or exhibition space is that people warm up to each other in a way that they wouldn't in passing on the street. The conversations, relationships, and familiarity that develops with people that live on your block is what makes the laundromat space special as a creative hub,” says Ilesanmi.
CONVERSATION & CONVICTION

"Art and creative exercises become an easy vehicle to create a shared experience that can turn strangers into neighbors," Ilesanmi adds.

The LP staff have seen neighborhoods that creatively engage each other generate conversations and solutions to community wide problems--an approach they bring to all the events the LP puts on around the city. In keeping things hyper-local and bringing art to people when they aren't necessarily expecting it, the LP helps people understand art as something that can exist beyond institutional walls or in theatres and museums. Arguably those tiny moments of beauty and thought-provoking newness are what the arts are all about.

"When we plan our programs, we always ask how we're doing and how we could do things better. We ask this of ourselves and our partners--be they neighbors, artists, passers-by, or community organizations," Ilesanmi suggests. "We start every conversation with the conviction that we are each the answer to our most fervent hopes. Artists and neighbors can come together, solve local problems and envision new communities creatively and together."

At the core of this process is creating mission-driven programming that will truly matter to the people experiencing it. For Ilesanmi and the LP team, seven guiding principles keep the organization grounded across the wide variety of programming they've offered and will draw upon for future projects.
The 7 principles? "We are Creative Catalysts, Community-Centered, Neighborly, People-Powered, Active Listeners and Learners, Collaborative and Cross-Pollinating by Design, and finally, Propelled by Love," says Ilesanmi. "For instance, we've been known to commission artists who've brought yoga-based printmaking, English language classes, film festivals, oral history booths, and photo portrait studios to their local coin-op. We teach free art classes on bead making, smoothie-blending, and tote bag design against the hum of the spin cycle."

It’s art that’s non-pretentious and accessible and breaks down barriers that many potential patrons might perceive to participation in the New York City art community.

Meanwhile, the freshness of the unconventional space encourages arts organizations to explore the untapped potential of their own out-of-the-box thinking. Ilesanmi says it best: "The power to harness our own imaginations is connected to a sense of freedom and agency to make the change we want to see in the world. By first of all meeting people where they are and often on their own terms—we have to entice them away from their normal routine to engage with us—we are breaking convention. This is especially true for communities of color and the economically vulnerable. Creativity is the engine, and we are together, with our neighbors, trying to make the world a more just and artful place one creative, unconventional, and artful intervention at a time."
PORTLAND ART MUSEUM
THE NAKED BIKE RIDE | ARTS COMMUNITY
ON NAKED AMBITION

If any town in America truly captures the spirit of “weird” it’s arguably the artistic and DIY loving city of Portland, Oregon, where a variety of Portland’s slightly “weird” residents set a new world record this past June. The 10th annual World Naked Bike Ride brought a rolling herd of 8,150 stripped down cyclists through 7 miles of city streets as a statement on oil dependency, loving your body, and the Portland community’s proclivity for getting a little weird. Amidst all the dancing, body painting, and general good vibes, the Portland Art Museum (PAM) opened its doors to all with an admission price of $1 for each article of clothing worn. The bravest (and nakedest) souls naturally got in free.
It was Portland's love for all things cycling that inspired *Cyclepedia: Iconic Bike Design*, one of two exhibitions coincidentally scheduled to open on the night of the *World Naked Bike Ride*. PAM held special nighttime hours for the *Cyclepedia* exhibition from 8-10PM and welcomed more than 1,000 scantilly-clad visitors to the show (the space could only handle about 500 per hour). From the beginning, *Cyclepedia* was a resounding declaration of a PAM's focus on collaboration, bringing together 23 sponsors, 26 program partners, and hundreds of individual bike owners. These collaborators, the *World Naked Bike Ride* among them, have helped provide more than 40 programs at the Museum and across the region that will engage hundreds of thousands of people with bike culture, bike design and the bike economy Portlanders love.

Forgetting the expectations and “rules” for an art institution is no simple thing, but it has arguably been PAM’s embrace of Portland’s unique brand of weird that has made them successful at engaging new audiences. Allowing 1,000 patrons in various states of undress to experience an exhibition created with them in mind is just one example, rooted in a deep sense of PAM’s mission. “Museum staff has developed an organizing principal for major exhibitions that we call Museum as *Platform,*” says Associate
Director of Education and Public Programs Stephanie Parrish. “Our goal is to make the art experience relevant to broader audiences. We do this by amplifying communication within the community around exhibition content, beginning with the thesis and objectives for the exhibition. This becomes a hub and spoke experience, with events and programs that engage audiences, institutions, and businesses throughout the community.” The PAM staff consider bold, community-based programming like the World Naked Bike Ride and Cyclepedia collaboration something of a no-brainer for engaging with their audience and mission. Parrish explains, “Portland is a city where people maintain 'live and let live' attitudes, open minds, and a deep interest in talking as a community about ideas and issues.” She adds that “the city's openness results in a highly collaborative community, which is at the core of the Museum as Platform concept. Collaboration is not only required internally between all departments - curatorial, collections management, education, development, marketing and operations, collaboration is required externally with program partners, content creators, funders and our audiences.” PAM’s model provides encouraging evidence that embracing eccentricities that make your community unique and creating conversations around programming that celebrates and challenges
that uniqueness can carry the arts into the 21st century. As Parrish puts it, "Audiences have an unlimited number of leisure time options. The Museum can be a victim of these changes or we can innovate by creating broader museum experiences. For the Platform concept to be successful, the Museum relinquishes some control of the experience, but it gains broader community involvement in return."

All things considered, it takes courage to make big changes to organizational goals and to take risks when budgets are tight and future plans are fragile. For the MAH, the Laundromat Project, and PAM, however, that risk has made all the difference. For organizations looking to follow suit, the hardest step towards innovative change is likely beginning the conversation with your staff and community. Our recommendation? A simple, poignant, “Let’s. Get. Weird.”
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1. The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History
2. MAH photos taken by Rachael Torres
3. The Laundromat Project
4. Ed Marshall
5. Portland Art Museum
6. Naked Men at Bar photo courtesy of Melody Awesomazing via waytoomuchportland.tumblr.com
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