

Five Skills for the Future of Arts and Culture

Scott Smith

Managing Partner, Changeist, The Hague

Rapid change is happening worldwide within the field of the arts and culture in an era of evolving infrastructure, technology, attitudes, and audience demographics and engagement. Referring to this evolving landscape, Scott Smith, the co-author of an international study on the Future of Culture, talks about five skills that the global arts and cultural sector must learn in order to thrive in the new economy.

One does not have to be a dedicated art critic to know that art and culture are changing rapidly around us. Many of us no longer have to take a day out, purchase tickets, dress up and stroll to a museum, gallery or theatre to engage with art. Increasingly, art meets us where we live: in public parks, shopping malls, in the wilderness, scrolling through social media, and on game consoles. Art, by its very nature, has always taken new and innovative forms, from ochre on sandstone in pre-modern days to images encoded in DNA and “art” rendered by neural networks. As the product of human creativity, art reflects or projects stories of triumph, tragedy, sublimity, and mundanity. It both responds to the moment and reflects eternity. Art does a lot of work—it always has done. But the work of imagining, making, delivering and supporting art is as complex as its many forms.

Here, on the edge of a paradigm shift in how we experience the world—through technology and what we experience in the unfolding, uncontained Anthropocene—the skills needed to do the work of making and bringing art to a dizzying array of publics are reconfiguring. With new tools constantly arriving, ways of working evolving, modes of experience changing, and audiences rapidly diversifying, an inventory of

necessary adaptations in the arts could fill this publication on its own.

Fortunately, two research efforts my colleagues at Changeist and I carried out during the global COVID-19 pandemic in the past two years have given us some focused insights into five particular areas of need, touching disparate but closely connected capabilities that will be increasingly necessary as we move into the next decade of opportunity and challenges. These research projects—a deep dive into the ecosystems of creative R&D we developed for a working group of arts organisations in the UK in late 2020 (still to be published), and a global survey into the Future of Arts and Culture carried out with support of Arup and Therme Group in 2021—pointed in similar directions regarding necessary skills for the near future of the arts, while looking at the landscape demanding these skills through slightly different lenses.

Below is a distillation of what our research showed are the most urgent skills needed, as reflected in these in-depth probes. The list can surely go on, but these were seen by over 200 arts and culture organisations and artists and technologists globally as the most pressing of many future needs.

Technology Skills

Art has always been reliant on technology, from made pigments to polished lenses to digital projections. In recent decades, however, the boundaries around what constitutes art and around many of the disciplines art interacts with have dissolved, creating rich ecosystems

of exploration and experimentation. While many institutions may still separate them, the arts and sciences are deeply intertwined today. The leading edge of artistic experimentation is taking place at the intersections of art and biology, art and material science, art and physics, art and computation and so on. While the latter is getting a tremendous amount of attention through the explosion of digital arts, whether through flashy non-fungible tokens (NFTs) or amazing fusions of arts and artificial intelligence, there is practically no technology stone that is remaining unturned by experimental, and often only loosely directed, collaborations between artists and technologists, or by self-described artists who take it upon themselves to explore new tools.

The cross-sector professionals who responded to help us develop the Future of Arts and Culture study and resulting scenarios saw mastering new forms of digital creation and delivery as a key challenge facing artists and institutions in the coming decade. This recognises the feedback loop of new tools reaching new audiences through new channels—online galleries, performance spaces, marketplaces, new narrative forms—which in turn will drive even more diversification. Tools of the so-called metaverse, such as mixed reality, sensory immersion, visual worldbuilding, narrative creation, and even digital currencies, will require familiarity if not some facility, in order to work with many aspects of art and culture in the years to come. But, as described above, the touchpoints of technology and art have spread far wider, into just about any form of technology or field of science you can imagine. Removing institutional, philosophical or curricular boundaries between arts and

technology will be key to delivering the skills necessary for the future that lies ahead of us.

Networking Skills

Somewhere, you have probably encountered an arts entity or “brand” from across the world, outside its normal geographical boundaries. This may have been through a touring exhibition, a documentary or an online experience. Through globalisation and the spread of platforms like the Internet into most corners of the world, arts institutions big and small are no longer confined to the physical communities they may be rooted in. Formal and informal networks abound in the arts today as well. Many creators, curators and producers shift between institutions, bringing new works to new audiences, creating many interconnected relationships that help hold the arts together.

In years to come, however, these networks may be both critical pipelines *and* lifelines. They will be critical pipelines in that they will play an increasingly important role in bringing new voices and talent from under-recognised perspectives and communities to audiences around the world. They will be critical lifelines as smaller and mid-sized arts institutions and platforms will need to band together to survive and thrive in a more turbulent and uncertain social, political, financial and technological landscape. As funding models shift due to changing priorities, such as climate change, or changing business models, the ability to build, maintain and grow networks and strong connections between and among institutions, creators, supporters and communities will be central to the continued existence of many arts organisations.

Storytelling Skills

Much of art is about storytelling, so this is an eternal skill in many ways. However, the arts have never lived in such a data-driven moment as they do today. Funders struggle to develop and impose metrics for impact in the arts, and lack a clear framework for understanding the ecosystems that make up the arts. Yet, they still live in and place arts organisations—and by extension, artists—in a world that seeks to manage by measurement. This dynamic expands exponentially in digital environments. Finding ways to tell stories about impact that move beyond the data-driven will be a necessity, especially as the digital side of the arts converges ever more closely with the data-driven worlds of media and entertainment.

Likewise, telling stories through different media, and with possibly unfamiliar forms, puts an emphasis on strong narrative skills. The local is increasingly global, and cross-cultural, as well as cross-platform, so stories must be conveyed to unfamiliar audiences, many of whom may be experiencing a culture, form or genre for the first time. For better or worse, attention is a currency with audiences as much as with supporters or patrons, and the options available to the audience already stretch toward the infinite.

Discovery Skills

The participants in our Future of Arts and Culture research shared many priorities for themselves and their organisations coming out of the

pandemic, but one of the clearest areas of energy and enthusiasm for future opportunities centred around bringing new talents, new voices and new forms to audiences. Regions that have been dominant in global arts discourse for decades or centuries are seeing the demand for new talents and ideas, particularly from peoples and communities that have been underrepresented and undervalued. Other regions that are just beginning to make a strong mark on the global cultural scene are eager to bring their own talents to wider publics.

With so much new talent on offer, relying on traditional definitions of curation alone will be insufficient. Active scouting, championing and supporting the elevation of new voices and ideas means sampling from sources and forms well outside one's "local" community, whether that community is socially, economically, geographically or philosophically defined.

Economic Skills

The death of distance created by digitalisation has not only collapsed value chains, but "markets" as well. The ability to reach an audience or patron or, increasingly, a co-creative community means artists and arts organisations have to take on much more responsibility for creating and managing their own economies.

Concern about future business models emerged as the single most important issue for our study participants considering their own organisations or role in the arts going forward. When we scratched the surface on this issue, we found this

encompassed not only worries about traditional sources of funding and the availability of public funding in the future, but also reflected a realisation that creators increasingly go direct-to-audience (dare we even say “consumer”?) in economic relationships. It is not only possible but, for a small but expanding group of artists, even profitable to create and maintain such direct economic relationships with audiences, whether via new forms of fundraising, selling or otherwise distributing ownership through digital platforms, or even creating new financial mechanisms that better suit their work and their communities’ interests. Artists are finding ways to license their own creativity in novel ways, fund their work

through non-traditional mechanisms, or even “assetize” themselves in experimental ways.

Of course, a great deal of arts and culture will continue to be created as a public good, just as there will still be many creators who are not concerned with the economic side of their work. However, as exotic business models proliferate, and arts funding dramatically reconfigures in the coming decade due to economic uncertainty, the pressure to take on management of one’s own business models and audiences will grow, making it even more imperative that economic skills be recognised and included among the creative ones. □

About the Author



Scott Smith is a futurist and founder of Changeist, a research and consulting partnership based in The Hague. With almost 20 years in futures, Scott and his team have worked with a range of global institutions, including SWIFT, UNICEF, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, AXA, ASOS, BBC R&D, Nesta, ArtScience Museum, Museum of London, the National Gallery, the National Lottery, and the Dubai Future Foundation. He is the co-author of “*How to Future: Leading and Sense-Making in an Age of Hyperchange*,” published by Kogan Page Inspire.

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