

EDITORIAL

A Full House Is Not a Full Measure: Cultural Institutions Must Evaluate What Attendance Cannot Show

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Attendance is useful information. It tells a theatre whether seats were occupied, a museum whether a door was crossed, and a festival whether a programme reached the public at scale. Yet attendance has gradually been asked to carry a larger claim: that a counted visit is evidence of cultural value. It is not. A full house can accompany an inaccessible experience, a shallow encounter, an exhausted workforce, or a community relationship that ends when the lights rise. A modest audience can sustain concentrated learning, artistic risk, and durable public trust. Counting bodies is necessary; treating the count as the achievement is a category error.

The attraction of attendance is understandable. It is visible, comparable, and easy to place in a funding report. More consequential effects resist the same speed. A person may return to a work in conversation weeks later. A school partnership may change the confidence with which a teacher uses performance. A local artist may acquire a collaborator rather than a credential. A visitor may decide that an institution is finally a place in which they can participate without apology. These outcomes require time, context, and follow-up. Their resistance to instant measurement does not make them unreal.

Cultural organizations therefore need a plural account of value. The first measure remains reach: who came, who did not, and how participation was distributed rather than merely totalled. The second is depth: what forms of attention, interpretation, or making became possible. The third is agency: whether participants could shape the encounter or only receive it. The fourth is continuity: whether a relationship, resource, or ca-

pability remained after the event. The fifth is condition: what the programme required from artists, technicians, educators, volunteers, and audiences in order to appear successful.

None of these dimensions can be reduced to a satisfaction score. Immediate surveys often capture hospitality better than consequence and privilege people comfortable responding quickly. A better evaluation uses several small instruments at different times: an exit question for immediate experience, a later invitation about what persisted, a partner conversation about unintended costs, and an internal debrief on what workers had to repair or improvise.

Institutions should also preserve the right not to be converted into evidence. Participation in art does not create an obligation to supply testimony, demographic detail, photographs, or an uplifting account. Consent to attend is not consent to be researched. Evaluation plans should specify what will be collected, why it is necessary, how long it will be retained, and what a person may decline without losing access. Anonymous observation can sometimes answer operational questions more proportionately than personal data.

The language of impact needs similar discipline. Cultural experience may be meaningful without producing a measurable change in health, attainment, civic behaviour, or local spending. Inflated promises make art instrumental and place impossible burdens on small organizations. They also weaken credible findings by encouraging every positive response to be described as transformation. An honest report distinguishes an output from an outcome, a participant's account from an independently observed change, and

a plausible contribution from sole causation.

Evaluation should influence programming while there is still something to change. Too often it begins after artistic decisions and budgets are fixed, becoming an exercise in retrospective justification. Instead, organizations can state learning questions at the outset: Which audiences need different routes into this work? What kind of participation is actually negotiable? What would make the collaboration worth continuing for the partner? What pressure might the timetable place on care, access, or technical labour? These questions turn evaluation from publicity into governance.

Boards and funders share responsibility. If they request only headline reach, organizations will optimize for it. Reporting should reward candour about exclusions, abandoned ideas, and mixed results. Comparative targets need restraint because an outdoor event, specialist workshop, tour, and archive residency create value through different relations between scale and depth.

The practical change can begin with one page. Alongside attendance, a project can report who shaped it, what participants could choose, what remained later, what costs were displaced onto others, and what the institution will alter next. The point is to place learning beside promotion.

A full house is a welcome sight, but it is a beginning of interpretation, not its conclusion. Cultural value lives in the quality of encounter, the distribution of agency, the conditions of production, and the possibilities that remain. Institutions that count only entrances know how many people arrived. They do not yet know what happened.

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