



The Pocantico Gathering

Happiness and a High Quality of Life:
The Role of Art and Art Making

Bill Ivey & Paul Kingsbury

The Curb Center at Vanderbilt
The Rockefeller Foundation
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The Curb Center
FOR ART, ENTERPRISE & PUBLIC POLICY
at Vanderbilt

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Participants

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Betty Edwards

Michael Frisch

Sandra Gibson

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Michael Hughes

Bill Ivey

Tim Kasser

Richard Kurin

Liz Lerman

Darrin McMahon

Pamela Rose

Martin Seligman

Joan Shigekawa

Steven Tepper

Peter Whybrow

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Conference Description

From May 31 through June 2, 2007, the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy hosted a unique gathering of writers and thinkers at the Pocantico Conference Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in Tarrytown, New York. “Happiness and a High Quality of Life: The Role of Art and Art Making” explored two key questions: Do art and art-making have a special role in creating happiness and a high quality of life in Western society? If so, how should public policy be shaped and deployed to strengthen those connections? Although a number of prominent arts specialists participated in the gathering, the conference bypassed the questions of funding and leadership that constitute a conventional arts agenda, focusing instead on questions of human happiness, satisfaction, and meaning in life as framed by experts in the fields of psychology, sociology, history, medicine, anthropology, folklore, literature, and other disciplines. The meeting was supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Although a number of meeting participants were charged in advance with the task of initiating discussion on specific topics, no formal papers were prepared. Inevitably, the discussion circled back to touch on the same issues from different perspectives, and conversation frequently raised as many questions as were answered. Although well-versed in the relationship between happiness and family, work, and spiritual life, participants were clearly advancing into new territory, as they tentatively identified those distinctive elements of the arts and art-making that might lead to happiness and a high quality of life. Both the meeting and this report are intended to be preliminary. Nevertheless, the conversation was promising; as attendees concluded their Pocantico meeting, there was general agreement that the two-day consideration of the connections between art and a high quality of life pointed the way to both further conversation and specific research.

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Background and Context for the Discussions

The conference discussion was framed on the opening night by Bill Ivey, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and current director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University. In setting the intellectual and procedural backdrop for the discussion, he emphasized the basic idea conveyed to participants in pre-conference mailings: that the invited eighteen scholars (including himself and Steven Tepper, associate director of the Curb Center) should consider themselves a “working group” that would clarify issues, advance compelling hypotheses, and recommend possible future courses of action.

Ivey described his personal interest in the connection between art and quality of life, and noted that many characteristics of a happy, high quality of life identified by psychologists, historians, and economists seemed achievable through engagement with art. In his work with cultural nonprofits and the NEA, Ivey encountered many individuals who derived a strong sense of identity, accomplishment, and meaning from painting, music, amateur theater, and writing. In many settings, art seemed to enhance quality of life for rich and poor, young and old. However, knowledge about the links between art and happiness was largely grounded in personal experience and anecdote, and discussion about art making and well-being in a democracy was usually limited to back-burner conversations among a handful of arts advocates. Brain scientists, sociologists, and psychologists have not, to date, made an “arts connection” in addressing the determining factors in quality of life. They concentrate instead on work, family, and spiritual life as the realms of thought, emotion, and experience in which we can identify building blocks of happiness. Additionally, many studies of quality of life begin as critiques of consumerism and the impersonal character of

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community life in our digital age; this research seems more intent on describing problems than prescribing solutions.

Engagement with art would seem to be a promising alternative to materialism because it offers a route to achievement, community connection, and status not dependent on wealth and spending. However, cultural critics and economists concerned about values, like psychologists and brain researchers, have not yet explored the potential benefits of art making as an affordable alternative to consumerism or electronic isolation. However, unlike government interventions in family life or the workplace that might rightly be deemed inappropriate, art making would seem to be an antidote to affluence that could be advanced through the application of thoughtful public policy.

Reformers and policy leaders in an earlier era had an easier time embracing aspects of art making as an avenue to improved quality of life. For example, as recently as the late 19th century reformers turned to crafts and handmade art as an alternative to the depersonalizing excesses of the industrial revolution. The resulting Arts & Crafts movement advanced engagement with art and artistic heritage on an international stage, affecting architecture, design, hobbies, respect for traditional culture, and the integration of nature with everyday domestic life. The Arts & Crafts movement survives mostly through its effect on design, but the movement's approach to improving quality of life still resonates. Could a 21st-century policy initiative advancing art-making mimic the Arts & Crafts response to industrialization, and help to offset the modern-day excesses of consumerism and electronically induced isolation?

While again emphasizing the preliminary character of the Pocantico meeting, Ivey introduced three overarching questions that would frame the discussion:

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- Are there any compelling hypotheses about the connection between art making and happiness? How can we best frame “happiness” and “art making” in relation to recognized determinants of high quality of life like religion, work and family life?
- Do connections between art, art making, and a high quality of life point the way to a meaningful public policy idea or intervention? Is art “good for what ails us?”
- What are the next steps, or research agendas, that can advance our understanding of the connection between art and a high quality of life?

Since any conversation about art and quality of life must take account of current trends in culture, what is the situation of the arts in the 21st century? As Steven Tepper noted, today in America we are witnessing a potential renaissance in the arts. Digital technology and the internet make it possible for people to experience the arts, make art, and communicate about the arts in ways that transcend boundaries of geography, nationality, and social class. Accompanying this technological transformation are changes in the expectations and motivations of audiences, especially younger audiences, who are seeking to create art themselves, to engage artists and art products in a more interactive way, to witness the creative process first hand, and to comment, critique, curate and reshape the content and meaning of art.

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Many indicators point toward this renaissance:

- The rise of Pro-Ams (professional amateurs) in a variety of fields, from music to gardening, home design, cooking, and computer animation. These citizens are generating new content, remixing music, distributing their own work, and connecting with like-minded Pro-Ams from across the world.
- User-generated content from blogging to online video game redesign.
- The explosion of choice and the opportunity to consume art from anywhere in the world.
- The ability to review and critique art without needing professional credentials.
- The ability to curate one's own cultural life and the art experiences of others.

Even traditional forms of artistic expression offline, such as literature and music, seem to be experiencing renewed popularity in the 21st century. For example, according to recent national polls, 80 percent of Americans believe they have a book “inside them,” just waiting to be written. In music, guitar sales have increased by a factor of three over the past decade. We can bemoan the rise of materialism, said conference participant Darrin McMahan, but as Susan Sontag once noted, more people read Jane Austen today than ever before.

Yet in the midst of this cultural ferment unleashed by new technologies, America continues to struggle with a number of problems which may frame and shape the analysis of any new policy interventions:

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- Increasing disparities in wealth between the upper and lower classes and persistent racial inequalities
- Rampant consumerism as a way of life
- Diminished civic engagement among all classes
- Increases in immigration that challenge old notions of community, culture and social integration
- Changes in the economy that are creating two very different classes of workers—creative workers and service workers—with differential access to culture and economic mobility.

Tepper emphasized the impact of economic, social, and geographical factors, noting that much of America’s artistic renaissance appears to be tied to the internet, and access to the internet is often unfairly distributed. Observers have long mapped the *digital divide*—variations in the penetration of digital technology grounded in geography, income, or class. But there is also a looming *cultural divide*—a separation of age, income, education, and leisure time that enables one citizen to explore, learn, and create on and offline, while another engages art experiences through traditional institutions and media of increasingly limited capacity. On one side of the divide, the privileged consume culture at the click of a mouse, invest in their own creative hobbies and explore new, diverse, and cosmopolitan cultural fare. On the other side, the less fortunate find that much of culture available to them is what’s for sale at Wal-Mart or broadcast on analog TV—limited choices that are affordable and easily engaged but rarely encourage creativity. While the creative class appears to be growing, the service class is also rising in numbers. Should society decide to pursue a public policy that increases art engagement to enhance quality of life, the playing field

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must be leveled to allow all citizens access to the hardware, software, internet connections, training, expertise, time and spaces essential to full participation in this new era of art making.

So while trained, affluent, urban Pro-Ams can be part of the internet arts renaissance, the arts that are most affordable and available to average Americans—broadcast television and radio, CDs sold by big-box retailers, and movies—tend to reinforce passive consumption, narrow self-interest, and isolation. This is the dark side of the 21st century digital frontier: a stiffening cultural divide that affords many citizens the tools of enhanced participation in arts and culture, while others are nudged toward passive contact with old media delivered by aging, sluggish distribution systems. The cultural divide, and the market forces that sustain it, must be addressed if democratic access to art making is to be considered.

In addition to persistent inequalities, America's obsession with consumerism also challenges the promise of a new renaissance in art and culture. Today researchers understand that consumption isn't a path to a high quality of life. Although it has been widely noted that Americans are living nearly twice as long as they did a century ago, and real income has advanced steadily since the late 1940s, citizens of Western market democracies do not seem to be any happier. As accumulating evidence indicates that increased material wellbeing has not produced a higher perceived quality of life, economists such as Sir Richard Layard and Daniel Kahneman have argued that public policy should turn away from programs aimed at increasing wealth toward those designed to increase public happiness.

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A key question for further discussion: Can broad access to the tools of our online arts renaissance provide a post-consumerist path to a high quality of life that will restore a more balanced civic life and address the concerns of scholars and advocates who support policies targeting happiness?

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The Arts and Happiness in History

Darrin McMahon, the author of *Happiness: A History*, offered comments on the connections between the arts and happiness. Throughout much of the history of Western Civilization there has been a general assumption that art must be beneficial to happiness and well-being because art has been so central to the rise of our civilization. However, because art has generally been *assumed* to possess the power to make people happy, there has been very little explicit discussion of the art/happiness connection within the multiple theoretical justifications for art. For that reason, said McMahon, the subject of the meeting should be understood as a contemporary concern rather than the manifestation of a long-standing speculation or investigation.

In fact, the commonly asked question in 21st century America—*Does It Make You Happy?*—is very much a modern form of inquiry and a product of late, mature capitalism, as are the many everyday variants of that question: *Does my relationship make me happy?/Does my car make me happy?/Does my art make me happy?* The sense of happiness implied by these questions is self-centered and somewhat hedonistic. Today, according to McMahon, happiness is popularly defined as “good feeling” or “pleasurable sensation.” However, there have been different working definitions of happiness employed in the past—definitions that were equally in tune with their times. For example, prior to the eighteenth century, happiness was not understood in relation to *good feeling* but in terms of *good living*. English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) defined happiness in terms of *utility*: the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The notion of happiness as pleasurable gratification can be thought of as a recent intellectual and behavioral trend.

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Long before Bentham, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) defined happiness as an activity or attribute of virtue, the manifestation of a life well lived. Happiness is the result of *doing* and, in Aristotle’s view, this kind of doing requires moral training. In *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote: “It is in our actions that we are happy.” Although art was an important marker of a virtuous life well-lived, McMahon noted that for Aristotle, art also plays a key role in training humans in how best to live both appropriately and virtuously.

Art, according to Aristotle, is an imitation of life. Humans derive pleasure and meaning from the most realistic representations of life, even representations that are sad or tragic. To be learning something, says Aristotle, is the greatest of pleasures. Learning is crucial to who we are as humans and crucial to happiness. Learning, adds McMahon, is also essential to art-making and to art as a representation of life. Art should instill lessons about life and life’s actions, says Aristotle, and plays a critical role in nurturing human beings. In fact, Aristotle’s views on the importance of art in training citizens for happiness were critical to the rise of the humanities which blossomed from the time of the ancient Romans to the Renaissance.

McMahon pointed out, however, that a review of the literature indicates that Aristotle’s view of the crucial connection between art and happiness was accepted as so obvious that it does not appear to have been discussed widely until recent times. In fact, over the history of Western thought, said McMahon, the presence of art has not so much been argued as simply assumed. The fundamental role of art in crafting the good life has until recent times been taken for granted. The Arts & Crafts movement fits in with the long intellectual tradition of accepting, without argument, the idea that art and happiness are linked. “Here [in this conference] we are trying to justify the obvious,” said McMahon, “that the arts are absolutely fundamental to creating good lives and good societies.”

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Observation: In Western thought, art has played an assumed important role in happiness and quality of life. Perhaps our contemporary understanding of happiness as pleasurable experience requires that the art/quality of life connection be reformulated and argued anew.

Further Reading

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What Is Happiness, and What Are Its Benefits?

If we are to advance art and art making as keys to happiness, we must be clear about what we mean when we say *art can make a citizen 'happy.'* What is happiness? As McMahon noted, the definition of happiness has evolved—from the pursuit of virtue and a good life to our modern sense of happiness as good feeling. Even today, noted Benjamin Barber, there is no generally agreed upon definition of happiness.

Happiness is pluralistic, meaning different things to different people. Barber argued that we must be honest in confronting the negative reaction to promoting policies to increase happiness in an era when most leaders see happiness as merely pleasurable sensation, and the pursuit of happiness as essentially selfish and fleeting. Barber and others cautioned that the word *happiness* itself can often be misconstrued as a rather superficial goal for one's life, and that the pursuit of public policy—about art or any other activity—directed at increasing happiness could be easily marginalized as wasteful or insignificant. Michael Frisch suggested that it would be more productive to talk about *meaning, fulfillment, and contentment than happiness.* As the Pocantico conversation began to unfold, an early consensus emerged among the group that recommendations using the word *happiness* in the contemporary sense would likely face difficulties gaining traction with the larger community of researchers and policy makers.

On the other hand, Martin Seligman (a leading expert in the field of positive psychology) was, from the outset of the meeting, less concerned about the word *happiness* than other participants. He suggested that although the term in its everyday, popular formulation was perhaps problematic, it could still be useful if properly understood. He argued that we don't need to abandon the word, but simply make certain that our use of the term is clear and understood. According

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to Seligman, contemporary Western notions of happiness that are grounded in research basically consist of “three measurable and buildable entities: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning.” Although Americans today mostly think of happiness as the experience of pleasurable, positive emotion, Seligman noted that psychological testing has shown that, of the three components, *meaning* consistently emerges as the most important marker of well-being or happiness, followed closely by *engagement*, with the popular sense of *positive emotion* actually ranking third.

Sociologist Michael Hughes agreed with Seligman’s position that *happiness* is about more than pleasure. He argued that in the literature of well-being “there has been too much emphasis on affect and positive feelings . . . I would argue that people are really probably much more motivated to maximize the meaning in their life.” He noted that individuals repeatedly make choices that maximize meaning, even when they know those choices won’t bring them more pleasure. Prominent among Hughes’ examples are people’s desire to have children, to fight in wars, and to live with relatives after they are independent adults. With each of these choices, common wisdom suggests that the resulting experiences are not likely to be pleasurable. However, such engagements *can* be expected to generate experiences that would lead to greater meaning. Research suggests that this expectation of increased meaning is why people make these less-than-pleasurable life choices so frequently.

Because of meaning’s central role in human satisfaction, said Hughes, “I think we need to find a way of engaging meanings in the empirical research, so that when we do these evaluations of life quality we’re really going to somehow get measures of meaning and how people are engaging meanings and being involved with meanings.” Meaning, he noted, often emerges from social structure

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and social experience, and one key way meaning is promoted or communicated is through the arts.

Psychologist Michael Frisch then expanded the definition of happiness, listing key benefits of well-being from the perspective of the positive psychology movement. Existing research suggests that happiness, in addition to being its own reward by making life meaningful, also leads to better health, longevity, and richer relationships. Frisch quoted happiness authority Edward Diener:

Happiness not only feels good, it conveys a wide range of benefits. Happy people are more likely to be successful because they are more likely to energetically and creatively pursue their goals. They build strong personal resources and relationships that they can use later to attain their goals, and they are more likely to feel existentially secure because they tend to connect to larger purposes and feel a sense of meaning in life. They bounce back more quickly from negative episodes.

Frisch noted that somewhere between 20 and 50 percent of human happiness is shaped by genetics and inherited traits. The remaining composition of an individual's emotional state is shaped not by inheritance or biology but by the condition of sixteen key factors that Frisch and colleagues identified: spiritual life, neighborhood, self-esteem, recreation, community, helping, creativity, health, home, love relationship, goals and values, learning, money, friends, children, relatives, and work. The importance of each area to overall well-being has been empirically validated, Frisch said, although individuals will place a different value on individual aspects of life.

To be open to creative, artistic pursuits, said Frisch, an individual must almost certainly have his or her desires met in a number of the sixteen areas that are most important to them.

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Observation: The historical and nuanced sense of “happiness” as “meaningful life” seems to connect naturally with art. Although art and art making may be, by themselves, insufficient to define or sustain a rounded sense of happiness, art seems especially promising as a route to advancing a number of established attributes of well-being, including “creativity,” “self-esteem,” “learning,” “work (avocational),” and even “goals and values.”

Further Reading

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Are Human Happiness and Materialism in Opposition?

Several participants approached the Pocantico meeting from the perspective of cultural criticism. First suggesting that America's materialistic, consumer culture is antithetical to happiness and overall well-being, they moved from a critical assessment of present-day cultural practices to a consideration of the possibility that engagement with art might provide an alternative foundation for values, happiness, and a high quality of life.

Benjamin Barber, political scientist and author of *Consumed*, reiterated the importance of defining "happiness" in a manner appropriate to our inquiry. He noted that in the realm of consumer studies, happiness is usually argued over by using the everyday or popular sense of the term, as the mere satisfaction of desire. This formulation, Barber cautioned, is unlikely to value art and art making very highly. However, the popular, widely held definition of happiness is unsophisticated and incomplete; it oversimplifies the nature of what we want. "The psychology of desire that starts and ends with 'I want, I desire, I need' is probably *averse* to human happiness," he said. "Human happiness is connected *not* with 'what I want' but with 'what I *want* to want.'"

Barber clarified the distinction between the two types of longing by describing himself as a man who "wants to drive a Humvee but who deep down really feels he ought to drive a Prius hybrid." What he wants won't make him happy for a variety of reasons. "I really don't want to want a muscle car in this society. I think it's bad for me, I think it's bad for my kids, I think it's bad for our world. In other words, I *want* a Humvee but I *want to want* a Prius," Barber said. However, he noted that the consumerist ethos of our time proceeds from the assumption that happiness, "is about satisfying what we want, and of

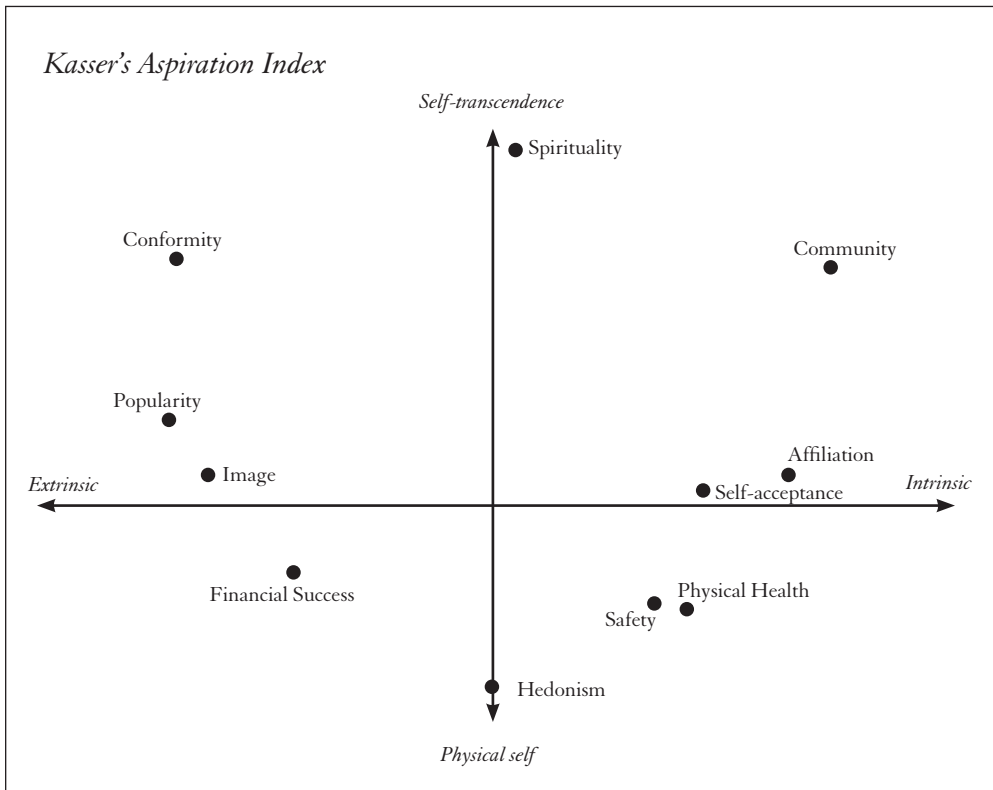
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course the corporations will say again and again that ‘we just give people what they want.’”

“Increasingly, the problem with materialistic culture,” Barber added, “is not that we shop and not that we’re consumers, but that’s all we are. It [materialism] begins to pervade and permeate every sector, suggesting that everything is for sale whether it’s art, politics, or religion itself—that everything is subordinated to the economy. The overall effect is to diminish diversity, and, to the extent it does that, it’s going to contract our happiness.” In short, by concentrating only on *wants*, consumer culture keeps us at arms length from the sense of happiness that connects happiness with meaning and a high quality of life. To paraphrase Hughes, “I *want* to live alone in a high-end condo with a high-definition TV set, but I *want to want* to live with, and care for, my aging parents,” or, “I *want* to drink a glass of wine and watch ‘American Idol,’ but I *want to want* to paint a picture.” Consumerism, for Barber, cuts us off from what we want to want and denies the choices — including the choice of *art* — that are necessary if we are to integrate meaning with happiness.

Psychologist Tim Kasser also addressed issues of materialism in relation to happiness and well-being. In the course of his investigations into *goals* and *aspirations*, Kasser and colleagues have developed the Aspiration Index—a circumplex graph that reflects an individual’s value system. (A circumplex is a circular chart that depicts elements of organizational culture.) His most recent version of the Aspiration Index was validated in interviews with more than 1,800 students from 15 different countries. During the Pocantico meeting, Kasser presented a simplified version of his Aspiration Index, which is reproduced here.

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The Aspiration Index distinguishes between two types of goals: *extrinsic goals* which are focused on gaining or generating praise, recognition, or external rewards (financial success, image, popularity) and *intrinsic goals*, which are inherently satisfying (personal growth, affiliation, community feeling). Interview data gathered by Kasser and his colleagues demonstrates that these goals—toward personal growth and community on one hand versus acquisition of material goods and status on the other hand—tend to be framed in direct opposition. “Money and community are in almost direct opposition,” Kasser said. “This circumplex has the ability to show goals in 180 degrees of opposition, and some analyses we did showed that money and community were 192 degrees apart.” The oppositional character of goals related to money versus those linked to community has been reinforced by different kinds of studies. Kasser noted,

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for example, that research by psychologists using different research models produced outcomes that indicated that people become greedier and less generous when their minds are filled with thoughts of money.

Above all, Kasser noted, interview subjects who focused on extrinsic, materialistic goals tended to be less happy, whereas a tilt toward intrinsic, self-directed goals was closely associated with well-being. “We’ve done a variety of different studies,” he said, “showing that a focus on [materialistic] goals is associated with lower vitality, less positive emotion, less self actualization, more depression, and more anxiety.” Additionally, research on entering college freshmen over the past forty years by other investigators has found that large increases in materialistic goals have been accompanied by a decrease in caring about a meaningful life and a decrease in caring about community. When challenged by participants to defend his assertion that consumerism and self-directed activities are truly in oppositional conflict, Kasser responded that his research has shown that positions within the circumplex constitute a zero-sum game. That is, as an individual becomes more absorbed in consumerism, he or she will without question become less involved in community affiliation and self-directed activities.

Extrapolating from his conclusion that consumerism and materialistic values drive out community connections and self-direction, Kasser asserted that art is a potential antidote to the pursuit of wealth and status—the very activities that observers like economist Robert Lane have determined fail to make people happy. Kasser noted that the character of art naturally demands self-direction as well as expressiveness and a sense of personal authenticity, while instilling a specific array of skills and competencies. He added that many art forms also involve working in groups (such as theater, music, and dance), and these creative

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activities lead toward increased affiliation with others, an aspect of life that has already been associated with happiness and well-being.

Peter Whybrow began his remarks by outlining the inherent problems he finds in America's culture of consumerism and their implications in relation to apparent thwarted happiness. Whybrow, a psychiatrist and author of *American Mania*, noted that schema of classical economist Adam Smith (1723–1790) remained “fundamentally appropriate” to this day whenever we seek to evaluate human goals and desires: goals and desires that, according to Whybrow, are rooted in human biology. Smith suggested that humans are driven by two feelings that ideally are balanced in opposition: self-interest and social sentiment. Smith felt that the “impartial spectator” (what we call “conscience”) would keep these two opposing internal forces in balance. When present and properly aligned, the two forces would drive humans to be simultaneously entrepreneurial (out of self-interest) and to work cohesively together (out of social sentiment).

This sort of balance, Whybrow noted, can be related to Kasser's extrinsic and intrinsic oppositions, and is relatively easy to achieve “when you're living in a small, well-knit community,” such as Boston in the 1700s, when the entire town had a population of only about 10,000. But communities of this sort no longer define most human interaction in the modern world. Whybrow argues that for humans biological evolution produced skills and attitudes required to cope with the scarcity of resources. Faced with persistent scarcity, human social sentiments and abilities were absolutely essential; it took a village to accomplish most important objectives. However, today in Western society most people are no longer faced with daily scarcity. As a result, according to Whybrow, the social side of Adam Smith's equation has broken down. However, the other half of Smith's equation remains robust; our innate biology drives us to consume, and

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our well-honed capitalist system continuously feeds this human biological need. But instead of generating satisfaction and psychological ease, abundance creates an addictive paradigm in which unchecked self-interest pushes us to want more and more. Unfortunately, said Whybrow, acquiring more of everything does not and, in fact, cannot create more happiness.

“Poverty isn’t good for people, but we now know that success isn’t good for you either,” he said. “We’ve done some studies that have showed that children who grow up in families with \$150,000—which is about three times the norm—tend to be much more anxious, much more self-abusive, tend to do many more drugs than those who have a median income. So it’s a U-shaped curve. You’re better off in the middle than you are at either extreme.”

Like other thinkers at the Pocantico gathering, Whybrow emphasized that Adam Smith distinguished between pleasure and happiness, the kind of pre-modern understanding of happiness noted by McMahan, Barber, Seligman, and Kasser. According to Smith, pleasure derives from self-interest, whereas happiness derives from social activities. Pleasure is a fleeting, instinctive pursuit, whereas happiness can only be sustained through social activity. “America has really learned how to make money, and we are the most successful commercial nation in the world,” Whybrow said. “We are like Florence in the 15th century. Now we have to learn how to make a society that is caring and meaningful for those who live in this country.”

Observation: Throughout the two-day meeting more than one conference participant restated the fundamental question: Are capitalism and a market economy grounded in consumerism inevitably in opposition to happiness and well-being grounded in a meaningful life?

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American Mania: When More Is Not Enough by Peter C. Whybrow (W.W. Norton, 2005) www.peterwhybrow.com

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What Are the Benefits of Art and Art Making For Individuals and Society?

Because the Pocantico gathering lasted two days, participants were only able to touch on a few areas in which the arts seem beneficial for well-being. One session of the conference focused specifically on benefits that the arts and art making might convey. Presenters included noted artists and teachers who shared personal and professional experiences to illustrate the apparent connections between art and quality of life.

During an evening session in which performances were interspersed with observations about arts learning and the meaning of music in everyday life, singer-songwriter Pam Rose discussed the relationship between music and her sense of a life of meaning and accomplishment. Trained in voice, classical guitar, and piano, Rose achieved, and maintains, success as a songwriter. She has made a living from music, composing hits for such singers as Reba McEntire and Martina McBride. However, Rose finds meaning in music making beyond commercial success or artistic respect. “If I didn’t make any money,” she said, “I’d still do it the same way. I feel compelled to make music.” Her remarks, grounded in personal experience, echoed the research-based observations of other participants: “Music always said something I could never say in words. I felt confined by language. A string of chords took me out of my mundane existence and connected me to something larger ... When I’m performing, I feel like I’m connected to every person that I’m in that room with.”

Rose maintained that, in her experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” makes sense. She recalled that when she was studying with her mentor, jazz musician Paul Mitchell, he’d say sternly, “Rose, are you *thinking*? Don’t ever let me catch you thinking again!” There was, she argued, special value in being in the moment, not off to the side analyzing what was going on.

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Acknowledging Rose’s successful career, Tepper asked about the opposite outcome, “What is it like for artists to walk away from their art?” Sandra Gibson responded that, for her, it was “emotionally difficult” to spend most of her working life as an arts administrator, instead of as a professional pianist. She explained that being separated from her art had been a surprisingly painful experience. “I haven’t played music in two years,” she said, “and it’s had an effect on both me and my husband; he’s also a musician.”

Ron Crutcher also noted the challenge of maintaining a connection with art in a non-art career. As president of Wheaton College, he had mostly given up the singing he had trained for from the age of five. But despite a demanding work schedule, he still plays the cello. Crutcher is part of a string ensemble—a group that manages to perform six concerts a year. He’s carved a continuing place for music making in his busy life as an administrator simply because it is central to his happiness.

As the conversation continued early the next morning, classical pianist Sandra Gibson, who serves as president and CEO of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, shifted her focus from the role of music in her life to talk instead about what the arts can bring to people—to audiences. “We like to say we’re in the business of creating experiences, creating enjoyable experiences, or provoking experiences for people,” she said. The arts allow an individual to create an “expression of self” and then to transmit meaning through that expression. The experiences and meaning that are conveyed by artistic expression can be emotional, intellectual, or both.

Fundamentally, Gibson said, art connects the artist and an audience. But the lines between the artist and the audience can blur to the point that audience participation actually becomes a kind of collaboration. Gibson noted her

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organization's past experiences with participatory art and its promise for engaging people: "We're finding that there's enormous enjoyment and interest and curiosity in witnessing the process of a work developing, in co-creating the work."

Betty Edwards returned focus to the individual and shifted the conversation from music to the visual arts, emphasizing, in that context, the unique character of art making. Her view is that art—visual art in general but drawing in particular—depends upon successfully deploying right-brain thinking, a process that permits and even demands the abandonment of many conventions of intellectual activity. Edwards, an esteemed artist and educator, is best known for her best-selling instructional manual, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, a method built on Roger Sperry's pioneering investigations of the differences between the two hemispheres of the human brain. Edwards noted that the act of drawing images on paper engages a different part of the brain than the one that manages verbal activities. In fact, said Edwards, drawing actually requires not thinking in words; in order to draw something, it actually helps to set aside the language system entirely. However, drawing—despite the mental reconfiguration it requires—actually seems to provide a kind of joy. "Students will say to me: Learning to draw changed my life. They say: Life seems so much richer to me now. I see things that I never saw before." Subjects that appear quite ordinary are no longer so when you see them as captured by the system of drawing. Edwards also noted that when people begin to draw they not only enter a rewarding process, but at the same time grant themselves the luxury of viewing themselves as creative individuals: "It's the idea of doing something that over the centuries has been so valued."

Unlike the deep, individual art engagement addressed by Edwards, Liz Lerman, founder of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, works within an art form

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that is inherently collaborative. The Exchange is a company of dance artists that performs and also teaches people how to create their own dance art. In 2002, Lerman received a MacArthur “genius grant” in recognition of her unique work creating modern dance involving communities throughout the United States. Lerman’s efforts have frequently focused on unlikely dance makers: business leaders, very young children, factory workers, and senior citizen groups. The Dance Exchange has successfully encouraged everyday Americans to push beyond perceived limitations of body image, physical strength, and stage fright, while also enabling first-time dancers to attempt choreography.

In fact, through the process of engaging older people and incorporating the movements of aging bodies into choreography, Lerman has seen how an art form allows individuals to benefit in multiple ways. “It’s an old idea,” she said, “that communities need to come together to think, feel, dream the things that matter to them, and sometimes those stories are invented in Shakespeare, and sometimes they’re invented in their family stories ... So the stories will emerge depending on how the artists engage the community. For me, the role for artists is that they make the stories matter.” Art, she concluded, validates people’s opinions. Art can inspire; art can reflect life through storytelling; and art provides an opportunity for empathy.

Psychologist Michael Frisch noted that creativity (art making or creative self-expression) has been found by psychologists to be an independent predictor of overall life satisfaction or happiness for most people. He briefly sketched the results of several relevant studies. A study of junior high school girls found that participating in visual arts led to increased levels of perceived satisfaction. A Rand study shared at the conference (*Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*) itemized a number of benefits that people derive

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from engagement with the arts: creative pursuits improve creative thinking, problem-solving, self-discipline, self-efficacy, and also increase school attendance and help at risk youth.

In addition, Frisch said, creative self-expression has been found to produce the phenomenon known as *flow*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has defined flow as a total engagement which allows a person to lose himself in an activity. The experience of flow seems to lead to a sense of well-being. “People are happier when they have more flow activities in their life, whether it’s at work or at school,” said Frisch. Csikszentmihalyi’s research has suggested that many activities can produce flow—including sports, games, and religious rituals—but art-making and creative activities have been identified as key producers of flow. Betty Edwards’ observation that students “lose themselves” in the act of drawing may be the result of the symptoms of flow, the loss of outside reference and self-consciousness that accompanies total submersion in an activity.

Tim Kasser noted several possible specific benefits of art and art-making. These less obvious connections between art and a high quality of life should be considered alongside such oft-cited benefits as community interaction and personal achievement and autonomy. For example, the ability to perceive beauty through engagement with art may itself lead to greater life satisfaction. Kasser noted that psychological studies measuring gratitude have tracked subjects through the course of a day and have found that the people who are more grateful are the ones who report being happier. Since beauty can be seen as a kind of gift, and a gift encourages gratitude, it follows that those who perceive beauty in the world may be happier as well.

Kasser also pointed out that engagement with the arts can bring with it a change in perspective: a willingness to set oneself aside and to embrace experience.

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“One of the things we know in the well-being literature is that a sense of openness to experience is associated with well-being,” he said. “Another thing we know is that the people who adjust the best to stresses in life are the ones who have more coping styles at their disposal rather than just one or two—and flexibility.” Kasser added that the change of perspective that occurs through arts education might lead to a broader sense of cognitive flexibility.

Art-making can also be a way of increasing the inventory of identities possessed by individuals—that is, the different roles that a person can play in the course of his or her daily life. Kasser explained that from the point of view of psychological health, “More identity usually is better [for overall well-being]. So if I can call myself a psychologist and an artist and a father, it gives me more things to be; it doesn’t put all my eggs in one basket, and it expands me and leads to growth. And then if things go bad in one situation, I’ve got another thing I can do because I have this other identity.” Artists for the most part are made, not born, said Kasser, so in developing artistic skills, one also develops a sense of confidence through the very process of creating that new identity. Kasser added that he is aware that the art/identity connection is a hypothesis, and one that is certainly testable.

Liz Lerman added to Kasser’s argument, noting that art has the capacity to produce feelings of empathy. She elaborated on her work in building new choreographies and dance movements based on the basic routine physical activities of elderly people. When these new dances were documented, and younger members in the community studied choreography to reproduce specific movements, the young dancers developed greater empathy for the condition of the elderly, as did audiences who watched performances. Kasser reinforced Lerman’s basic point: “Empathy is something that builds relationships, and

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relationships are one of the foundations of quality of life,” he noted, “so anything we can do to build empathy, we’re building quality of life.”

Early in the meeting, as participants grappled with issues of definition, Seligman specified the three “measurable and buildable entities” that define happiness: *positive emotion, engagement, and meaning*. Although participants expressed conflicting opinions about the ease with which a research agenda could escape the popular understanding of happiness as mere positive emotion, there existed considerable agreement that happiness as the result of a meaningful life well-lived offered promising connections with multiple attributes of art making. However, in contrast to social scientists who have studied happiness and meaning, arts professionals have most often stressed *engagement* with art as a key mechanism for advancing quality of life. In her work with disadvantaged young people in arts-based organizations, Shirley Brice Heath (an anthropologist and professor of English literature) said that she observed the importance of young people accumulating multiple experiences with meaning by taking part in a variety of engagements. “We’ve looked again and again at how important it is for young people to be able to multiply these meanings by multiplying their layers of engagement as they keep learning and moving,” she said. “So [the process] becomes this kind of figure eight, which is very pleasurable for them: moving back and forth between engagement and meaning. They don’t really talk about pleasure so much as they talk about the work of it, and how hard it is.” Over time, the process of engaging and mastering difficult work becomes satisfying. “Well-being,” Heath said, “is about complexity.”

Heath noted that, in fifteen years of studying young people’s engagement with arts-based organizations, “85 percent [of the young people observed in the arts programs] showed that—in terms of adaptability, in terms of access to jobs, in

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terms of retention of jobs (and in some ways of finding further education), in terms of reading more outside of school, and most important, in terms of finding ways to reduce the violence and level of depression in their lives—these young people came out way ahead over the control group.” In Heath’s formulation, meaning emerged out of engagement with art, even though the sense of meaning in the lives of young people is most often experienced in work, reading, and reduced violent impulses. Meaning generated by arts engagement enhances overall quality of life.

The notion that the challenge of mastering an art form was itself an important source of meaning surfaced in several contexts. Crutcher pointed out that artists often find that the very act of creating art is a struggle, but one that can lead to satisfaction and contentment. He noted that, like many artists, he has been both painfully challenged and self-critical of his own work while performing on stage or in a studio, but once he completed a performance and experienced the waves of applause from an audience, he felt satisfaction and contentment. “Connecting with the audience, having the work produced or performed—this provides a level of contentment and meaning that helps you to rise above those negative feelings [about one’s artistry].”

Crutcher also noted the pedagogical and mentoring value of artistic instruction for children and young people. Regular, consistent artistic instruction—in music, in dance, in drawing, in theater—can provide a key adult mentoring opportunity for a child. “Art, music, dance—they can help transport you to a different time, a different place, a different space, and perhaps thus help you to transcend the vicissitudes of life,” he said. “In order to have those capacities, one has to have, preferably at an early age, that communal experience” of artistic instruction. “I do believe that over a lifetime, if there were a way to ensure that

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as many of our children as possible had access to that experience in a high-quality way, it could contribute to a higher quality of life over a long period.”

And meaning doesn’t depend exclusively on serious engagement or professional performance. Whybrow noted that merely practicing an art form, such as working to learn a musical instrument or trying new dance steps, can impart meaning and satisfaction. To practice or rehearse an art form requires some kind of training as well as repetition to produce learning. If we don’t engage and hone the skills required to produce and understand art, he noted, people will still connect with culture, but it will be the kind of culture that can be engaged most easily. Sadly, our default arts connection is frequently the television set, and many studies show that the passive consumption of culture as delivered by television reduces quality of life.

Michael Hughes noted that meaning is a key aspect of people’s feelings of contentment. He added that “one of the ways we promote meaning is through arts. If we are engaging with arts, engaging with culture through the cultural products and through art-making,” we are transmitting meaning, which, in addition to the benefits already specified, can increase feelings of contentment. Hughes went on to say that we should not only be thinking about the problems of passive consumption or the benefits of art making as they affect individuals. Both the production and the consumption of art and culture generate cultural capital. Cultural capital allows people to integrate with others. “So cultural capital gives you a foundation for creating social relations and integrating people, and it does it in different ways. We can envision a kind of “puzzle model” in which we have culture production and consumption, and it generates different kinds of cultural capital that then generates social relations—out of which come enhanced social relations, enhanced quality of life, all the kinds of positive things and the meanings that we’ve been talking about.”

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Further Reading

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange: www.danceexchange.org

Betty Edwards: Learn to Draw: www.drawright.com

The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards
(Tarcher, 1999)

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
(Harper Perennial, 1991)

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A Possible Frame for the Benefits of the Arts: A Vibrant Expressive Life

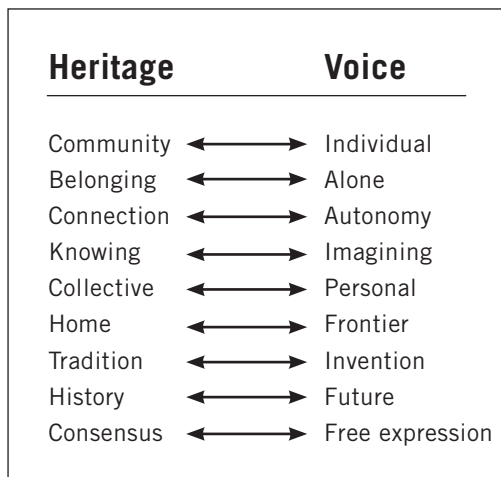
Bill Ivey observed that most of the discussion gravitated toward engagement and meaningful life experiences as essential components of happiness. In this spirit, to the extent that art or art making was invoked as a possible aspect of a high quality of life, the Pocantico gathering had emphasized the *doing* aspect of art—performing, learning, enhancing empathy, connecting with community and so on. This is the side of art that can advance feelings of autonomy, individual development, personal self-worth, and mastery or control. But because art is also a rich and respected container for cultural heritage and values, it is important to take note of the ways art engagement can help maintain a sense of continuity and place. As background, Ivey explained that as he worked on his new book (*Arts, Inc.*, published in 2008) the concept of *expressive life* emerged as a kind of metaphorical container for different aspects of art and art making. The notion conceives art and culture as connecting with everyday life in two distinctive ways: as *tradition and individual talent*.

A vibrant expressive life exhibits individual achievement. A number of comments at Pocantico highlighted autonomy and individual voice as markers of happiness and linked accomplishment and resulting self esteem as attributes of art making. This function of art arises out of an individual's personal vision, and may at times actually require a revolutionary break with the past. But other forms of expression, such as historic folk songs, classic novels, early radio and television programs, or, for that matter, the works of Beethoven or Brahms, live in a space reserved for tradition. Here art is not about autonomy, but functions primarily to ground us in history, community, and shared heritage. So, presented graphically, a diagram of expressive life would consist of two halves: one labeled "Heritage," the other labeled "Voice."

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Under “Heritage,” Ivey grouped such artistic values as tradition, community, consensus, accommodation, and belonging. These components of expressive life are usually connected with community art or art from the past, Ivey argued, and “are artistic resources we can draw on.” Heritage, then, is our “cultural stock portfolio,” the accumulated store of arts and culture developed over time. In contrast, Ivey said, the other half of the circle, “Voice,” represents the personal vision of the individual producing art. “Voice” encompasses invention, autonomy, creativity, self-esteem, mastery, and free expression. As a result, this half of the expressive life equation ends up being “more about sending out than receiving.” For the arts to be healthy in a culture, and for individuals to secure the benefits of a vibrant expressive life, there needs to be a sense of balance and fluidity between heritage and voice. Heritage provides a rich storehouse of accumulated artistic expression that enables a culture to, among other things, maintain a sense of community and shared history even during hard times; the Voice side of the equation allows people to feel that they are independent, unburdened by the past, and free to achieve and succeed. Both are important. Ivey indicated that this framing device for viewing arts and culture is still a work in progress, and he invited comments and critiques.



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Responding to Ivey’s diagram and description, Michael Hughes noted the importance of the equation staying in balance. Too much heritage, and a culture is stifled, he said; too much individual voice, and a culture can become cacophonous and unintelligible. Martin Seligman noted how Fredrich Nietzsche articulated something similar in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Great artists, great philosophers, great thinkers,” said Seligman, “in order to be what he defined as ‘lions’—able to roar at the society around them, at tradition and heritage—must first be the ‘beast of burden’ that carried on their back tradition and heritage, and internalize that and let it seep into their skin, and only then can they go on” to develop their individual talent and voice, to become “raging lions.”

Building on Seligman’s comments, Joan Shigekawa expressed reservations about the hard line dividing artistic heritage and artistic autonomy. She argued that creativity always draws on artistic heritage, and that while the two parts of expressive life have certain dominant characteristics, we should think about finding a way to be less severe or arbitrary in visual representations of “heritage” and “voice.” Ivey agreed that the expressive life graphic drew a hard line between components of expressive life, but noted that a number of influential observers have emphasized conflict between heritage and autonomy. The oppositional nature of culture as it’s always been, as opposed to culture as you invent it, shows up in the writings of Amartya Sen and Anthony Appiah, and is part of the argument in Tom Friedman’s *The Olive Tree and the Lexus*.

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Problems of Inequality and Cultural Difference

Early in the Pocantico conversation, Tepper explained the emergence of a growing *cultural divide* that makes it especially difficult for some categories of citizens—the elderly, the poor, the undereducated, and residents of rural areas—to participate fully in art, art making, and heritage. Several participants noted that issues of inequality—such as poverty, racial discrimination, lack of opportunity, and lack of mentors—not only affect expressive life online or in a digital environment, but have presented huge obstacles holding many back from experiences of happiness and a high quality of life. It is much more difficult for people to engage the arts when they are beset by issues of inequality, and when inequality generates conditions approaching absolute material scarcity, it becomes difficult for citizens to engage either heritage or personal creativity.

To give the participants some overall perspective on inequality in the United States, Tony Brown (associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University) shifted away from the cultural sphere to focus on studies of inequality in the delivery of health services. Brown stressed that his examples were from studies he pulled at random; it would be equally possible to cite examples of inequality in prisons and in educational systems, for example. Brown noted that the mortality rate for black children in Harlem is higher than it is in Bangladesh, a third-world nation. White patients in Los Angeles were significantly more likely to receive pain medicine for long bone fractures than blacks or Latinos. According to another study cited by Brown, 42 percent of black adults believe that racial equality will not be achieved in their lifetimes; 23 percent say that racial equality will never be achieved at all. Brown's central point in citing these various studies was to remind Pocantico meeting participants that for those who suffer the effects of inequality in America, engaging with art may never be a

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priority. “If 23 percent of black Americans think racial equality will never be achieved,” said Brown, “what is the point of promoting the arts to them?” Indeed, several presenters indicated that it is a fundamental principle of psychology that people will pursue basic needs, such as money, before they can pursue higher goals.

Benjamin Barber agreed, saying that in America “we’re good at the pursuit of happiness, but we’re bad at inequality, and it’s a serious weakness in our country.” However, he did go on to note the overall optimism in the American character. For example, he said, research has revealed that poor people consistently identify themselves as middle class. Ivey agreed, adding that while inequality and material scarcity can take away the time, money, training and motivation required to engage heritage and individual development through art, most researchers consider the threshold of income or quality of life at which people turn away from worrying about food and shelter—toward art, religion, and family life—to be fairly low.

Both Tony Brown and Michael Hughes pointed out that over the years studies have suggested consistent differences in life satisfaction and happiness between blacks and whites. However, Hughes saw some reasons for optimism in this regard, noting that the General Social Survey recently showed that the gap in perceived happiness between blacks and whites is closing. Hughes suggested that perhaps, even in the face of inequality, there may be cultural opportunities that generate life meaning for those who are oppressed in ways that may be protective, but which we have not found ways to measure. The now-famous New Orleans Ninth Ward gave many indications of being a community that was poor and culturally vibrant at the same time. However, it is difficult to find anything more specific than impressions or anecdotes that are

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suggestive of ways in which an active and balanced expressive life might to some degree actually counteract or offset the problems that result from inequality in education, health care, or income.

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Questions of Public Policy and Goals

If the happiness and satisfaction that can be derived from a meaningful life can be in part achieved through engagement with art, can we also consider the ways public policy might employ art to make people happier? Richard Kurin (acting undersecretary for history and culture for the Smithsonian Institution and an anthropologist) has studied many cultures firsthand. He noted that our western conception of happiness is not necessarily shared all over the world. Kurin discussed the example of Bhutan in the Himalayas, a country that has had a Gross National Happiness policy in place since 1972. The Bhutan policy states that the role of the nation is to provide for the happiness of its people. Imposing such a policy goal in Bhutan may pose fewer obstacles than in the United States, Kurin noted. For one thing, the populace of Bhutan is largely Buddhist; citizens do not require or even seek opportunities for what we think of as leisure activity, and they tend to view themselves in an ethical relation with their natural environment. Nevertheless, said Kurin, if Bhutan can develop a National Happiness policy, perhaps the United States can as well, although it would need to be advanced differently. Noting the differences in cultures that separate the United States and Bhutan, Peter Whybrow commented, “We in America have committed so much to individualism, we fail to see the advantages of the collective good. We don’t have Buddhism to motivate people, and we won’t get more arts participation merely by scolding people.”

“The ultimate purpose of the American government is to provide for the well-being of the nation,” said Ronald Crutcher, in considering how to advance the notion that the arts and well-being are intimately connected. His statement echoed many of the conference’s participants who argued that the time has come to change the national conversation from the accumulation of wealth to the

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attainment of well-being, happiness, or a high quality of life. Based on his experience promoting a new curriculum at Wheaton College, Crutcher said he felt people were excited by the idea of turning out college graduates who were prepared to lead full, engaged lives—in other words, a life directed toward well-being rather than toward earning power.

Crutcher expressed concern, however, about current United States arts education policy and related arts education programming, wondering if arts education can provide the attitudes and skills required to approach happiness and a high quality of life through the arts. Crutcher sees an educational system too focused on the end product in the arts and not on the production and distribution of art. He also sees a need for better arts education and for more policy support to help non-artists learn about art and art making. The best place to begin, Crutcher said, is with a new emphasis on the teaching of the arts to children. To accomplish that goal he would advocate more art teachers, but also rigorous training in arts skills for all teachers specializing in elementary education. In addition, he argued that the United States needs more arts mentoring focused on young people, carried out by citizens in retirement. Echoing Brown and Hughes, Crutcher noted that by the year 2050 almost 50 percent of American schoolchildren will be black, Latino, and poor. This population will need help assimilating, but will also need a contact with heritage, and will especially need a source for feelings of opportunity and hope. Crutcher stated that public policy encouraging mentoring in the arts by older citizens could provide essential tools of autonomy, progress, and success to young people.

Joan Shigekawa from the Rockefeller Foundation framed the question of happiness, quality of life, and art in public policy in terms of current research and existing programs. “Is there any evidence that quality of life and the arts are on

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the agenda of political leaders?” she asked. Answering her rhetorical question in the affirmative, Shigekawa pointed to a few key developments.

She first cited the Key National Indicators Initiative being developed by the National Academy of Medicine under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences. In addition to examining numerous standard economic benchmarks for national success (e.g., macroeconomic trends, labor market, public finance), this working group project is also taking into account quality of life, as well as arts and culture, as key indicators of the country’s place in the world order. Shigekawa also noted that for the last ten years the Urban Institute, an urban policy think tank, has been developing the Arts and Culture Indicators Project, “trying to look at the role that arts and culture plays in developing healthy communities, especially in poor, urban neighborhoods.” Currently, twelve major cities are working with the Urban Institute on tracking cultural vitality and cultural indicators. A report was recently issued on findings thus far: *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators* (The Urban Institute, 2006).

Shigekawa emphasized her belief that there exists a policy appetite for arts and culture in the United States. She noted that increasingly, city mayors want to develop the arts within their communities to attract the creative class and grow their economies. The presence of arts and culture is now commonly viewed as the key to attracting young, college-educated professionals aged twenty-two to thirty-four to communities. She noted that within the larger field of public policy, two groups of professionals are eager to make use of demographic information regarding arts and culture: professionals who work on economic development plans for cities and regions, and city planners. Shigekawa attended the American Planners Association conference in the spring of 2007, and was

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struck by the high level of interest in connecting arts and culture with city planning as expressed by leaders from all over the country. She added “that they were very aware that they didn’t quite have the tools to think about the cultural infrastructure and the creative economy. So that was a very interesting indicator that there is some policy appetite for all the things that we’ve been talking about.” Finally, Shigekawa pointed out some ways major cities across the globe are both pursuing the creative class and examining their own city policies to see how they can best advance as magnets for creative industries. She noted that cities represented at the 2007 International Society for Electronic Arts conference were beginning to zero in on ways to market themselves creatively. For example, Helsinki emphasized its design prowess, while Zurich and Osaka promoted building new creativity clusters. “So I put these out as evidence that around the world there’s a focus on creativity in many different ways. China is different from Australia and Australia is different from New Zealand, but they all seem to have an idea planted somewhere in their brain that they are going to do something on creativity, and there’s a willingness to see public policy as a way of making creativity part of economic development and quality of life. I think it’s a good moment for what this conversation is trying to accomplish for creativity and for well-being.”

While Shigekawa observed interest in quality of life and culture emerging in a number of specific public policy venues, Martin Seligman (director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania) opened his comments on the public policy dimension of the Pocantico meeting with a broad view of the current situation. He posed the question, “What is our prosperity for?” He suggested that America is currently at something best described as a “Florentine moment.” Seligman noted that in the 15th century, the leaders of

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Florence decided that as the wealthiest and most successful city-state of its time, the community should invest its surplus in the arts. That investment led directly to the Renaissance, which ultimately benefited the entire world. Today, Seligman suggested, America is at a similar crossroads. “Why do we want money?” he asked rhetorically. Wealth, he answered, should be deployed to sustain well-being. America is at a point in the evolution of its prosperity and the maturity of its democracy at which citizens can make national choices. “Are we about money, or are we about well-being?” Seligman asked. He suggested that if the national conversation can be diverted from matters affecting wealth toward questions of overall well-being, many of the goals for the arts that we have discussed will rise as public policy priorities.

However, said Seligman, we cannot advance new ways of addressing happiness and quality of life using the arts or other interventions without first developing new measurements of well-being in the United States. “Our economic indices, such as the Gross Domestic Product, have really gone awry,” said Seligman. “That is, the more prisons we build, the more drugs people have for psychosis, the greater our Gross Domestic Product. What is measured drives policy—and what we measure right now is money.” He noted that economists and psychologists are working on new indices to measure national well-being (for example, the Genuine Progress Indicator), and said that he believed these could be employed in harmony with existing economic indices. “As we get rigorous measures of national well-being of how much meaning people have in their lives, or how much engagement they have in their lives, or how much positive affect they have—policy can be driven around that.” But absent the ability to actually measure quality of life beyond material well-being, arguments on behalf of new policy will be unconvincing.

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Seligman reiterated and expanded on his remarks made early in the Pocantico gathering. As a positive psychologist, he believes that what we call happiness “fractionates into three measurable and buildable entities: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning.” All three aspects of happiness can be measured, and all three can be increased in people’s lives, he said. “You can build the amount of meaning in life, the amount of engagement in life, and the amount of positive emotion in life.” If the United States can begin to focus on measuring and building well-being, said Seligman, the national understanding of the goals of our democracy can be transformed. For Seligman, the arts would be one beneficiary of a reconfigured approach to assessing the health of society. “If the national conversation can somehow change from wealth to well-being, the arts problem is solved automatically,” he said. “The funding of the arts becomes a central national goal when the conversation shifts.”

Further Reading

<http://wheatoncollege.edu/President/bio.html>

Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators by Maria Rosario

Jackson, Florence Kabwasa-Green, Joaquin Herranz

(The Urban Institute, 2006)

Martin Seligman: Authentic Happiness: www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu

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Is It Time for a U.S. Department of Cultural Affairs?

Whereas Joan Shigekawa expressed optimism that creativity is increasingly being recognized by policy professionals as a key factor in quality of life in cities in the United States and around the world, Ivey expressed reservations about the situation in the United States, noting that he saw the cultural policy environment as too fragmented and too concentrated on nonprofit issues to take on emerging questions of happiness and quality of life. In pointing out the lack of engagement in key policy questions on the part of self-identified cultural leaders, he reminded colleagues that our cultural system was significantly reshaped during the years he served as NEA chairman, but the transformation wasn't the result of expanded or decreased arts funding. Instead, it was the extension of the term of copyright in the Sonny Bono Act, the elimination of the United States Information Agency, the lifting of constraints on media ownership, and various new intellectual property enforcement provisions in the 1996 Digital Millennium Copyright Act that changed the rules surrounding culture, art making, and art distribution. Significantly, with the exception of the American Library Association, the organizations we generally think of as making up our arts or cultural community weren't at the table when key provisions of these policies were developed. Ivey noted that currently cultural policy gets made piecemeal. Authority is divided, making it far too easy for the marketplace to influence narrow legislation and regulation to benefit arts industries. In order to create an environment in which cultural policy can be developed and coordinated to connect with the public interest, "perhaps we should work toward the creation of a Department of Cultural Affairs at the cabinet level?"

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Ivey acknowledged that he had actually made the argument against such a department many times while serving as chairman of the NEA. After all, if there were such a department, wouldn't culture "become politicized," and content "managed?" But, he said, "we're doing that right now" in a de facto way without any real oversight. Congressional hearings and Federal Communications Commission regulations have managed the content of broadcasting and movies for years. At the very least, Ivey said, an effort to create a central cultural department would help take the policy focus off nonprofit funding, where it's been for decades. "What has passed for cultural policy in the United States, to a very large extent, has been about the needs of the nonprofit arts community—when you talk about cultural policy it's about how is the symphony doing in relation to its audience, or what are the funding streams like for ballet, or what are the funding streams like for a folk arts organization. In a sense, if I were a conspiracy theorist, which I am not, I would say that the existence of the nonprofit community and its relationship to public policy has presented a perfect opportunity for the large media companies to have their own way with our culture. In a sense they said to all the smart people, you go play over there, here's your sandbox. Worry about that; worry about another \$10 million a year for the NEA, or the loss of \$10 million. Be sad some years, be happy other years, but leave us alone to extend copyright, to extend the reach of intellectual property, limit fair use; do a whole range of things that ultimately have huge consequences for the public good, for happiness, for quality of life, and so on."

For Ivey, there is a key question that we have to answer before linking art with public benefits: "Can we implement great ideas around quality of life through culture if authority and responsibility in culture are so divided—and because of the division—so easily dominated by market forces and large

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corporations that these good ideas just aren't going to get through?" To break through such a logjam, Ivey concluded, a United States Department of Cultural Affairs may be needed as a kind of "hub" around which ideas can be organized and policies hashed out.

Kurin agreed that the way the United States connects culture with public policy is fragmented and tilted toward the marketplace, but he was concerned that a new federal department might be a bridge too far. "Would you roll up ten existing entities into a new, gigantic department along the lines of the Department of Homeland Security? Maybe it would be better to envision a White House coordinating entity, like the National Security Council?" he added. "Something that might be more achievable and still solve some of the biggest problems."

Further Reading

"American Needs a New System for Supporting the Arts," by Bill Ivey, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, www.vanderbilt.edu/curbcenter/support
Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life, edited by Bill Ivey and Steven Tepper (Routledge, 2008)

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Questions for Further Study

What specific benefits does engagement with the arts convey? And can we find points of commonality between engagement with the arts and engagement with sports? Several times during the conference, various participants noted that, in order to make progress, it is fundamental to determine what specific benefits to well-being are conveyed by engagement with the arts. Some of these possible benefits were touched on during the course of the conference (see above). However, more research needs to be done to determine the connections to well-being. In addition, Darrin McMahon noted that many of the benefits to well-being that are commonly believed to come from engagement with the arts—e.g., decreased anxiety, increased empathy and civic engagement, fresh perspectives—have been commonly imputed to organized athletics in the United States. As McMahon said, it is easy to make the case in America for the importance of organized athletics. Sports constitute a pillar of American life, revered for their widely assumed benefits for individuals and society. If many of these same benefits occurring in sports can also be found in the arts, said McMahon, support for the arts will come more naturally. On the other hand, it is important for scholars to determine whether the arts provide any distinctive advantages that are not already present in sports, volunteering and other domains of social life.

Assuming that research tells us that the arts are good for well-being, how do you foster the development of individual artistic skills in America? Peter Whybrow noted that humans are biologically driven to seek out novelty. He posed the question: “How do we harness this insatiable curiosity to teach individuals to draw, to paint, to play musical instruments, to dance, to write?” He noted that such training would allow people to lead more complete lives. In addition,

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development of artistic skills would give people an alternative to passive entertainment, such as television. Adding, “If you don’t have these skill sets, you’re going to watch the television, because there are no skill sets required for that.” More practically, more research is needed on the role of novelty as a form of social and cultural capital (e.g. discovering and sharing new cultural experiences feeds and supports social relationship) and as a source of identity. And, more specifically, how does the search for novelty relate to the arts? And, what are the differences—in terms of emotional commitment, engagement, sense of accomplishment, positive affect—between passive and active forms of leisure?

What kind of art is good for what kind of people? In posing this question, Tim Kasser talked about a study which had been published in *Art Therapy*. In the study, college students were asked to describe stressful moments from the past. In all cases, during their descriptions, their anxiety increased, and it was measured and recorded. Afterwards, they were asked to draw randomly or to color in assigned patterns. Those who colored in the assigned patterns had stress levels go lower than when they entered the study. The point of sharing this, said Kasser, is that this study suggests that different kinds of art may benefit different kinds of people depending on the circumstances. “I think we’ve been talking about art’s effects and well-being in a really broad way,” Kasser said, referring to the conference. “In our study, I think a structured engagement with art was what was successful, and an unstructured engagement with art didn’t work.” So, he said, as connections between art and well-being are explored, it is important to be specific about which kinds of art benefit people in which kinds of situations.

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How can we increase people’s engagement with the arts and with civic activities when time always seems to be an issue? Tim Kasser noted that Americans work about 160 hours a year more now than they did in the 1970s, about 36 more minutes per workday. In addition, people’s average commuting times have increased, as well as other time-consuming activities. Other studies show however that the balance between work and leisure has remained relatively constant over the years, with the average American experiencing slightly more leisure now than in the past. Regardless, people perceive a growing time crunch and feel pressured to accomplish more in what feels like less time. In this context, how can we get more engagement with the arts, which requires time, said Kasser, if people believe they are overscheduled as it is? “If our goal here is to talk about giving arts to the average person,” said Kasser, “the average person is too busy to sit down and draw. If you look at the number one reason people give for not volunteering or not voting, it’s that they’re too busy. And it’s the same for not exercising as well: they’re too busy.” Given the absence of a national vacation law or national overtime laws, Kasser said, lack of time for art could be a genuine issue. Scholars need to better understand trends in leisure and work, including perceptions of the “time bind,” in an effort to learn more about what motivates different forms of participation. Such research needs to acknowledge and take serious the enormous hours devoted by most Americans each week to television viewing. Why do people watch television? Does such leisure share anything in common with more active pursuits like art making? Can increased media literacy deepen engagement with television in a way that contributes to a high quality of life?

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How can we identify, count, and measure the ingredients of a high quality of life, happiness, or even a vibrant expressive life? Many participants noted that developing good metrics is critical for advancing policy. What are the metrics currently used by scientists and social scientists to measure happiness and quality of life? Can these metrics be adapted for public policy purposes? Are there a similar set of metrics for measuring cultural vitality? Arts scholars and marketing consultants need to get beyond measuring people’s arts experiences as simply a matter of immediate positive or negative affect—did you like the performance? What indicators would we use to measure levels of “engagement,” “positive affect,” or “meaning” in relation to an arts experience?

Is research in the “hard” sciences an avenue to understanding the special relationship between art and quality of life? *Learning, Arts, and the Brain: The Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition* and *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, by Oliver Sacks, represent efforts to employ diagnostic and imaging methodologies to the human brain as it engages art. Can the demonstration of the chemical, biological and symptomatic effects of art engagement on measurable brain activity form the basis for a quality-of-life argument on behalf of a deeper investment in connecting citizens with art and art making?

What would a United States Department of Cultural Affairs do? What would be its boundaries? What federal agencies, existing regulation, and government programs might be under or aligned with such a Department? What would a federal policy agenda look like that was centered on improving quality of life and wellbeing through art and art making? How are the some of the most significant cultural policy issues of our times—intellectual property, trade in

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cultural goods, media consolidation, heritage preservation, education—related to quality of life issues? That is, if we can “fix” these larger problems that plague America’s cultural system, will the lives of individual citizens be improved?

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Conclusions

- * Art and art making appear to offer a promising possible path to happiness and a high quality of life.
- * Art can function as both a reservoir of heritage and an arena for individual human development.
- * Attempts to link public policy with quality of life will founder unless happiness is understood to describe an engaged, meaningful life, not mere “pleasurable sensation.”
- * Meaningful engagement with art and art making can constitute an intrinsic goal that stands as an antidote to consumerism.
- * Art and related concepts of beauty can produce feelings associated with happiness, such as gratitude, empathy, and contentment, recognized attributes of happiness.
- * It may be possible and appropriate to advance cultural vitality and a vibrant expressive life for all as a ‘public good’ or a ‘merit good’ in a democracy.
- * The development and execution of public policy that engages the United States arts system will require greater coordination.
- * Significant and growing inequality exists in the distribution of resources essential to connecting citizens with art, art making, and a vibrant expressive life.

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