

Bill Adair

In this issue, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier talks with Bill Adair of the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. Bill is director of Exhibitions and Public Interpretation, a funding category specifically created to recognize the increasingly blurred lines and fluid boundaries in the presentation and interpretation of material and visual culture.



Q Ellen In reading Pew's online and published material, it is clear that collaboration is one of your core values. Can you talk a bit about how that came to be at the Center, and why?

A Bill We've frequently supported collaborations and multidisciplinary work when they have met our criteria for funding, but in the last few years we've noticed an increasing interest among our constituents in working across traditional boundaries. In consolidating our program categories at the Pew Center, we've been responding to the way artists and organizations work now. A history museum or an arboretum is just as likely to come to us for support of a contemporary art installation as they are a

traditional didactic exhibition. Arts organizations continue to further blur disciplinary differences in their programming. Is it a performance or a gallery installation? Practitioners now often ignore these distinctions. We're following the work.

Q Ellen Crossing a boundary—going outside of one's expertise to create something new—can easily feel risky, uncomfortable, or even scary. Can you share your thoughts about the importance of risk taking, and how to lessen our aversion to risk?

A Bill Taking risks is going to be a part of any ambitious and rigorous cultural practice and we encourage our constituents to take informed

and calculated risks. Some organizations are embracing change and flexibility as a regular part of their work and it shows in their imaginative programming and in their higher level of audience engagement. Our society continues to change with lightning speed—increased competition for leisure time, new audience expectations, shifting demographics, radical new technologies, etc. If the culture sector doesn't take some chances in responding to this evolution, we're going to be left behind. We need to acknowledge an aversion to risk in our sector and move through it with thoughtful programmatic experimentation.

Bill Adair is Director, Exhibitions and Public Interpretation at the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. The Center is a multidisciplinary grantmaker and hub for knowledge sharing about culture, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and dedicated to fostering a vibrant cultural community in Greater Philadelphia.

Adair is also a coeditor, along with Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski, of *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Left Coast Press/Routledge, 2011).



Q Ellen In your work, how do you start conversations/foster innovation among people who come from diverse practices, approaches, and places? Are there ground rules? Best first steps? Something else?

A Bill I think it's important when working across boundaries to begin with humility and an acknowledgment of what we don't know. What do audiences really want? What are our clear goals and what are the best ways to achieve them? If an organization wants to work with a contemporary visual or performing artist, what additional expertise is needed to make this a fantastic project? If someone wants to experiment with new technologies,

who are the best people to help maximize success? New programmatic strategies require new skill sets and new expert partners.

Q Ellen As a cultural grantmaker and thinker, what advice do you have for those who create exhibitions? What do you see as the benefits in coloring outside the lines—in creating work that is interdisciplinary, boundary shattering, or disruptive?

A Bill Exhibitions are increasingly about providing complex experiences. Audiences seem to be expecting meaning-making as well as knowledge-sharing in their museum visits. There is so much smart and exciting work being done in

experience development within many practices—art installation, participant-based performance, television, virtual reality, gaming—as well as exhibition-making. We'd be very interested to support experiments that demonstrate how we can learn from and with each other in these arenas. One thing is clear—the future is a mash-up of cultural practitioners engaging with audiences to create things we cannot yet even imagine. ■

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