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DCAC Archive : Director's Letters

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I write a lot in these pages about the value of the experience of art. And as a theater practitioner, I am all about the experience. But I am broader in my embrace of experience than just what might be considered art, especially as it relates to performance. For example, we have two fantastic programs at DCAC for visual artists which are entirely based on experience. Sparkplug facilitates a working collective for a group of artists to experience for two years. They experience all the ins and outs of trying to work together as a group. At times it can be very trying, other times rewarding, but it is seldom "status-quo." And for all the things that might happen in those two years, the only thing they will be able to take away with them is the experience of having done it. Our Curatorial Initiative is similar. But here it is a mentor/mentee relationship that gets experienced. Planning, plotting, and preparing an exhibition of one's own design and seeing it come to fruition is indeed quite an experience, and in this case guided by one more experienced. In each of these programs our goal for the participants is to grow as individuals and artists through these experiences.

When you think about it, this idea of experience permeates our whole society. People do unpaid internships all over Washington solely for the experience. When you are checking out prospective jobs you always have to grapple with just how much experience is required. And if you are the one doing the hiring, then the experience of the applicant is extremely important. Often it is the range of experience that gets the employer's attention, just one of the many reasons to do a semester abroad; yes, for the experience. We value experience. It even creeps into our selection of romantic partners, you want to seem compatibly experienced, if one seems to have too much experience it can be off-putting, or maybe totally exciting. In any case, you don't want to seem to be someone who (as my grandmother would say) "ain't been nowhere or seen anything."

I argue all the time that the basis of any art is engagement. Like Rothko and his idea of experiencing his paintings. If you go to the Philips Gallery and look for the four Mark Rothko paintings they have on display, you will find them in a smallish room with rather atmospheric lighting. A sign on the wall says that to protect the experience no more than eight viewers are allowed in the room at one time. That is exactly the way he wanted them displayed. He was consumed by how the paintings would "live" once they left his studio. And he believed that this "life" came from the way people would see and engage with his work. I think he was right. Unfortunately, not all artists can control the environment in which their work will be seen, and perhaps wouldn't want to, but Rothko was trying to do something more than show you his

paintings. He wanted you to be taken with them, delve into them, dream through the colors and the glow of the saturation and emerge a different person. It is not to be simply looking at a painting; it is to be an experience of a painting. And an individual one at that.

So, you can imagine my delight when one of the members of our Board of Directors came up with the idea of offering extraordinary experiences to people as a fundraising event for DCAC. Ways to raise money for the organization is a hot topic at Board meetings, but almost every idea we come up with has been done over and over. The idea of an Art Auction always rears its head, but I am not alone in fierce opposition to auctioning art. We all think (biased, I know) that DCAC is different than all other organizations and that we should be doing something never seen before, something daring, something exciting, something new! So when Buck Downs started describing what he was dreaming of, an auction of unrepeatable artistic experiences, we jumped to the ready and began trying to figure out just what this could be.

There would need to be an array of experiences, different in scope, things that not everyone could easily do, and suitable for various group sizes. It should be part live auction and part silent auction. It should be a party with great hors d'oeuvres and drinks. It should be an experience in itself, in a place that would be known by most but seen by few. It should have a great dj, a dynamic emcee and a commanding auctioneer. Once we had figured all of that out, the rest was easy (I jest). But we have managed all of those things in our newest bi-annual fundraising event: The Experience Auction.

Now I don't want you to think I've been leading you down the path, here. I mean every word I wrote above about how much I believe in the value of experience. I think that life is nothing more than a long string of experiences, some wonderful, some not so much. But friend, we have gathered some of the most extraordinary experiences that one could imagine for your bidding pleasure at this event. Each and every one a memorable and unrepeatable experience for you, your family, and in some cases, lots of your friends. You owe it to yourself to come and simply experience the first ever live auction of artistic experiences in Washington, DC, maybe even the world.

The festivities will be in the historic Kennedy-Warren Club, an art deco Washington landmark on Thursday, May 12 from 7 – 10 pm. Everything about this event can be found online at www.theexperienceauction.com. There you can see the descriptions of every experience to be offered, you can read more about the concept, and most importantly, buy tickets (tickets start at only \$35 for DCAC members). If you've been waiting for a really unique event to come along so you could support your favorite cutting-edge arts center, then your day has arrived.

I am hoping that you are getting as excited about this idea as we are. To be able to offer something so personal, so gratifying, and yet so fleeting gives us great pride. I hope you will join us at this one-of-a-kind event and support DCAC by bidding on some one-of-a-kind experiences. In the words of that visionary, Buck Downs: "The things you get to do are better than stuff you have to have."

I'll see you there.

B Stanley,
Executive Director