

An Elegant Process Folios

In his book *The Elegant Universe*, Brian Greene describes a significant contradiction in the field of physics that has been conveniently ignored for years: The two major philosophical foundations of physics—Einstein’s theory of general relativity and the theory of Quantum Mechanics—are essentially incompatible. Greene notes that there’s no deception or conspiracy to deny this incompatibility. Simply put, those working on big, cosmic problems use Mr. Einstein’s theory effectively; the other theory suits those working on the very small sub-particle problems. Each camp is thoroughly convinced of the excellence of its own theory and only grudgingly acknowledges the other theory. The fact is that neither theory effectively addresses all contexts.

There’s little motivation to reconcile the contradictions, except for scientists like Greene and others who are working in increasingly complex arenas of physics that can’t be tidily tucked into either theory. They require a more thorough and compatible way of thinking and working. What Greene offers in *The Elegant Universe* is not an alternative or new improved theory, but a unifying principle. He not only addresses the disconnect between the two camps but, more importantly, offers new avenues of thinking, working and understanding the universe.

In our own arena of the arts, there has been a similar contradiction over the years. It may not be rocket science, but it’s just as conflicted and stultifying as Brian Greene’s example in physics. Every arts organization is expected to produce and connect art that is unique and particular to that artist(s) and organization. Yet there is also an expectation that each organization look and function a prescribed way, regardless of size, scale, discipline, environment or working format. There is a profound belief that the same organizational approaches that work for the very large-budget institutions can be scaled to work for all. The fact that the traditional organizational model hasn’t been working well for the large-budget organizations for more than 20 years has forced some in the traditional camp to grudgingly acknowledge that there are *alternative* formats of working. Still, like physicists working at opposite sides of the theoretical debate, while they may recognize that other formats are possible they still cling to the belief that their approach, in spite of its challenges, just needs minor adjustment or the provision for ‘exceptions’ to be workable.

Just as in physics, what works in one situation doesn't apply in another, and also like physics, our world has grown far more complex. We in the arts need a more effective and unified set of working principles to draw upon. We need appropriate processes that are unique to the arts professionals and organizations using them.

AAR's work focuses less on what *doesn't* work from big to small and in between and more on what *does* work. What is constant, what is consistent, what is real and true regardless of size, scale, format or foibles? What we have learned is: If an arts organization of any kind is successful, it is because of what occurs on stage when the curtain goes up, or in the gallery when the doors open. Not really such a revelation—except for the fact that the curtain going up is the result of an extraordinary series and sequence of actions, interactions, decisions, inventions, revisions, solutions, discoveries, and resolutions. All of these are shaped and driven by a disparate group of arts professionals with shared vision, passion, commitment, trust, discipline, craft, precision, acute attention to time, money and detail, and a degree and intensity of collaboration that business gurus endlessly talk about, rarely achieve and never fully understand. This amazing amalgam of activity that we broadly refer to as *the artistic process* is the reason that any artist, or arts organization, or program or body of work, *works*.

The artistic process is the unifying principle in the arts. The proof is manifold: It is the element that reconciles how all arts expressions, visions, values, sizes, shapes, forms and formats are integrally connected as a field and appropriately supportive of each other yet unique, self-referencing and undeniably diverse. It is how each organization can be a whole, productive and healthy entity for the artists and everyone involved. It works large, small and every scale in between.

The challenge is how the professional arts leadership of each arts entity can bring the artistic process, in all of its richness, complexity and effectiveness, to the center of the organization. How do you help all of your partners, both professional and community, understand your particular process and how to use it to best advantage? How do you transfer something so organic, ephemeral and instinctive in the studio to practical application throughout the organization? How do you withstand external pressure dismissing the artistic process while simultaneously insisting on *industry standards, best practices, branding* or whatever current business fad is being touted as the solution?

The Folios that follow, beginning with Folio One: The Process Driven Organization, describes the most elegant concept and process that we know – the artistic process. In sequence and individually the Folios describe the practical application of the artistic process to virtually everything an arts organization does in support of its vision, mission and body of work. For many years, the artistic process has served as centerpiece for the way the AAR Team approaches all of our work with arts professionals and their professional and community partners. No matter how much we learn about the artistic process and the many ways that it can inform an arts organization's life, there are constantly new dimensions being revealed. As we continue to expand our understanding and experiences in the field we will be updating these Folios and providing additional insights into our work through our Special Reports and essays. We welcome you to follow our work and for more information on ARTS Action Research please check our website at www.artsaction.com.