

INTRODUCTION

More than 100 cultural journalists from around the country convened in May in the San Francisco area for a reunion and symposium of current and former fellows of the National Arts Journalism Program. They were joined by arts journalists and news executives from *The Washington Post*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio and several alternative-weekly publications, as well as concerned artists, scholars and funders. After a weekend of ardent discussions and focused working sessions on the future of arts journalism, the symposium participants left inspired and rejuvenated, but not blindly optimistic.

Even as the arts in America blossom in record quantity and endless variety, the field of arts journalism has suffered a painful retrenchment over the past several years. Cultural desks have been hit as badly as any news department during the recent period of media-industry downsizing. Publications large and small are replacing staff arts writers with freelancers at an accelerating pace, depriving their readers of a consistent voice on the arts page (too often, it is only a single page). The demands of reporting on conflicts abroad and on homeland security have pushed arts criticism and reporting to the margins. National Public Radio, *The New York Times* and other major media outlets have initiated structural changes in their cultural coverage, leading to shake-ups of mission and uncertainly among arts staffs. Experienced arts writers are encouraged to take euphemistically titled “early retirement” packages. Newspaper chains are eliminating local staff critics to exploit “economies of scale” by feeding a single writer’s pieces to a network of affiliates. And the financial belt-tightening often leads to the slashing of coverage of books and classical music—subjects that draw limited advertising support. Arts writers and editors are struggling with the thankless task of making a quantitative, bottom-line-driven case for their beats. Alarm bells are ringing.

And yet, the story in arts journalism is not all doom and gloom. Signs of creativity and ambition are everywhere. Arts journalists are constantly reasserting their indispensability and adaptability—whether in the form of a newsmagazine exposé of a film studio’s manufacturing of false quotes to hype blockbusters, the flourishing exploration of the intersection of art and politics, or innovative approaches to arts coverage on web sites such as *Andante.com* and *ArtsJournal.com*. Coverage of the arts remains vital to communities, business, recreation and intellectual development, even more so during this time of national reassessment and introspection. In short: the chronicling of culture strikes at the core mission of every news publication.

These transcripts illuminate the tensions in arts journalism, but also the opportunities for growth and invention. The first two panels, which took place on May 10, 2002 at the University of California/Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, featured members of

San Francisco's artistic vanguard discussing media coverage of their art forms and the perspectives of top executives in the newspaper, magazine, radio and online journalism fields on trends in various corners of the news industry. The third panel, on recent turmoil in book coverage, took place May 11 at San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel, and featured literary journalists, authors and book-industry experts.

In publishing these transcripts, the editors would like to thank the moderators and participants in these panels, the Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, and The Pew Charitable Trusts for their continued support of the work of the National Arts Journalism Program and its fellows.

The Editors