

Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts MAPP International Productions

The Innovators

Founded in 1994, **MAPP International Productions (MAPP)** helps individual artists create, premiere and tour performing arts projects. Over the three to four years it often takes to move a project from its conceptual stages to full production, MAPP provides artists with a range of services, including managing schedules and budgets; securing grants, commissions and residencies; arranging and marketing performances and community engagement activities; and documenting work. MAPP has developed 25 multidisciplinary projects; produced more than 50 tours; and instituted international exchanges and partnerships. The organization has an annual budget of \$825,000.

The Innovation

MAPP developed the *Cultural Investor Program (CIP)* to promote interaction between individual artists and the public, with the aim of generating new resources for MAPP and its artists. Contrary to traditional art patronage models based on a “ladder of engagement” where the objective is to move patrons up the ladder, MAPP envisions *CIP* will operate as “interwoven loops of engagement that are multidirectional, iterative and highly personal.” Engagement activities will take place online and in live events through studio visits, reading groups, round tables and social gatherings. By taking part in a dynamic mix of activities, which open up artists’ processes of creation and discovery, patrons will be stimulated not only to engage but as MAPP says, “to invest in the work of contemporary artists as part of their lives.”



Top: David Rousseve’s *Saudade*. Photo by Jorge Vismara. Bottom: Artist David Rousseve meets MAPP Cultural Investors following his show, *Saudade* at Jacob’s Pillow in Lee, MA.

Starting Conditions

In 2006, MAPP changed from a for-profit to a not-for-profit structure. MAPP (formerly MultiArts Projects & Productions) wanted to enhance its flexibility, increase advocacy for artists, and connect more aggressively with the public. Why was this so important after more than a decade of distinguished success? Fundamentally, MAPP said, it was motivated by what appeared to be a continuing disconnect between the public and contemporary artists – particularly those whose work challenged conventional assumptions, ideas and practices. MAPP knew the organization needed direct resources, greater visibility, and stronger infrastructure to address this issue. MAPP was also interested in the new trends in direct relationship-building it saw in commerce and politics. How, MAPP wondered, could it use these techniques to enhance appreciation of, and support for, artists in contemporary society? With this question percolating, MAPP was accepted into the Innovation Lab in January 2009.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

Working with Lab facilitator Richard Evans, MAPP began a tenacious exploration of possibilities related to creative engagement and online fundraising. In Phase 1 of the Lab, an Innovation Team of staff, Board members, artists and consultants viewed a number of relevant websites and set up a wiki as a repository to share, review and comment on research and development materials. The Team also revisited the organization's mission, goals and core values. They were guided by one desire: "to enroll individuals into MAPP's value set and underlying vision of how artists might be more fully appreciated and their critical role in the world more deeply understood." The Team began thinking about reciprocity: in an ideal system, what promises would MAPP make to artists and patrons, and what promises would they, in return, make to MAPP?

According to Executive Director Ann Rosenthal, MAPP's Team came to the Intensive believing that technology was a promising pathway to deeper engagement by the audience. "We wanted to create a dynamic space," she says, "where individuals could interact with artists' creative processes, materials and activities, as well as with the artists themselves. We

viewed this project as strictly Internet-based...with the primary goal of generating financial support from the public for MAPP's operations as well as for specific artists' projects." Good use of media, the Team believed, would sustain audience interest in an artist's work from conception to production.

The Team's work during the Intensive was transformational. Quickly, the Team realized it wasn't simply talking about a web-based transaction that would stimulate financial support for projects; rather, it was after a whole new system of patronage and a concerted effort to open up the artist's entire process. The public would interact directly with artists throughout the arc of a project's life – via a combination of web-based and real-life events – during which time the public could ask questions, comment, see video, and meet others engaged in the work.

A second major development came at the end of the Intensive. Struggling with how to create a platform to support its ambition, the Team's technology experts urged MAPP not to invest in creating a platform from scratch; instead it could integrate different online functionalities by using several existing platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and

others, pulling MAPP's material on each site into its own unique online presence (akin to the technique known as "life-streaming"). By embedding these existing tools into its own website, MAPP could brand itself in new and powerful ways. By the end of the Intensive, the Team had turned its research into a set of goals and principal strategies, a detailed user profile, and a system of organized incentives and engagement steps that MAPP would facilitate for its new patrons.

Shifts in Assumptions

This work led to significant exploration of the hypotheses MAPP had going into the Lab. MAPP had come into the Lab process to explore how best to build public engagement in the process of developing artistic work. It knew it had to build a broader base of support. Because of its mission and history, MAPP started the Lab with a conception that put artists at the forefront of the project, driving patrons to engage with the artists' individual creative processes. In a seemingly subtle, yet actually significant shift, the Team realized the organization itself needed to be the center of the project, leading efforts "to bring a diverse community eager to share and support MAPP's curatorial vision and the artistic works that bring it to life."

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The experience affirmed MAPP’s early, but not-fully-tested, instincts that while the ultimate product was important, it was one more step in the engagement continuum. MAPP had long sensed and even lamented the detrimental effects of the country’s tendency to “commodify art.” “We came to a deeper understanding of how staying true to [our] mission requires us to nurture an educated public who values artists as creative thought leaders in our society.”

Recognizing that patrons would respond differently depending on their interests, MAPP soon realized it needed a gradual approach to deeper engagement – one that acknowledged the public’s inclination to become involved at different times and for different reasons throughout the life cycle of a project. At the same time, MAPP realized that no combination of on-line tools – no matter how well integrated – would provide the kind of engagement the organization sought. Technology alone could not meet the needs of a diverse audience, nor could it satisfy the goal of putting artists and audiences together in ways that would spur patronage of the artistic process. MAPP would have to provide both online and live experiences that continually reinforced each other throughout the artistic process. The shift convinced MAPP that it was working on something much larger, more complex, and more expansive than it had imagined. The upside was that MAPP now believed it could make a monumental difference in the way artists and audiences interacted. The downside was that, within the Lab’s roughly 12-month timeframe, MAPP could only begin to prototype its ideas. Full implementation would take longer. The output of the Lab, therefore, was not the *CIP* itself, but the master plan for it.

New Pathways to Mission

The *Cultural Investor Program* represents a dramatic new approach for MAPP to fulfill its mission of bridging the divide between contemporary artists and the public. Rosenthal says, “As we moved away from the idea of engagement solely through a greatly enhanced website to an integrated program of live events with artists and a robust and varied web presence... we transitioned from an emphasis on generating money to an emphasis on generating a supportive and sustainable community.” This approach, she says, “more accurately reflects MAPP’s identity as a nimble organization that is highly responsive to artists’ needs.” It is also a much more robust and organic system that offers flexibility for both artists and the public.

The Prototype

As MAPP’s understanding of the implications of its work evolved, the need for research and testing became imperative. With funds from the Lab, MAPP initiated three activities: a social-technographic survey of the current MAPP public, pilot cultivation events, and the master plan. During the survey phase, MAPP gathered information from over 2,000 existing constituents, as well as from audiences for current MAPP productions. MAPP wanted to understand how familiar its constituents were with interactive online programming, how willing they might be to interact with artists using social media, and what kind of online engagement would drive their participation. What MAPP learned added to the complexity of the project: There was no common denominator for how or when audiences became engaged; instead the organization saw a myriad of combinations. Further, audiences did not automatically

stay engaged of their own accord, and needed repeated prodding from MAPP to reinforce initial contacts. As a result, MAPP learned it would have to increase both the diversity and the rate of its contact with the public.

Not surprisingly, MAPP found as many questions as answers: How would the organization know the logical next step each cultural investor might take, and how could it use this information to communicate more strategically? How could it manage thousands of contacts from the audience? What incentives would be needed to keep patrons moving through the creative journey of the artist? How could the organization help artists manage this process, and how could it encourage them to open up their often private processes to the public? MAPP is continuing to collect data to answer these questions.

MAPP knows it still needs to refine the components of the program, including various kinds of live and online content, feedback and evaluation mechanisms, and systems for encouraging and collecting contributions. Because wider patterns of online participation suggest that no more than 1 percent of participants will be active creators of content, 9 percent intermittent contributors, and 90 percent people who read and listen (with these groups making donations in line with the depth of their engagement), MAPP suggests needing to build a pool of 15,000 ongoing contacts – yielding 1,500 active cultural investors – over the next five years to be successful. MAPP also knows that the program must involve not only the lead artists on a project at the outset, but the performers, designers and artistic collaborators as well.

Obstacles and Enablers

MAPP's deep experience in working with individual artists was a critical enabler of creative thinking. The organization's leaders are comfortable with research, process and multiple forms of engagement, and they are not wedded to a particular institutional perspective. Because of its history and its experience supporting diverse artists with different ways of working, MAPP was comfortable with the Lab's focus on adaptive capacity. The Lab Intensive was particularly generative for the organization, leading to its breakthrough thinking about the important relationship between live and online events, as well as its conscious understanding of how patronage linked to artistic process could overcome the barriers between artists and society. The primary obstacles MAPP faces are the complexity and cost of the full-scale implementation effort. The financial hurdles are high, and MAPP must address at least two critical questions: Should it partner with other contemporary producers and presenters in implementing the *Cultural Investor Program* in order to involve a larger critical mass of artists with whom individual investors could interact? And, how can MAPP best balance its commitment to developing new artists' projects with creating the necessary "slack" for its innovation – i.e. the resources and capacities necessary to support *CIP* and MAPP's new means of advocacy and public engagement?

The Impact

MAPP's master plan for *CIP* lays out an ambitious framework that affirms the program's potential impact. By developing direct relationships with artists, **public participants** would become more informed and dedicated, meet and connect with others who share their interests, and grow their personal and professional networks. **Artists** would receive greater financial support, better understand the impact of their work on a diverse international constituency, learn how to market both their processes and their work, and discover how to integrate technology into their creative practices. **MAPP** would achieve greater brand visibility and improve its ability to raise funds for its own operations. The **field** would have an important new model for creating engagement, and could learn from MAPP's careful documentation and testing of both the concepts and the assumptions embedded in the *Cultural Investor Program*.

According to Evans, *CIP* has potentially huge impact for audiences, individual artists, MAPP, and the field, that has yet to be fully tested. He says, "Among the organizations investigating new forms of engagement with the arts, MAPP is unusual in offering a systematized, replicable approach, centering on dialogue between multiple artists and individuals, and involving real-life as well as online activities."

MAPP profited immeasurably from its participation in the Lab, and from its work surveying audiences, piloting events, tracking participation, and evaluating activities in real time. While working to secure funds to bring *CIP* to scale, MAPP has incorporated the program into how it thinks about all of its endeavors. Now, as MAPP begins a relationship with an artist on a new project, the organization and the artist create a plan for engaging current cultural investors and attracting new ones. With each survey of its participants, MAPP reports that it sees indications of greater understanding of MAPP, and a growing interest in engaging with the organization and with artists in the process of creating work. According to MAPP, the organization's base of 50 patrons in early 2009 (prior to the Lab) has now grown to nearly 400 cultural investors who participate in the artistic process in diverse and meaningful ways.

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