



Artscape Turns 30

The venerable festival enters its fourth decade brimming with populism and newfound energy, thanks to its expansion into Station North. By Geoffrey Himes

It's too hot, too crowded, the parking is awful, but still we go every year. Because each time we're tempted to skip Artscape, we remember something special that happened at the last one, and we find ourselves heading down to Mount Royal Avenue once again.

traffic. Maybe we wandered into the Mount Royal Station Building just to get out of the heat and into the air conditioning, but we were so taken by the paintings that we started attending gallery openings in the fall. Maybe we were so tickled by the Art Car Parade that we went out and bought a glue gun and started attaching toys to that old car we were going to trade in for \$100. Maybe we bumped into an old Baltimore friend in the crowd, someone we hadn't seen in years, and, after an exchange of phone numbers, a friendship was rekindled. Maybe we were walking from the Main Stage to the Food Court and saw, out of the corner of our eye, a hand-carved wooden bowl in a woodworker's booth, a bowl that now sits on our living room table, urging us to go back to Artscape one more time to see what else we might discover.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR MAKING ARTSCAPE EVEN BETTER.

This year, July 15-17, is the 30th annual Artscape, and despite complaints and controversies, economic downturns and budget cuts, the festival is bigger and more popular than ever. It's a demonstration to the rest of the state that downtown Baltimore can be safe as well as fun. And it's one of the few events in Maryland where people of all races, all ages, and all lifestyles assemble in the same place and get a good look at one another.

"It's important for any city to have experiences where all kinds of people come together," says Clair Zamoiski Segal, who ran Artscape from 1987 through 2001. "It's important for us all to get out of our own neighborhoods, networks, and comfort zones and mix a little."

"Artscape's not that different from the Grand Prix, the City Fair, the Orioles, the Ravens—these big events are critical to a community shaping its idea of itself" says

more Cultural Alliance. "It draws a mix of people across all age groups, and they all see each other enjoying the same thing. That's a transforming experience."

Artscape calls itself "America's largest free arts festival." There may be larger arts festivals that are ticketed, and there may be larger free festivals that aren't dedicated solely to the arts, but there's no larger festival that's both free and arts-centered. And because it's free, it attracts an audience that more accurately reflects the demographics of Baltimore than Orioles games, the African American Festival, or the BSO. When you walk down Mount Royal Avenue during Artscape, you think, "Yes, this is what Baltimore looks like."

"The 'people watching' can be as good as anything on the stages or in the exhibits," says Bill Gilmore, the executive director of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts (BOPA), which puts on Artscape. "When people come to Artscape, a lot of them are willing to let it all hang out there in the way they dress and present themselves. That's Baltimore culture, too."

Though it's expensive to put on—the costs are upwards of \$700,000—Artscape has a positive economic impact on the city. In 2009, Artscape hired Forward Analytics of Pittsburgh to do an "Audience Research and Economic Impact Study" of the festival. The report found that 350,000 people attended that year's Artscape (47 percent from beyond the Baltimore metropolitan area, 10 percent from out of state) and 40 percent of attendees spent two or three days at the festival. Those visitors pumped \$25.97 million into Baltimore's economy—\$7.02 million had a direct impact and a further \$18.95 million had an indirect impact (hotels, restaurants, transportation, shopping). "Revenue created by 2009 Artscape," the report concluded, "more than offsets the public investment."

In ways that are harder to measure, the festival also helps local arts organizations build audiences. Because the festival is free, Artscape-goers are more likely to sample art forms they've never tried before. If they like something, maybe they'll



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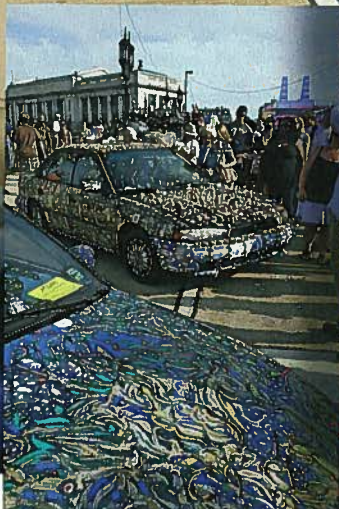
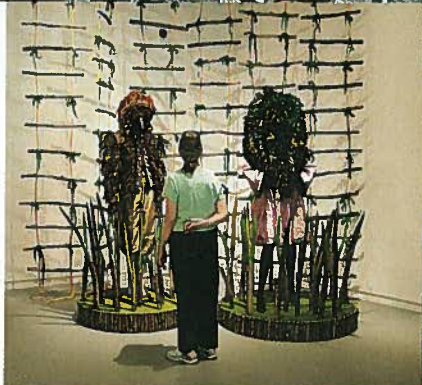
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Clockwise from top left: Listening to music near Train Station Building; street performers; handcrafted boots for sale; crowds along Station North; art cars; custom lamps at a craft booth; mixed-media installation by Meissa Webb.



see the same thing. “If you want to dabble in an art form you don’t know much about, you can try it without the barrier of admission,” says Kathy Hornig, the current Artscape director. “When the symphony throws open its doors and does a whole concert [during Artscape], that’s an experience a lot of people haven’t had before. There are a lot of people in Baltimore who would never have set foot in the Meyerhoff if not for Artscape.”

If Artscape’s populism is its greatest asset, it’s also a target for criticism. For some in the arts community, the phenomenon of working-class folks walking into a jazz concert, an art exhibition, or a theater performance

legends rather than the latest hip-hop act or indie-rock band offends certain hipsters.

“I like it precisely because it’s such a broad audience,” counters Laure Drogoul, the Baltimore conceptual artist and sculptor who has had several large pieces at Artscape over the years. “It’s not just an art audience; it’s also people going to the fair for the day. That’s the beauty of Artscape; it’s an every-person festival. It doesn’t hide art away in a sanctioned space. It’s a gazillion eyeballs looking at your work, and that’s a great thing for an artist.”

“You’d walk from an R&B concert where people were really excited,” recalls Gary Kachadourian, who was Artscape’s

with the same sense of excitement. I was always impressed that both those things were happening within 300 yards of each other.”

Artscape inherited its populist, state-fair-like ambience from the Baltimore City Fair, which began in 1970 under mayor Thomas J. D’Alessandro III. This was just two years after the 1968 riots that shattered Baltimore City and sent many in the middle class scurrying to the suburbs. First held in Charles Center, the City Fair was an attempt to bring people back downtown and restore some optimism to the city’s core. By 1973, the Fair had moved to the new city park around the Inner Har-

In much the same way that the ethnic festivals spun off from the City Fair to launch their own independent events, Baltimore's arts community struck out on its own. The Baltimore Arts Festival was held at Hopkins Plaza and then, like the City Fair, moved to the Inner Harbor, only to be displaced by Harborplace. In the late-1970s, there was no Baltimore Arts Festival, and the community searched for a new site and a new approach.

Fred Lazarus became president of the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in the fall of 1978, and he suggested re-

"It's not just an art audience; it's also people going to the fair for the day."

locating the festival. "There were space pressures downtown," Lazarus says. "I said, 'It's not right to have the artwork hanging on fences by the harbor; it should be in galleries. Why don't we bring the festival uptown?'"

It made sense. MICA was there; so were the Lyric and Theatre Project. The Meyerhoff was slated to open in 1982. It was a de facto arts district already, so why not call attention to that fact with an arts festival? The city agreed and decided to make it a free festival that included all the arts. They also settled on a new name: Artscape.

The first year featured music by Ray Charles, Ethel Ennis, and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. "I remember the first Artscape, when it was still in June," says Segal, "and it poured the entire weekend. When I was running Artscape, the biggest challenge was always the weather. If people didn't come, we wouldn't get the sponsorships we needed, so for three months, my best friends were the folks at the National Weather Service. We moved the date because June was usually rainy,

So if you're wondering why anyone would schedule an outdoor festival in Baltimore on the hottest weekend of the year, that's the reason. That and the fact that MICA and the University of Baltimore couldn't let the festival use its buildings and facilities if Artscape was held during the school year or right after.

The big challenge for Gilmore, over the years, has been to broaden the scope of the festival. With an eye and ear toward diversity, this year's musical acts include an *American Idol* winner (Fantasia), a Hasidic reggae rapper (Matisyahu), a ska band (The Pietasters), and a blues/hip-hop group (G. Love and Special Sauce).

Pop music, jazz, painting, sculpture, and literature have always been prominently featured, but classical music and other genres—like film, theater, and outsider-art—were underrepresented. "When we started, for example, the Meyerhoff was dark during Artscape," Gilmore recalls. "They were afraid people were going to spill snow cones on the carpet. At first, we convinced them to open up for backstage tours. Then, they agreed to have chamber music in the lobby. When they did the chamber music, it was a watershed moment, because they saw their lobby filled with all kinds of people, young and old, listening to chamber music. That convinced them to book a regular Friday-night, ticketed event during Artscape and also a free Saturday afternoon show."

One of Gilmore's most crucial decisions was expanding the festival up Charles Street to North Avenue in 2008. It was a risk, but it was a gamble Gilmore was willing to take, because the arts scene was buzzing in that Station North area. Some young artists had already launched the Whartscape Festival as a satirical poke at Artscape. Gilmore sat down and talked to the Whartscape organizers as well as the folks at the Everyman Theatre, The Charles Theatre, and Penn Station. "The key was early communication and not making a final decision until we had 100 percent—well, 99 percent—buy-in from the local businesses," says Gilmore.

sea of people. If you had said 10 years ago that we should have Artscape activities at Charles Street and North Avenue, people would have thought you were crazy, but now it seems a perfectly natural idea. That area has changed that much that fast."

"Just as the City Fair ultimately gave birth to the Inner Harbor," notes Haragan, "Artscape is giving birth to Station North by allowing people to come in and reimagine an area they thought was dead. You'll always get some short-sighted resistance. Little Italy tried to kill the Inner Harbor because they thought it would steal their business away, which is funny because now they couldn't live without it."

Because this year is the 30th Artscape, the semi-official theme will be "1982." Some, though not all, of the music and visual displays will refer to 1982 by recycling and rearranging the sounds and motifs of that year. The carnival booths lining the Midway on the Charles Street Bridge will do the same. Like 1982, 2011 finds the economy still mired in a recession. But recent budget cuts won't affect the number of activities, Gilmore promises; most of the money will be saved in backstage cost cutting. There won't be a printed program this year, and there won't be video screens on the big stage, but otherwise the cuts shouldn't be visible to the audience.

Of course, the best moments at Artscape are often the ones that were never planned. As an example, Kathy Hornig cites a 2006 concert by the rock band Secret Machines that was threatened by a sudden downpour. "We kept going," she recalls, "because there wasn't any lightning, and instead of dampening the party, the storm really got the party going. People were dancing in the rain, and when it let up, this giant rainbow appeared over Mount Royal Avenue. That's the kind of special effect you can't buy." ■

GEOFFREY HIMES is an occasional contributor to Baltimore.

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