Editorial: Distractions

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A recent email thanking us for providing coverage of the vast arts scene in Vermont was a welcome reminder that we are in dire need of the distraction of culture.

Each week, in Vermont Arts, Editor Jim Lowe and his team of writers bring us inside a treasure trove of performance and visual arts from around the state. Lowe, who has been working for the newspapers now for four decades, will tell you how much it has grown, evolved and helped to reshape Vermont.

We need the arts.

Presently, our lives can feel defined by division, suspicion and anger. But that is why we need for our lives to be enriched and energized.

Yes, there are bills to pay, upcoming elections to debate, various institutions to defend, and communities struggling to find common ground. Why devote time, attention or public resources to museums, theaters, orchestras, galleries, schools, artists, and cultural organizations?

Because the arts are not an escape from civic life. They are one of the places where civic life happens.

Art gives people a way to see one another more clearly. A song can preserve a community's memory. A play can place an unfamiliar experience in front of an audience and make it personal. A painting can challenge assumptions without delivering a political speech. A novel or poem can ask readers to inhabit the mind of someone whose background, beliefs or circumstances are entirely different from their own.

That capacity matters enormously.

Democracy depends not only on laws and elections but also on our ability to recognize the humanity of people with whom we disagree. The arts can create precisely those encounters. They invite us to listen, observe, imagine and sometimes simply sit with hard issues and topics. They remind us that human beings cannot always be reduced to political labels, social media arguments, or partisan identities.

That's why supporting organizations and individuals who support the arts is particularly important right now. Across Vermont, we know it well. From top to bottom, Vermont has a thriving arts community, and for that, we should all feel very fortunate. It's not true everywhere.

Cultural institutions are facing financial pressure, political hostility, and declining public support. The consequences of those factors extend far beyond the arts community. It can mean job losses, removing gathering places, or depriving audiences of slices of culture or students of opportunities to develop creativity, discipline and confidence.

Lowe will tell you the arts strengthen the habit of participation. They bring volunteers together, create audiences, encourage mentorship, and give people reasons to gather in person rather than retreat into increasingly isolated digital worlds. In a healthy democracy, those relationships matter.

Critics of the arts will say some art is harmful and instigates polarization and fuels the political fires. That's an ignorant excuse to make every attempt to silence those whose opinions and expressions do not match our own. That is censorship.

Supporting the arts does not require agreeing with every artist, institution or work of art. In fact, meaningful support actually requires accepting disagreement. A society committed to artistic freedom must tolerate art that challenges its assumptions, unsettles its sensibilities, and occasionally makes us really uncomfortable.

That principle is especially important in this polarized era. If we support artistic expression only when it confirms what we already believe, we are not really supporting the arts. We are supporting ourselves and our echo chambers.

But there is also an economic argument. Artists, cultural institutions and creative businesses contribute to local economies, attract visitors and help communities develop distinctive identities. (You can point to several venues around Vermont that will provide the receipts that creative economies can work and thrive.)

The value of the arts cannot be measured entirely in dollars — and should not be. Some of the most important returns are intangible: curiosity, empathy, imagination, memory and connection. Those qualities are not soft alternatives to the serious work of citizenship. They help make that work possible.

We do not have to agree about politics to agree that children deserve opportunities to create, that communities deserve places to gather, and that artists deserve the freedom to make their work.

We can also disagree about which institutions deserve funding while still recognizing that a society without a vibrant cultural life would be poorer in every meaningful sense.

The question before us is not whether the arts can solve our divisions. They cannot. A painting will not repair a broken institution, and a concert or a play will not settle any political argument.

But the arts can help create the right conditions in which people are willing to listen to one another again. That is something we badly need.

As our kind note writer explained, “Public discourse encourages Americans to see opponents as enemies; supporting the people and organizations that keep the arts alive is an investment in something larger than entertainment. Thank you for all you are doing to provide space for community and the possibility of understanding.”

The arts do not ask us to agree. They ask us to see, hear, feel and imagine. Every arts venue that gives us a reason to gather, listen, imagine and feel something together is worth protecting.