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Tight economy puts squeeze on arts organizations

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Diane Haithman. *Los Angeles Times*, 7 de noviembre de 2008

Closures, layoffs and downsizing are the order of the day as the downturn affects orchestras, museums and theater companies.

When it comes to his future arts giving in today's economy, even Eli Broad, perhaps Los Angeles' most generous arts supporter, is looking at the bottom line.

"The value of the Broad Foundation is down 18%," says Broad, who can count among his latest contributions \$56 million for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Broad Contemporary Art Museum, \$10 million to the new Broad Stage at Santa Monica College and \$6 million for Los Angeles Opera's coming production of Wagner's epic "Ring" cycle.

"Let me say this: It can't be business as usual for the next several years."

FOR THE RECORD:

Economy and the arts: A article in Friday's Section A about economic problems in the arts said that an exhibition of Dan Graham's work scheduled to appear early next year at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary had been moved to the museum's Grand Avenue building and postponed to February 2010. The show will open on Grand Avenue in February 2009. —

Arts organizations throughout Southern California are scrambling in the face of declining ticket sales and donor contributions. This week brought news of layoffs and concert cancellations by the Pasadena Symphony and of the possible collapse of Opera Pacific, Orange County's only professional opera company.

Jason Alexander, artistic director of Reprise Theatre Company, said that his organization, which presents Broadway musical revivals, had seen a 15% to 25% decline in its subscriber base over the last several years. "Everything is on the table," Alexander said. "We are radically rethinking not only the kinds of productions that we want to do next but the very structure of our organization.

"We're all going after the same pool of major individual donors, corporate donors

and grants. When the pool really gets dry and everybody's trying to jump in, somebody's going to land in the shallow end."

At Southern California's art museums, the most drastic steps have been taken by the Museum of Contemporary Art -- a privately supported institution that runs on about \$21 million a year. MOCA will close the Geffen Contemporary, a warehouse-like annex in Little Tokyo, for six months beginning Jan. 6.

A large exhibition of artist Dan Graham's work that was to appear there early next year will be moved to the museum's Grand Avenue building and postponed to February 2010. And three shows planned for the Grand Avenue site -- featuring the work of artists Luisa Lambri and Drew Heitzler and the architectural firm Morphosis -- will be moved to later slots.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which operates on an annual budget of about \$60 million from public and private sources, enacted a hiring freeze about three weeks ago. Attendance is up, thanks in part to a popular exhibition of photographic portraits from Vanity Fair magazine. But revenue from membership fees has fallen about \$500,000 short of the \$8.6-million goal for the current fiscal year.

At the Autry National Center -- which encompasses the Museum of the American West, the Southwest Museum of the American Indian and the Institute for the Study of the American West, all on a \$14-million annual operating budget -- 15 positions have been eliminated. Some of them were unfilled, said Autry President John L. Gray, but 11 full- and part-time employees lost their jobs Tuesday, leaving 142 staff members.

"The positions eliminated were not related to the care and conservation of the Southwest Museum's building and collection," Gray said. "This was a preemptive move in anticipation of decreased attendance and giving to the Autry over the next couple of years."

And with donations down more than 10%, the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach has cut its budget from \$4.5 million to \$4 million, partly by reducing staff. Also gone is "Orange Crush," a monthly indie-rock concert program at the museum.

Broad, a founding trustee of MOCA and a board member at LACMA, said that, in order to survive the recession, museums will have to continue to reduce their workforces and overheads as well as acquisitions. In addition, he said, the museum world must "become more populist" in what it presents to the public and markets to cultural tourists. He pointed to the economic boost LACMA received from its popular Van Gogh and King Tut shows.

Southern California's theaters are equally nervous, although none has yet experienced the difficulties of Opera Pacific, which has presented performances at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa for more than two decades. Citing a lack of deep-pocketed donors, it announced Tuesday that it had canceled the two remaining productions of its 2008-09 season, laid off all but two members of its staff and put its Santa Ana headquarters on the market to settle its

debts.

Gilbert Cates, producing director of Westwood's Geffen Playhouse, predicted that, because most performing arts organizations must commit to their season schedules months in advance, Southland theatergoers probably wouldn't see the full force of the economic downturn reflected onstage until the 2009-10 season -- as a sort of aftershock to the current quake.

"For the Geffen, 60% of our revenue is ticket sales, but the rest is donations, from individuals and corporations," Cates said. "One day a donor has \$2 billion, the next day, you have \$800 million. That's still a lot of money, but is that going to have an impact on a \$450,000 donation?"

Center Theatre Group, which oversees the Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas theaters and the Mark Taper Forum, recently announced a recession-minded program that makes available 100,000 tickets at \$20 for all performances at the three venues for the 2008-09 season.

Sheldon Epps, artistic director of the Pasadena Playhouse, foresees more partnerships between small and large arts groups, such as sharing staff and marketing resources. Epps said most theaters include on their schedules one or two "TBA" productions, and that will allow some to opt for less-expensive shows -- smaller casts or less elaborate staging, for example -- if necessary.

As is the case for many ballet companies, its annual "Nutcracker" is the "bread and butter" of Los Angeles Ballet, said co-artistic director Thordal Christensen, that will help fund other productions throughout the year. What will it mean to the company that this year the economy has gone south for the holidays?

Christensen said "Nutcracker" ticket sales are up 15% from last year. Still, he said, the 30-member company is exploring various kinds of family and group packages and promotional partnerships with other organizations. For example, company members presented a pas de deux as part of the Geffen Playhouse's Family Fun Day this fall.

"We have to work together to help each other," he said.