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Dancing Across Borders

This week my colleague in New York, Karen Marta, attended a screening of *Dancing Across Borders*, Anne Bass's new documentary, which opens today in Manhattan. She described how the dance patron and philanthropist had single-handedly changed not only the life of a young Cambodian boy she brought to study ballet in New York, but that of his entire family.

Bass said in an interview about the documentary in *New York Magazine* that she "just couldn't get his performance out of [her] head" after she saw Sokvannara Sar, known to everyone as "Sy," perform a traditional Cambodian dance in Angkor Wat on a trip with the [World Monuments Fund](#) in 2000. She eventually decided to bring the sixteen-year-old to New York City where she helped him to be admitted into the [School of American Ballet](#). His parents, who had depended on him to help the family to survive, never dreamed that their son would go to America to become a ballet dancer. After years of rigorous training in New York, Sy was invited by his teacher [Peter Boal](#) to join the company at [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#), where Boal is now the artistic director. Bass videoed the years of extreme physical demands of a dance form that the boy neither initially understood nor particularly seemed to like and these videos became the basis for her documentary, which is finally about the devotion of both patron and protégé to art. I kept thinking about something Alfred H. Barr (the first Director of MoMA) had written in his introduction to one of my favorite books, Peggy Guggenheim's memoir [Out of this Century: Confessions of an Art Addict](#):

...a patron is not simply a collector who gathers works of art for his own pleasure, or a philanthropist who helps artists or founds a public museum, but a person who feels responsibility towards both art and the artists together and has the means and will to act upon this feeling.

Supporting the arts has always been, and is perhaps inherently, elitist on some level. [Kevin Salatino](#) once told me a story about [Philippe de Montebello](#) who when asked by a young boy on a school group at the [Metropolitan Museum](#) if museums were elitist, knelt down and said "yes, and now that you're here you are too. We're all elitist." The current argument about private and public investment in the arts centers on the potential for serving social and economic goals, but the reality is that many patrons support the arts for their own social and economic interests and that is a part of philanthropy. Stories like Anne Bass' reveal another personal and visionary side of what compels patronage.