



Community-Based Arts Organizations

A NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY

by Ron Chew



**Animating
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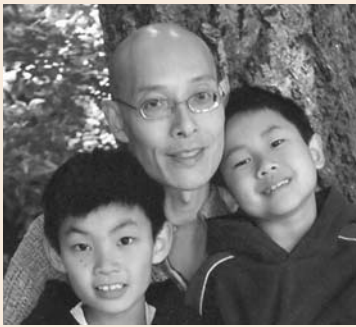
This essay was developed for and supported by the Exemplar Program, a program of Americans for the Arts, in collaboration with the LarsonAllen LLC, and funded by The Ford Foundation.

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Amid changing demographics, a new political climate, technological advances, and globalization, small and mid-sized community-based arts organizations offer artistic excellence and innovation, astute leadership connected to community needs, and important institutional and engagement models for the arts field. This essay underscores the crucial contributions of this segment of cultural organizations in the cultural ecosystem and toward achieving healthy communities and a healthy democracy.



Ron Chew with his two sons,
Cian and Kino.

Ron Chew is principal of Chew Communications. He served as executive director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum from 1991-2007. Known as an innovator using cutting-edge presentations with a locally oriented emphasis, Chew helped redefine museums by melding cultural identity, civic participation, and museum programs into a new tool in the fight for social justice. He received the Ford Foundation Leadership for a Changing World award and was an honoree of the Association of American Museum's Centennial Honor Roll, which recognizes the top 100 people who support the profession and help make America's museums places of discovery, inspiration, joy, and life long learning. Prior to his role at the Wing Luke, Chew worked for 13 years as editor of the International Examiner, an acclaimed newspaper in Seattle's Chinatown-International District. There, he was instrumental in a larger movement to recognize the role of ethnic and neighborhood newspapers in anchoring healthy communities.

COMMUNITY-BASED ARTS ORGANIZATIONS: A NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY

by Ron Chew

In the arena of the arts, the ground has quietly shifted. Against a rapidly changing demographic landscape, shaped by recent immigration and increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, there is widespread acknowledgement that traditional European art forms like ballet, opera, and the symphony can no longer be considered the sole windows into a community's artistic soul and the sole measures of this country's creativity. Art, in its highest expression, appears in many places and takes many forms. Art emerges just as glowingly and powerfully at a Somali community center or a meeting of Native American basket-weavers, in an inner-city skateboard park, or in the songs of protesters at a street rally to support affordable housing.

A segment of arts organizations—once viewed as less attractive distant cousins to the “big boys”—has emerged at the center of this more expansive vision of the arts. These typically small and mid-sized arts organizations, often community-based in their mission or practice, provide a canvas for the works of emerging artists and are bustling laboratories of experimentation and innovation. The work of these organizations moves people to understand that art can be about more than engaging in an aesthetic experience. Art can also comfort in times of trouble, heal personal wounds, inspire community participation, and foster a more compassionate society.

Anan Ameri, founding director of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, says, “When people talk about art in this country, they usually talk about classical music and beautiful things behind glass. That’s what we’ve been told. But art can and should be used to mobilize people.”¹ Ralph Pena, artistic director of Ma-Yi Theater Company, an Asian American theater company in New York, agrees. “We have a moral imperative to see how we can make this a better world. If theater doesn’t hold out hope and an ideal of how we might live our lives, then it’s empty. I’m not interested in that kind of theater.”²

As this change in thinking has unfolded, a number of innovative arts and cultural organizations—inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and other frontline causes—have made it to national center stage. Many of these groups—let’s call them “community-based arts organizations” for lack of a more precise vocabulary—are



Filipino Youth Activities Drill Team performs at the grand opening of the Wing Luke Asian Museum's new facility, May, 2008. Photo by John Pai. Courtesy of Wing Luke Asian Museum.

located in impoverished and blighted neighborhoods seeking affirmation, rebirth, and a new sense of identity. Others work nationally as touring companies that practice community-based work in partnership with local organizations. Some are situated within colleges and universities, but extend their reach far beyond the campus setting. These arts organizations include people of color and other leaders with a deep commitment to diversity and who hold as fiercely to values of tolerance, equality, empowerment, and audience participation as they do to the pursuit of artistic excellence.

Holding to such values, these groups have established a finely tuned community-based artistic practice that is authentic, responsive, and contributes to larger social and civic goals. In the lexicon of the Rockefeller Foundation, which has supported these cause driven organizations for more than a decade, its work is about the practice of “assertive humanism,” arts and culture responding to contemporary social conditions.³

Diane Espaldon, a consultant with LarsonAllen, has worked with many of these community-based arts organizations over the past decade. Espaldon herself helped co-found Theater Mu, a Minneapolis-based Asian American performing arts organization, in the early '90s. “One of the things common to a lot of these groups is that they often have multiple agendas. It’s about arts meets cultural preservation, meets community building, meets business incubation, meets civic engagement, meets social justice. These groups come from a different

“It is a new era and time for public and private funders, civic leaders, and others to recognize their incredible value and invest in these organizations as core community institutions.”

—Barbara Schaffer Bacon, *Americans for the Arts*

artistic vision. Their work is already larger than the art itself. It’s not simply about ‘I’m an artist and I want to express myself.’ It’s about what it all adds up to. It’s an acknowledgement that the art is taking place in a larger context.”⁴

Observing these groups from the national vantage point of Americans for the Arts, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, who co-directs its Animating Democracy program, observes: “Individually and collectively, these organizations have come into their own. Often perceived as at the margins, they are, in fact, critical to the cultural ecosystem.”⁵

This essay examines how these once marginal groups have established themselves as a new center of gravity in the arts. These groups—boasting longstanding reputations for artistic excellence, innovation, and civic engagement—provide new operational models and leadership for the field. Their work is especially significant—and instructive now—in the context of this country’s changing demographics, new technological advances, globalization, and a changing political climate. “They offer the right assets to be supported at this moment in time in our communities and the country,” said Schaffer Bacon. “It is a new era and time for public and private funders, civic leaders, and others to recognize their incredible value and invest in these organizations as core community institutions.”⁶

THE EXEMPLARS

In 2007, leaders from community arts organizations that participated in the Exemplar Program and ARTOGRAPHY: Arts in a Changing America, both funded by the Ford Foundation (see sidebar), met in Chicago to share their experiences with one another and to talk about the future of their work as innovators and leaders in the arts field. The meeting was organized by Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, in cooperation with LarsonAllen LLP and LINC (Leveraging Investments

in Creativity), which administered the Exemplar and ARTOGRAPHY programs respectively.

The attendees discussed finding ways to articulate their theory of social change and stay true to their values in the face of dominant mainstream values. How, participants asked, do community-based organizations retain their grassroots practices, cultural traditions, and spirit of creative innovation? Osvaldo Sanchez, artistic director and curator at InSite, a program of public art based in San Diego, asked the gathering: “Is it our goal to fit in and be successful in this society or is our goal to transform society?”⁷

Norman Akers, artist and faculty member at the Institute of American Indian Arts, spoke about the challenges of being based in Santa Fe, a major tourist destination. When the Institute changed from a two-year to a four-year program, the students shifted their energies from creating products for the Santa Fe tourist market to engaging in “processes reflecting our own philosophies,” shifting the balance back to “maintaining our truth.”⁸

Feeling the power and influence of their collective history and current work, participants underscored the need for others, in their own communities and in the national arts arena, to understand the value of their contributions. Jordan Simmons, artistic director of the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, said, “Our folks at home need to see we exist in a broader field.”⁹ Simmons was referring to the larger community-based arts

One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida) by Javier Téllez (2005), supported by InSite, employed a human cannonball to explore spatial and mental borders in the context of San Diego-Tijuana. Here, David Smith is fired over the border between Mexico and the United States. Photo by Alfredo De Stéfano.



movement—impressively represented at the Chicago gathering but often invisible to the organization’s staff, board, and constituents.

“For years,” Diane Espaldon remarked, “many of the community-based arts organizations felt and were treated as though they were operating on the margins of the arts field, but, in fact, these organizations are at the leading edge. Community-based arts making is now mainstream.”¹⁰

Foundation-supported initiatives like the Exemplar Program and ARTOGRAPHY have helped to establish definitions and baselines for the field of small to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations whose work is grounded in community. “A lot of groups,” noted Espaldon, “have been doing this community-based work for a long time and now everybody is interested, so let’s put together some guideposts. Everything is community-based: well, what do you mean by that? What is this field? What is shared vocabulary? What is the foundational base? Where is this field going?”¹¹

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—Diane Espaldon, LarsonAllen

One great snapshot description of this field comes from a report written by Carol Atlas for Americans for the Arts on a 2005 convening of Exemplar organizations in Santa Fe. The report took a stab at answering the question, “What’s an Exemplar?”

“As value-based organizations, they are purposeful and have a sustained commitment to fundamental values related to cultural responsibility, ethical practices, and respectful relationships. They are groundbreakers; however, they remain firmly rooted while breaking ground. Attuned to significantly changing demographics, they honor both cultural legacies and future possibilities, understanding them as a continuum, not a contradiction. They often work in partnerships that cross silos and sectors to connect art organically with other areas

THE EXEMPLAR PROGRAM AND ARTOGRAPHY: ARTS AND A CHANGING AMERICA

Both the Exemplar Program and ARTOGRAPHY were supported by the Ford Foundation’s Arts and Culture program. The Exemplar Program provided support to a dozen leading edge organizations from two earlier Ford Foundation initiatives: Animating Democracy and the Working Capital Fund. Animating Democracy supports the linking of arts and civic engagement on contemporary issues. The Working Capital Fund, administered by LarsonAllen, supported mid-sized African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American arts groups in strengthening their organizational capacity and working capital. ARTOGRAPHY supports diverse arts organizations that connect innovative art making with 21st century U.S. population changes.

Exemplar Participants

Arte Público Press (Houston)
Cornerstone Theater Company (Los Angeles)
East Bay Center for the Performing Arts (Richmond, CA)
Institute of American Indian Arts (Santa Fe, NM)
Intermedia Arts (Minneapolis)
Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (Takoma Park, MD)
National Black Arts Festival (Atlanta)
National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago)
Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) (Los Angeles)
Sojourn Theatre (Portland, OR)
Urban Bush Women (Brooklyn, NY)
The Wing Luke Asian Museum (Seattle)

ARTOGRAPHY Participants

Appalshop (Whitesburg, KY)
Arab American National Museum (Dearborn, MI)
Chicago Public Art Group (Chicago)
Diaspora Vibe Gallery (Miami)
InSite (San Diego, CA)
Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (Old Town, ME)
Ma-Yi Theater Company (New York, NY)
Vietnamese Youth Development Center (San Francisco)
The Village of Arts and Humanities (Philadelphia)

such as health, community development, humanities, and social justice. They are multilingual in more ways than just language, and their social networks run broad and deep.”

ARTISTIC INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE

Grounded in these values, organizations such as those in the Exemplar and ARTOGRAPHY programs have made their mark artistically through a commitment to excellence and experimentation. They have pushed past aesthetic norms by innovating in both form and content, and have toiled assiduously to perfect strategies for community-based work. What’s more, the commitment to community values and engagement creates a self-generating cycle of creative thinking and innovation because of the dynamism of the process and the many players who move in and out of this kind of program work.

These groups have developed distinctive aesthetics that have been absorbed into their particular fields. Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, for example, has created a company that includes elders and unconventional body types, challenging what a professional dance company should look like. Dance Exchange continues to cross boundaries in what it calls “trans-domain” work. *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, an examination of the impact of genetic research through dance, is a recent example. Participating scientists found the collaboration so compelling that the makers of a science textbook have invited Dance Exchange to help creatively adapt it to convey science concepts in fresh ways.

These community-based arts organizations have merged art and activism around specific core social issues, as in the

A scene from the 2007 performance of *Los Illegals*, written by Michael John Garcés and directed by Shishir Kurup, part of Cornerstone Theater Company’s multi-year Justice Cycle project. Photo by John Luker.



case of Appalshop’s media arts and theater work. A multidisciplinary arts and education center, the organization has spent decades in rural Appalachia dealing with poverty and, more recently, the prison industrial complex.

The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) created a project of enormous scale and layered meaning called *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, a nearly one-mile-long mural depicting the untold histories of Los Angeles’ indigenous and immigrant populations. SPARC continues to innovate in mural making by advancing the use of digital technology through the Cesar Chavez Digital Lab.

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Cornerstone Theater Company’s multiyear theater cycles examine vast topics from many perspectives. Following its groundbreaking five-year Faith-based Theater Cycle, Cornerstone mounted a second major theater cycle on the topic of justice, inspiring new works such as the play *Los Illegals*, written by Michael John Garcés, the theater’s artistic director. This 2007 piece was created in collaboration with undocumented workers, their families, immigration lawyers, judges, and “others on the front line of the battle over illegal immigration.” Garcés met with hundreds of community members and spent many hours at work sites with day laborers. The moving bilingual production of *Los Illegals* featured 26 performers, including several day laborers and domestic workers.

The innovative work of these organizations has sometimes taken the form of national and international initiatives. In 2008, Urban Bush Women’s collaboration with Compagnie Jant-Bi of Senegal came to fruition in a 19-city tour of *Les écailles de la mémoire* (The scales of memory). This production, welcomed to critical acclaim, explored the visceral link between African Americans and Africans. It delved into the chasms and similarities between dancers living in a Muslim country and those from a predominantly Christian tradition—dancers linked by common ancestry, but separated by history, geography, and dance form.

Sojourn Theatre, a multi-ethnic ensemble-based company, produced three major new works in two years,



For Your Eyes Only, a piece by Elliot Durko Lynch, was featured as part of Naked Stages, a program designed to give artists space to build performance and production skills while creating a new performance art piece. Intermedia Arts © 2007.

experimenting with unique approaches to topic, setting, and civic engagement. *The War Project: 9 Acts of Determination* explored the question, “How as a nation do we decide what to kill and die for?” It earned Sojourn its second Best Ensemble of the Year Award from the Portland Civic Theatre Guild. *One Day*, a touring play

These community-based arts organizations have merged art and activism around specific core social issues.

about one 24-hour period in the life of an Oregonian, was created in partnership with the Portland Mayor’s office. Through *One Day*, Sojourn connected art and public policy, allowing residents to imagine the future they wanted for Portland. Citizen feedback became part of the mayor’s new vision plan guiding the city’s development over the next 15 to 20 years. *BUILT* took place

in three cities in 2008—Chicago; Hartford, Connecticut; and Portland, Oregon—and examined the challenges of housing, infrastructure, neighborhood cohesion, and equity. It did so through a site-specific traveling game-based dramaturgy that is half set performance and half improvised and facilitated interactivity.

A whole new generation of artists and organizations are expanding the universe of this sector.

In 2002, Intermedia Arts launched a multiyear multidisciplinary initiative—*Immigrant Status*—in response to the loss experienced by Minnesota’s immigrant community following the death of Senator Paul Wellstone. The project, which explored the impact of current policies and conditions on recent immigrants, sought to tackle important issues from different angles and to cultivate longer-term relationships. Another of its community engagement programs, *Espejos*, is an artist mentorship program designed to support development of emerging Latino and Latina artists. Participants, who were paired with mentors of the same discipline over a period of three to five months, received digital media training and worked on exhibitions and performances alongside their mentors.

While organizations such as these, with decades of history, continue to push the aesthetic envelope of community-based arts practice, a whole new generation of artists and organizations are expanding the universe of this sector. In addition to organizations as old as 30 years, many ranging from six to seven years old are deeply engaged with community building, rigorous aesthetics, and activism. Fulana, a New York-based video collective founded in 2000 by four Latina artists, is one example. Fulana uses parody, satire, and an aesthetic ranging “from cable-access kitsch to Telemundo tinsel” to create mock television commercials, music videos, and print advertisements. Its focus on popular culture delves into the nuances that bind Latino experiences. Thousands of miles away, Vicky Holt Takamine is founder and *kumu hula* (master teacher) of Pua Ali’i ‘Ilima, a school of traditional Hawai’ian dance. Holt Takamine seamlessly binds her cultural expertise and advocacy work on behalf of Hawai’ians, their cultural traditions, and the protection and preservation of the cultural and natural resources of Hawai’i.

HISTORICAL MARKERS

The coming of age of community-based arts organizations has sparked growing curiosity about its history. Much of the significant history—the juncture at which community-based artists and cultural workers began to establish the framework for the field—took place in the era following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although some documentation has been done, there are still significant artists and organizers who have yet to be interviewed. There are vital source documents still sitting in people’s basements and in office file cabinets, unattended and forgotten. Significant oral history and research projects lie in waiting.

Jan Cohen-Cruz, a scholar of activist and community-base performance art, has pointed to what she describes as “historical markers” in the field of activist community art. The Harlem Renaissance (1919–1929) was an “early context for various models of African American activist art,” she writes. In the 1930s, there was a grassroots amateur movement of “workers creating theater for workers,” inspired by the Russian Revolution. “The lid finally blew off in the tumultuous 1960s, when broad questioning of the status quo once again found expression in the arts,” she writes. In that era, “identity politics”—traditionally underrepresented and misrepresented groups coming together to express themselves—became “a central trope in activist art.” El Teatro Campesino was created in the 1960s as a political organizing tool for farm workers.¹⁴

Opportunities will abound to reassert the connection of the arts to community service, shedding new light on the constructive role of community-based arts organizations.

Co-authors Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, writing in *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, noted that President Roosevelt’s New Deal included arts initiatives such as the “commissioning of murals, orphanages, libraries, museums, and other public buildings” and support for “visual art, music, theater, writing, and history.” New Deal cultural programs gave “jobs to artists who could not hope to make a living in the private economy,” including writers like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, painters like Jackson Pollack, and theater artists like Burt Lancaster, then a circus performer. “It suggested the possibility of a permanent role for artists in community service.”¹⁵

In the 1970s and ‘80s, cultural democracy—a concept influenced by international exchanges with European groups—provided a guiding vision for grassroots artists and cultural workers in the U.S. “Cultural democracy is predicated on the idea that diverse cultures should be treated as essentially equal in multicultural societies,” Adams and Goldbard write. They said this concept has been “promising,” but most practical applications have been “half-hearted.”¹⁶

During this same period, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a massive federal jobs program, was crafted as a government response to high unemployment. The program helped launch the careers of many artists working in communities. CETA put artists to work in schools, housing projects, community centers, and social service agencies. “There is scarcely a community artist who was around in the mid-’70s who did not either hold a CETA job or work directly with someone who did,” Adams and Goldbard write. CETA was eliminated by the Reagan administration in 1982.¹⁷

If the U.S. economy stays in a period of protracted stagnation—as it did during the Great Depression of the 1930s or the prolonged recession of the 1970s—opportunities will abound to reassert the connection of the arts to community service, shedding new light on the constructive role of community-based arts organizations.

Marjorie Schwarzer, chair of the Department of Museum Studies at John F. Kennedy University in California, said the public “seeks solace in the arts during troubled times.” She noted, for example, that museum attendance rose during the Great Depression, the recession of the late 1970s, and after September 11, 2001. “Also, interestingly, private donations to museums increased,” she said.¹⁸

Vanessa Whang, director of programs for the California Council for the Humanities, said people turn to cultural arts centers in hard times. “Community-based cultural centers are places where people can still interact face-to-face in a specific setting,” she said. “I think cities that don’t recognize this will be ignoring this at their own peril, particularly in a difficult economy.”¹⁹

According to Schwarzer, government employment programs like the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s and CETA during the 1970s “had a direct and lasting influence on public access to the arts, and these kinds of programs hold as much promise today as they did in their day.” The government funds were directed not only to “obvious targets like mainstream museums in larger urban centers,” Schwarzer said, but also to smaller rural communities in states like Idaho and Oklahoma, which had previously lacked quality arts programs.²⁰

Community-based cultural organizations have been the much-sought-after partners to the established mainstream institutions. Despite this, they have often not benefited equitably in the allocation of funds to support their contribution to the work.

Ford Foundation programs such as IllumiNation and Future Aesthetics have invested in younger organizations that are advancing issues of new aesthetics, new generational leadership, and exercising first voice.¹² IllumiNation has supported indigenous artists and performers, encouraged entrepreneurship, and helped build networks between individuals and organizations. Future Aesthetics has helped artists working along the fringes, pushing the boundaries artistically, socially, and politically in literature, dance, music, theater, and media arts. Ford Foundation Arts and Culture Program Officer Roberta Uno describes “future aesthetics” as “the kind of art produced in this age of urbanization, technology and communications innovations, globalization, and new networks of community organizing and resistance. One vivid example of this kind of art is hip-hop.”¹³ Working in partnership with the Hip-Hop Theater Festival (Brooklyn, New York), Rennie Harris Puremovement (Philadelphia), Global Action Project (New York), Miami Light Project (Miami), La Peña Cultural Center (Berkeley, California), and Youth Speaks (San Francisco), Future Aesthetics has opened the doors for geographically, economically, and ethnically diverse emerging artists.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Community-based cultural organizations have thrived in the shifting demographic currents. Their missions and programs often address the influx of new populations with a keen understanding of the historical legacy of racial and cultural inequity. Over the past couple decades, they have been the much-sought-after partners to the established mainstream institutions because they provide knowledge of—and authentic relationships with—communities of color. Despite this, community-based groups have often not received the credit for the



In one of the most distressed communities in California, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts serves predominantly low-income youth of color with extensive artistic training opportunities in the performing arts and world cultures—traditional and contemporary. © East Bay Center for the Performing Arts

success of these partnerships or benefited equitably in the allocation of funds to support their contribution to the work.

Laura Zucker, executive director of the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, said Los Angeles County—the most populous county in the United States—provides insight about the creative possibilities that await many other communities as demographic shifts deepen around the country. In Los Angeles County, more than 47 percent of the population is Latino, 13 percent is Asian, nearly nine percent is African American—and only 29 percent is white. “We’ve entered the next phase,” Zucker said. “There’s such diversity. There are so many interactions. Now, many of the traditions are beginning to be shared. New hybrid art forms are being created through collaborations.”²¹

She pointed to a collaboration between Kayamanan Ng Lahi, a Philippine folk arts organization, and Danza Floricanto/USA, a Mexican folkloric group. The leaders of the two groups, both folklorists, discovered their shared history in the story of a Spanish galleon that had traveled between Manila and Acapulco. In 2003, the two groups presented *Acapulco to Manila: An Untold Pacific Rim Story*, a program of Filipino and Mexican folk dance, music, and storytelling “built around this cross-cultural current.”²²

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—Vanessa Whang, *California Council for the Humanities*

With the election of Barack Obama, the first person of color to ascend to the presidency, there is hope that Obama, once a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago, will understand the worth of community-based arts organizations.

“Community-based arts organizations can play a major role in making people understand the demographic shift and how it’s much more nuanced than simply black and white,” Vanessa Whang said. “President Obama personifies this. He has a white mother and a father from another land and grew up in Hawai’i. That’s what America is. We’re all mixed up. It’s time we were able to talk about it. As we evolve as a country, we can have a more nuanced conversation about culture.”²³

SETTING TRENDS THROUGH GLOBAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL REACH

Stretching the vision from the local to international has been a natural progression for community-based arts organizations. Artists and organizations of color often have a symbiotic relationship with other countries and cultures. Many arts and cultural activists in the U.S. retain a connection to the language and culture of their ancestral places. The online revolution has allowed community-based arts groups to overcome the separation of distance and share information and collaborate on programs across cyberspace. New audiences are within easy reach.

From its home base in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District community, the Wing Luke Asian Museum serves a local Asian and Pacific Islander population that is made up of well over 20 separate and distinct ethnic groups, each with its own unique history, language, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions. Nearly half of the Asian Pacific American population is immigrant.

“Opening our expanded home a few months ago,” says Beth Takekawa, executive director, “we’re just beginning

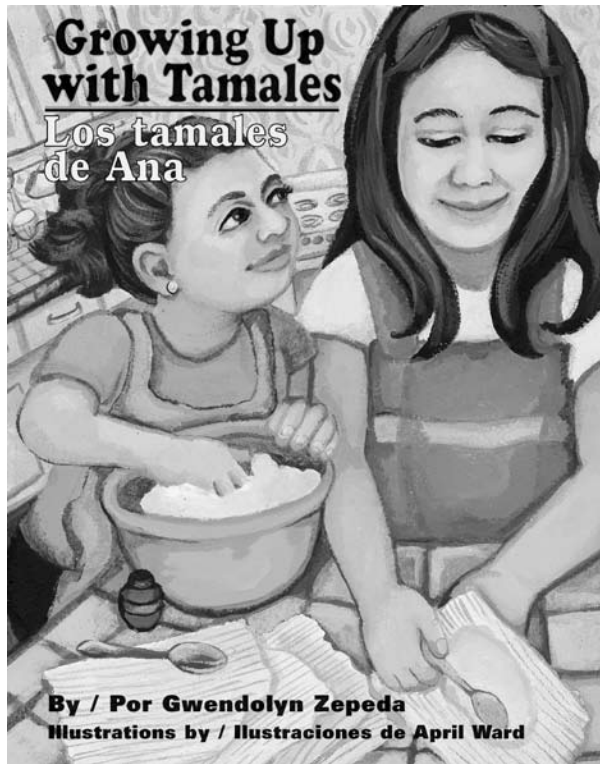
to explore our new programming horizons. Program innovations will emerge from our interactions with a broader slice of Asian Pacific American ethnic groups, from our new profile internationally, and from now being a more substantial force in presenting our historic neighborhood as well as Seattle and its region as a unique cultural and economic asset located on the Pacific Rim.”²⁴

The National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, established in 1987 in the Pilsen neighborhood, has now matured beyond its local community roots to more fully pursue its vision of *sin fronteras* or “without boundaries,” displaying art from both sides of the border. In a giant leap forward, the museum created *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present*, an exhibition that is making its way to 11 cities in the U.S. and Mexico, promoting significant cross-cultural dialogue and yielding a huge impact wherever it traveled. (See sidebar.)

Ralph Pena is a founding member of Ma-Yi Theater Company, which was born in 1989 out of the shared vision of politicized Filipino immigrant artists trained in street theater. He notes that “the majority population in this country is going to become the minority. What does that mean for our work? Asian American is not a monolith. There are many, many layers of ethnicity—you name it, we have it. It’s not a fixed point. What does it mean to be Asian American now? How do we address it? We need to tie it to what’s happening around the world.”²⁵

Seizing new technologies and delivery systems, community-based arts groups are applying their pioneering spirit to navigating the complex interplay of local, national, and international cultures.

Pena pointed out that Ma-Yi is doing research for a play set in the mines of South Africa and the Philippines, two regions linked by a history of colonialism. “Going to Africa opens your eyes,” he said. “We have to plug into a much larger dialogue for our community. We’ve always been stuck in these conversations about assimilation and integration—I understand how that emerged given our historic place in America—but the rest of the world isn’t discussing that anymore.”²⁶



Arte Público Press' Piñata Books fills a void in the literary market by publishing children's literature that authentically and realistically portrays themes, characters, and customs unique to U.S. Hispanic culture.

Seizing new technologies and delivery systems, community-based arts groups are applying their pioneering spirit to navigating the complex interplay of local, national, and international cultures. In the process, new creative forms and artistic investigations are emerging.

At the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF), Stephanie Hughley, executive producer, and Leatrice Ellzy, manager of artistic programming, agree that community-based arts organizations must create a new global perspective. "We have to understand that all around the world, we're all facing the same critical issues," said Hughley. "How do we preserve the environment? How do we deal with the injustice of poverty? Art has the potential to deal with the issues of humanity."²⁷

Ellzy said NBAF will be focusing on an Internet and new technology campaign to reach global audiences with the support of a grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. "We believe that technology levels the playing field. It's opened up the world between people. You can go on Facebook, for example, and press a button and communicate with another person anywhere. There are no

filters anymore. We can use this as an opportunity to build community and help other arts organizations too."²⁸

Arte Público Press, based at the University of Houston and described as "the creative part of the Latino Civil Rights Movement," publishes contemporary books as well as the lost literary history of Latinos in the U.S. Arte Público has also begun to harness the power of new technologies, an especially daunting undertaking for an independent publisher rooted in the traditionally underserved Latino community. In 2008, it launched *Latinoteca*, a new Web portal that pulls together written, audio, and visual information about the history and culture of Hispanics in the U.S. from many different sites. This new portal has helped thrust Arte Público forward into the digital era, a major challenge for small independent presses.

Marina Tristan, assistant director, has been at the organization for more than 22 years and has lived through many changes. In that span of time, Arte Público has grown from four to 15 full-time staff members and an equal number of part-time staff. "For us, one of the ways we're trying to be responsive to the changing demographics is by keeping up with technology and providing books in digital format," Tristan said. "I'm not interested in reading a book on the computer or a handheld device, but younger people are. Making books available to them is important. Right now, we're looking at Amazon's handheld reader, Kindle." At the same time, Tristan noted, wholesalers have been requesting digital copies of Arte Público Press books for the kindergarten to 12th grade market. "The challenge for us is that there's a huge difference between our resources and the multinational conglomerates that control not just publishing, but the media sector as well. We're dealing with the market consolidation of wholesalers and even book reviewers—the Walmartization of America. How do we stay viable when we can't spend a small fortune publishing a book?"²⁹

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES AND ADVANCEMENT

Even organizations with 20 to 30 years experience and national reputations continue to struggle to build staff, financial reserves, and systems that can support the quality and scope of programs to which they aspire. Heavy reliance on foundation support has put some in an untenable position for the long-term, especially with the dramatic economic downturn. The most mature organizations—those with strong track records of public

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICAN ART: Extending Community Nationwide

In 1987, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum opened its doors in a renovated boat craft shop. Firmly rooted in the Pilsen/Little Village neighborhood of Chicago, the museum positioned itself as a first voice advocate for Mexican arts and culture and a focal point of Chicago's growing Mexican community. The organization, a model of a highly successful community-based arts organization, has now extended its reach far beyond the neighborhood in which it was born.

Carlos Tortolero, president and the founder, started the museum by inviting five other teachers to a series of meetings at his house to develop the institution. "We were all teachers. Teachers are always planning, right? Lesson plans, always preparing—that's how teachers work. Nobody thought we could do it. When we were doing the original museum, people would say, 'They're just teachers.' It was such a dirty four-letter

in fact, a learning moment for the staff in strengthening the museum's civic agency as well as benefiting the community and the field. When the exhibition was launched in Chicago, dynamic public programs brought together in dialogue Mexican Americans and African Americans—the two largest ethnic groups in the country—using the art as catalyst. These civic engagement programs have served as a model for sites along the international tour.

Similarly, in the summer of 2008, "at a time when you scarcely heard a public debate on the immigration issue in the presidential campaign," the exhibition *A Declaration of Immigration* exercised the power of art to keep attention focused on the issue. The exhibition featured more than 80 artists from 20 countries and received extraordinary press coverage in 300 newspapers on six continents.

"Our goal is...to help create a strong network among Latino organizations and cultural organizations of color. We are institutions of kindred spirit and common purpose that have an important role in the changing demographics of this country."

word. People did not believe you could do an art museum in a working class community of color with a bunch of teachers."

The skeptics are now silent. On December 5, 2006, in recognition of its 20th anniversary, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum changed its name to the National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA). The name change signaled the status the museum has earned as the largest and leading Mexican cultural institution in the U.S. Its collection has grown to more than 6,000 items through donations of work and innovative acquisition strategies that engage the community. Landmark exhibitions have brought international attention and created models of civic engagement for the field. Commitment to museum education and in advancing culturally specific organizations has positioned the museum as a thought leader.

Two important exhibitions in recent years have put the museum on the map. The *African Presence in Mexico* tells the lost history of African contributions to Mexican culture, relating that history to contemporary relations in the U.S. As it makes its way on an 11-city North and Central American tour, Latino, African-American, and mainstream museums have welcomed the exhibition, including the Smithsonian Institution where, in 2009/2010, exhibition programs will provide a backdrop for dialogues on race. The *African Presence in Mexico* has been,

Founded as it is by teachers, the museum is particularly attuned to the fact that art is not even part of the curriculum in neighborhood public schools. In addition to school tours, the museum's Education Department conducts more than a dozen arts education programs for youth, such as the *Yollocalli Arts Reach* program, which offers afterschool arts education classes, and *WRTE Radio Arte*, an award-winning radio station. The department also creates and distributes bilingual education curriculum nationally.

NMMA is leading the field in other museum education efforts too, such as a teacher professional development program and a master plan to become the Center for Museum Education. The Center would develop peer education programs for teachers, librarians, and museum educators through a summer institute, curriculum writing seminars, and possibly an annual symposium focusing on museum cultural education practices. Finally, the museum's *Sor Juana Festival*—which celebrates the artistic, academic, and civic contributions that Mexican and Mexican American women have made to our lives—has expanded beyond Chicago to Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Milwaukee, and San Antonio.

As the NMMA advances on national and international fronts, it has not abandoned the people and needs of its own

Pilsen/Little Village community. In a neighborhood where many live below the poverty line and the high school dropout rate is one of the highest in the state, the museum chooses issues, programs, and curricula through which it can meet its mission and community goals. For example, the Día del Niño Family Festival, which draws on average 14,000 people a year, has focused on combating childhood obesity. Amazingly, museum admission continues to be free.

“One of the things that has always interested me about the arts is that people in the arts always say art is for everyone, but I don’t see that happening,” said Tortolero. “Our mission is about serving the people, and serving the people is about starting with the folks right across the street from us.”

Chicago is home to more than 1.3 million Mexicans, and the museum is deliberate in efforts to establish the Midwest as a national center for Mexican culture. It remains as committed as ever to providing a vital gallery space for Chicago-based Mexican artists, curated by community artists and young NMMA staff. Works by Chicago Mexican artists went on tour in the African Presence in Mexico exhibition, have been presented in the traveling Sor Juana Festivals, and have provided the soundtrack for the national bilingual curriculum with its extensive distribution.

The continuity and vision provided by Tortolero and Vice President Juana Guzmán have been crucial. Tortolero’s background in education has brought laser focus to the museum’s education agenda, and Guzman’s knowledge of Chicago’s cultural landscape from her tenure at the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and her economic development acumen has put the museum on solid ground. The museum also puts full stock in advancing new leadership and tapping the knowledge, enthusiasm, and expertise of young people. Eighty-five percent of its staff is Mexican and a majority of department heads are young Mexicans under age 40. Many grew up in the neighborhood and learned the ropes in the museum as high school interns or college docent educators. Young people are thrust into positions of great responsibility, but are given the guidance and tools to succeed.

In 2001, the museum tripled its space. With the creation of

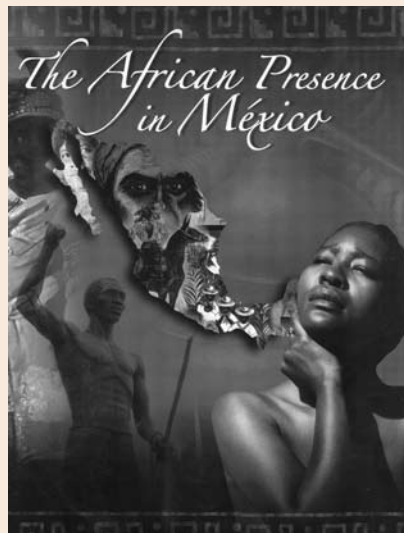
archival vaults in 2006, NMMA is on track to become a national center for the conservation of Latino art. In 2004, the Board of Trustees adopted a new strategic plan. Strong governance over the years has supported the museum’s efforts to establish an excellent donor and membership base and maintain a solid financial base, including an endowment just under a million dollars.

NMMA believes it is in everyone’s interest to have strong, diverse cultural organizations throughout the U.S. “Our goal is not to be larger than everyone else, but to help create a strong network among Latino organizations and cultural organiza-

tions of color. We are institutions of kindred spirit and common purpose that have an important role in the changing demographics of this country.” The museum has made it a priority to share its best practices with colleagues, creating programs such as the Wallace Mentorship Program. NMMA staff members mentor staff from ethnically based organizations such as Teatro Vision, the Arab American National Museum, the Wing Luke Asian Museum, and the Mexican Museum. They have built long-term relationships where information is shared on important operation and programming topics like capital drives and political strategies on immigration issues.

NMMA has found a smart balance in being both opportunistic but true to itself. The Wallace Foundation relation-

ship is a good example of creating win-win situations for itself, the field, and funder. However, Tortolero and Guzman have been vocal in challenging the museum field and funders where policy change is needed. Says Tortolero, “Our work is about political expression. We are saying we are part of the cultural fabric of this country, but we’ve been denied. We fight back and create our own institution that is about expressing who we are through our own eyes. That’s what first voice is about. We still are not getting our share.” While fortunate to receive consistent support from major national foundations, that support has come “only when there is a special diversity program, not when the NMMA applies based on its own needs and merits. If the NMMA is to fulfill its role as a national institution, it must secure funding on par with mainstream museums.”



The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present opened in February 2006 at the National Museum of Mexican Art, bringing together in dialogue African-American and Mexican-American communities.

and private support—are being tested. Many funders still favor special programs or initiatives rather than investments to stabilize operations or support steady institutional growth.

With decades of experience under their belts, leaders at these organizations have learned how to restructure their organizations, create better financial systems, market programs, integrate new technology, and build additional constituent followings so that their work will last into another generation. Because many have evolved from scrappy shoestring organizations into established ones, a few have even developed innovative institutional models and sophisticated approaches to sustainable management that may very well put them in better stead than some of the big guys.

Leaders at these organizations have developed innovative institutional models that may very well put them in better stead than some of the big guys.

Dance Exchange’s shared artistic leadership model breaks open the notion of a single artistic visionary leading a performance company, replacing that approach with multiple artistic leaders who share a philosophy, but who allow space for each person to contribute to the creative process. The Wing Luke’s culturally based growth model demonstrates that an organization and facility can grow and thrive based on support from within a culturally specific community. The National Mexican Museum of Art has repositioned itself as a national museum, with growing international reach, while maintaining a strong neighborhood base.

Sojourn Theatre’s nimble organizational model allows it to be opportunistic programmatically, working across the country, but also to maintain a core commitment to its base in Portland, Oregon. Michael Rohd, Sojourn Theatre’s artistic director, says, “Portland, Oregon is a wonderful place for us to come together and do this work that is at the heart of our collective artistic lives. But we don’t need to be a regional theater to do that. In fact, an attempt to sustain ourselves as a traditional institution puts at risk many of the nontraditional core impulses that motivate us.”³⁰

These organizational models reflect the values on which the groups were built—flexible, community grounded, and inclusive. The groups are guided by a community organizing outlook rather than a corporate perspective. At the same time, they continue to concoct fresh new arts initiatives.

Urban Bush Women, founded in 1984 by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, a visionary artistic director who is still with the organization, is a performance ensemble that seeks to “bring the untold and under-told histories and stories of disenfranchised people to light through dance.” In recent years, the organization has struggled with—and has overcome—major financial problems, allowing the group to move forward and reach new institutional plateaus. At the same time, the organization mounted a 20th anniversary event co-chaired by Eve Ensler. Both Zollar and Nora Chipaumire, associate artistic director, have separately earned New York Dance and Performance Awards (Bessies) for a piece inspired by pioneering choreographer Pearl Primus.

The Wing Luke Asian Museum, the only pan-Asian Pacific American community-based museum in the nation, has created a new model for exhibition and program development based on intergenerational community organizing strategies. Frequently called upon to

Family oriented activities such as the monthly *Family Day at the Wing* are just one dimension of the Wing Luke Asian Museum’s deep commitment to community and civic engagement. Courtesy of Wing Luke Asian Museum.



share this model, the museum is considered a leader in the museum field regarding community-based practice. The Wing Luke, now in its 41st year of operation, has matured into a seasoned elder statesman of sorts, providing a convening point for other nonprofit organizations by hosting seminars to share its program model and its vision of sustainable growth in the neighborhood.

In 2007, the Wing Luke completed an ambitious \$23.2 million capital campaign to remodel a historic hotel into a living museum, with preserved historic spaces, galleries, community hall, story theater, and community heritage center. Significantly, the campaign, dubbed “How To Keep a Story Going,” was completed with equally strong support from the public, private, corporate, and foundation sectors. A total of 1,600 donors—both long-standing civic philanthropists and many new Asian Pacific American first-time givers—contributed to a vibrant campaign that allowed the museum to emerge debt-free at the finish. During lobbying efforts to get a state appropriation, several thousand Asian Pacific elderly and community activists, embracing the Wing Luke project as one of their top priorities, converged on the State Capitol in Olympia for a one-day rally and lobbying effort. As a result, the museum received \$1.5 million to help jumpstart the campaign.

The East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, born in an abandoned church in a tough Richmond neighborhood following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., continues to work toward “social reconciliation, social justice, and social change.” The center offers instruction in music, dance, theater, and new media. Through its Artist Diploma Program, diplomas in the arts are awarded to middle school and high school aged kids in recognition of artistic excellence and commitment to learning. The multicultural curriculum and commitment to social change through community service distinguishes East Bay from other community arts schools.

Following an economic downturn in California several years ago and a period of severe funding cuts by the California Arts Council, East Bay has worked diligently to move out of a deficit situation with the help of the Working Capital Fund. Because it is located in one of the most economically distressed and violent neighborhoods in California—serving an extremely vulnerable population of students and families—East Bay has worked diligently to create a financially sustainable operation in keeping with its commitment of serving as a long-term

asset to its community. The efforts have paid off. East Bay has had several annual operating surpluses in a row. It is currently working on an ambitious capital campaign, scheduled for completion in 2010, to redevelop a historic structure in downtown Richmond into its new permanent home.

Organizations are pursuing earned income opportunities, both as entrepreneurial ventures and as ways to minimize the impact of fluctuating foundation support. The Wing Luke acquired an established neighborhood tour business, donated by a long-time museum supporter. This new endeavor ties in very naturally with the museum’s work in the neighborhood and helps generate a new stream of earned income.

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Cornerstone Theater, and SPARC have been invited by corporations to provide services to the private and non-arts sector entities. Cornerstone is using its theater and community-based research methodology to help Gilead Sciences, Inc., a manufacturer of HIV/AIDS treatments, understand why some patients are reluctant to change their treatments. In partnership with Verizon, SPARC developed a collaborative mural with four high schools across the country to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Montgomery bus boycott. SPARC also was commissioned by Bank of America to create a work visualizing the dreams and history of the local immigrant population in Bell, California. In a broader context, Dance Exchange worked with a consultant to identify mission-driven revenue sources that build on its products and processes.

Conscious of the need for human resources and training to sustain such ventures, these organizations acknowledge the need to balance new income streams, especially from corporate clients, with a continuing commitment to institutional mission and values.

Diane Espaldon noted, too, that corporate partnerships “aren’t always a deal with the devil made solely to increase earned income.” Some community organizations, she said, approach these partnerships as “a logical extension of their mission because they are able to bring their strong community values, community networks, methodologies, and diversity of experience into environments where these are most needed.”³¹

With all the experimentation and learning on the job that has happened in the field of community-based arts, seasoned leaders have begun to look back and interpret



The horror of Hurricane Katrina was addressed in “Place Matters: A Look at Displacement,” a workshop production of Urban Bush Women’s 2006 Summer Institute. “Place Matters,” directed by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, combined movement, music and the spoken word to evoke that horror. Courtesy of Urban Bush Women

their work. Many leaders are now taking time to pause, reflect, and write down and share their best practices in “first voice.” This codification of best practices and philosophy will be especially valuable as some of these leaders leave the field or prepare for retirement, and as others who follow in their wake try to understand and learn from those who came before them.

Codification of best practices and philosophy will be especially valuable as some of these leaders leave the field or prepare for retirement.

In 2006, Cassie Chinn, a long-time exhibition developer at the Wing Luke, authored a handbook on the community-based exhibition model. The East Bay Center is beginning to document the philosophical underpinnings of its multicultural curriculum to produce what Jordan Simmons calls “valuable interpretive knowledge.” Cornerstone has developed *The Cornerstone Community Collaboration Handbook* for its Institute Summer Residency and to preserve a legacy of the organization’s work. Dance Exchange has created online tool kits to share its practices with the field. Urban Bush Women is also exploring how it might document its artistic history.

Leaders at these organizations say they are very mindful of the value of documenting their work. Still, they find it very difficult to carve away the time and space to focus on such endeavors when there are pressing artistic and organizational demands that take precedence.

The organizations that have not only endured but also thrived are the ones that didn’t just focus on program and art; they also pay close attention—usually behind the scenes—to developing a strong operating and capital structure. Without diminishing their own aesthetic vision and aspirations, they have combined foundation support with their own savvy and their own community’s support and used the resources to leverage growth and sustainability for their organizations.

COLLABORATION: A NECESSITY AND A VALUE

What can community-based arts organizations teach us about collaboration? By their very nature, these groups have survived because they’ve been able to initiate and sustain meaningful, creative, and enduring collaborations with other stakeholders in the quest for community betterment.

Emiko Ono, director of grants and professional development at the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, said: “The kind of collaborations that happen at the grassroots are extraordinary. Smaller organizations are the incubators for new ideas. The big guys can’t innovate at the same level. In the past, these ideas have been co-opted, but now there’s a recognition of where these ideas came from. The simple idea of listening—that came from the community-based organizations.”³²

Urban Bush Women as a company has worked hard to be recognized as a contributor to civic life since settling in Brooklyn. It has formed a partnership with a business incubator and has an ongoing relationship with a housing community center to serve young people. The latter has resulted in B.O.L.D. (Builders, Organizers and Leaders through Dance), a program combining dance training, literacy activities, and dialogue to nurture problem solving, consensus building, and leadership development. The program has been so potent that local elected officials are helping identify other Brooklyn sites and resources to support replication of the model.

At the same time, Amy Cassello, executive director of Urban Bush Women, looks to ensure reciprocity in all its partnerships and build the potential for combined

local and national impact. That's where listening skills are being tested anew. She described efforts to deepen a partnership with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a New Orleans-based group that teaches community organizing through its *Un-Doing Racism* workshop. The People's Institute has been involved in Urban Bush Women's Summer Institute in Brooklyn. Next year, the Summer Institute will be held in New Orleans.³³

"For the past five years, we've talked about developing a more comprehensive way of working together," Cassello said. "How do you create a meaningful partnership? How is our work complementary? How do you fund-raise together? How do you work out differences and similarities in mission? How do you create a meaningful relationship with non-artists? How can integrating movement into their presentations benefit their work?"³⁴

The National Black Arts Festival has struggled with similar questions. While expanding to year-round education and family programs in addition to its signature festival in July, NBAF is advancing a carefully thought-out strategic long-range partnership with the Woodruff Arts Center. Together they seek to bolster the festival's long-term sustainability and the Center's capacity to expand the diversity of its programs and audiences.

Leaders in the field acknowledge that to achieve social or civic as well as artistic goals, they need to extend partnerships across disciplines and fields. As collaborations necessarily extend across fields, systems, and sectors, the complexity of the endeavor increases. Cultural organizations find themselves honing skills and knowledge bases to collaborate effectively and credibly.

A reading in Lebanon, Virginia of Appalshop's *Thousand Kites*, a community-based performance, web, video, and radio project centered on the U.S. prison system. © Thousand Kites.



Appalshop has deep expertise in an array of media production—films, video, theater, music, spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, and books. For the past nine years, through its *Holler to the Hood* project, Appalshop has used radio to bring together prisoners and their families during the holiday period. The project was developed in response to the complex social issues created by the growth of supermax prisons in central Appalachia. At the same time, this kind of audience participation has helped provide a voice for prison reform.

These groups have survived because they've been able to initiate and sustain meaningful, creative, and enduring collaborations with other stakeholders in the quest for community betterment.

"One thing we're looking at is how to get the different media working together on larger projects than any one program," Art Menius, Appalshop director, said. "Support systems need to begin to operate in a more integrative way in order to enable collaborations across fields and sectors." Menius adds, "One aspect of this is that we want to look for nontraditional funding sources. We want to move out of the social justice and arts funding silos. So, for example, we want to see what kind of funding might exist in the sciences. We're concerned about the environment of central Appalachia and what kind of future economy we might have as coal resources are depleted from this region."³⁵

William Cleveland, author and director of the Center for the Study of Art & Community, said the arts community in America has historically "both isolated itself and been isolated from the working of the broader community." "There are many fellow travelers involved in parallel movements that are part of the creative community, people involved in sustainable development, community social justice, environmental work, green industries, political and social reform," he says. "The boundaries need to melt."³⁶

Thousand **KITES**

SUPPORTING, SUSTAINING, AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

Community-based cultural organizations attract and develop a distinctive kind of leadership. These groups believe in artistic and cultural expression as the primary catalyst for engagement around civic, racial, ethnic, and community issues. Generally small and midsized, they are resourceful despite chronic undercapitalization. They have committed leaders who have encoded true diversity into core values, mission, and practice.

For all these reasons, the leaders of these community-based arts organizations have become the new field leaders. They are sought out for funding panels and as speakers at field conferences. Many veterans have been distinguished with significant honors—MacArthur Fellows Program “genius” awards, New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Awards, Ford Foundation Leadership for a Changing World awards, and others.

Kumani Gantt has been artistic and executive director of the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia for a little more than four years, following in the footsteps of founder and painter Lily Yeh. Working with residents, the Village transforms vacant lots in the neighborhood into gardens and parks.

Gantt, a Philadelphia native, worked for 11 years at Center Stage, a regional theater in Baltimore, before returning home to Philadelphia. “I stay involved because I see the connection between art and issues of justice and equity,” she said. “Regional theater is about people coming to you—to the sacred door. Here, the people live right next to our office. We’re right here where the people live.”³⁷

Gantt said that being executive director—the first time she’s filled this kind of position before—is “a lot of work.” She feels good that the Village focuses on building staff skills and that she’s helping mentor a young man to be a future leader. However, she doesn’t believe that she will be able to sustain the level of activity and number of hours she put in the last year. “To be frank, for me to stay in this field for another ten years, I would have to find a way to regain a creative life. That’s more important to me than money.” Gantt is definitely worried about the money too. “In four more years, I’ll be 50. I’m very concerned because I’ve worked in the field for a long time, but I don’t have enough for retirement. When I look at my economic health, it’s not great. It’s not horrible, but it’s not great.”³⁸



A young person learns van painting as part of the 2007 Hip Hop Festival sponsored by the Village of Arts & Humanities in Philadelphia. © 2007 The Village of Arts & Humanities.

As a generation of leaders who have founded community-based groups has reached middle age, some want to move on to rediscover themselves and pursue fresh interests, allowing others to make the leadership ascent. Leadership transition is increasingly a concern for many community-based groups, raising questions of how artistic vision is sustained and even if artist-driven organizations can continue when founding leaders choose to move on. If a community-based arts organization is good at what it does, what is at stake—with the departure of a key leader—is not simply the potential loss of an artistic vision but a key community asset that drives economic development and a broader community vision.

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Beyond this, how will the field attract a new younger generation who might want this work as a career, but who don’t want to become new martyrs to the cause, living on starvation wages like those who worked in the trenches before them?

In 2005, Bill Rauch stepped down as the visionary artistic director for Cornerstone Theater after leading the organization for 20 years. During this time, Cornerstone

had become one of the leading forces in creating theater in collaboration with local communities, using issues of tolerance and social justice as underlying messages. Cornerstone stakeholders realized they were facing the greatest organizational change in their history. Board, ensemble, and staff members met the challenge head-on. They spent two years planning for the transition, making a careful hiring decision and overlapping some of Rauch's remaining time with incoming artistic director Michael John Garcés.

When Liz Lerman, founder of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, wanted to shift her role in the organization in order to focus on certain artistic priorities, the company went through what former artistic director and company member Peter DiMuro described as an "externalization of a person's methodology into the value system of an organization." The company established a shared artistic leadership model that is working.³⁹

In my own case, I left my position as executive director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum in 2007 after 17 years and completion of an ambitious capital campaign. Even before the campaign began in 2001, I told my staff and board I did not intend to stay in my position beyond the campaign. Right away, my executive director responsibilities began shifting to other members of the leadership team. Planning began in earnest to develop a strategy to allow the museum to be up and running once the campaign was completed. My other leadership team members, Beth Takekawa and Cassie Chinn, now anchor the museum as executive director and deputy executive director.

Even in these circumstances of dramatic organizational change, community-based arts organizations are testing and offering strategic and creative approaches for others to consider as models for the field.

Where will the next generation of community arts leaders come from and how will they be prepared?

Undergraduate and graduate programs in community-based arts are attracting a new generation of young people and spurring a new interest in the arts. Observers note that this is similar to what happened in the 1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson, in the era of the Great Society, when the country renewed its commitment to education, civil rights, and the war on poverty. "You have idealism coming back to the college campus," William Cleveland says.⁴⁰

Colleges and universities offering courses and programs focusing on community arts practice have begun to convene to discuss ways to create curriculum and institutional support for this new movement. A study of community-based arts training was conducted by Imagining America, a consortium of higher education institutions committed to public scholarship in the arts, humanities, and design. The study has helped to isolate the strengths and weaknesses of classroom and field education among these largely new programs as they prepare new community-based artists and arts administrators to be skilled artists and community cultural workers.

Current leaders of community-based arts organizations tend to strongly value the fostering of young leadership within the organization. Carlos Tortolero, president of the National Museum of Mexican Art, points with pride to many of the young people who have practically grown up at his institution. "Passing along the vision is easy at a culturally grounded institution like the National Museum of Mexican Art," he says. "We have five or six people who have worked at the museum since they were 15 and have spent half or over half of their lives at the museum. They get it! As a founder, I am confident that the museum will not only continue after I am gone, but will flourish. People who work at culturally grounded institutions aren't looking for their next job in the arts. They have found a place where they truly belong and can contribute to a vital cultural presence and vision."⁴¹

Jordan Simmons, who rose from student to teacher to artistic director, said he still feels useful at age 53 and cherishes the chance to be with a circle of instructors "one generation above me in their '60s" as well as second and third generation youngsters "coming in and taking responsibility for the place."⁴²

Young artists are also being nurtured into leadership roles—artistically and in relation to community work—in organizations like Urban Bush Women, Cornerstone Theater, Sojourn Theatre, and Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. These same organizations take seriously their responsibility to share time-tested methodologies—and protect the integrity of these methodologies—by offering training institutes. These institutes have expanded to meet demand and have provided an earned income source for these groups, allowing them to share their model at the same time they are rewarded for their knowledge and expertise in the performing arts.

At the same time, the hip-hop generation—those who have come of age in the urban youth rebellion of the post-Civil Rights era—have founded new organizations that are forums for melding their interests in artistic expression and social activism. Case in point is Youth Speaks, a San-Francisco-based organization established in 1996 as a presenter of spoken word performance. The group, which works with 45,000 teens in the Bay Area alone, has created partner programs across the country and has organized numerous local and national youth poetry slams as well as literary arts and theater programs.

Founder and Executive Director James Kass said Youth Speaks is one of the few performing arts organizations that isn't worrying about diminishing audiences. "Audiences aren't our problem because our work is situated in the community," he said. "We're constantly moving to bigger and bigger auditoriums and spaces. We used to go into high schools back in '96 and ask how many people like poetry. Maybe two or three people would raise their hands. Now, we go in and ask the same question and maybe half of the group raises their hands—and it's with enthusiasm."⁴³

Kass said hip-hop has begun to move further and further beyond the boundaries of race and class as young people across the globe have begun to find a voice for issues that speak to their lives. "As young people write about the environment, they're shifting away from polar bears and shrinking ice caps. They want to talk about dilapidated schools or the drugs in their immediate environment—the neighborhood they live in. It's about getting young people in front of mayors and officials—not only just bringing them into the conversation, but allowing the conversation to shift to them."⁴⁴

THE SUPPORT OF FUNDERS

In the past decade, several Ford Foundation initiatives, supported through its Arts and Culture program, have helped shine the light on community-based arts. These included the previously mentioned Animating Democracy, Working Capital Fund, and ARTOGRAPHY programs, as well as the Shifting Sands Initiative (supported through Ford's Asset Building and Community Development program), which looked at arts as a community development strategy.

On a national level, the Ford Foundation has not been alone in the support for community-based arts. The Wallace Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Doris



A poet performs in the Grand Slam Finals at the 12th Annual Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam, April 2008. Photo by Scott Chernis.

Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation have also invested major dollars in small and midsized arts organizations that work at the intersection of diversity, community empowerment, and social issues.

Through much of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Rockefeller Foundation's Creativity and Culture Program was an essential anchor for what many then and now refer to as the field of community cultural development. The foundation provided funding for arts and humanities through PACT (Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation) and MAP (Multi-Arts Production Fund).

Ben Cameron, program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, noted that while his foundation supports the full spectrum of arts organizations—from those who believe solely in "arts for art's sake" to those with a heavy commitment to social issues—more dollars have begun flowing to support organizations with community missions as the demographics of the country have begun to shift. As the foundation has moved away from supporting "big infrastructures through endowments," Cameron said, community-based organizations have gained greater advantage in vying for a piece of arts funding.⁴⁵

Huong Vu, senior program officer for the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, said, "We have to be more sensitive to the idiosyncratic needs of the sector." In communities of color, the arts thrive in community centers, churches, gymnasiums, festivals, and family settings. "There's less of a hierarchy between artist and audience member. It's not like going to the symphony or the opera where you're supposed to sit over there in that section of seats and the stage is over there and you dress a certain way; you're

quiet and you clap when you're supposed to. At centers of color, a lot of times, you stand up, and you whoop and you holler. You get up and dance. You go get a drink of water, you go back to your seat. You talk to someone. It's more fluid and participatory. The norms and behavior are very different."⁴⁶

Some national funders, such as the Wallace Foundation, have partnered with state arts agencies as a way to expand the reach of the arts to underserved populations. These public bodies—committed not only to excellence but also to community building and citizen participation—often have their ears closer to the ground and can make good judgments about the best places to invest arts dollars. Here and there, a small grant of several thousand dollars and solid technical assistance to a thinly supported organization with great potential might make the difference between survival and oblivion.

The Washington State Arts Commission (WSAC)—struggling with how to support the arts in relatively isolated communities and in new emerging demographic pockets across the state—received money from the Wallace Foundation to support that very goal. According to Mayumi Tsutakawa, manager of grants to organizations at WSAC, the commission used the Wallace grant to support ethnic, low-income, and disabled communities through established organizations like the Wing Luke Asian Museum and smaller lesser-known organizations like the Arab Center of Washington, the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center at the Evergreen State College, and BrasilFest. "In the case of all these organizations, they strongly represent their communities," she said. "They demonstrate artistic excellence. They show leadership. They are artistically risk taking. In all these communities, it's important to support the young artists and the nontraditional arts."⁴⁷

Still other local arts agencies explicitly commit their public resources to small and midsized cultural organizations, especially those that serve specific cultural groups that have been ignored or under-supported. The San Francisco Arts Commission's Cultural Equity grant program is one example. And recently, the Arts & Science Council in Charlotte, North Carolina decided, amid some controversy, to cap funding to mainstream institutions so that it could increase support to smaller and midsized groups serving culturally diverse populations.

Michael John Garcés wonders whether the elusive stability that many arts organizations strive to achieve might

be the wrong end goal. "Perhaps we should be striving for maximum flexibility, and our organizations could expand and contract as opportunities arise."⁴⁸

Claudine Brown, program director of the Arts and Culture program at Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Roberta Uno, of the Ford Foundation, share a sense of hope that substantial new arts initiatives will come to pass under the administration of Barack Obama. Obama has expressed a commitment to expand partnerships between schools and arts groups and develop an artist corps to work in low-income schools and the community.⁴⁹

"We're not only in a position to solve problems, but we also bring joy—and joy should not be underestimated when this nation is confronting its greatest challenges."

—Claudine Brown, Nathan Cummings Foundation

During the new administration, Uno said, community-based arts and cultural organizations will continue to be "on the forefront" of creating the type of art that "catalyzes public discourse and community engagement." The infusion of government funds will be critical to support this work, she said, because "the type of money the foundations have is not enough to create the kind of sustained change that we need. The foundations cannot be looked at to sustain the entire field."⁵⁰ Claudine Brown adds that community-based arts organizations could become the home and training ground for potential artist corps workers.⁵¹

Following a meeting of arts and social justice groups, Brown urged community-based arts groups to be assertive. In 2008, as banks and the auto industry lobbied for help from the government, she reminded, "We help those who are sometimes the ones who have the greatest needs. We're not only in a position to solve problems, but we also bring joy—and joy should not be underestimated when this nation is confronting its greatest challenges."⁵²

Animating Democracy Co-directors Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza agree that community-based arts organizations are well positioned to satisfy multiple

As cultural relevance and equity become a stronger focus for policy makers and public and private sector funders, these culturally grounded groups can be recognized and supported as the vital community institutions they are.

goals—artistic, social, civic, and economic—because they operate on multiple levels in community. As cultural relevance and equity become a stronger focus for policy makers and public and private sector funders, these culturally grounded groups can be recognized and supported as the vital community institutions they are. “Funders—public and private—need to embrace community-based arts institutions,” said Korza. “In the changing faces of communities and against a backdrop of social and civic needs, these organizations should be considered primary, alongside and equal to the traditional mainstream organizations. Foundations and public funders need to make available institutional support to these groups as a regular grantmaking commitment, not as a special initiative, so that they can grow and stabilize.”⁵³

CLOSING

Back in the early 1990s, at the beginning of my career in museums, I attended a gathering of about 20 cultural activists in Washington, DC, hosted by the Anacostia Community Museum, a neighborhood museum born out of the Civil Rights Movement. I was told that the goal of the organizers was to bring together like-minded individuals working to link community issues to museums and cultural centers.

It was affirming for me—a community journalist and activist turned museum director—to know that there

were other individuals who also believed that art, history, and culture could and should be rooted into the fight for community empowerment. I came to understand I was part of a larger grassroots movement, the outlines of which were shrouded somewhat in darkness because most of us were too impoverished and too busy to see outside beyond the individual silos in which we worked.

The Anacostia Community Museum was seeded by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967, the height of racial tensions, as an “experimental storefront museum.” At the time of our meeting, it had moved out of the impoverished neighborhood in which it had first found its voice. Now it was grappling with how it might rekindle the spirit of its founding director, John Kinard, the educator who pioneered the creation of exhibitions that spoke to social issues. Although Kinard was gone—he passed away in 1989—his legacy and the spirit of his commitment and genius shone over those of us gathered in Washington, DC.

Over a decade and a half after I got my first glimpse into the field of community-based arts, the field is now teeming with networked peer organizations whose staffs talk frequently to one another online and in person. Nowadays, it is not so unusual to hear—in the national news—about a special program at one of these cohort organizations and how it changed a life or created new hope in a forgotten community or ignited a change in public policy.

As the practice of community-based arts continues to mature—and the organizations at the center of this work take their rightful place in the cultural landscape—they will continue to provide new vibrant models, develop innovative work, and serve as leaders in the arts for this nation. It will be especially important to not simply acknowledge and support this work, but also to cultivate a broader appreciation for its complexity and delicacy and to see the potential that lays waiting as many others begin to build on this strong tradition.

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This essay was developed for and supported by the Exemplar Program, a program of Americans for the Arts, in collaboration with the LarsonAllen LLC, funded by the Ford Foundation.

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