

MacArthur Foundation

Chicago Commitment

The Arts: Making Meaning – A Synthesis of Conversations with Creative Leaders

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Historically, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation described its support for the arts as a “civic contribution to Chicago,” noting that cultural vitality is a benefit to the city’s “overall economic, educational, and civic” life. It is hard to disagree with those characterizations. And while one can point to the economic impact research study by Americans for the Arts that found arts organizations generate at least \$3.21 billion annually in Chicago, the value of arts and culture is more than economic output.

In the summer of 2017, Julia Stasch, President of the MacArthur Foundation, invited staff to rethink the narrative of the Foundation’s arts grantmaking. That invitation launched a six-month process that created formal and informal spaces for conversation. The following frame was used for those conversations: “The arts play an essential role in communicating cultural and political histories, beliefs, and key issues of the day, yet we know that not everyone’s stories have been heard or equally heard, documented, or valued. Whose voices are missing? What are they saying? What one or two things could be done to amplify those voices?” Then participants were asked for their reactions. This paper highlights major themes that emerged. We have been careful to include and note the voices of our participants. Where relevant research exists, we included it with citations. The remainder of the paper represents the observations and ongoing conversations MacArthur staff is having with the leaders in the field.

Art develops identity and human potential.

In each conversation, participants expressed that art is central to our human existence—it helps us make meaning of our experiences; it helps us develop our identity; it echoes or disputes history; it can be a source of celebration or a source of resistance; and it can make us better, more empathetic individuals. Participants talked about people’s natural tendency toward art and creative expression. While they were speaking from the heart about that connection, science verifies it. Evolutionary researchers have argued that the two traits that define our humanity are the abilities to make moral judgments and to engage with art. Neuroscientists recently found that the parts of the brain that are active when we make moral judgments and when we engage with aesthetics are the same. That is, the instinct to engage with art is possibly as deeply engrained in us, and as inherently human, as the instinct to judge right from wrong.¹

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A number of conversations explored the fact that art can contribute to social-emotional education. Participants explained that art and creative expression for adults are essential parts of our ongoing development as people, and engaging with art is like exercising an invisible creative muscle that also shapes our feelings of empathy and generosity. When individuals spoke about youth and social-emotional education, however, there was a greater sense of urgency. Research has shown the multiple benefits of engaging with the arts for youth—benefits such as higher cognitive abilities,² better social

¹ Zaidel, D.W. and M. Nadal, “Brain Intersections of Aesthetics and Morals,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 367-80.

² Neville, Helen, et al., “Effects of Music Training on Brain and Cognitive Development in Under-Privileged 3- to 5-Year Old Children: Preliminary Results,” in *Learning, Arts, and the Brain: The Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition*, ed. Carolyn Asbury and Barbara Rich, (New York: Dana Press, 2008).

skills,³ greater likelihood of going to college,⁴ and higher academic achievement in general.⁵ Participants in our conversations used words such as “transformative” and “life changing” when talking about the impact of exposure to the arts for children and stressed the urgency of making sure all kids had access to creative outlets. One arts leader called the arts the ultimate “open source” project because the techniques are available for anyone to learn and use. However, while we are born with some of the resources to make art, children without access to teachers, mentors, creative materials, or spaces are significantly less likely to explore their creative voices.

Art and creative endeavors help youth develop their identities, process their experiences, explore their hopes, and name their challenges in a safe, supportive environment. Individuals talked about how, in our racially segregated communities, young people of color view art and creative expression as survival tools. These youth process a complex mix of deeply felt emotions, social and geographic isolation, internalized messages of self-hate, and unequal access to resources. Beyond that, some use art and creativity to chart their career paths, side-stepping the barriers of structural racism to create a way to make a life and a living. With content that questions or is in active resistance to a dominant narrative, young people who make art are sources of strength for local communities but are often not heard or valued beyond them.

Art is a social process.

A recurring theme in our conversations was that art is about more than just a final product, such as a painting, a play, a book, or a concert. Art-making and -viewing are social processes that lead to important personal and societal outcomes. For many organizations, art is about the process of collective art-making, which they noted can help achieve outcomes such as progress toward social justice, community healing, improved public health, catharsis, new collaborations, new connections, and bridge-building. These organizations tend to operate in community centers, as parts of other organizations, in church basements, or in park district buildings—in other words, in spaces that are not exclusively viewed as art spaces. For other, more traditional organizations, engaging with and witnessing art products is one of the processes by which our society makes meaning together, a way we develop a shared sense of what is true, good, just, and valuable. These organizations, which typically operate in recognizable art spaces like museums, galleries, and concert halls, are now challenging themselves to bring those products into communities to more broadly share that opportunity to make meaning from art. There are also a number of organizations in our Foundation portfolio that view the value of their art as coming *both* from the process of making art and from the reach and impact of the end product.

To illustrate, a number of participants attested to the fact that art plays a role in communities that is greater than simply the production of art: they argued that people see art as a way to connect with other people. The research confirms that this is a trend in the arts. A survey conducted by Arts Midwest and the Metropolitan Group found that socializing was the most commonly cited motivator for arts participation: 73 percent of respondents included this as the reason they attend events.⁶ This suggests that arts environments and events

Many of the more traditional arts organizations are moving out of sanctioned performing spaces to alleys and public swimming pools in an effort to meet people where they are.

³ Social Dynamics, LLC, “Executive Summary.” *Evaluation Report*, (2005), accessed August 8, 2011, <http://www.socialdynamicsllc.com/completedstudies.html>.

⁴ Catterall, James S., *Doing Well and Doing Good By Doing Art: A 12-Year Longitudinal Study of Arts Education – Effects on the Achievements and Values of Young Adults*, (Los Angeles: I-Group Books, 2009).

⁵ Heath, Shirley Brice, “Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts during Nonschool Hours,” In *Champions of Change: The Impact of Arts on Learning*, ed. Edward B. Fiske, (Washington, DC : Arts Education Partnership : President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1999), 19-34.

⁶ “Creating Connection: Research Findings and Proposed Message Framework to Build Public Will for Arts and Culture,” Arts Midwest and Metropolitan Group, (April 2015),

that are more social are more likely to be highly attended. Further, research by Americans for the Arts found that 67 percent of Americans believe the arts “unify our community regardless of age, race, and ethnicity.”⁷

In addition, research demonstrates that art that emphasizes an engaged public throughout the art-making process produces more positive social outcomes. Researchers Stephanie Stallings and Bronwyn Mauldin investigated arts participation and found that in the Chicago metropolitan region, arts programming, especially that which is geared toward a broader participatory public, shows the promise of building even greater cultural inclusion and tolerance. These researchers found that individuals active in participatory arts came together across social boundaries, including economic and occupational status, ethnic background, age, and geography. Participants even reported that as a result of their participation in these activities, they developed certain social inclinations such as a greater tolerance for difference, the ability to constructively give and receive criticism, an improved capacity for trust and consensus building, and enhanced problem-solving skills.⁸

Participants described the ways in which their communities used art together to make meaning of current events. For example, artist Maria Gaspar led *96 Acres*, a series of community-engaged, site-responsive projects that involved community stakeholders’ ideas about social and restorative justice issues and also examined the impact of incarceration at the Cook County Jail on Chicago’s West Side. The act of making art brought neighbors of the jail, families affected by incarceration, and local school populations together to humanize the massive 96-acre site and engage in a healing process.

The trend toward more social and process-oriented arts environments is reflected in people’s preferences for the words we use to describe our funding as well. MacArthur and many other foundations have historically referred to their funding for the creative sector as “Arts and Culture” or something similar, but research by Arts Midwest and the Metropolitan Group suggests that, for most people, the phrase “arts and culture” conjures an image of something static. Survey respondents preferred the phrase “creative expression,” because it describes a more social, participatory arts environment that is inclusive of everyone and not solely professional artists.⁹ Indeed, when MacArthur’s description of its arts portfolio came up in our conversations, some people felt that “creativity” better reflected the broad spectrum of arts processes and experiences. Still others felt that it was important to use the word “art,” which to them expressed a level of quality and professionalism that artists deserve. Some participants rejected the “arts and culture” label, pointing out that in many African American, Asian, Arab, American Indian, and Latinx communities, art is integrated into all facets of life, not thought of as a separate activity. While there was no consensus on what the Foundation should call the portfolio, participants expressed interest in expanding the conventional definition of “arts and culture.”

Art amplifies voices—but many artists’ voices are unheard.

The choices that arts organizations make about what to put on stage, play in concert, hang on a wall, or otherwise put into the world can confirm a dominant narrative, or it can confront it. It can also give

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56e347ee0442621615c31e5e/t/5715598b27d4bdbf70c7115b/1493738754943/Creating+Connection+Report.pdf>

⁷ “Arts and Economic Prosperity 5: The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts & Cultural Organizations & Their Audiences, Summary Report,” Americans for the Arts, (2017),

http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/aep5/PDF_Files/ARTS_AEPsummary_loRes.pdf.

⁸ Stallings, Stephanie N. and Bronwyn Mauldin, “Public Engagement in the Arts: A Review of Recent Literature,” Ford Theatres and Los Angeles County Arts Commission, (August 2016),

https://www.lacountyarts.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/lacac_pubenglitrev.pdf

⁹ Arts Midwest and Metropolitan Group, “Creating Connection: Research Findings and Proposed Message Framework to Build Public Will for Arts and Culture,” (April

2015), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56e347ee0442621615c31e5e/t/5715598b27d4bdbf70c7115b/1493738754943/Creating+Connection+Report.pdf>

presence to voices that are otherwise unheard and make truth known where it was hidden. Groups that reflect and speak on behalf of underrepresented communities capture and share stories that are not often featured in mainstream cultural organizations. “To walk into a museum and see art on the walls done by people who look like you,” said one participant, “makes you proud; it gives you a feeling of legitimacy.” As larger, often white-led institutions begin to address the issue of equitable and inclusive representation on their stages and galleries, our participants grappled with questions about how these institutions can do so responsibly.

When arts organizations create space for underrepresented voices, the organizations provide the underrepresented with power and capital they would not otherwise have. Arts organizations provide

Art helps communities find one another, cultivate their identities, and find the strength to speak out and be heard.

platforms for community voices, create collective power, and provide space to negotiate and advance equity. A number of participants remarked that the arts can be especially valuable for isolated and segregated populations, whose voices are otherwise silenced. While one of art’s great benefits is bringing together different communities, sometimes there is value in convening and strengthening *like* communities. For example, one leader spoke about how overwhelming and confusing life can be for new immigrants. For some communities, arts organizations serve as a bridge between the home country and this new one. Another leader talked about the responsibility her organization feels to create a sense of normalcy, while at the same time educating immigrant populations about their rights in the United States and how to advocate for themselves in American society. Newly arrived immigrants are just one of many groups that might experience isolation or segregation. Art can bring communities together based on race, geography, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and more.

While Chicago’s creative community is vibrant and diverse, there are still missing voices. People in our conversations raised specific concerns about the limited number of American Indian- and Arab-focused arts organizations, which caused participants to question why mainstream cultural institutions were undervaluing art and artists from those communities. Some participants reported that their voices as artists and leaders of arts organizations are missing from broader conversations in the city. A number of people articulated a similar sentiment: the arts can lift up voices that have otherwise been unheard, but in order to bring those voices to the fore, they need to be heard and valued beyond the walls of their own organizations.

In all of the conversations, participants expressed the desire to feel more connected as a community of artists and practitioners. “Most of our time is focused on the day-to-day survival of our organizations,” said one person, “but there would be great value in coming together at least once a year to share information and learn from each other.” Participants also identified an interest in developing a wider network of relationships with organizations and leaders in other sectors that intersect with the arts, such as education and community economic development.

People talked about the way city government makes decisions and lamented the fact that artists and creatives were rarely at “the table.” Given the deeply entrenched politics of Chicago, there was a lively debate as to whether or not it was worthwhile for the arts community to become more politically involved in order to put pressure on officials to be more intentional and consistent about including artists on commissions and in city decision-making processes.

Inevitably, we reached a point in nearly all of the conversations where we confronted a reality—we have not yet arrived at the point where the broader public sees the value in arts and creative practices. Given all the benefits of the creative process and the arts, why are there not more advocates? When state and local budgets are considered, arts- and culture-related spending is often the first to be cut. Arts leaders

pointed out that while STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) programming has given the arts validity within the academic environment, that status is rarely sufficient to protect the arts' place as an equal educational component. Individuals talked about the need to cultivate more advocates outside of the arts who can help others see the benefits of the arts.

Overall, artists and arts organizations experience a lack of funding and the societal acceptance of the “starving artist” construct, which assumes that only a struggling artist can create authentic art (whether that is visual, physical, oral, or written). This construct embraces the notion that becoming an artist means committing to a life of poverty and instability. Fulfillment, in this conception, is assumed to be in the making of the work—not in being paid for it. One artist voiced it this way: “I am tired of being the most creative, intelligent, most-in-the-know, and coolest person at the table and yet also and always the brokest.” This false construct devalues our artists, who serve as visionaries and truth-tellers, and creates a culture where it is acceptable to underpay and underappreciate artists.

There is a pervasive and dangerous idea that the “starving artist” is an enlightened state.

Many artists working in communities felt that their work was invisible and was not valued at the level of work presented in a gallery or on a professional stage. Their work is conducted in communities that have little, if any, access to other programming, so the need is great. Funders, however, have a hard time fitting these artists' work into prescribed categories; they also have a difficult time funding small, loosely affiliated groups without formal nonprofit status. Some of the individuals felt that the word “institution,” which funders often use to refer to arts organizations, left a negative impression that actually separated the organization from the communities they serve.

Art contributes to inclusive economies and vital communities.

Art, culture, and creativity are essential to Chicago's present and its future. The economic impact of the arts on the City of Chicago is significant—as noted above, arts organizations generated \$3.21 billion in economic activity and more than 85,000 jobs in 2015.¹⁰ The past decade has seen increased interest in creative placemaking: projects where art plays an intentional and integrated role in place-based community planning and development. A number of participants expressed that this interest in creative placemaking could address long-standing challenges that artists face—where artists are brought in only at the end of a project to make a building “cool” or to explain a policy in an engaging way.

Many artists want to preserve local culture when integrating art in community development. There is deep concern, however, that art and artists have been viewed as gentrifying agents. Chicago has seen situations where artists were so successful at revitalizing a location that, as the cost of living rose, they could not afford to stay. Many of our participants embraced the responsibility to ensure that local communities continue to thrive (sometimes called “place-keeping”) even as their neighborhood economies grow.

Similarly, when arts organizations are factored into community development, they may feel a disproportionate responsibility to fix all of a community's problems. These arts organizations operate like community-based organizations and can find themselves providing more than just art instruction: they provide meals, mental health support, and additional services and support to ensure their participants thrive. Leaders talked about the many challenges this introduces with regard to organizational and financial effectiveness.

¹⁰ “The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Cultural Organizations and Their Audiences in the City of Chicago, IL (Fiscal Year 2015),” *Arts and Economic Prosperity 5*, Americans for the Arts, (2017).

Chicago is a deeply segregated city, and as poverty is concentrated within communities of color so, too, is a lack of opportunity.¹¹ The opportunity to receive a quality education, to access public transportation and health services, and to pursue a rewarding career is not equally available. However, we heard in our sessions that when the doors to traditional career paths will not open, art arises as an area in which young people can access opportunities. Participants noted that some of Chicago's young entrepreneurs of color have found success in fashion, music, and literary arts. Because of this, the arts industry is viewed as a significantly more inclusive economy than others. Unfortunately, these sectors are often overlooked and undervalued by corporate and government actors, which often means that those entrepreneurs have to leave the city to be financially stable.

When the doors to traditional career paths will not open, art and art-making arise as areas in which young people can access opportunities they are otherwise missing.

Structural challenges exist.

Funders play an important role in perpetuating or disrupting the status quo. Funders often focus on tangible outcomes, while organizations are more interested in how people feel about their experiences. Funders may not ask the organizations what they are interested in measuring. Organizations often feel pressure to reshape programs for difficult, sometimes even counter-intuitive, funder-specified outcomes in order to access funding. Some participants seemed resigned to the fact that funders set the arts agenda—what is seen, what is valued, etc.—based on what they choose to fund. Cultural differences also play a role in how organizations view their relationships with funders. One arts leader said that because black-operated and -owned organizations value their independence, they can be reluctant to accept funding and program directives from donors outside their community.

Participants noted that the most common nonprofit status, the 501(c)(3), is not ideal for organizations working in communities of color. Organizations face challenges with board recruitment and with the “traditional” fundraising model, which puts an emphasis on individual major gifts. Inheritance and philanthropy work differently in majority-white communities than in some other racial and ethnic groups, making the individual gift model unrealistic for many communities of color. Many young arts leaders, regardless of background, see the 501(c)(3) as too constraining; they are opting for different, more flexible structures, such as fiscal sponsorship or a limited liability company. These structures give them more artistic freedom, but few funders will fund organizations without 501(c)(3) status.

Participants also highlighted how the traditional board structure challenges nonprofit organizations. Organizations feel pressure to pack boards with individuals of wealth and to create board “give/get” donation policies that will put the organization on stronger financial footing. However, this approach raises many equity-related issues. How can organizations find leaders who are truly representative of the communities they serve *and* who have the financial resources to meet the give/get policies? If an organization is working with historically marginalized communities, how are those communities represented on its board? At present, arts leaders suggested, there are a few leaders of color who are regularly asked to serve on boards. How can those opportunities be more widely available? Nonprofit leaders also said that managing and engaging board members is often a challenge, and yet those activities are key to the organization's ability to thrive. Leaders felt they could benefit from additional resources (whether time or financial) to become more effective board managers.

In fact, arts leaders talked in general about how few resources there are for organizations that are working to increase their institutional effectiveness or for leaders who are seeking professional

¹¹ Chetty, Raj and Nathaniel Hendren, “The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects,” *NBER Working Papers* No. 23001, National Bureau of Economic Research, (May, 2017), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23001>.

development for themselves. Again, for organizations of color that are from communities of color, this need was voiced in an urgent way. “So much is expected of our organizations,” said one participant, “but no one wants to invest in us and our skill development at the level that is required to deliver these programs.”

Appreciation and Next Steps

The staff of MacArthur expresses their deep gratitude to those who participated in these conversations. As we respond to the call to refine our funding for the arts, our priority is to begin with the insights from these rich conversations.

We can play a role in creating a more equitable creative community in Chicago that reflects the city’s many narratives. Supporting these organizations is an investment in imagining a better future for the city, one that includes more voices and perspectives. Three overarching goals emerged from these conversations that will guide how the Foundation refines its work in the arts and culture space:

- We will work to amplify voices, be they individual or collective voices, which are not heard. This includes a careful review of what organizations we fund (and those we do not), but it also includes, for example, whose stories we highlight on our many platforms.
- We will build connections across and within sectors, populations, and geographies. We will look for places where we can create meaningful convening and networking opportunities within and outside the sector.
- We will challenge structures that reinforce inequities. We will revisit our grantmaking criteria and grant award amounts and conduct deeper research on the traditional nonprofit structure to better understand its strengths and weaknesses as well as explore alternative structures.

We continue to welcome input as we refine the program.