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making  
change

# Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice

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[artmakingchange.org](http://artmakingchange.org)

DAVID. BUT HE IS TO



**“Artists are the real  
architects of change,  
not the political  
legislators who implement  
change after the fact.”**

**—**

**William S. Burroughs**

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# purpose of the research

Helicon Collaborative, supported by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, began this research in 2015 in order to contribute to the ongoing conversation on “socially engaged art.” Our goal was to make this important realm of artmaking more visible and legible to both practitioners and funders in order to enhance effective practice and expand resources to support it.

“Every major social movement throughout time has integrated art and activism.”

A working definition of “socially engaged art” is artistic or creative practice that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large. A range of different approaches fall under this umbrella, including what is sometimes called art and social justice, artistic activism, community-based art, cultural organizing, participatory art, relational aesthetics, civic practice, and social practice art. We also included in our definition the artistic and cul-

tural practices of disenfranchised communities, such as the African-American Mardi Gras Indian tradition of celebration and protest in New Orleans. Finally, we included artists that are practicing in the traditions of politically-inspired art movements, such as the Chicano Arts Movement and the settlement house movement, whose origins were embedded in creating social change for poor or marginalized people. Some of these forms of practice overlap and intersect, while others have distinct lineages and approaches. The link between all of them is a philosophy that a primary purpose of art and artists is to be a catalyst for positive change in the world.

Socially engaged and community-based artwork is not new. As Steve Lambert from the Center for Artistic Activism points out, “Every major social movement throughout time has integrated creativity/art and activism. The Prophet Muhammad used prayer songs — a new form. The American revolutionaries used theatrics — tea in the harbor.” Deep community-based practices “have existed for a long time in low-income communities where artists are doing the work and living it,”

Kemi Ilesanmi from The Laundromat Project says, even though they often “have not been seen or recognized by people outside those communities.”

No research has been done to determine whether more artists are engaging in socially engaged practice now than in previous years, but there is no doubt that these kinds of practices are gaining more attention and interest from funders, academics and artists themselves, a growing number of whom want to use their creative skills to benefit communities and address social, economic or political issues. There are many indicators of this trend:

- Since the first “social practice art” MFA was started at California College of Art in 2005, at least 10 other fine arts schools have developed masters-level certification programs, and many other fine arts institutions are now offering classes and programs in this area.
- The Alliance of Artist Communities notes a definite increase in “social practice” artist residencies, to the point where now they estimate that 15% of residencies have community engagement as a primary goal.<sup>1</sup>
- A growing number of conferences, such as the Creative Time Summit started in 2009 and Open Engagement started in 2007, provide spaces for artists and supporters of socially engaged work to dialogue and share work with each other and a broader public.<sup>2</sup>

This increased attention to the social impact of art may be driven, in part, by the increasing urgency of social issues (among them economic inequality, police brutality, immigration, transgender rights, structural racism, and climate change) and the pro-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.artistcommunities.org/socialpractice>

<sup>2</sup> There are also long standing regular gatherings of socially engaged and community based artists, like *Roots Week*.



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liferation of social movements focused on addressing them. In addition, there seems to be a growing recognition among social movement leaders, community organizers, justice advocates and issue-based organizations that artists and creative strategies can be allies in achieving their goals. These trends are drawing new artistic practitioners and supporters to this kind of work, and elevating the visibility of art-making that has been going on for a long time in some communities.

Yet despite increasing numbers of artists, cultural organizations, academic institutions and funders

working in this realm, this area of practice is not well-documented. In comparison, studio artists have been studied extensively, and the resulting data on their needs and practices have shaped the structure and programmatic strategies of the current nonprofit arts system.



Here we define “studio art” as practices in which artists are focused primarily on developing the formal or aesthetic qualities of their work, with the goal of creating works of art that are then presented to an audience. “Studio artists” working in this way include visual artists, performing artists, literary artists, and media artists. “Socially engaged” artists work in all artistic media as well, but for them, the “work” is the sum of the aesthetic product and an intentional social impact, and the process of developing the work — often in concert with community members -- may even be the “product.” While studio art may have socially relevant content, its primary purpose is not to effect a social change (although one may occur). In some instances, the line between “studio art” and “socially engaged art” is blurred; individual artists often cross from one form of practice to the other depending on the needs or intentions of a project.

The definitions we use here are intended as helpful guidelines, not as rigid categories.

While studio art practices and socially engaged practices are both valid and valuable approaches to art-making, our current systems of training and support strongly favor studio-oriented approaches and are not serving socially engaged artists well. For example:

- Most academic training programs are structured to help artists find and express their individual artistic vision through perfecting aesthetic technique, and do not train artists in the skills or mindsets needed to work collaboratively with communities or non-arts partners, something socially engaged artists often do.
- Most nonprofit cultural organizations are structured financially and organizationally to develop and present work in galleries or on stages for paying audiences, not to engage artists over long periods of time to work for social change on behalf of and with communities.
- Grantmaking processes tend to operate in ways that are challenging for many socially engaged artists: they tend to favor individual artists (or formal organizations) over collectives, clear artistic products over emergent processes, and short timeframes for outcomes over long term change.
- Most artist residencies are structured to give artists time “away from it all” to reflect, conduct research and/or focus intensively on honing their craft. Socially engaged artists need this kind of respite as much as studio artists do, but they also need residencies that offer the opportunity to deepen their skills of community engagement and social action.
- Critics and funders alike often use fine art criteria and language to assess the quality and value of socially engaged work, even though it has different aesthetic origins, values and intentions.

To date, most efforts to support and understand socially engaged art practice have situated it within an economy and support system built for studio art. Although the lines between studio and socially engaged art practices are blurring in some cases, there are fundamental differences in the philosophy, values and practices of socially engaged art that warrant independent investigation and validation. Our research sought to understand socially engaged art making as a distinct set of artistic practices with its own origins, intentions, methodologies, values, ethical principles, aesthetics and practical needs.

This knowledge and understanding is a prerequisite for developing more robust systems of support for socially engaged practices and, ultimately, for enhancing the positive social impacts this kind of artistic practice seeks to have.

**“We need a map because different parts of this system don’t see each other. Whole bodies of practice are locked out of resources when they are not seen.”**

Our goals were to:

- Demonstrate some of the range of creative practices that make up this landscape of work, as well as what makes the work ethical, effective, and beautiful;

- Provide a framework that reveals both meaningful commonalities as well as distinctions in practice, within which artists and supporters can situate themselves in relation to others working in this area;
- Encourage stronger connections and relationships between parts of this ecosystem of artistic practice to ensure greater impact; and
- Attract more support for this work, and help guide resources in ways that will have meaningful impact.

The response to the research initiative from artists, funders, and other supporters was overwhelmingly positive, confirming that there is a real need for more exploration of and transparency about this realm of practice. As one artist said, “We have to map the ecosystem if we are going to develop a thoughtful approach to sustaining this work.” Another said, “We need a map because different parts of this system don’t see each other. Whole bodies of practice are locked out of resources when they are not seen.”

Funders felt the need for more clarity as well. According to one funder “We need to better understand the composition of this field, its internal diversity and common characteristics, in order to make good decisions about how to allocate resources.”



**Installation of  
BROADWAY:1000 STEPS,  
a project to connect  
the public to natural  
systems in urban life**

Photo Credit: Mary Miss

# methodology

For this research, Helicon conducted a literature review, completed in-depth interviews with over 50 diverse artists, field leaders and funders, met with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation's 2015 Artist as Activist Fellows, and led a focus group with socially engaged artists on preliminary findings and potential next steps. <sup>3</sup> We received invaluable guidance and input from Risë Wilson and other members of the Rauschenberg Foundation staff throughout the process. Additionally, prior to publication, this report was shared with 19 artists, funders, and others engaged with socially engaged art practice to gather feedback.

In our original research design, we planned to conduct a survey of artists to capture quantitative data on the field but artists steered us away from this, suggesting that interviews and discussions with field leaders would provide deeper insight and greater nuance. We also realized that many of the artists we would hope to reach with a survey might be difficult to reach, or might not participate, so we expanded the number and range of our conversations instead. <sup>4</sup>

Artists said that the kind of bird's eye view a funder or researcher can offer is a valuable complement to the perspectives of individual artists working in this

realm, who do not always see their work as part of a larger whole. However, we also heard that an attempt to describe this ecosystem needs first person narratives from artists doing the work. For ethical reasons, artists suggested that any further mapping of this area of practice should be created with and by artists. The website [artmakingchange.org](http://artmakingchange.org) accompanying this report is a beginning effort to invite additional voices to contribute to this evolving conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> This work was also informed by insights gained from other Helicon projects involving socially engaged artists. This included the Art of Change initiative for the Ford Foundation, which brought together 36 socially engaged artists at various career stages including Theaster Gates, Suzanne Lacy, Rick Lowe, Amalia Mesa-Bains and Carrie Mae Weems. We have also conducted research on socially engaged artists working on environmental issues.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, we learned that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation was conducting a national survey of artists, and we worked with them to ensure that some of questions specifically relevant to artist-activists were included in their survey. The results of that survey can further inform this knowledge base.



**Participants in Allied  
Media Conference  
Workshop: “Physical  
Languages of  
Liberation — West  
African Dance”**

Photo: Ara Hawrani

# findings

## defining “socially engaged art”

Socially engaged art defies a tidy definition, but our research revealed several common attributes:

- It is based on **belief in the agency and responsibility of art and artists** to affect social change or influence the world in some way. It is not art created for its purely formal qualities or primarily for an art world audience.
- It uses **“forms” and “materials” beyond those used in studio art** and often operates outside of conventional nonprofit or commercial presentation settings and formats. The socially engaged artists’ toolkit includes dialogue, community organizing, placemaking, facilitation, public awareness campaigns or policy development, as well as theater games, art installations, music, participatory media-making, spoken word and other media. Examples: Los Angeles Poverty Department, Project Row Houses, Alicia Grullón, Hank Willis Thomas. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Profiles of these examples are included later in the text.

- The creation process often involves **artists working in collaboration** with community members, other sectors, or other artists. The artwork, therefore, is usually not an expression of one person’s singular creative vision but the result of a relational, collaborative process. The process of creating the work is often a core part of the artistic “product.” For example, if an artist’s desired “product” is stronger social ties in a neighborhood or mobilizing a community to actively engage in a political process, the “artwork” may be the actions relating to fostering meaningful relationships or demystifying civic processes, made possible by unconventional thinking and new, creative approaches. Examples: Mondo Bizarro, Laurie Jo Reynolds.
- The work may **include subject-matter that addresses social, political or economic issues, but it doesn’t have to.** Cultural expression in and of itself may be a political act for a group whose opportunities for creative voice have been limited by poverty, assimilation, or oppression. Examples include the Alaska Native Heritage Center’s efforts to preserve and revive Native languages and cultural practices that are at risk of extinction, or the Mardi Gras Indians, whose elaborate handmade suits ex-



press and celebrate the unique history and culture of the New Orleans African-American community during a festival from which African-Americans were traditionally excluded.

As work that happens inside of specific social contexts and at the edges—of artistic disciplines, neighborhoods, issues, and sectors—the definitional boundaries of socially engaged practice can be blurry. Different lineages of art practice within this ecosystem incorporate different philosophies, pedagogies and traditions, and there are some forms of studio art that resemble socially engaged art aesthetically, but do not have a social intention. Some forms of cultural organizing emerged from particular political contexts, such as the Black Arts Movement and Teatro Campesino. Other forms of socially engaged art, like the more recent movement of “Social Practice” art,<sup>6</sup> have lineages that pass through the fine arts world, and build on the

work of artists who are also recognized as part of the high art canon, such as Joseph Beuys. Still others, such as many types of community-based art practice, developed in part as an intentional alternative to the mainstream art world. And there are many independent artists—including popular and commercial musicians, filmmakers, game designers and others—who do not self-identify as part of any specific social or political tradition, but nevertheless use their voices and platforms to address local and global socio-political issues.

Many artists trace their lineage to a very personal and idiosyncratic set of experiences, places of origin, spiritual traditions, mentors (including family members),

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<sup>6</sup> Social practice is a specific genre of socially engaged art making with roots in contemporary visual art production, which often focuses on participatory engagement of non-artists. Portland State University’s masters program and the Open Engagement conference are sites of this type of socially engaged practice.

and art movements. Artists we spoke with claimed a wide variety of influences, such as:

- **Family and community of origin** — activist parents, cultural traditions of community, immigrant or refugee status, growing up in poverty or other difficult conditions
- **Art experiences / movements** — Black Arts Movement, Fluxus, Free Southern Theater, Hip-Hop, public art, Punk rock, El Teatro Campesino
- **Socio-political theory and movements** — Quaker and Jesuit philosophies, Occupy, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, settlement house movement, World Social Forums, the Works Progress Association (WPA), the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)
- **Inspiring artists and political figures** — bell hooks, Freedom Singers, Harry Belafonte, Tony Gatlif, Rick Lowe, Suzanne Lacy, Liz Lerman, Marcus Garvey, John O'Neal, Afrika Bambaataa

This diversity of influences and experiences is part of what makes this work vibrant and sustains it over time, but it also poses a challenge for defining this area of practice as a “field,” because often artists identify more with their specific tradition or influence than as part of a larger community of practitioners. In addition, we found that some artists do not use any particular terminology to describe what they do.

As Carlton Turner of Alternate ROOTS said, “People on the ground in communities don’t use terms, they just do the work.” Suzanne Lacy, at Otis College of Art and Design, shared her experience with cultural practitioners in Oakland who are “working in sophisticated ways, doing long-term cultural work focused on youth development, and building on the work of the Black Panthers and others. They don’t call themselves social practice artists and they aren’t connected to foundations or the formal art world.”



## nine variations in practice

Socially engaged art can have a lot of variation, depending on what makes sense for each artist and context. There are nine attributes around which socially engaged art typically varies, and these can be used to identify and sort work. Each individual project or body of work can be placed somewhere along each of the following spectrums.



## aesthetics

from social aesthetics to fine art aesthetics.

social

fine

Laurie Jo Reynold's organizing and advocacy with Tamms Year Ten

Kara Walker's public art piece A Subtlety

## role / function of the artist

from artist as a facilitator of a co-creative process to the primary creative agent / visionary.

facilitator

creative agent

Pedro Reyes' Amendment to the Amendment: (Under)stand Your Ground, a participatory creative process to revise the Second Amendment to the Constitution

Eve Mosher's original High Water Line project, in which she drew a blue chalk line around New York City indicating where sea level is expected to rise as a result of climate change

## origin of the artist

from being from the community to never having been there before.

rooted in

from outside

Artist collective Complex Movements' art and activism work in Detroit

Artist collective Complex Movements' art and activism work in Seattle

## definition of the “work”

from the process as “the work” to a final product as “the work.”

process

Artist Marty Pottenger’s project **Thin Blue Lines** working with the Portland Maine Police Department to write poetry

product

Director Alex Rivera and musician Aloe Blacc’s music video “**Wake Me Up**” on immigration reform in collaboration with the National Day Laborer’s Organizing Network

## direction of influence

from directed inward to serve the community itself to directed outward to reach others

inward

The **Alaskan Native Heritage Center’s** focus on programs that celebrate and preserve Native heritage

outward

The **Tibetan Freedom Concert’s** raising popular awareness of and interest in the situation of the Tibetan people through a music festival

## origination of the work

from generated within the community itself to generated by an artist based outside of the community.

community-generated

Alicia Grullón’s work in her community of the Bronx on **Percent for Green**

outside generated

**Cornerstone Theater’s** work with diverse communities to tell their stories through theater

## place

from work that is inseparable from a particular place  
to work that is not geographically specific.

place specific

non place specific

Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses*

Hank Willis Thomas' *Question Bridge*

## issue

from single-issue focus to addressing multiple issues.

single issue

multi-issue

Thenmozhi Soundararajan's work through  
#Dalitwomenfight to expose and end caste  
based sexual violence in India

Queens Museum's programs  
on a variety of issues that affect  
their local community

## duration

from a one-time project to a commitment over  
many years.

short term

long term

Suzanne Lacy's *Between the Door and the Street*  
that gathered 400 people on stoops on a  
street in Brooklyn over the course of a day to have  
discussions about gender politics in public

Thenmozhi Soundararajan's work through  
#Dalitwomenfight to expose and end caste based  
sexual violence in India

There are many ways that these characteristics can come together in any individual project, and artists were clear that different points on the spectrum are not objectively better or worse than each other. They did stress that there are effective and ineffective choices (and often ethical and unethical ones) for a particular project and community. The goals and context of the work should inform decisions about how a project embodies these characteristics.

For example, many community-based artists critique artists who are not from a particular community for coming in, doing a short-term project and then leaving. To be sure, this approach is likely to be ineffective for true community transformation, and may even interrupt or set back local efforts for change. Achieving affordable housing or racial equity, for example, will likely not be achieved by a short-term intervention led by someone new to the community. The lack of understanding of the relationship dynamics and history of the issue can cause real harm. Artists who wish to intervene on long-term, systemic issues in communities where they don't live are likely to be more effective if they work within existing structures and with community leaders, and should not overpromise what a short-term project can achieve.

“Everything has a life span. It is great if things last for a long time, but sometimes a short-term project is of the most value.”

Yet Steve Lambert argues that “short duration works, if well-conceived and executed, can be as effective as extended residencies / engagements” for certain goals, such as exposing new people to an issue. And even Rick Lowe, who himself has been committed to Project Row Houses in Houston for over two decades, says, “Everything has a life span. It is great if things last for a long time, but sometimes a short-term project is of the most value.”

It might even sometimes be the case that outside creative resources or perspective can advance a cause in ways that community members acting alone could not. The key is to ensure that the project design is aligned with its intent, from both ethical and practical standpoints, and with what the community needs and wants. In other words, form follows function.

## fundamental components

While socially engaged art can take a wide variety of shapes, we heard repeatedly about three essential elements that are fundamental to all socially engaged work, regardless of the variations in form.

### Intentions

Artists emphasized that the primary consideration for an artist or a funder with regard to socially engaged work is intention — what are you trying to do and who is it for? There may be multiple intentions for a single project, but it is critical that there is a match between project goals and design.<sup>7</sup> Especially for artists working in communities that are not their own,

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the project must fulfill its ambitions. Because much of socially engaged work is innovative, aspirational projects will sometimes fall short of their ambitions (see the section: [Quality of Practice](#) on p.25 for more on this). What we are cautioning against is the mismatch between espoused project goals and project design.



collaborators Heidi Quante and Eve Mosher say, this “must involve a process of research and inquiry with the community you intend to benefit to figure out what it really needs and wants. Trying to do a project without doing that is like being a nurse and trying to help someone before asking them what is wrong.” Both artists focus much of their work on issues of environment and climate change, frequently collaborating with each other and working in communities which they are not based. Heidi Quante cautions that sometimes the community’s needs can conflict with the artist’s vision: “Sometimes a funder or an artist really loves an art project conceptually or aesthetically but it doesn’t have the intended effect on the community” because it wasn’t designed with the community. Even for artists from and based in the community they are serving, effective socially engaged work must be iterative and evolve in response to the community’s input.

Michael Rohd from Center for Performance and Civic Practice suggests a spectrum for understanding artistic intent as it relates to the relative control that the community and the artist have over the process and the outcome. According to Rohd:

- A ‘studio artist’ has complete agency over the process and the outcome.
- An artist conducting ‘social practice’ may consult with the community along the way, but the artist retains ultimate control over the process and result.
- Art that is actually co-created and involves artist and the community as equal partners every step of the way is ‘civic practice.’

Our society needs great artists working uncompromisingly toward their singular vision, but these may not be the same artists that are great at achieving social outcomes or working in a community. Heidi Quante

puts it this way: “There are two kinds of artists. One walks into a room and says ‘here I am.’ The other walks into a room and says ‘here you are.’ I’ll go to a show of a great ‘here I am’ artist, but I want to do community work with someone that says ‘here you are.’”

## Skills

Socially engaged or community based art requires both artistic skills and “social” skills. Like artistic skills, many of the social skills are intuitive and not easily defined, but artists insist that they can also be taught as a craft and developed at different levels of proficiency. Some of the nonartistic skills that practitioners rely on regularly in their work include:

- Cultural competency – understanding different cultural viewpoints and working to overcome unconscious bias
- Respect for different kinds of knowledge/expertise
- Listening with respect, and being humble
- Power and influencer analysis
- Policymaking
- Knowing multiple languages (literally and figuratively)
- “Human” relational skills like empathy, reciprocity, humor
- Ability to deal with delicate power dynamics
- Meeting facilitation
- Fundraising
- Relationship / partnership building
- Organizing / leadership

Artists acknowledged that it is difficult to develop high levels of expertise in both artistic and social skills, and that not all practitioners have equal capacity for both. However, artistic and social functions do not necessarily need to be fulfilled by a single person as long as they are equitably valued in the process.

This is one reason why many socially engaged artists work collaboratively. Organizations like Springboard for the Arts are working to develop “bridging” infrastructures that can help more artists do this work. Laura Zabel of Springboard says, “We are trying to create systems that allow as many artists as possible to participate in serving their communities. Theaster Gates’ work is driven by him and his unique capacities, but not all artists have that. We need the exemplars, but we also want to figure out how more artists can participate in small or large ways so we don’t have just one exemplary artist doing this work.” These functions can be performed by intermediary organizations like Springboard or by people whose job it is to bridge the aesthetic and impact goals of a project, much like “impact producers” in filmmaking.

## Ethics

Because socially engaged art involves working with human beings, often in communities that have been historically disadvantaged or discriminated against, there are ethical implications of doing this work that do not exist in studio art. Professional fields of practice that work with people—sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, public safety, education—have codes of ethical conduct and consequences for breaking them. Social and community-based art practice does not yet have this kind of formal code. Many artists suggested such a code of conduct should be developed, and there are some efforts underway to do so.

Artists who have been working in communities for a long time observe these general principles in their work:

- **Humility** – Honoring the knowledge and traditions of the people and place, and being aware of your biases and what you might not know.
- **Honest inquiry and deep listening** – Asking people what they want and being aware of power

## spotlight on ethics

### especially when working in a community that is not your own

Using these ethical principles are often automatic for artists working in their own communities, but as increasing numbers of artists seek to do socially engaged work, often in and on behalf of communities that are not their own, these ethical principles become more important to articulate, teach and uphold. Artists offered a few additional refinements on the list outlined above for artists and funders who want to work in communities that they are not familiar with or are not their own:

- **Secure an invitation to be there** — If you want to do work that benefits a community that is not your own, find out whether you are welcome first and in what way. This may involve an extended process of relationship building.
- **Be aware of your own bias and privilege,** and that being an artist, even in your own community, can be a form of privilege. Bob Martin from Clear Creek Collective in Kentucky says, “Before artists can do this work in communities that aren’t their own, they need to understand their own privilege and the ethics of entering and leaving communities.”
- **Recognize and value local expertise, knowledge and cultural practices** and do not attempt to speak on behalf of others. Also recognize that even within a community there may be complicated dynamics of power and representation.

- **Leave the community better than you found it (with new skills, resources, connections) and have an exit strategy,** especially if the work brings up issues or provokes controversy that the community will have to deal with after you are gone. Favianna Rodriguez of Culture Strike says, “Artists walk away with a kind of capital after the project is done, and often have privilege and access that the community doesn’t. So it is important to ask, ‘What are you leaving behind, what will the community have at the end?’ They are coauthors of the work, but their names are often unknown.”
- **Work with community-based entities (people or organizations) that can provide a through line for the work.** Jose Serrano McClain says, “Our role [at the Queens Museum] is making sure there is continuity between the different themes and projects artists bring to the table and that they really serve the community. This is a community with a lot of needs and without a lot of time. People’s energy is a precious resource, we want to make sure they feel like what we are doing is useful.”

Some artists argue that community based work should not be done by “outsider” artists at all, but others contend that this foregoes significant creative energy, ideas and resources that can be directed for change. Erin Potts, founder of Revolutions per Minute, says, “We need ethical guidelines for how artists can work in communities that are not their own. Some social justice advocates argue that only the artists in and of a community can act on behalf of that community, that anything else is colonization or oppression. But there needs to be a way that other artists can join in as allies in a non-harmful way. A punk artist that goes to New Orleans after Katrina and gets inspired and makes a song that they play at punk shows all over the country reaches a whole new audience who didn’t formerly know about the issue. This is a valid experience and a valid form of expression, and good for the ultimate social justice outcome.”

dynamics, cultural differences and language barriers that may make it difficult to get a quick or obvious answer. Being aware that what a community is or who can speak for it may be complicated or contested.

- **Reciprocity** — Practicing genuine exchange and sharing of power between the artist and community at all stages of the process, from idea generation to aesthetic choices to implementation.
- **Generosity** — Recognizing that people's time and energy are precious, and making sure to provide something of real value in exchange.
- **Equity** — Equitably compensating and recognizing community members as co-creators.
- **Safety** — Especially where controversial or painful topics are being addressed, ensuring that the people involved are protected and supported both during and after the project.

Long-time practitioners expressed concern that the ethical issues involved in this work are not fully understood or appreciated by some in the fine arts world and in philanthropy. This is becoming an important issue as socially engaged practice becomes more popular with artists who come from fine arts backgrounds. Many artists told us that the term “social practice art” has negative connotations in some communities, who associate it with artists who come in, stir things up, and then leave without consideration for the long-term consequences in the community. Of course this is not true of every social practice artist—there are many who practice in highly ethical ways. The point, is this is an issue that deserves immediate attention to ensure the integrity of this field of practice going forward.

Many people noted that there seems to be an implicit assumption in the fine arts world that artists are innately capable of working with any and all communities, and that art transcends racial, class or eco-



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nomic background biases. Favianna Rodriguez says, “Many in the art world feel that artists are magically endowed with superpowers and can enter into and speak for any community.” And as Bob Martin from Clear Creek Creative puts it, “In the high art world, we mythologize the genius artist, but you can be a genius and still perpetuate oppression.” People in low-income communities are acutely aware of dynamics of power and privilege operating within the art world, and often view professional artists warily. Elizabeth Yeampierre, from UPROSE, a community development organization in Brooklyn says, “Culture has always been a part of everything we do. Now that



this work is becoming sexy in the art world, we are finding that young, privileged artists with art school degrees are coming in and wanting to help our community. We are in an awkward place where we want to work with these artists in a mutually respectful way, but they are coming in and appropriating our culture and supplanting local leaders, including artists, who have done this work for a long time.” Professionally trained artists are, in fact, a more privileged and less diverse population than the country as a whole.

This situation exacerbates historical inequities in the nonprofit arts and philanthropy fields, where low-income people and communities of color have long been disadvantaged in funding and access to opportunity. For example, between 2009 and 2013, only 9 percent of art funding flowed to organizations whose missions are to serve ethnic and racial communities and economically disadvantaged communities.<sup>8</sup> Cultural activist Caron Atlas notes, “Within the arts field, there are big inequities that influence who gets money. Community-based work and longtime social justice artists are actually doing worse than before ‘social practice art’ became hot. It has become harder

for them to raise money.” Historically, much community-based art work has operated outside of (and sometimes even in opposition to) the formal arts system and its nonprofit, academic and philanthropic structures. Artists with whom we spoke noted that even as socially engaged work becomes more popular within the fine arts world, there remains what Favianna Rodriguez calls an “activist art ghetto” in which this work is not considered in the same pools of funding that support “real” (i.e. studio based) art practice. As Kemi Ilesenmi of The Laundromat Project says, “Calling your work ‘community arts’ puts you in a category where you are only eligible for small sums of money.”

All those that we spoke with emphasized that the first rule of this work, for funders and artists, should be “do no harm.” Ethical standards for philanthropy and practitioners should not prevent artists from doing socially engaged work, but rather encourage the recognition that there are real consequences of this work for communities, and many forms of this work are based in legacies of political and economic struggle and contexts of inequality. If those doing and supporting this work intend to use art as a means of improving society and conditions for people suffering injustices, it is critical that it not replicate the structures they are intending to challenge, reveal or change. This means, in part, honest reflection on the history, power dynamics and cultural biases within the arts system itself and a willingness to address these.

## training

There are a growing number of academic programs teaching social practice and community-based art. A recent report by Bill Cleveland and the Center for the Study of Art and Community, “Options for Commu-

<sup>8</sup> From analysis of Foundation Center data on grants over \$10,000 by the top 1000 foundations. Steven Lawrence, former Director of Research at Foundation Center, in research conducted for Helicon Collaborative, 2016.

nity Arts Training and Support,”<sup>9</sup> lists 126 programs in community arts at colleges and universities and at least 40 non-academic training programs. However, many leading practitioners have developed their skills outside of academia—in community settings, under the guidance of experienced mentors and community culture bearers, or through their own experimentation. This kind of practice-based training through person-to-person connections is important to validate because the skills and values of this work are nuanced and take time to develop. Networks, mentors and peer communities are key to the growth and development of artists and standards of practice in the field.

**“You need an organizing sensibility to do this work, but that is the opposite of what is taught in art school. In art school you learn to be a star and self-promote. In organizing, you find others to lead.”**

Some practitioners question whether the social elements (as opposed to artistic technique) of this work can be sufficiently taught in an academic setting at all. Sanjit Sethi, visual artist and Director of

the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, says, “These [social] skills are teachable, but whether they can be taught like ceramics is debatable.” And some expressed worry about the growth of academic programs focused in such training because they see the values and structures of academia itself as counter to the goals and values of socially engaged work. They argue that because academia is socioeconomically exclusive, is based on hierarchical systems of knowledge, leads practitioners to indebtedness, and is removed from real life settings, it inhibits—rather than enables—this work. The philosophical orientation of art schools can also be a problem. Suzanne Lacy says, “You need an organizing sensibility to do this work, but that is the opposite of what is taught in art school. In art school you learn to be a star and self-promote. In organizing, you find others to lead.”

There are a few structured community-based learning pathways for practitioners seeking to do this work. Some of the exemplars noted repeatedly in our interviews include: The Laundromat Project’s Create Change program, Alternate ROOTS’ ROOTS Week, Urban Bush Women’s Summer Leadership Institute, and Revolution per Minute’s Artist Labs. There are also efforts currently underway to develop new comprehensive certification pathways for community-based learning as alternatives to academic degrees. The curricula of these programs are often built on studying community-based practitioners. Carlton Turner explains, “Most curriculums are developed from an institutional approach to community-based work. They are based on theory and studying other people who’ve done it. Rather than that, the Intercultural Leadership Institute is working on creating a learning framework for this work to be legitimized not from theory but from practice. So, for example, if you have come to ROOTS Week every year for 5 years, you have essentially completed a graduate degree in community based arts and you should get recognition for that. It is a place where people can learn

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<sup>9</sup> William Cleveland, “Options for Community Arts Training and Support,” Center for the Study of the Arts and Community, 2016.

about values, share skills, learn best practices, build their network. Putting universities, which are elite and about profit, in charge of validating this work, which is about equity and justice and changing the system, is inherently problematic.”

## quality of practice

Artists agreed that understanding “good” socially engaged or community based artwork is complicated for a number of reasons:

- **What is good — both in terms of aesthetics and efficacy — depends on the perspective of who is judging.** Both process and product need to be taken into account, and both the artist’s and the community’s sense of success should be considered.
- **Much of the work is experimental.** Much socially engaged artmaking pushes boundaries and tries things that have not been done before. On the path toward finding what works and creating true social change, there are going to be “failures,” but as much can be learned from these as successes (and sometimes things fail in one way and succeed in others).
- **The work is multi-dimensional and operates within complex systems.** There are many factors, including some outside of the artist’s control, that affect the outcomes and impact of the work. It is difficult (and, some would argue, unnecessary) to isolate which outcomes are due to the “artistic” part of the work alone.
- **The goals of a work may change as the community engages with it.** As Sanjit Sethi said, “If these projects are intended to enable dialogue and critical engagement, then it is almost impossible to predict what will happen in advance—if

the dialogue is genuine, it will inevitably go in unanticipated directions.”

- **Much of this work is intended to influence communities or systems over the long term,** and cannot be evaluated for success over the course of a grant period. In fact, applying short-term metrics to long-term goals can actually distort the work.

“We need to focus on learning more than evaluation.”

These caveats do not mean that anything goes. There are bad and ineffective practices, and many artists we consulted desire more rigor in assessing projects and learning what works so that their own practice, and the entire ecosystem, can get stronger. But as Erin Potts says, “We need to focus on learning more than evaluation.”

Currently, tight competition for resources and power dynamics with funders inhibit artists from being honest about their failures for fear of losing support. Artists suggested that socially engaged projects need to be reframed as experiments, and seen as part of a larger body of evolving practice and learning. Rather than seeing themselves as gatekeepers, funders might see themselves as partners and co-learners on this path. In fact, many business and scientific entities that are focused on innovation and social change work this way. For example, Google[x], which seeks to invent “moonshot” technologies to make the world “a radically better place” says, “we actively embrace failure: by making mistakes, we make progress. In this way, our ideas get stronger faster, or we discard them and move on to new ones.”

If socially engaged funders and artists truly want to see the biggest impact in the world, then everyone has a vested interest in seeing the best work and practices rise to the top, which requires a greater tolerance for so-called failures on the path of learning.

## “How do we engage with the aesthetics of this way of working without bias?”<sup>10</sup>

Artists agreed that the quality of work is an essential piece of its effectiveness. The art and the process must compel and move people. But the question of who gets to judge quality—the funder, the artist, the community, or an outside evaluator—is paramount. As Jen Sokolove, a former Program Director for the Compton Foundation—which supports art for social change—said, “I am good at judging what art appeals to people with my aesthetic tastes and demographic profile. It can be a challenge to try to identify what quality means to the particular audience you are trying to reach for the impact you want to see, especially if they are very different from you.” Many noted that so-called “objective” standards of artistic quality are themselves entangled in power relations. As Denise Brown of the Leeway Foundation asks, “How do we engage with the aesthetics of this way of working without bias?”

There are several efforts underway to better understand effective work in this area. The Evaluation Learning Lab, a coalition of practitioners, researchers and funders, has developed [a framework for](#) tThe

Center for Artistic Activism is currently researching [the effectiveness of artistic activism](#) and how to measure it, and there are many attempts to understand the social impact of film, media and popular culture on social justice issues, including the recently released [#Popjustice](#) report series, [Active Voice’s](#) work, [Brit Doc’s Impact Guide](#), [Spoiler Alert!](#), and the influential work of [The Culture Group](#).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://blog.americansforthearts.org/2014/11/18/finding-beauty-in-another-reality#more-25550>



**Dia de los Muertos  
procession**

Photo Credit: Gustavo Garcia

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# snapshots of socially engaged art making

There are thousands of artists engaged in socially engaged practice in communities across the country. The variety and diversity of approaches is hard

to capture, but here are just a few snapshots to give a flavor of the work.





## Rick Lowe, Project Row Houses

projectrowhouses.org

1993 — Present

Houston, Texas

Project Row Houses (PRH) was started by artist Rick Lowe (who was trained as a painter) and a group of fellow artists in 1993 with the intention to revitalize and transform Houston's Third Ward — a largely African-American, low income community. Over 20 years, PRH has purchased and restored 23 historic shotgun houses, where it now sponsors a range of activities like art installations, artists' talks, artistic residencies, and arts classes. Community development, social services, real estate and economic development are a fundamental part of PRH's artistic practice, and its overarching ambition, both aesthetically and socially, is community transformation. Lowe explains that he thinks about "the social environment as a sculptural form, so that we understand some of the everyday, mundane things that happen—from transitional housing for single mothers or educational programs or real-es-

tate development—not only from the standpoint of the practical outcomes from these services but also the poetic elements that can be layered onto them."

**ii** PRH's work builds on the work of African-American muralist John Biggers, who developed principles of healthy row house communities, and Joseph Beuys, who worked with social structures as both artistic materials and sites for creative transformation. Artistic materials used by Project Row Houses include historic architecture, social networks, tax and zoning policies, and affordable housing, as well as paint, music and sculpture. Members of the Third Ward community are active co-creators of the work, making key decisions and guiding the direction of the project.

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**ii** <http://www.artpractical.com/column/interview-with-rick-lowe/MA>



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## Laurie Jo Reynolds, Tamms Year Ten

[tammsyearten.org](http://tammsyearten.org)

2008 – 2013

Southern Illinois

Laurie Jo Reynolds is a video artist with a public policy background who has been working on the issue of prison reform for decades. In 2008 she launched Tamms Year Ten in partnership with a coalition of inmates, former inmates, families, lawyers and concerned citizens advocating the closure of Tamms Correctional Center, a 'supermax' prison in Illinois that is specifically designed for sensory deprivation and solitary confinement. The campaign included a combination of political organizing and advocacy tactics, linked with artistic actions and interventions. The art actions were intended to raise awareness of the situation, humanize the inmates in the eyes of outsiders, and reduce the isolation and suffering of the prisoners themselves. For example, Photo Requests from Solitary invited men in isolation to

request a photograph of anything, real or imagined. Due in part to her efforts, Tamms was closed in 2013, but the photo project continues to raise awareness about solitary confinement elsewhere. Reynolds calls her work "legislative art," which recognizes "no distinction between art and politics."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <http://brooklynquarterly.org/on-legislative-art-laurie-jo-reynolds-and-tamms-year-ten/>



## Mondo Bizarro and Art Spot Productions, Cry You One

[cryyouone.com](http://cryyouone.com)

2013 - present

South Louisiana

Cry You One is a theater and musical piece and online platform produced by New Orleans based Art Spot Productions and Mondo Bizarro to gather and share stories about Louisiana's disappearing wetlands. It "celebrates the people and cultures of South Louisiana while turning clear eyes on the crisis of our vanishing coast," seeking to understand "what is going to happen to the culture that sustains our home when the land that sustains that culture disappears?" The piece enables local people to share their stories and process their emotions. It is also an organizing tool, showing policy makers and the broader public what is at risk as a result of climate change. The artists use the piece as part of organizing locally, with organizations like the

Gulf Future Coalition. They also tour nationally to other places that are suffering from land and culture loss as a result of environmental degradation. In each place, they work with local artists and organizers to adapt the show to the local conditions and issues. In Appalachia, for example, Cry You One worked with the Clear Creek Collective to incorporate local stories around issues of mountain-top removal coal mining. The artists are building a national grassroots network of people working to save their communities.



## Hank Willis Thomas

[hankwillisthomas.com](http://hankwillisthomas.com)

New York, New York

Hank Willis Thomas is a fine arts-trained visual and conceptual artist with pieces in the collections of major museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum. Much of his work deals with race, identity, popular culture and power. While he has a firm footing and acclaim in the fine art world, some of his work crosses into socially engaged practice in both form and content. His trans-media, collaborative project Question Bridge invited Black men to ask and answer each other's questions about the complexity and diversity of this community that is usually presented in a unidimensional (and mostly negative) way in popular culture. Thomas also co-created an artist-run Super PAC called For Freedoms to raise money to create artist-designed ads during the election season. Participating artists include Carrie Mae Weems, Jim Goldberg, Alec Soth, Dread Scott, Xaviera Simmons, and Rashid Johnson.

The purpose of the PAC is not to support a particular candidate or party, but rather to elevate the role of artists and art in the political process. They say, "Our medium for this project is American democracy, and our mission is to support the effort to reshape it into a more transparent and representative form."



## Alaskan Native Heritage Center

[alaskanative.net](http://alaskanative.net)

1999 - present

Anchorage, Alaska

The Alaska Native Heritage Center opened its doors in 1999 in Anchorage, in a political and social environment that was overtly hostile to Native people. The purpose of the Center is to support and preserve Alaskan Native culture for the benefit of the Native community and to build cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect between the Native community and the non-Native Alaskan community. Director Annette Evans-Smith says that “for Native people, art isn’t separate from life. We don’t even have a word for art. We happen to make very beautiful, expressive things and live very expressive lives. It is like the air we breathe.” The Center is helping tribes from all over Alaska preserve their traditional cultures by reviving Native languages, connecting master artisans with apprentices to pass on practices like kayak and fish wheel building,

mounting educational exhibits and other activities. And while the site collects artifacts and sponsors exhibitions, it emphasizes that it is not a museum but a “living center.” One Board member said, “We’re not a museum. We are not dead Native people behind glass, showing what we used to be 100 years ago. We are alive today. We are about celebrating how we are today, and how we want to be in the future.”



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## Queens Museum of Art and Los Angeles Poverty Department

[lapovertydept.org](http://lapovertydept.org)[queensmuseum.org](http://queensmuseum.org)

January 31, 2014 - May 11, 2014

Flushing, Queens

The Queens Museum is working to incubate and support cultural work that is relevant to and inclusive of its local community, and has become a hub for socially engaged art through partnerships with social practice artists such as Pedro Reyes, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Tania Bruguera. Its role, according to Jose Serrano-McClain, a former Community Organizer for the Queens Museum, is "to make sure there is continuity between the different themes and projects artists bring to the table and that they really serve the community." In 2014, the Museum hosted the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a theater company founded in 1985 on Los Angeles's Skid Row by artist John Malpede and made up principally of homeless or formerly home-

less people. Their project included an exhibition and performances at the Museum as well as a five-week residency with Drogadictos Anónimos (DA), a Corona, Queens-based drug recovery group. DA members performed "Agentes y Activos," a traveling theater piece in which those impacted by drug policy perform an actual 1998 House of Representatives hearing on alleged CIA involvement in crack cocaine trafficking into the Los Angeles area. DA members reported that the opportunity to express themselves creatively was transformative. Serrano-McClain notes that this kind of work "is about opening up the idea that we're all art makers."



## Tibetan Freedom Concerts

freetibet.org

1996 - 1999; 2001; 2003; 2012

San Francisco (1996), New York City (1997),

Washington D.C. (1998), Amsterdam, (East Troy)

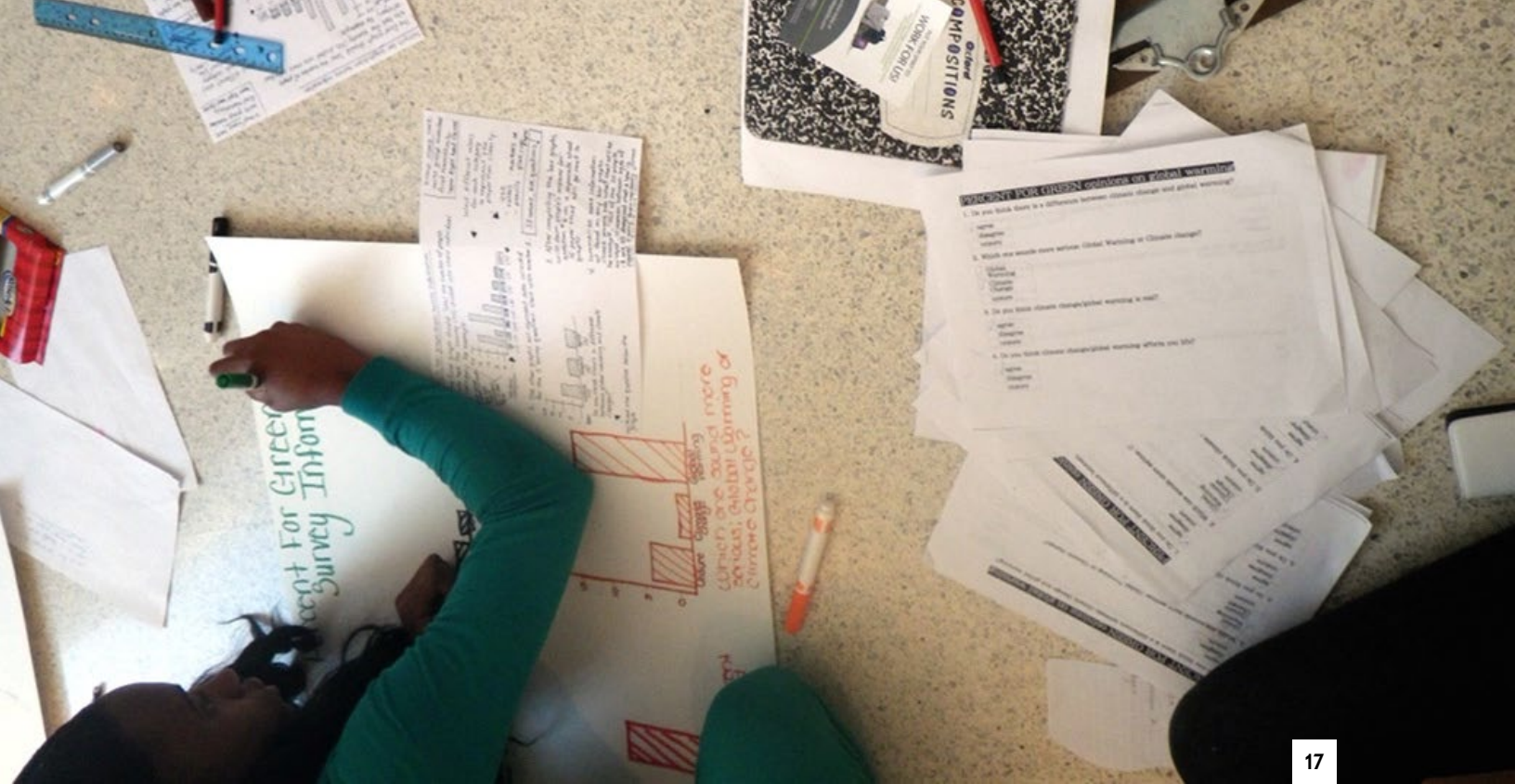
Wisconsin, Sydney, Tokyo (1999), Tokyo (2001),

Taipei (2003) Vienna, and Geneva (2012).

In the 1990s, a group of artists and activists created the Tibetan Freedom Concerts, a new kind of benefit event designed to raise awareness, not just money. The series of concerts brought together popular musicians, like the Red Hot Chili Peppers and De La Soul, with knowledgeable issue experts from the Free Tibet movement. This helped attract, inspire, and engage young people in the issue of Tibetan independence and its human rights struggle with China, and then leveraged this new awareness to build the existing movement. The concerts were a true partnership between artists and activists, raising \$5 million and reaching a worldwide audience

of over 6 million people online and over 300,000 live. The series helped re-energize, expand, and mobilize a student movement, the Students for a Free Tibet, which grew from 30 student chapters before the first concert to 650 chapters today.<sup>13</sup> Out of this work grew Revolutions per Minute, an organization that helps popular musicians and comedians connect to and influence causes they care about.

<sup>13</sup> Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy. The Culture Group. <http://revolutionsperminute.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Making-Waves-The-Culture-Group.pdf>. p 39.



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## Alicia Grullón

[aliciagrullon.com](http://aliciagrullon.com)

New York, New York

Since 2014, Bronx-based artist Alicia Grullón has been using art to facilitate community conversations about climate change and to push for policies and programs that help support sustainability initiatives in low-income neighborhoods. She has organized community workshops for people to create art exploring and responding to environmental issues that they face in their daily lives. She says the response from the community has been “relief that we can talk about climate change in relation to real issues facing our community — economic development and environmental toxins — not polar bears.” The workshops build local awareness and engagement around sustainability issues within the community, and help people recover the “green intuition” of their traditional cultures, much of which has been lost in their contemporary urban environment. Artworks created at the workshops are shared with policymakers and the broader public, introducing

voices to the conversation about climate change that are often not heard. Based on the ideas generated in the workshops, Grullón and community members have proposed a piece of legislation, Percent For Green, which seeks to earmark one percent of City funded construction costs to support green initiatives in underserved neighborhoods.



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## Youth Speaks, The Bigger Picture

1996 - 2016

San Francisco, California

Youth Speaks works with teenagers and young adults around the country, helping them find and express their unique voice through spoken word and poetry. "By making the connection between poetry, spoken word, youth development and civic engagement, Youth Speaks aims to deconstruct dominant narratives in hopes of achieving a more inclusive, and active, culture." In one of its many projects, Youth Speaks is collaborating with University of California San Francisco's Center for Vulnerable Populations on "The Bigger Picture," a youth-driven campaign designed to raise awareness about the Type-2 Diabetes epidemic. It helps young people create poems and music videos that tell their own stories about the environmental and social factors that are driving this epidemic in their lives and communities. The young people's creative

[youthspeaks.org/thebiggerpicture](http://youthspeaks.org/thebiggerpicture)

stories deal with issues like marketing of sugary products in low-income schools and food deserts. These stories are used as educational tools to reach other youth, and contribute to the larger public policy conversation about how to address the issue. "The Bigger Picture" has garnered national attention, including a feature on the homepage of *The Huffington Post* with over 1 million video views.



**Front/Space in Kansas City presents exhibit of raw data on issues like food deserts and blight with artist-derived solutions.**

Photo Credit: Leandra Burnett

# — supporting a dynamic ecosystem

All the artists we spoke with emphasized that this area of practice is not simply a gaggle of disparate projects led by “super star” practitioners, and that this commonly held view is an impediment to the work. Rather, it is actually a complex, dynamic and interdependent web of artists, organizations, and communities, working with a variety of cultural traditions, tools, and methodologies. While the studio art field is also complex, the interdependent nature and intent of socially engaged work—whether it concerns preserving a cultural tradition, influencing public opinion or policy on an issue, or building a stronger community—makes attending to the larger system, as well as its parts, even more relevant and important. Artists told us that the success of their work is highly dependent upon the health of the system overall.

The concept of an *ecosystem* as a way of understanding how socially engaged art functions emerged in our conversations, and had broad resonance with artists.<sup>14</sup> Many suggested that the ecosystem framing could be helpful to the thinking of practitioners, funders, and educators about this area of practice:

- In an ecosystem, **biodiversity and redundancy** are key to health. Healthy systems have multiple organisms providing similar and overlapping

functions, which ensures resiliency in the face of disruption. There are many pathways to achieve social change or building community through artmaking, and impact is often a result of several artists and organizations deploying multiple approaches, which can’t be traced to one project or intervention alone.

- In earth sciences, as well as many other systems, the **greatest creativity and richness lies at the edges** where multiple systems touch. Much socially engaged art occurs at the boundaries between things like emotion and logic, beauty and usefulness, play and seriousness; or it serves to build bridges between different communities, groups of people or sectors. Business schools, technology labs, and people are realizing that this

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<sup>14</sup> Calling this tapestry of lineages, methods, values, intentions, and artists a “field” did not resonate with the people we interviewed, in part because it seems to imply more uniformity and alignment than in fact exists. In addition, some artists felt that the idea of a field is actually out of alignment with the values and origins of much of this work, which questions, resists and provides alternatives to unjust power structures or systems of oppression. Many felt that “fields” that are defined by philanthropy or academia often reinforce power imbalances and inequities — things that many artists working in this realm are seeking to correct. As Carlton Turner said, “Fields are defined by people in power to separate and segregate. They are inherently hierarchical and about control.”



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kind of disciplinary cross-pollination offers new ways of seeing things and has great transformative potential.

- For seeds to take root and prosper, **the soil must be nurtured.** Even the most brilliant and potentially catalytic art project will not produce lasting change without a sustained investment in the artistic work and the community it is meant to benefit. Socially engaged art making is dynamic and relational and neither artists nor artistic practices exist in separation from their larger context.

- **Every creative process has a natural cycle** that leads up to and follows the visible periods of flowering. Planning, sowing, gestation and periods of dormancy are necessary to ensure a bountiful harvest and sustainable life. The active period of socially engaged projects takes a lot of energy, and socially engaged artists need time to research, plan, reflect, document and integrate in order to continue to do this work at high levels.

So, what would it look like to nurture a healthy ecosystem for this work? According to artists and field leaders, fertile conditions for socially engaged work would require:

1. **Hubs or physical centers in communities** that can be “homes” for incubating artists / projects, capturing and sharing knowledge, and providing a throughline for action beyond the duration of individual projects. As José Serrano-McClain and Prerana Reddy from the Queens Museum said, “Because the Queens Museum is based in the community we can think over a longer timeline than a project. We are doing multiple projects—Corona Park, Flushing Meadows, Immigrant Movement International, a partnership with Queens College—that are synergistic and building on each other. To do this work, you need community art spaces that can provide this anchoring and sustaining role.” These hubs might be multi-function community centers or even networks like Gulf South Rising, a regional coalition working to address the causes and effects of climate change. The effectiveness of artists’ projects often depends on entities like this.
2. **Training and education pathways for artists and community activists / organizations** that validate existing masters, help document pedagogies, support community based approaches, and build networks. Many of the skills needed to do this work are not taught through fine arts educa-

tional institutions but are developed over many years in community settings. Community based organizations and mentors need increased validation and support, and artists need stipends to pursue ongoing training and development.

3. **Intermediaries** (both individuals and organizations) that can translate and facilitate connections between artists / arts organizations and social change sectors. The work of creating impact via socially engaged art work takes time, energy and specific skills that not all artists can or want to dedicate. In addition, the true potential of successful work is often limited by the lack of capacity on the part of both artists and activist organizations to amplify and replicate it. There is a need for supportive entities that truly understand both art and social change and can help build bridges between the two and spread effective work widely.

4. **Unrestricted, long-term operating support** for artists, activists, hub institutions and intermediaries. This recognizes that much of the work required to achieve impact requires long term, sustained effort and does not always look like an easily defined "project." In addition, many artists wished for more support for aspects of projects that are critical to the impact of the work but not typically included in grants, such as exploratory research, process design, and community consultation beforehand, and assessment and reflection afterwards to harvest, integrate and share learning.

5. **Education for both arts funders and issue-based funders** to help create greater understanding of this work and ensure ethical and effective investments. Artists, field leaders, and funders all acknowledged that there is currently insufficient understanding among funders on both sides about how to recognize and support good work in this area. Artists suggested more conversation among art funders and issue-based funders and between

funders and field leaders to build bridges, share knowledge and put more resources behind leading practitioners, important experimentation and what we already know works. Since the dynamics of communities can be complicated and nuanced, funders entering new communities should reach out to local funders and groups in those places to understand the lay of the land before making grants. Finally, funders used to supporting studio artists need to develop new grantmaking criteria and processes that are tailored specifically to socially engaged artists, such as supporting processes as well as "products" and supporting community participants as well as artists.

6. **Documentation and learning** of effective practices. Many people said that being serious about art's potential as a force for social change requires learning from what works and what doesn't. This requires changing current funding practices and mindsets to truly encourage artists to "fail up," and supporting assessment, documentation and dissemination of findings. It also includes supporting opportunities for knowledge exchange that reach across location, culture, generation and approach to practice. Knowledge building efforts should be artist-led and first and foremost case studies of practice (both successes and so-called failures) and a code of ethics that can be taught and upheld by people in the field.

Our current historical moment of social and political upheaval is providing an opening for new ways of thinking about how we organize ourselves and do things as a society. Artists and creative practice can play a potent role in shaping a new and better future, and the increasing interest in this area of work is an encouraging sign. Intentional cultivation of this ecosystem can provide the supportive ground that will help artists use their creative capacities to benefit communities and society at large.

## what's next?

Mapping the Landscape and the microsite on which it is housed were created as catalysts for an ongoing conversation among artists themselves. [Artmakingchange.org](http://Artmakingchange.org) displays information—Heli-con's report, a set of commissioned essays, a list of resources for professional development, funding, and ongoing education—but it is not a two-way microphone. Using the channels of social media, **#art-makingchange** offers a set of prompts on Twitter and Instagram to discuss the unique challenges and opportunities you face as an artist working in the public sphere.





**HOLA's Public Art  
Residency program  
connects young  
people with artist  
Tanya Aguiniga**

Photo: Nara Hernandez

# research resources + acknowledgments

## people interviewed or consulted

**Raquel de Anda and Gan Golan\***

Artists

**Caron Atlas**

Art and Democracy

**Roberto Bedoya\***

Oakland Cultural Affairs Commission

**Stanlyn Brevé\***

National Performance Network

**Dudley Cocke\***

Roadside Theater

**Teddy Cruz\***

Estudio Teddy Cruz

**Julie Decker\***

Anchorage Museum

**Beka Economopolous\***

Not an Alternative

**Deborah Fisher\***

A Blade of Grass

**Thelma Golden**

Studio Museum of Harlem

**Alicia Grullón\***

Artist

**Jenny Kendler\***

Artist

**Marda Kirn**

EcoArts

**Pam Korza + Barbara Schaffer Bacon**

Animating Democracy

**Josh Healey\***

Movement Generation

**Sammy Hoi**

Maryland Institute College of Art

**Kemi Ilesanmi**

The Laundromat Project

**James Kass**

Youth Speaks

**Suzanne Lacy\***

Artist

**Steve Lambert\***

Center for Artistic Activism

**Liz Lerman\***

Arizona State University

**Rick Lowe\***

Project Row Houses

**Frances Lucerna\***

El Puente

**Susan McAllister + Naomi Natale\***

Artists

**Maurine Knighton**

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

**Bob Martin\***

Clear Creek Collective

**Eve Mosher\***

Artist

**Danny Peralta**

The Point

**Erin Potts**

Jumpslide Strategies

**Heidi Quante**

Creative Catalysts

**Prerana Reddy**

Queens Museum of Art

**José Serrano-McClain**

NYC Mayor's Office

**Favianna Rodriguez\***

Culture Strike

**Michael Rohd\***

Center for Performance and Civic Practice

**Chemi Rosado-Seijo\***

Artist

**Sanjit Sethi\***

Corcoran School of the Arts and Design

**Jen Sokolove**

The Compton Foundation

**Thenmozhi Soundararajan\***

Artist

**Nick Slie\***

Mondo Bizarro

**Ada Smith**

Appalshop

**Jess Solomon**

Cultural worker

**Caitlin Strokosch**

National Performance Network

**Nato Thompson**

Creative Time

**Carlton Turner\***

AlternateROOTS

**Deanna Van Buren\***

Designing Justice + Designing Spaces

**Frances Whitehead\***

Artist

**Risë Wilson**

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

**Jasiri X\***

Artist

**Elizabeth Yeampierre**

UPROSE

**Laura Zabel**

Springboard for the Arts

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\* Indicates practicing artist

## training programs

Alternate Roots, [ROOTS Week](#)

[Cornerstone Institute Summer Residency](#)

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## about helicon

Helicon collaborates with artists, cultural organizations, foundations and other creative enterprises to make communities more vital, sustainable and just for all people. More than a research firm, their work includes strategy, organizational development, along with a span of coaching and consulting services. All of which operates from the belief in the power of culture to contribute to a more just, sustainable and beautiful world. To learn more about who they are and what they do, visit [heliconcollab.net](http://heliconcollab.net)

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We acknowledge that this is a complex ecosystem in a constant process of evolution, and recognize the risk in attempting to define it. Inevitably there will be things we left out or described imperfectly, and we apologize for any errors of fact or interpretation. We offer this contribution, and invite others to take it farther.

## photo credits

**1:** Page 5, Image for Cry You One taken near the back of the E.J. Gore Pumping Station in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Photo Credit: Melisa Cardona **2:** Page 6, JooYoung Choi in her installation of Have Faith For You Have Always Been Loved at Project Row Houses. Photo Credit: Alex Barber. **3:** Page 12: Nicole Miller's installation Death of a School. Photo Credit: Bridget Fernandes. **4:** Page 13, 2014 Allied Media Conference. Photo Credit: Ara Hawrani. **5:** Page 14, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Grantee Summit 2017. Photo Credit: Mark Poucher. **6:** Page 19, Living Walls mural by Know Hope. Photo Credit: Joshua Gwyn.

Photo Credit: Joshua Gwyn **7:** Page 22, Mama Olayeela Daste leads prayer and libation blessing in Congo Square. Photo Credit: Ralph Bush. **8:** Page 24, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Alicia Grullón **9:** Page 28, Exhibition opening at Project Row Houses. Photo Credit: Alex Barber **10:** Page 29, Aerial View of Project Row Houses during Round 41, curated by Ryan N Dennis. Photo Credit: Peter Molick **11:** Page 30, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Tamms Year Ten — Torture is a crime **12:** Page 31, Audience gathers along the journey of Cry You One, a 2.5 mile processional in the heart of Louisiana's disappearing wetland. Photo Credit: Melisa Cardona. **13:** Page 32, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Question Bridge. **14:** Page 33, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Alaska Native Heritage Center. **15:** Page 34, Agentes y Activos performed at the Queens Museum by LAPD and Drogadictos Anonimos. **16:** Page 35, 1998, The Tibetan Freedom Concert at RFK Stadium in Washington DC. Over 120,000 people attended the concert. Photo Credit: Mr.TinDC / Flickr, Courtesy of Public Radio International. **17:** Page 38, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Alicia Grullón. **18:** Page 37, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Youth Speaks. **19:** Page 40, Photo Credit: Courtesy of Mondo Bizarro **20:** Page 42, Photo Credit: Courtesy Thenmozhi Soundararajan.

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