

## **A Special Opportunity for Arts and Culture Funders to Advance Democracy**

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*Grantmakers in the Arts, Online Forum on Equity in Arts Funding*

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I've been pleasantly surprised by the amount of attention Fusing Art, Culture and Social Change, NCRP's most recent report, has generated. More than 200 media outlets have run stories referencing the report, which far exceeds the amount of coverage we've received for other reports in our High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy series.

Why is this work generating so much discussion? Is it because the report is so well written? Certainly Holly Sidford penned a compelling piece. Yet, many well-argued essays generate little attention. Is it because Grantmakers in the Arts (GIA) has done such tremendous work in its role as discussion-promoter-in-chief for arts funders? They surely have gone beyond the call of duty, but I don't think that's the answer. Is it because these issues are new? Hardly. During a session at this year's GIA conference, one funder lamented that we have been discussing equity in arts funding for 40 years and little has changed.

I think a noteworthy explanation for the sustained interest is that release of the report coincided with the rising Occupy Wall Street movement and a growing concern nationally with issues of equity and fairness. With economic justice and democracy front and center on the national zeitgeist, perhaps our report caught on to something that already is part of the national consciousness and public discourse.

There's an important connection here that can point us towards where I think the discussion needs to go next. Thus far, coverage of the report has centered primarily on the question of who benefits from arts philanthropy, which is an important question and certainly one that we hoped would gain traction. In addition to continued dialogue and action about who benefits, I hope we see more discussion about how arts philanthropy can contribute more robustly to our democracy and to the creation of a more fair and equitable world.

Now is a moment in time when real social change seems possible (in spite of the inability of Congress to take meaningful action). The Occupy movement has given many people an opportunity to express their anger and put forward a vision of a different and better world. What

can arts funders do to build on the energy of this moment? What else can we do to better connect arts and social justice?

Our report found that only 4 percent of grants made with a primary purpose of supporting arts and culture were coded as promoting social justice. The arts, as our report notes, are an essential means by which communities and cultures find meaning and engage with the world. And the same is true for individuals – each of us uses the arts in ways that help us make sense of the world. The arts are a means for us to shape our identity, consider the future and determine what we want that future to be like.

The arts are also crucial to advancing democracy: they are a means to animating civil society, they provide us with creative methods of dealing with differences among us and, by doing so, they help us create common cause and shared purpose with society. So, starting at the individual level and moving through each layer of society, the arts are fundamentally tied to a strong and vibrant democracy. And when foundations fund arts and culture groups with an explicit purpose of advancing social justice, they are contributing to participatory parity and moving us closer to a more just and equitable world. Americans for the Arts, through its Animating Democracy Project, released recently a report with which most of you are likely familiar. NCRP and I appreciate the incredibly important work that Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza did on *Trend or Tipping Point: Arts & Social Change Grantmaking*. Their comprehensive analysis of social justice grantmaking in the arts and culture community is a great resource.

I hope we continue challenging ourselves to ensure arts philanthropy benefits everyone in our society. I also hope we grow more rigorous in our exploration of how our funding for arts and culture can make a substantive contribution to social change, helping bring greater equity to our nation and the world.

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