

Occupy the Arts

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Generally speaking, people in the arts tend to think of themselves as progressives and innovators whose purpose includes questioning the status quo. But when it comes to thinking about their own way of doing business, and especially when it comes time to look at the way money is raised and distributed, it is astonishing how artists can sound like they are adapting conservative talking points. Often hanging on financially by their fingernails, arts leaders have been taught to play a particular game that exists only within a specific artistic ecosystem, and no matter how unjust that system might be, they often become extremely defensive if that game is questioned. And yet, more and more artists and arts bloggers are doing just that -- asking uncomfortable questions about economic equity, diversity, and fairness within the world of nonprofit arts institutions.

On September 17, 2011, Occupy Wall Street first gathered in Zuccotti Park to protest that the top 1% of Americans took home roughly 25% of the nation's total annual income; just a few weeks later, Holly Sidford and the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy (NCRP) released a report entitled [Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change](#) about the nonprofit arts scene that went OWS one better. Their report showed that nonprofit arts institutions with annual budgets over \$5 million, which represents 2% of all nonprofit arts organization, raked in 55% of all contributions, gifts and grants from philanthropic institutions who give money to the arts.

Let's put this in perspective: if there were one hundred people splitting \$1 million according to the OWS breakdown, one lucky guy would get \$250,000 and the other 99 would each get \$7575, a ratio of 33:1. Now let's look at the nonprofit arts scene: if one hundred arts organizations were splitting \$1 million dollars according to the NCRP breakdown, two lucky arts organizations would get \$550,000 (\$275,000 each), and the other 98 would each get \$4591, a ratio of about 60:1. In other words, the income gap in the nonprofit arts scene is *almost twice as wide as in the culture as a whole*.

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