

Shaping a Critical Discourse

A Report on the Joint Convening
of Artography: Arts in a Changing America
and the Animating Democracy/
Working Capital Fund Exemplar Program

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BACKGROUND

From May 14–16, 2007, grantees from Artography and Animating Democracy/Working Capital Fund Exemplar programs met together in Chicago to share their experiences, reflect on the lessons they learned, and consider ways they might draw on the collective power of their work. The Artography and Exemplar staffs, mindful of the considerable common ground shared by the grantees, were eager to provide an opportunity for these organizations to come together. The participating groups are leaders recognized in the field for their exemplary community-based practices and their creative innovations in relation to changing demographics. The Ford Foundation supports both Artography and the Exemplar program.

Artography: Arts in a Changing America is a two-year pilot grant and documentation program being incubated by Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC). Its goals are to recognize, strengthen, and chart the expanding realm of cultural aesthetics and organizational practice as seen through a lens of the changing demographics in the United States. Through a nationwide open call for applications and a peer grant review process, LINC made grants to nine small to mid-sized nonprofit organizations that exemplify artistically visionary and community responsive practices.

The Exemplar Program recognized 12 small to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations from across the country for outstanding cultural work in their communities and in the field, based on their participation in the Animating Democracy program of Americans for the Arts and the Working Capital Fund of LarsonAllen Public Service Group. Through grants for operating support, knowledge/capacity building, and field advancement, the two-year Exemplar Program aims to foster a holistic and integrated approach to organizational health, institutional growth, civic engagement, and aesthetic investigation. It is being implemented by Americans for the Arts in collaboration with LarsonAllen Public Service Group.

See [Attachment 1](#) for a list of convening participants and [Attachment 2](#) for the meeting agenda. Profiles of the Artography and Exemplar cohort members are included in [Attachment 3](#).

THE CONVENING

The convening’s primary purpose was to provide time for peer exchange around artistic, institutional, civic, leadership, and other field-related matters.

The staff of the Artography and Exemplar programs worked with twenty cohort members to identify topics of interest and to develop the convening design and structure. Twenty-nine individuals participated in the overall planning of the convening as well as presenting or facilitating parts of it. Seven cohort members, in close consultation with staff, developed the two topical tracks, Aesthetics and New Ways of Working. See Attachment 4 for a list of cohort planners. The convening was shaped by the following guiding principles defined by the cohorts:

- Draw on the experience of the cohort members
- Have sufficient time and a limited number of topics in order to provide for deeper discussion
- Encourage diverse points of view and constructive debate
- Get a sense of place in Chicago
- Provide unstructured time for informal networking and continuing conversations

The first day was hosted by the National Museum of Mexican Art, a participant in the Exemplar program. It began with separate meetings of each of the two cohorts. Participants received a tour through the museum galleries, including an introduction to the *Arte Textil Maya: Collections of the Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya* exhibit by curator Cesareo Moreno and education staff member Luis Tubens. The musical ensemble, Sones de México, performed a number of regional styles of the Mexican *son* and original work.

In advance of the convening cohort members had been asked to: “Find (or make) and bring a postcard completed as follows: On the postcard, respond to the questions “Where are we coming from? Where do we want to be? You can interpret “we” as yourself, the arts worker, your organization, or the field.” Participants talked about their postcards on the first night to introduce themselves. The cards were then displayed during the convening and are also included throughout this report.

The second day began with Urban Bush Women dancer Paloma McGregor warming up the group by inviting participants to step outside of their comfort zones by expressing some abstract concepts through movement. Participants then chose between two day-long session tracks—Aesthetics or New Ways of Working—to engage in a focused discussion that would build through the day. In the afternoon, the conversations continued on site visits to local arts organizations. The Aesthetics group toured murals created by the Chicago Public Art Group and visited the Experimental Station, “an incubator of innovative cultural, educational, and environmental projects and small-scale enterprises” on the South Side of Chicago. The New Ways of Working group traveled to the West Side to visit Redmoon Theater, a group that “creates theatrical spectacles that transform streets, stages, and architectural landmarks into places of public celebration.”

On the third day, the whole group reconvened to consider “the power and potential of their own leadership to advance the aesthetics, ideas, and values they care about” and identified opportunities for action. This included topics concerning organizational leadership, leadership in the arts and culture field, and leadership in a larger social context. Issues that resonated with the group were discussed further in small groups that set goals for future work. The convening ended with a closing call and response led by CK Ladzekpo.

A note about the report: Several people contributed meeting notes for this report: Diane Espaldon, Pam Korza, Karen Mueller, and Michael del Vecchio from the Exemplar Program and Toni Hsu, Judilee Reed, and Vanessa Whang from Artography. The author also acknowledges the additional contributions made by del Vecchio in organizing the note-taking, and Korza, Whang and Barbara Schaffer Bacon in critiquing drafts of the report.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

The convening continually revealed and embraced the creative tensions and contradictions of working in the context of changing demographics, engaging generational shifts and new approaches to collaborative community practices, having diverse value-based structures, and being a cultural agent of change. The overarching themes and questions that arose for the gathering are outlined below:

Affirming values

How do we define and enact our values on our own terms? This includes what underpins our missions and purposes, standards of excellence, aesthetics, and social relationships. How can we better articulate what motivates us to do what we do, how we do it, and what is at the center of our work? Examples of programs and structures that reflect these values include collaborative models of curating and producing work, partnerships built on trust and respect, and a willingness to, as Paloma McGregor put it, “expand the history that is being understood and reframe the contemporary context” and move beyond “labels and packaged identities.” Commercial hip-hop, on the other hand, offers an example of how a transformative and self-determined cultural movement based on values of diverse and free expression can be co-opted and restructured by a consolidated media.

Engaging in critical dialogue and learning

How do we create safe spaces (physical, written, and virtual) for critical dialogue and learning based on the products and processes of our work? Maribel Alvarez named an “ethical commitment to interrogating aesthetic practice” as an integral dimension of cutting edge “aesthetics that matter.” Dialogues about political contradictions, structures of selection and curation, approaches to collaboration, and questions of whom we make art for and why we make it, can be challenging—even among sympathetic colleagues. Is a criticality of practice part of our organizational cultures? Do we have a language for this critical practice? If, as Olivia Gude suggested, “a great critique is one that sees what the work is about and helps you better realize it,” who are we willing to hear criticism from? For some, this needs to be a person with whom they share a social change purpose, for others, this is not required. What are the settings where we can push beyond what has become comfortable in order to do the learning and unlearning that are part of being at the front of cultural change?

Making the case

What is our value to our communities and to the arts ecology? How can our worth and assets be described other than in financial terms? How can we communicate this value not only amongst ourselves, but also to the arts and culture field, to other sectors, and the media and policymakers? What is the most effective way to make our case? It was suggested that overview documentation and analysis of a body of community-responsive work, something bigger than any one of the groups, would be helpful. Jordan Simmons said, “Our folks at home need to see we exist in a broader field.” What are the stories of resiliency that can be shared and the unique characteristics that can be quantified? Sometimes the need is for something simple and persuasive like a map reflecting assets, e.g. social networks, cultural competencies, and responses to changing demographics. A comparative analysis can be a powerful way to demonstrate cultural equity and inequity.

Sustaining the work

How do we sustain our work and stay true to our missions and purposes? How do generational shifts, leadership transitions, institutional partnerships, marketing and technology initiatives, and foundation grants renew and stabilize—or derail—organizations? Groups are raising endowments, engaging in a community-building approach to fundraising from individuals, and using technology to increase audiences and donors. They are also integrating their work into curricula and textbooks; adapting their work for corporate clients; and partnering with larger institutions, public agencies, and community development corporations. Staying true to mission can raise questions about who you choose to partner with, whether you are compromising the integrity of your creative work, if issues of class and lack of infrastructure will limit access in communities, and how virtual networking could replace face-to-face relationships. Generational shifts and leadership succession also draw attention to whether the mission itself continues to be relevant.

Taking action

In a broader context, there is a window of opportunity in a country that is hungry for hope and change. How do we seize this moment and become cultural agents of this change? Dudley Cocke pointed out that as organizations rooted in place and culture, as well as engaged in transnational communities and international exchanges, the cohort is well positioned in a post-industrial global context. What's needed is to be responsive to the concerns of our communities, engage with other sectors, and be proactive. Nicolás Kanellos challenged the group to answer his questions: "How do we influence the media? How do we get a seat at the table in Congress? How do we talk collectively to foundations and corporations? What are better ways of interfacing with the educational system?" The cohort considered what power it has collectively and how it can best use this power to write policy, not just change it.

Understanding a theory of social change

What is our relationship to the mainstream? Do we want to adapt to it, redefine it, or reject it? Many of the groups engage in strategies both inside and outside dominant systems, integrating or becoming the mainstream while retaining grassroots practices, cultural traditions, and creative innovations. But do we internalize and replicate mainstream values when we work in these structures? As expressed by Osvaldo Sánchez, "Is it our goal to fit in and be successful in this society or is our goal to transform society?" Artistic practice has the power to change people's point of view and question the status quo. Are we creating transformative social models or becoming shaped by the market, mass media, major institutions, and other mainstream structures? Change can also be a negative force that threatens a traditional and holistic worldview, cultural continuity, and the affordability of a community. We need to articulate our theory of social change and develop a critical discourse around it that will hold us accountable to our values.

AESTHETICS TRACK

Track Overview

The aesthetics track explored questions of process and product, meaning making, values and standards, and the changing circumstances that influence how and why we make art. It built on the recognition that grantees of the Artography and Exemplar programs bring a broad array of approaches and diverse contexts to aesthetics and making art. The session began with conversations examining two questions with an interviewer and three participants kicking off each conversation. Then all participants joined in through large and small group discussions, relating the questions to their creative work and programs.

Question 1: In the making and exhibiting/presenting of art, how do we know when it works?

Interviewer: Michael Rohd, Sojourn Theatre

Participants: Osvaldo Sánchez, Installation Gallery; Jordan Simmons, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts; and Laurie Woolery, Cornerstone Theater

Question 2: How are creativity, aesthetics, and creation of work being affected by shifting contexts?

Interviewer: Maribel Alvarez, University of Arizona, Tucson

Participants: Dudley Cocke, Appalshop; Theresa Secord, Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA), and Jorge Valdivia, National Museum of Mexican Art

The afternoon site visit included a tour of murals created by the Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG) and a visit to the Experimental Station where Dan Peterman and Connie Spreen joined a continuation of the morning's discussion. The group also experienced a sound installation by CPAG's Juan Chavez at the Hyde Park Art Center.

Key Themes

The following is a summary of themes that resonated during the aesthetics sessions. Please note that it cannot include the full richness of the discussion, and many other important points were made as well.

Approaching aesthetics

Participants were drawn to the aesthetics track for several reasons. "I am both the artistic director and the executive director. The split is not balanced. I'm here to get rejuvenated on the artistic side," said Kumani Gantt of Village of Arts and Humanities. While Gantt came to reconnect as an artistic director, Marina Tristán stretched out of her customary focus on day-to-day operations and marketing at Arte Público Press to explore. Olivia Gude of CPAG was drawn to a discussion about a "progressive aesthetics" that is "more holistic and embodied" to use in her teaching. Some of the group had to get past the baggage that the word "aesthetics" can carry; it is considered a buzz word or loaded concept that needed qualification. It was pointed out that the notion of aesthetics was tied to an 18th century idea of a science of beauty, seen as mechanical or evoked a narrow canon that was used to privilege the work of some and exclude that of others. Osvaldo Sánchez asked whether in fact, "this debate about the aesthetic may push us to hide. People find formal mechanisms that legitimate what they are doing. Dealing with an aesthetic as the main problem would not drive you to structural change." The participants wrestled with reframing the conversation and unpacking the baggage of aesthetics in order to move on to the questions.

Doing and making

The conversation was reframed, in part, in terms of the creative agency of doing and making. “My aesthetic is having people do and not be done to,” said Jordan Simmons. He told a story about a young girl who had struggled in an East Bay Center ensemble until this year. “She changed her body relationship to the ground, dealing with gravity and relaxation of the body in another way. It was a moment when she plugged in. She changed her perception of her relationship to the world through her movement.”

Roberta Uno of the Ford Foundation spoke of the “aesthetic shift that comes from doing something...in making things you start remaking the world, re-imagining it.” In indigenous communities, said Theresa Secord, “we center on the making.” She described the spontaneous and natural process in which people make baskets, carry out interviews, engage in dialogue, teach language, sing ancient songs, pound ash, and celebrate their culture—all of which is holistically connected to their creation story.

Installation Gallery is reconsidering the relationship between art and audience shifting from a consumer approach to one of co-production. Osvaldo Sánchez asked, “Where is artistic production located?” His story about a workshop involving model airplane pilots across the U.S.-Mexico border emphasized the process of co-production with artists and community members, and warned against “aesthetic fetishism.” “It was the shared experience of flying together over the border fence...a concrete coming together, but not necessarily through the aesthetic. Human emotion was the quality of the experience.”

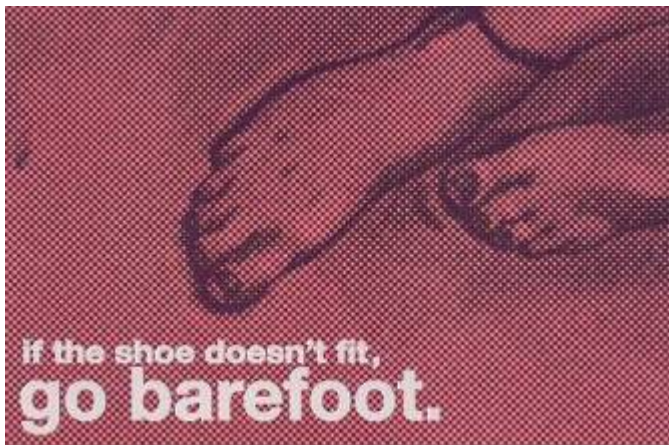
John Borstel of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange offered a definition of aesthetics based on how an artist is mediating the relationship between art and audience. He raised the question of participants versus audiences and asked if the entire audience could be considered participants. Rosie Gordon-Wallace asked, “How can we all be cells, where you replicate/infect your medium and also send out witnesses?”

There was discussion about whether “bearing witness” was also a form of “doing.” Simmons recognized “change through observation” as well as direct participation. Gude described a process of “symbolic participation” where a community member who did not directly participate in a mural feels an ownership in it because his friend or relative did. Considering Sánchez’s question about where artistic production is located, Michael Rohd raised the issue of accessibility, and whether there are situations where people who participate in a co-production might feel left out of the form the work ultimately takes.

Mission and purposeful choices

When the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts had to make difficult choices about budget cuts, the staff made their decision from a shared sense of purpose, not a definition of an aesthetic. Simmons commented, “Because I work with youth, the main purpose is to nurture them. That provides a clarity within which many different aesthetic views can live.” Many others in the group also spoke about their creative work through the lens of mission and purpose. For Cornerstone Theater, a collective of very diverse artists, what they share in common is the mission. Laurie Woolery described the healthy tension experienced by the company when they worked with a guest director who had a different aesthetic and approach from that of their longtime artistic director. Yet ultimately the play was “still Cornerstone;” the company’s mission could hold multiple aesthetics. Said Woolery, “We keep going back to mission. What is this for and is the mission still relevant for the company?” Questions of mission relevance as well as

mission clarity resonated in the group. Mission can draw young artists to an organization, but can also become a “brutal box” inhibiting innovation.



*...Constant awareness and acceptance of putting on big boots and willingness to go barefoot
rebirth*

—Laurie Woolery
Cornerstone Theater Company

Shifting contexts

In describing the ethnographies that she is writing of three of the Artography organizations, Maribel Alvarez emphasized the importance of the context for their work. In the case of Diaspora Vibe, “Miami is a place of arts organizing engendering change through civic dialogue...who gets what, why, and when?” Diaspora Vibe’s Rosie Gordon-Wallace painted a vivid picture of Miami as a city where “neighborhoods are zip-coded by culture, like cultural apartheid,” and gentrification challenges art-making through the displacement of emerging African American artists who no longer have access to workspace.

Setting up the discussion about the relationship between aesthetics and shifting contexts, Alvarez noted the “iconic moments of American

imaginary—poor folk, Indians, and our latest national fantasy (or nightmare), Mexicans. Each of these communities has a lot to say back.” For the National Museum of Mexican Art, place mattered from the start when they chose to locate the museum in the working class Mexican-American neighborhood of Pilsen rather than downtown.

Acknowledging its relationship with place, Radio Arte, the museum’s radio station makes its studio visible to the neighborhood through a street-level storefront. The museum also defines its community as Mexicans on both sides of the border, and is connected and in dialogue with transnational communities.

Dudley Cocke described the concentric circles of Appalshop’s community. The “bulls eye in the circle is where we are,

Recovering the past, creating the future
“El Olvido” by Judith Ortiz Cofer

*It is a dangerous thing
to forget the climate of your birthplace,
to choke out the voices of dead relatives
when in dreams they call you
by your secret name.*

*It is dangerous
to spurn the clothes you were born to wear
for the sake of fashion; dangerous
to use weapons and sharp instruments
you are not familiar with;*

*From Terms of Survival
(Arte Público Press, 1987)
From the postcard of Marina Tristán,
Arte Público Press

10 counties in southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, and eastern Tennessee.” The circles move out to include cultural exchanges all over the world including youth in Indonesia and rural communities in China. These exchanges are “anchored by a strong sense of place, a root” that complicates the stereotypes and mythologies that Alvarez referred to. When Appalshop began its exchange with the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, they identified for each other their strong rootedness. “A bridge has to be anchored on both sides before a span is made...We both expected our tradition as tradition to be strengthened and at the same time something new [would be] experienced.” Cocke also raised the concept of “suppressed context,” such as Native American influences in Appalachian culture.

Economics and cultural ownership

Norman Akers of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) spoke about the challenges of the Institute’s Santa Fe context, a major tourist destination where markets determine the aesthetic. When IAIA shifted from a two-year to a four-year program, it also shifted the balance of “maintaining our truth,” and could train young people to experience their own potential. Students moved from creating products for the Santa Fe tourist market to engaging in “processes reflecting our own philosophies.”

For the members of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA), the marketplace has historically been part of the function of their work. “We’ve sold baskets in that place for 200 years,” said Secord. “People contemporize baskets for marketing reasons and to assert their own identities.” This is part of the dynamics that keep tradition alive. Still, there is concern about the survival of some basket-making traditions, such as pack baskets for fishing that young basket-makers cannot afford to continue making, and fishermen cannot afford to buy. MIBA is committed to fair trade where baskets are bought on the weaver’s terms.

Akers and Secord also identified the complexities and contradictions of the rise of the casino industry for some Native communities. Akers described how it “changed the dynamic of how we interact.” When he goes home, the people who used to share stories and traditions now talk

about which casino they’ll go to. Secord also noted the changes in communities “where languages and art forms were dropping off.” On the other hand, many tribes who couldn’t afford a museum or cultural center now have one.

Cocke identified economics as a defining context for art in this country and cultural equity as the defining issue in the 21st century. Not only have we lost sight of class, the affinity that Appalshop shares with many groups of color, but the arts have gotten stuck in an old economic paradigm. Regional theater, for example, has adopted the dominant industrial economic model where “plays are assembled like an assembly line in Detroit...We’re in a ‘postindustrial’ moment, but the arts haven’t made the shift.” Cocke sees this as a place where this cohort can take a leadership role, given its ability to engage the global through grounding in the local.



We are coming from Asian-American theater and going beyond Asian America and beyond theater.

—Maria Josephine C. Barrios
Ma-Yi Theater Company

Who controls the economy and owns the means of production—be it a recording studio, a record label, consolidated media, the Internet, or even the airwaves—has an impact on aesthetics and cultural equity. Silvia Rivera of the National Museum of Mexican Art used the example of hip-hop to demonstrate how a culture born to urban youth who wanted a voice to express their experiences can become commodified, exploited commercially, and mass-produced. “It’s all about the venues and the forms we own.” Rivera described how hip-hop started changing when the media consolidated, with increasingly narrow media ownership limiting the diversity of voices that could get heard. She asked, “What is a sustainable economic model for this work?”

Juana Guzman of the National Museum of Mexican Art urged the group to “take a hard look at ourselves” and consider what it will take to become economically viable for their own survival and for the good of their communities. Her museum is a good illustration of the positive economic impact—\$9.5 million—that a cultural institution can have in a community based on a study by C3D in North Adams, MA.

Authenticity and first voice

Creating opportunities for people to speak for themselves, represent their own aesthetics, and define for themselves what is valuable was the reason many of the groups in the Artography and Exemplar programs came into being. Appropriation makes the need for cultural ownership acute and the question of first voice urgent. Moreover, self-determination is tied to cultural equity, economic support, and the ability to leverage power.

And yet while recognizing the need for first voice historically and currently, some people also explored the limits of self-expression and the politics of identity. Sánchez acknowledged first voice as a starting point but asked “whether national identities are hiding much more complex identities.” He noted how “demographics exist in different dynamics.” First voice does not guarantee progressive change or necessarily reflect social justice values. Said Alvarez, “We can no longer say a Latino organization is per se progressive, just because it’s Latino. Many are not. What are the communities, what are the values, what are the strategies?” For Sánchez the question is, “Which models get us to which values? Do you buy Corona or from a local microbrewery for your event if you want to send a message? Is first voice enough?”

Paloma McGregor of Urban Bush Women raised the question of expanding identity and valuing different forms within a culture. “How do we continue to push open the languages and rip the labels to show how divergent the roots are? The roots spread in different directions and they are feeding from different places. I do have concerns as a black dancer, inspired and enabled by the tremendous historical strides of those who came before, about also becoming trapped by old missions and notions that are held by organizations, the field, and communities. The pioneers, in my mind, should be seen as the beginning of a long and evolving legacy, not a static rubric for all who come after.”

Cassie Chinn noted that at Wing Luke, “often times we can instinctively tell if [something] has an Asian-American aesthetic as opposed to one from outside.” This notion of authenticity addresses the question of who gets to determine the meaning and value of a work and define excellence in relation to it. Juana Guzman offered an example of how these questions can play out in a policy-making setting. She affirmed Rudy Guglielmo’s (past) work at the Arizona Arts Commission to gain recognition for the first voice aesthetics of Native American basket-makers, and to create a context where basket-makers could set the standards for their own work.

Roberta Uno recognized that “if we allow excellence and aesthetics to be defined by one group and don’t define it for ourselves, we will get marginalized.” However she also described ways that protocols and standards can be set within “diverse voice networks.” “Who you learn from, how you honor them, and how you are responsible to them, even if you innovate” are key issues. She offered the example of a Hawai’ian basket weaver who founded an alliance that developed its own way of training outsiders. He was not a native Hawai’ian but had grown up on a coffee plantation and carried that knowledge with him. What was important in this case was the honoring of tradition, his being given permission to participate by native Hawai’ians, and his “geneology of cultural practice.”

Creative, holistic, and value-based approaches

Coming from “15 years of work primarily defined by the expectations of the art world” InSite is moving towards “a structure that better fits our progress, our interests, and our criteria.” Michael Krichman noted how InSite is rethinking the balance between process and product in the work (with a greater emphasis on the former), creating structures to enhance co-production with community and other artists, questioning when public events are appropriate or not, and considering the best ways to document process-oriented work. One of the ways this is expressed is through the curatorial process that Sánchez has put into place for InSite, opening it up to an outside group of curators who come in to critique and inform his process.



—Theresa Secord
Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance

Dan Peterman offered another example of a dialogic approach to curating where the curator is in dialogue with a person (the artist or someone else) who can advocate for the work to deepen an understanding of its context and intentions. The Experimental Station site visit offered further evidence of this group’s value-based and holistic programming. An incubator of arts projects with the goal of building an independent cultural infrastructure, the Experimental Station designs its schedule to respect the flexibility of timeframe needed for experimentation. The space echoes Peterman’s own artistic practice which connects art and ecology. The building is constructed with recycled materials and designed for multipurpose use, drawing on “the ecological principle of diversity, recognizing the dynamic treasure of resources that a diverse and complex environment brings.” This diversity includes independent publishing, contemporary art, experimental music, visiting writers, organic gardening, bulk food purchasing, ecological initiatives, and a bicycle shop/youth education program.

In the context of selecting work for a citywide festival, CK Ladzekpo of East Bay Center for the Performing Arts raised the question: “How do you evaluate someone’s work in a multicultural, multiethnic environment? People say, ‘you are not from my culture, you can’t understand what I do,’ but it’s a multicultural audience.” For Ladzekpo, it is a question of how to think of the whole

community, not just of oneself. The Arab American National Museum/ACCESS does a lot of multicultural programming, including the Festival of Colors—a three-day festival of music from around the world. Public Programming coordinator Lauren Bass noted the importance of staying true to your mission and having a long view. When programming happens over time everything does not have to be accomplished in a single event, such as having representation of each stakeholder’s culture. It also helps that they partner on the festival with diverse groups such as New Detroit, a coalition of leaders from civil rights and advocacy organizations, human services, health and community organizations, business, labor, foundations, education, media, and the clergy.



—Shay Wafer
Cornerstone Theater Company

Vanessa Whang of Artography spoke of “the complexity of working in a globalized world” where people don’t necessarily know the context for the work. Curating within this multiplicity requires “an enormous amount of responsibility to understand and contextualize the work and to know whether you know enough.” Whang also raised the issue of appropriate spaces for work that comes out of different cultural systems. “Not all performance makes sense on a proscenium stage in a hall with fixed seats, or in a two-hour time frame. There are not enough arts centers that are designed to accommodate diverse cultural practices.”

Creating a critical discourse

For Maribel Alvarez, an “ethical commitment to interrogating aesthetic practice” is an integral part of the cutting edge practice of an “aesthetics that matter.” Making this commitment to critical discourse is not always easy, given a history where the work is misunderstood, misrepresented, and invalidated. Alvarez also noted that being at the front of cultural change means that “a large part of learning has to do with unlearning—words, structures, protocols, practices, markets. Where are the safe places that can encourage and nurture critical dialogue, learning and unlearning? How can we create a language for critical practice?”

The question also arose: what criticism has value for you? A dialogue between Olivia Gude and Michael Rohd illustrates two perspectives on this question. Rohd disagreed with Gude’s position that she was only open to criticism from those who come with a social justice perspective. Rohd explained, “I have colleagues who don’t share my passion, but in the art form and experience that I am trying to create, I have a lot to learn from them, and they can learn from me.” He relayed what a director once said about a community-based company: ‘I don’t think their work is strong but I can’t say that because it will seem like I’m not down with the activism.’ But Rohd went on to say, “I want respect for the work and not just the intention.” Gude responded that “criticism without empathy for what people are trying to achieve” and from people who think they are “ideologically neutral” can be harmful to artists. For her “a great critique is one that sees what the work is about and helps you better realize it.”

Maria Josephine Barrios of Ma-Yi Theater Company named three kinds of critical discourses: “what our peers think, what scholars think, and what audiences think,” noting that often what the audience thinks is different from the other two. She asked the other groups what they are

