

Green Paper for Americans for the Arts

Submitted by The Association of American Cultures (TAAC)

Topic: The future of... Cultural Democracy in America. Recognizing that some progress in equity and diversity issues has been made over the past three to four decades, it is most urgent at this time to evaluate and set forth action agendas around: equal participation in policymaking, equitable funding for all cultural institutions and equity in multicultural leadership.

“The simplest and most profound expression of democracy (is) people speaking, debating, and trying to develop common goals without giving up individual identities. Recognizing that we have multiple and distinct identities yet share larger national identities is fundamental to the pursuit of democratic ideals...”

**--James Early of the Smithsonian Institution and TAAC Board, Report from the conference
“Open Dialogue XI”**

This brief paper comprises a scan of some recent developments in cultural democracy in the United States and an invitation to others to add their thoughts and corrections, resulting in a current working document of needs and intentions for The Association of American Cultures (TAAC).

The concept of **cultural democracy** comprises a set of related commitments:

- protecting and promoting **cultural diversity**, and the right to culture for everyone in our society and around the world;
- encouraging **active participation** in community cultural life;
- **enabling people to participate in policy decisions** that affect the quality of our cultural lives; and
- assuring **fair and equitable access** to cultural resources and support.

--Institute for Cultural Democracy (<http://www.wgcd.org/cddef.html>)

In its 26-year history, TAAC has transitioned through different leadership models and personnel, but maintained a scope both national and multicultural, not an easy task through times of scarce funding resources for the arts, creating at times rivalry and regionalism, if not ethnocentrism. TAAC has continued to convene biennial Open Dialogues with diverse artists and representatives of arts organizations, private and government funders, in order to air grievances, test theories, share stories of challenge and celebration, inevitably toward the objectives espoused in the definition of cultural democracy.

At the most recent TAAC biennial conference, “Open Dialogue XI: Global Connections to Cultural Democracy,” in Denver and cosponsored by the Western States Arts Federation in 2007, Dr. Doudou Diéne, of the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights, and based in a highly multicultural Paris, France, told this African proverb: “In the forests, while the branches of the trees are fighting with each other, their roots are kissing.” He said this offers a kind of solution to our current dilemmas in seeking cultural democracy. “Let us consider the branches of the trees as the diversity of races, ethnicities and religions. This type of diversity of what is visible. Our branches fight each other because ideological or political events make them touch, move around and fight.” Our solutions, however, lie not in the branches but in the roots, he explained. “The roots represent what is invisible and intangible—the universal values that all communities have created. We should start at the roots and move toward the branches rather than the other way around...this allows us to practice a multiculturalism that is not discriminatory but recognizes the authenticity, value, importance, and specificity of each community.”

Our Characteristics – The Need to Measure

Before we can make decisions on what must be done to right wrongs and create access to equal representation and funding for all arts programs, we need measures that count our particular characteristics and problems, in all diverse communities in America. Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson of the Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators Project states that "our years of research on arts and culture in a range of communities across the United States have enabled us to expand the conventional paradigm of what counts as arts and culture in a way that makes it more consistent with, and inclusive of, the demographic realities of our nation—including low- and moderate-income communities, communities of color and immigrant communities."

In the recent Philadelphia Cultural Engagement Index, researcher Alan Brown studied the elements and degree of arts participation in the City of Philadelphia, taking care to include all demographic groups. His research found that "engagement levels for African Americans and Hispanics were found to be higher than those of Whites." Much of the difference is accounted for by higher levels of personal practice, such as storytelling, taking part in performances in churches, performing dance as part of a group, or composing original music. Furthermore, the study indicated that cultural role models within these African American and Hispanic communities form one of the greatest influences in maintaining these levels of participation. This study was based on research and funding from The Wallace Foundation, which has developed methods of measuring arts participation and the benefits derived therein.

Another study of 184 individual artists and arts workers in the Asian American arts community in New York City in 2009, by the Asian American Arts Alliance, found that 60% of artists they surveyed make less than \$10,000 a year from their art and 37% of arts workers are not paid at all for their art work, while 70% of artists work either full or part time outside of their artistic careers.

Undoubtedly there are other measures and studies we need to become aware of to build the TAAC work plan for future years.

A Wide Range of Current Problems

Over the past three to four decades, TAAC and progressive arts activists have observed and spoken out on issues that lie at the intersection of the arts and race. Take August Wilson's plays with their searing and authentic Black stories and language. He has said they should be performed and directed by Black people. He eschewed color-blind casting for his plays. This causes dilemmas for theatre companies, actors, audiences. The argument might be put that culturally specific actors and directors deliver a more genuine experience, truer to the playwright's wishes. At the same time, the debate continues as to whether large theatre institutions are taking funding away from culturally specific and/or community based theatre companies when they produce plays by playwrights of color.

Citing high poverty levels of Black and Hispanic children in Washington, D.C., and the high percentage of these children in that school district, African American education researcher Dr. Mary Hanley at George Mason University wants to identify issues in the education of Black and Latino children, specifically that these children of color need "equitable access to aesthetics and production of the arts in a city that is rich with tradition, diverse culture and internationally known arts organizations. Considering that the arts inform, excite, engage and support empowerment, and

critical thinking” she says, for the children from these low income and diverse backgrounds the arts will aid every young person in dealing with the challenges and complexities of urban life.”

Political responses to arts inequity most recently and pointedly have been voiced by the Cultural Equity Group (CEG) in New York City, led by Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, leader of the Caribbean Cultural Center. CEG has been working in a coalition with arts institutions and organizations to study the funding available to arts institutions in this major city and gain equitable support for culturally specific arts institutions.

Models for Culturally Specific Funding Support

“For years, many of the community based organizations felt and were treated as though they were operating on the margins of the arts field, but, in fact, these organizations are at the leading edge.”

--Diane Espaldon, LarsonAllen, “Community Based Arts Organizations: A new Center of Gravity,” Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts.

Many arts activists from communities of color and their supporters, dating back to the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s remember the days that grants were available from the Expansion Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, lead for many years by the articulate A. B. Spellman. Indeed, many local and state arts agencies offered funding programs for ethnic, minority or communities of color in those days. Many culturally specific arts organizations found a trusting, understanding staff and parity with other applicants in these programs. And many of these programs included support for artists with disabilities as well.

Although the days of those “ethnic set-aside programs” has ended under some criticism that they were discriminatory to others, or ghettoized the organizations of color, new programs have taken their place, under new language that ultimately bolsters support for these same communities. Two programs funded by the Ford Foundation, the Exemplar Program and Artography have provided grants for ethnic specific professional arts organizations nationally. The model organizations they funded feature staff leadership and boards made up of talented people of color, missions that support community-based decision making and identify self determination for neighborhoods.

The current Artography program applies its funds towards the challenge of “changing demographics and the role of artists.” Its grants seek answers to questions such as “What does it mean to create art at the intersection of shifting and sometimes unsettling demographics?” And “How are the media, popular or youth culture impacting aesthetics and art making?” And “What are the intrinsic ties of community to art making?”

In his recently published essay “Community-Based Arts Organizations: A New Center of Gravity,” writer Ron Chew posits that small and midsized community-based arts organizations, many of them representing communities of color, offer artistic excellence and innovation, astute leadership connected to community needs and important institutional and engagement models for the arts field. The publication underscores the “crucial contributions of this segment of cultural organizations in the cultural ecosystem and toward achieving healthy communities and a healthy democracy.” Ethnic specific organizations such as Arte Public Press in Houston, National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, and the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle are examples of these leading organizations.

And in California, a major study of philanthropic foundation funding revealed that communities of color were severely under-funded, compared to their population numbers and

specific economic, education and social welfare needs. In response, the Community Leadership Project, sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard, James Irvine, and William and Flora Hewlett Foundations and others, was developed. The \$8 million commitment over three years will “strengthen grassroots organizations that are led by or serve low-income people and communities of color in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area, Central Coast and San Joaquin Valley.

Will other such progressive studies and projects follow in other parts of our nation, leading to greater parity for arts organizations seeking to create cultural democracy, i.e. equal access to funds and decision-making for all arts organizations?

The Future

“We are building a world where cultural pluralism is valued, protected and promoted. We position ourselves on a global scale. We are anti-institutional, but seek recognition from the mainstream. We envision culture as surpassing nationalism and ethnic boundaries. We firmly denounce the use of social constructions, like race and geographic borders, to limit access to cultural resources...”

--Tatiana Reinoza Perkins , young arts leader and visual artist at the TAAC Open Dialogue XI conference, “A Manifesto from Emerging Leaders”

The Board of Directors of TAAC is dedicated to the transition to new young leadership with a focus on documenting contemporary conditions, recognizing new art forms in our communities and capacity building to meet the need to build greater levels of cultural democracy in America.

TAAC requests that those interested in pursuing a new national study of current conditions on access to funding and policy responsibility for all cultural groups please join us in constructing and building this. We want to pursue partnerships with the Cultural Equity Group, National Association of Latino Arts and Culture and other ethnic specific and national policy and advocacy groups. As Dr. Doudou Diéne said, we should start with our commonalities in the “roots” and move toward the issues in the “branches.”

In order to continue the dialogue and the exercising of democracy by providing those concerned with cultural democracy a central and safe place to meet, The Association of American Cultures invites all to join the upcoming biennial Open Dialogue XII conference, to be held in Chicago and supported by many Illinois funding and arts organizations, August 12 to 14, 2010. TAAC’s three components of the conference framework will be:

- Equal participation in policymaking
- Equitable funding for all cultural institutions
- Equity in multicultural leadership

We urge you to join us – see details at www.taac.com or our Facebook page.

Submitted by The Association of American Cultures

Mayumi Tsutakawa, Chairperson