

Angie Kim, Center for Cultural Innovation  
Keynote Address at Future Arts Forward



*Center for Cultural Innovation held its Future Arts Forward convening at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, CA. Over 230 artists, arts workers, arts educators, and creatives gathered to envision the future of the arts. Angie Kim, President and CEO of the Center for Cultural Innovation, opened the program with a keynote address. The transcript of her address is provided here.*

I stand up here as the head of the Center of Cultural Innovation. If you were to look at my resume, it might seem that my life has been a series of linear, upward progressions, but that's not altogether true. For every better job title, there were forks in the road. Sometimes, I chose a better-paying job and bigger title. But, other times, I deliberately chose paths that seemed counter to expected professional advancement. One of my major decision points came about 5 years ago when I decided to go back to school after a career working successfully in arts philanthropy. That wasn't an easy decision—not at that moment and not for a few years afterward. You see, I left a fun arts grantmaking job with a good salary, health and retirement benefits, travel reimbursements, and the ability to make instant friends. (I mean who doesn't love an arts grantmaker?) So, what did I do? I traded all that in to instead work on a dissertation—on a topic that helped me explore how social change happens and the nonprofit sector's role in either helping or impeding progress. And, let me tell you, my new aspiration was definitely not glamorous: I exchanged business suits for pajamas. But I made that choice because I wanted to research something that had been deeply troubling me. At that point, I had spent 15 years in organized philanthropy, but I didn't feel like I was making a difference. Here I was working for the nonprofit sector—a sector meant to be a safety net and a public good—but I actually felt that I was inadvertently part of the problem. I didn't see how I was actually supporting systems change when it comes to income equality, redistributions of wealth and power, and environmental sustainability.

So... a lot has happened since then, and here I am now at CCI. Because of my new lens, our work has expanded to be about both (1) helping artists acquire sustainability to pursue their artistic practice, and (2) also now includes unfettering artists' productivity as artist-citizens. If there's one thing that a Trump Administration enables, it's being better understood by others now for why CCI is championing artist strategies as part of larger solutions for social change.

This past year, CCI undertook a national research project to understand what has been changing in how artists are supported in their work. This report is downloadable on CCI's website, and it is called Creativity Connects. The report describes many significant trends, but there are two that I want to call out today. These are trends that are not only impacting artists, but also the entirety of all sectors in the U.S., no matter if you work for an arts or a health nonprofit or in the proprietary or government sectors. These are changes that we, in the arts, are not yet talking about ...until today.

The first change is disruptions taking place because of demographic changes. If you took a look at the readings we posted on our Future Arts Forward page of CCI's website, you would have learned that the origin story of the U.S. nonprofit arts system is rooted in proliferating Western European hegemony. You should imagine that in the early 20th century, when "low brow" art forms were popular, like vaudeville, there was a desire to create an elite class distinguished not only for their money but for "high art" Western European cultural identity. These elites became our early American philanthropists, establishing fine arts institutions all across America. Everyone here has probably been to one. The desire to civilize the U.S. through proliferating a Western European canon resulted in professionalizing the arts, ensuring only those with academic training and the right credentials would be legitimated as an "artist." What resulted has been a wildly successful, unparalleled nonprofit arts system, one in which I have personally benefited as a trained art historian, museum employee, and gallerist. But, what we're inheriting is an arts sector—whether commercial or nonprofit—that prioritizes recognizing "art" and "artists" from, primarily, one cultural point of view. More than ever, the arts sector has become out of touch in a world of significant shifting demographics.

So, today, we get to ask ourselves: If the arts sector is but an empty vessel—an instrument, a platform—how would we re-write and re-consider who is in, and who is out? What will look differently if we transform this sector to no longer be as exclusionary as it has historically been? What would it look like instead to have different cultural expressions be supported comprehensively so as to create a new, uniquely American arts and culture sector? In essence: What needs to change, and how do we go about making this change?

The second disruption that is described in the report has to do with shifting generational perspectives. I, personally, identify as a Gen Xer. My worldview was informed by being a latchkey kid, witnessing the Challenger disaster, and being the first generation to look at student loans as a lifetime obligation. Consequently, I'm part of the generation skeptical of institutions yet still employed and loyal to them because I've benefited from them. What our Creativity Connects research shows is that younger generations are demonstrating that they are not as loyal to existing systems and institutions.

Technology has, for the first time, enabled creatives of all types to not depend on traditional institutions for funding or employment. For instance, young artist collectives raise funds online rather than through grantwriting to foundations. Visual artists are rejecting commercial gallery representation and using online platforms to go direct-to-consumers and cut out expensive middlemen.

Young artists also are frustrated by applications that force them to check only one discipline box and ignore their varied ways of working, multiple interests, and pluralistic identities. In addition, we all are more cause-motivated and desirous for social impact. CCI has a grant program, Creative Economic Development Fund, which supports artists who are working in “triple bottom line” ways. (Our definition of triple bottom line is: artistic practice for social impact using commercial strategies.) One of our grantees shared that this was the first art grant where she felt that her political, cultural, and artistic identities were competitive assets and not just confined to talking about her art project in isolation to all these relevant factors.

Right now, the nonprofit arts system primarily focuses its support on artists in their studio. I absolutely support the nonprofit sector funding artists to pursue artistic practice that don't have commercial demand—and CCI will fight to keep those opportunities flowing. But the problem is that there's no systemic support for artists to be citizens, to work outside the arts sector, and as activists. For example, there are no funds to forgive art student loans, which disproportionately affects people of color and which silences entire communities; or for legal defense if artists participate in civil disobedience. Unfortunately, patronage, solely, of production of art:

- a) ignores artists' full capacity for expression,
- b) inhibits creatives' ability to earn income through marketing their many assets beyond the objet d'art, and
- c) denies those in other social sectors from benefiting from cultural workers' contributions in driving social change.

In short, nonprofit arts' trickle-down economics, competition-based grant funding that replicates capitalism within our arts nonprofit system, Western European-based discipline-specific approaches, and project-specific funding reward artists for making art but not enough for their social change capabilities. And, we need both.

So today, let's talk about what the future of work looks like. How can artists and arts workers be part of cultural expression and social change? What might be better financial models for supporting both? Who are the future patrons, donors, buyers, employers, and contractors for all our marketable abilities? How can the entirety of the creative labor

workforce be unfettered? Ultimately, we get to ask ourselves today: What are your ambitions, and how will we get there?

I acknowledge that when it comes to human rights, freedom of expression, closing the gulf between the haves and have nots, and celebrating the various and diverse American cultural identities, we've just taken a major step back this past Friday. Right now, there are explicit threats of de-funding the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities, which will have ripple effects throughout every community in America. But, for all those who voted for Trump because of a feeling of being left behind by the major institutions and the 'powers that be', the arts sector has been complicit in creating the very conditions that led to this populist referendum. We cannot meet the threats that are coming by only fighting to protect the arts. Now is the right moment to find common cause with other movements that we share interests with—fair wages, workers' rights, redistribution of opportunities and income, housing, health, and education. So we have a choice: Are we going to shape a future that is supportive of all, or are we going to use our inherited arts sector to simply make more colorful the elite class? This is a big task, because the organizations and platforms to work across sector, with the arts, have not been invented yet.

For those of you who want to help shape the arts to be more reflective of the diaspora of American cultural identities and to shape it to be more equal, equitable, and fair, this is actually a great time to be an artist, creative, and part of the creative labor work force. Not only are creatives of all types already engaged in ways that go outside the artists' studio box, but there are growing markets and demands by those outside of our sector for artists' contributions—in economic and community development, transportation, health, technology, science, and education. Because of significant demographic and generational changes, the groundwork is, right now, laid for activating change. Hence, this is a great moment. I know that sounds strange right now. But, really this is the right moment for change because everyone is restless. But, in our quest for change, let us not forget that we also need to fundamentally re-make our own arts industry. Whether you work for a post-production outfit, a music studio, or an arts nonprofit, the arts has a legacy of exclusionary practices that needs to be fixed. We need to do three things:

We need to fight to protect the already-existing infrastructure that enables so much creative expression to happen,

We need to redress the legacy of exclusion and elitism within the arts sector, and

We need to invent new entities and ways of working that de-silo our efforts and reach more, and more diverse, peoples—especially in suburban and rural areas, those in the

middle of America, those without the same kinds of family upbringing, education, and income levels, and those with opposing political points of view.

I told you my personal and professional paths were not linear ones. I have an aversion to conformity and doing things that seem the easiest, which sometimes gets me in trouble. A lot of this is because of my own cultural background: I grew up in San Bernardino County—not a rich place—specifically in Fontana, CA—a place both affectionately by those living there, and derisively by outsiders, called “the valley of the dirt people.” In all my years in the arts sector, not once has this background been asked about or considered an asset. Yet, it’s this background that gives me the fire to channel any sense of injustice toward my support of artists and free expression.

So today, I ask you to sit with people you don’t know and really listen to what they have to say and offer. Let’s model how we as expressive citizens need to build innumerable bridges and friendships with new partners, collaborators, and fellow change-agents over the next 100 days, 4 years, and the rest of our professional lives. Exchange emails and numbers and commit to sitting down with each other after this convening. Our efforts can no longer be confined to just addressing what’s best for artists and the arts; we must expand our fight alongside others so that the arts become part of solutions that work for everyone. Thank you.