

Documentation of Future Arts Forward

A project of the Center for Cultural Innovation,
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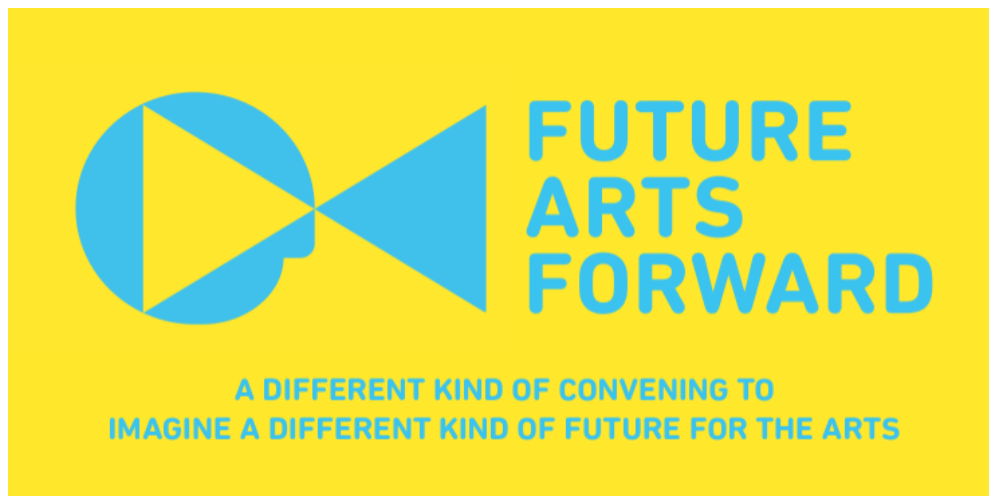
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This report briefly summarizes the high points of the multiple discussions that made up the Center for Cultural Innovation’s (CCI) *Future Arts Forward* initiative. Additional material—including readings and videos—is available at http://www.cciarts.org/future_arts_forward.htm



BACKGROUND TO THE CONVENING

CCI is dedicated to unfettering artists' productivity and impact. For close to 20 years, it has been providing innovative programs of support and technical assistance to a broad cross-section of artists, and conducting research to advance their contributions of artists to society.

Beginning in 2015, CCI launched a new national effort to explore the changing landscape of support for artists, and envision new ways to ensure a bright future for America's creative workers. As part of this effort, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and with support from Surdna Foundation and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, CCI undertook a yearlong national research project that concluded with a landmark report, [*Creativity Connects: Trends and Conditions Affecting U.S. Artists*](#),¹ which identifies major themes and issues of concern. The report outlines what artists *offer* to communities as well as what they *need* to thrive in today's evolving social, political, economic and technological context.

The research found that artists' creative skills and capacities are of increasing interest to diverse sectors, but their ability to meet this interest and partner with non-arts entities is limited because our current training system and infrastructure of support are not providing the necessary skills, knowledge, and networks. The report also found that many of the most significant challenges that artists face—affordable housing, debt relief, reliable income, retirement funds, and childcare, for example—are universal needs, not artist-specific ones. These pressing concerns for artists can only be adequately addressed by resolving them for society at large.

The *Creativity Connects* report suggests that we need to “recalibrate how our society understands the value of artists and influence the larger systems within which artists live and work in order to make [these systems] more equitable and sustainable.” It calls on those interested in supporting artists to move beyond small-scale and incremental thinking—such as project support, fellowships and space stipends—into imagining and making structural changes that can achieve sustained and system-wide changes for the majority of artists. It suggests that the arts sector can achieve more—for artists *and* for society at large—if it breaks out of traditional, siloed ways of thinking by working and build bridges with allies in other sectors.



¹ Note: I was a researcher and co-author of that report.

FUTURE ARTS FORWARD

Recalibrating the systems of support for artists and others who share similar challenges is a tall order, and it was beyond the scope of the report to chart a roadmap for change. However, after the report's release in 2016, CCI began to explore how to activate the recommendations within it. One of the aspects of that activation was a series of four convenings held in 2016. This document shares some of the substance of those conversations.

With support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation with additional travel support from Ford Foundation and Getty Foundation, CCI convened more than 200 artists, arts workers, arts educators, creative entrepreneurs, independent designers, and creative thinkers at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, CA on January 23, 2017. The goal of the day, called *Future Arts Forward*, was to push participants' imaginations and expand their sense of possibility beyond an extension of the *status quo*.

The convening also kicked-off a joint January term class for 13 students at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts and Bennington College, in partnership with CCI. Students engaged deeply with the same lines of inquiry as the *Future Arts Forward* convening around the future of the arts. Students in the course attended *Future Arts Forward* and a post-convening design session at Stanford University on January 24, hosted by and including students from their Institute for Diversity in the Arts. In mid-February, the ASU and Bennington students presented their final projects at a gathering at ASU, which included students, faculty, and nine-CCI sponsored delegates from the *Future Arts Forward* convening.



PARTICIPANTS — THE PEOPLE IN THE “ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED”

For more than a decade, leaders in the nonprofit arts sector has been discussing how the sector can adapt to changing conditions—including technological disruptions and opportunities, shifting demographics, shifts in audience and consumer expectations and a “generational transfer” of leadership. These conversations rarely include young people, people from smaller cities or rural areas, and those with cultural backgrounds and creative practices that place them outside the formalized nonprofit sector. Yet these are precisely the groups that represent the changing demographics and diversifying cultural attitudes and practices affecting the future of the arts sector. As James Kass from Youth Speaks says, “We always want to talk about the future of the arts, but the future is never in the conversation.”

This creates a situation where those charged with strategizing about the future have a vested interest, no matter how unconscious, in maintaining the *status quo*. As Steven Tepper, Dean of the Herberger Institute for Arts and Design at ASU put it, “It is hard to innovate yourself out of a system, when you have a stake in that system as it is.”

Future Arts Forward flipped this paradigm. Due to intentional outreach by CCI and its partners, the room was *filled* with people who are normally left out of policy conversations— young people, including undergraduate students, as well as representatives from non-metropolitan areas, all sizes and types of cultural entities, and all kinds of cultural backgrounds. By elevating voices rarely heard in these discussions the conversation was different from typical arts policy conversations in both tone and content. Artist and Emerging Arts Professional San Francisco/Bay Area member Cristina Ibarra noted that this “was the first ‘future-centered’ convening that many of us have attended where the focus wasn’t on ‘how can artists get more?’ but rather ‘how can the future be more inclusive, equitable, and just; and how are arts and culture a part of that?’”



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Addressing the Bennington and ASU students, Dr. Mariko Silver, President of Bennington College, said “to make radical change you must be able to simultaneously envision the world as you want it to be, and also realistically engage with the world as it currently exists.” This imaginative pragmatism infused the spirit of all parts of the FAF convening and students’ work.

Overall there was broad agreement with the assertion in the *Creativity Connects* report that “greater attention must be paid to larger structural issues and trends influencing the overall context in which artists live and work.” The conversation was wide ranging, but there were four recurring themes, all of which operate at the systemic level.

1. ARTICULATING AND ENHANCING THE ROLES THAT ART AND ARTISTS PLAY IN SOCIETY

In general, participants embraced the idea that art and artists have an active role to play in society, and many expressed a desire to put their creative skills in service to other sectors or the pressing issues society is facing. One participant said “[FAF] reminded me that the arts can be radical. It helped me realize that I can be working for justice *within* the arts.”

The young participants across all three convenings were uniformly impatient with the idea, often reinforced by the art world itself, that they have to choose between being an artist and being engaged in the “real world.” Bennington student Lauren Roshan said, “I want to be a lawyer and my art informs why, but academia and the world tells me I have to choose.” There was a strong proclivity toward a more expansive definition of “artist” that allows people to bring their whole selves to their work and to engage with the world in a variety of ways. This restlessness to be both citizens and artists suggests a need to fundamentally re-define what the term “artist” means.

Even among those participants less inclined toward radicalism, there was a prevailing belief that art and artists have an opportunity—even an obligation—to be useful, especially in these times. Participants expressed a hunger to find ways to better partner with other sectors as creative problem solvers and civic partners. One person said, “What if we thought more about how can we be useful and less about what we want for ourselves? What problem are we a solution to?”

The group rejected the false dichotomy that has been set up between instrumental and intrinsic qualities of art. Jonathon Freeman from the Native Roots Network and a CCI Advisory Councilmember commented that this separation is, in and of itself, a construction of Western European culture. For example, in many Native cultures, the utility and beauty of art are deeply intertwined. The Western European construct of putting aesthetic objects and experiences on a pedestal for an audience has rarefied artists and artwork and separated them from their daily usefulness to society. Reconnecting art to society requires a more expansive definition of utility and value than we currently employ, so that it includes things like the power of art to move hearts and minds toward political action; stimulate learning and critical thinking; and help in healing, health, and learning—alongside providing beauty, meaning, and emotional connection.

Participants recognized that the way that we currently talk about and measure what matters in society is misaligned with many things that are essential to well-being, including, but not limited to the arts. Some shared knowledge of efforts across a number of sectors to find new, more holistic ways of understanding and measuring value—from triple bottom line companies to quality of life metrics. Participants argued for linking the arts and artists to these larger developments around holistic well-being.

2. DISRUPTING EUROCENTRIC CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND VALIDATING THE FULL RANGE OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS THAT MAKE UP AMERICA TODAY

CCI Executive Director Angie Kim pulled no punches in setting up the *Future Arts Forward* convening, clearly situating the origins of our formal nonprofit system in a desire of 19th and 20th Century elites to perpetuate Western European “high art” and cultural identity. The origins of the nonprofit arts sector has led to a system that systematically privileges certain kinds of art / artists over others. The result is a nonprofit cultural sector that is misaligned with the cultural and demographic diversity of our country.

Participants felt strongly that the nonprofit arts sector needs to address its “legacy of exclusion and elitism” or it risks becoming irrelevant as the population and cultural tastes of



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America continue to change. In a provocative exercise in which participants were asked to create a series of headlines about the future, many reflected an acute awareness that—if not intentionally redirected—the trend line in the arts will continue towards greater concentration of resources for relatively few. Many commented on how inequality in the arts intersects with inequality more broadly—the fact that certain communities have been excluded from resources in society means that their cultural narratives have also been obscured or silenced. The arts sector needs to take steps to redistribute money and power in order to rectify this.

Headlines from the futurist exercise like “Backlash Against Artist Elite Across Country: Creative Class is the New Upper Class” reflected concern that this trend threatens the legitimacy of the arts and artists in society. Some referenced the Trump presidency, only a few days old, as an example of how systematic disenfranchisement of people can lead to disastrous backlash, and worried that the arts are sometimes complicit in reinforcing some of the divisions we now see.

Yet throughout all the gatherings there was also great excitement about the cultural vitality that exists in all kinds of communities, often outside of the formal nonprofit sector. This includes artists working for social change, creative entrepreneurs and a diverse range of cultural expressions from all parts of the world. Despite their frustration with its current iteration, participants expressed a desire to reclaim the nonprofit arts system so that it more fully embraces the full range of cultural expressions in America today. Many suggested that if the cultural system were more reflective of the cultural diversity in this country, it would have beneficial ripple effects throughout society.

There was a rich discussion about the need for a more nuanced approach to cultural equity that is not “essentializing,” or assuming people’s cultural preferences are constricted by their race or background. A Native Hawaiian talked about how it feels to be expected to practice traditional Hawaiian art, whether or not they want to. Nicolette Zillich, an ASU student artist said, “I’m Nicaraguan, but I don’t want Nicaraguan folk songs, my thing is Stevie Wonder. We need to go beyond ‘cultural relevance’ to ‘cultural responsiveness’.”

3. FIXING OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS (FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST FOR ARTISTS)

Participants agreed that our current educational model is not preparing students with the skills and capacities that they need to be successful in the world today or looking toward the future. In the large convening, many working artists reported that making a living as an artist means being able to apply your creative skills in multiple settings, but this is not taught, or even talked about, in formal arts training programs. One person said, “Not everyone is going to be first violin, but that is the expectation set up for artists by fine art schools. We need to train people for a range of career options.”

Many artists in the discussions also felt inadequately trained in the non-arts skills they need for their career, such as business skills and entrepreneurial mindsets. This hinders artists—especially those without financial means—in their ability to pursue their practice once out of school if they do not find immediate art world success.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ASU-Bennington final student projects addressed the topic of educational reform most directly. Students went far beyond the content of fine arts programs to critique educational structures and pedagogy overall. A number of the projects the students presented focused on redesigning the educational system to create more engaging and humanizing settings for learning and development – from pre-K through graduate study. This included new educational models that would be more relevant to today’s world, such as greater support for “iterative failure” in the service of innovation and learning, and breaking down academic and professional silos to allow people to “major” around a mission or inquiry question, rather than a discipline.

Several students challenged our conventional understanding of where learning happens and who is considered to have expertise. Many desired to disrupt the “presenter model” of a teacher in front of a classroom in favor of more participatory and reciprocal pedagogical styles. Others suggested rethinking classrooms as maker spaces, or even using the world itself—gardens, retirement homes, foundries—as the classroom and engaging community members as teachers in their areas of expertise.



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A number of students were motivated to rethink education because they see our current system failing entire communities and perpetuating inequality. A Bennington student critiqued the invisible social and economic class barriers embedded in formal arts education institutions, which diminish opportunities for people from working class backgrounds, like herself. She proposed remaking arts training in a trade school model to level this playing field. Without exception, these students imagined a future in which educational institutions are more actively engaged in their social contexts.

4. DEVELOPING NEW FINANCIAL MODELS FOR SUPPORTING CREATIVE WORK, AND GOING BEYOND THE NONPROFIT ARTS SYSTEM

Participants in all the gatherings discussed the financial precariousness of artists and small arts groups, and how that leads to risk aversion and ultimately stifles expression. However, as in the *Creativity Connects* report, they acknowledged that the financial challenges artists face are shared with large numbers of other Americans who also struggle with contingent work situations and lack of employer benefits, rollbacks in health care coverage, crippling levels of debt, and low wages. They advanced the idea that true sustainability for artists can only be achieved by systems-level changes that are *not* artist specific. One person noted, “The Affordable Care Act helped more artists than any artist funding program ever. It changed the underlying economics for artists throughout every community in America. We should be organizing for preserving it and identifying other systemic things like that to work towards.” To enact this requires supporters of the arts and artists to go beyond (but not leave behind) project support to include support for strategies that can help bring about structural change.

In addition, participants expressed a desire to see the resources in the nonprofit arts system grow and be allocated more fairly. Participants also recognized the need to also seek new sources of revenue outside of the nonprofit sector. There was excitement about the growth of interest in arts and culture from other sectors, from community development entities to the corporate sector, and many noted the need to create more pathways for the arts and artists to connect with these

opportunities. This includes training artists and other sectors to work with each other, and building bridges across professional silos. This requires a new infrastructure of funders, intermediaries, practitioners, and networks that can transmit resources and bridge the gaps between arts and non-arts sectors.

There was also interest in crowdsourcing and community funding models not only as sources of revenue but also as ways to align strategically with community values that might be different from those encouraged by the philanthropic system or the commercial market, such as commons-based practices ([Howlround](#) and [OurGoods](#) are examples of this).

Furthermore, some participants were inspired by the growth in social entrepreneurship and the concept of triple bottom line being pursued by some corporate entities, and saw potential to integrate arts and culture into these approaches. For example, the Creative Economic Development Fund is a new collaboration between CCI and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs that funds artists using a commercial business model for a social or community benefit. The discussions acknowledged that the nonprofit arts sector no longer has the exclusive claim on artistic integrity or social benefit, if it ever did, and that for many artists and communities, market-based approaches may actually be appropriate and sometimes should be eligible for contributed revenue.

NEXT STEPS

Future Arts Forward asked some big questions and generated some big ideas, but what comes next? How will these things actually be operationalized and what will they yield? The ideas shared and connections made at the convening will likely take time to bear fruit, but in the meantime, CCI is continuing to push the work forward. To this end, it has:

- Launched a **new grant program**, *Investing in Tomorrow Organizational Grants*, with support from the Hewlett Foundation, that provides change capital to projects that seek to make the nonprofit sector more inclusive and equitable, expand intergenerational and/or multicultural leadership, or explore more financially sustainable models.



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- Started the **Creative Industries Incentive Network**, a three-year program supported by the Surdna Foundation, that is incubating creative economy experiments in five California communities. This includes experimental learning in impact investing, a Latino-based cultural cooperative, artists' social and place-based enterprises, and workforce development initiatives.
- Building **strategic alliances with partners in other sectors**, such as with municipal government and financial institutions, to advance systems-level changes that will benefit artists, among others, and where the arts and creativity have potential to catalyze successful outcomes.

CCI is eager to connect and partner with others—within the arts and beyond—who are interested in working towards a better and more creative future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Frasz was an observer at *Future Arts Forward* and the three student convenings. She is a writer, researcher and cultural strategist with Helicon Collaborative, a cultural consultancy working for a sustainable, just and creative future for all. She is the director of Helicon's strategic initiatives on art and environmental sustainability and also works on individual artists, cultural equity, and art and social change. She was co-author of the *Creativity Connects* report. She believes that ideas like basic income, new holistic ways of value measurement, and the commons hold promise for cultural and social transformation, and that artists have much to contribute and gain from embracing efforts to develop them.