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★ ★ ★ *New Community Visions part of the*  
Transforming America's Communities Through the Arts Initiative

# Artists & Communities

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Conversations on Passion, Practice, and Engagement

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ACCIDENTALLY  
ON PURPOSE

Marty Pottenger &  
Jess Solomon

EDITED BY

Alicia Gregory  
with Elizabeth Sweeney



# **Artists & Communities**

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ABOUT THE NEW COMMUNITY VISIONS INITIATIVE,  
PART OF TRANSFORMING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH THE ARTS

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*Americans for the Arts'* New Community Visions Initiative is a national visioning exercise for local arts agencies, arts organizations, artists, and those interested in better understanding the future role of arts and culture in helping American communities thrive.

In this series, veteran community arts leaders come together in conversation with emerging community arts leaders to share their visions for, experiences with, and challenges to making healthy, equitable, vibrant communities through arts and culture. As community-based work receives more recognition, and intersections and collaborations become stronger, these conversations illuminate just how artists and community arts leaders can work to sustain and maintain healthy communities through their practice.

New Community Visions is part of a sustained, three-year suite of large-scale initiatives from Americans for the Arts that are together called *Transforming America's Communities Through the Arts*. Through those initiatives, we hope to:

- generate dialogue on a national, state, and local level around the creation and sustainability of healthy, vibrant, equitable communities;
- activate a diverse set of programming and partnerships spanning public, private, and nonprofit sectors;
- lay the groundwork for a collective movement forward over the next decade and beyond;
- and help leaders and the public better understand and celebrate arts and culture as mechanisms for creating and sustaining healthier, more vibrant, and more equitable communities in the United States.

**[www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CommunityVisions](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CommunityVisions)**

This project is made possible through an ever-growing list of funders, partners, and advisors.

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## FUNDING PARTNERS

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We would also like to thank the City of San José Office of Cultural Affairs, Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The Applied Materials Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, Ken and Mary Ann Ferguson, Kirkpatrick Foundation, Cultural Development Corporation, The Saint Paul Foundation, Arts Council Oklahoma City, the Vermont Community Foundation, Allied Arts, Norman Arts Council, Oklahoma Arts Council, and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art for their generous support of the New Community Visions Initiative.

*Support as of April 30, 2015*

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## NEW COMMUNITY VISIONS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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The New Community Visions Advisory Committee, which has informed the nature and trajectory of the project, includes:

- Jennifer Cole, Metro Nashville Arts Commission
- Deborah Cullinan, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
- Shannon Daut, Alaska State Council on the Arts
- Carla Dirlikov, opera singer
- Randy Engstrom, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture
- Floyd Green, Aetna Inc.
- Tatiana Hernandez, Hemera Foundation
- Maria Rosario Jackson, The Kresge Foundation
- Michael Killoren, National Endowment for the Arts
- Jeremy Liu, PolicyLink
- Ron Ragin, composer and artist
- Bahia Ramos, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- Holly Sidford, Helicon Collaborative
- Nick Slie, performing artist, Mondo Bizzaro
- Regina R. Smith, The Kresge Foundation
- Katie Steger, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
- Carlton Turner, Alternate ROOTS
- Nella Vera, Serino/Coyne
- Laura Zabel, Springboard for the Arts

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## REGIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL PARTNERS

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The regional gatherings associated with New Community Visions would not have been possible without the participation of this growing list of regional, state, and local partners who have contributed thought leadership, proposed the names of participants, and assisted in crafting the regional events.

Special thanks to our national funding partners, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, for their significant support.

### **Regional**

- Arts Midwest
- Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation
- Mid-America Arts Alliance
- New England Foundation for the Arts
- SouthArts
- WESTAF

### **State**

- California Arts Council
- Georgia Council for the Arts
- Minnesota State Arts Board
- New Mexico Arts
- Oklahoma Arts Council
- Oklahomans for the Arts
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
- Vermont Arts Council
- West Virginia Division of Culture and History

## Local

- Allied Arts
- Arts & Business Council of Greater Philadelphia
- Arts Council of Oklahoma City
- Burlington City Arts
- Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy
- City of San José Office of Cultural Affairs
- City of Santa Fe Arts Commission
- Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences of West Virginia
- Creative Santa Fe
- Cultural Development Corporation
- Flynn Center for the Performing Arts
- Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance
- Macon Arts Alliance
- Metropolitan Regional Arts Council
- Minneapolis Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy
- Norman Arts Council
- Oklahoma Arts Council
- Oklahoma City Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs
- Oklahomans for the Arts



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## COLLABORATORS AND VOICES

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### Collaborators

- Michael Rohd, Center for Performance and Civic Practice
- Margy Waller, Topos Partnership
- Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Mara Walker, Americans for the Arts

### Voices

- |                            |                            |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ▪ Rosa Cabrera             | ▪ Laura Mandala            |
| ▪ Maryo Gard Ewell         | ▪ Marty Pottenger          |
| ▪ Ian Garrett              | ▪ Felipe Buitrago Restrepo |
| ▪ Talia Gibas              | ▪ Judy Rollins             |
| ▪ Deana Haggag             | ▪ Kahikina de Silva        |
| ▪ Brea M. Heidelberg       | ▪ Jessica Solomon          |
| ▪ Christina Sanchez Juarez | ▪ Vicky Holt Takamine      |
| ▪ Liz Lerman               | ▪ Judith Tannenbaum        |
| ▪ Clayton Lord             | ▪ Michael Warlum           |
| ▪ Robert L. Lynch          | ▪ Constance Y. White       |
| ▪ John Malpede             | ▪ Laura Zabel              |



# Accidentally on Purpose

— Marty Pottenger & Jess Solomon in Conversation —

## ABOUT THE CONVERSATION

Marty and Jess met for the first time at the National Institute for Directing & Ensemble Creation, dedicated to serving theater artists of color and women directors. Eager to continue the conversation they began there, the pair touched on:

- Evolution – the challenge of honoring artistic history while staying open to *new* ways of creating
- Listening – the importance of listening and relationship building in all civic engagement and community-based work
- Teamwork – the necessity of building teams among community-based artists and arts practitioners

Marty and Jess evoke a sense of *accident* when they speak about coming to their work. “Somehow I accidentally made a career out of going where I’m not wanted and making art there...” Marty recounted of her work with police officers and politicians, among others. Jess spoke of her own practice around art, culture, story, and community that manifested as her organization Art in Praxis, wondering, “Should I go back to grad school for this?” The following conversation illuminates two women who have gravitated toward work that calls to their hearts, minds, and spirits and betters the people and communities they touch.

## About the Contributing Authors

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**Marty Pottenger** has worked since 2007 as the founding Director of Art at Work in the city manager's office of Portland, ME, exploring how arts projects can deliver solutions to problems that have everything to do with relationships and nothing to do with the arts. Marty has worked with hundreds of local artists, municipal employees, elected officials, and residents—together creating more than 500 original works and engaging tens of thousands of Maine residents. Marty is currently working as a consultant to Boston, MA; Holyoke, MA; Broward County, FL; and Portland, ME.



**Jess Solomon** is an organization development practitioner and cultural worker with roots in Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC. As the Director of Art in Praxis, Jess partners with organizations and communities to build their capacity to be more intentional, strategic, and creative. Her communities of practice include Alternate ROOTS and the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture.

**JS:** I'll start with the big question: what is your vision for artists working to achieve healthy, equitable, vibrant communities today—and even in the future?

I know that with Art in Praxis, our focus is on increasing impact of progressive organizations and communities. We envision a world where artists are in dialogue with these groups as provocateurs, weavers, and capacity builders. Together, they are cultivating more open and creative places to work and live. Because these conditions exist, the skills and capacities needed in those communities are able to grow.

I'm also curious to know how you define “communities” because often times in our work people throw that word around a lot.

**MP:** Well, I feel like we could have a whole hour conversation—and a fun one—about defining community.

In terms of my vision for artists working for healthy, equitable, vibrant communities, there's been a seismic shift in the past 10 years of art people, and people who are involved in art-making, focusing on the ongoing challenges that exist in our communities. At first I was very skeptical when universities began starting programs in social practice and arts practice. I'm aware of the capacity that any large institution has to co-opt—certainly in education—taking things over, turning them inside out, and even making them less able to have the kind of impact that they could in the real world.

But I don't know that that's happened. Instead, I see thousands of arts practitioners getting a chance to think with each other, learn together, and learn about work that's come before them. They're now thinking about where art belongs and what art does from a *radically* different perspective, certainly in the United States.

I'm excited. It's not a minute too soon. And I think, understandably, a fair amount of the work being made is not

as sharply focused on the impacts and outcomes that are possible in that process, but I think that will come with learning. And with doing.

**JS:** I'm thinking about what you said as far as seismic shifts in the last 10 years, and what has happened in the country over that time. Hurricane Katrina and George W. Bush immediately come to mind. What was happening in the cultural work, in the field, in the philanthropy sector at that time? What were some of the things you saw as the coming of this new energy?

**MP:** In 2003, I organized two panels at the American Festival Project's annual gathering. Our board was an amazing group of artists—each making unique contributions to the developing field of what is now being called 'social practice art.' As board chair, I was doing a good deal of work, but the planning was highly collaborative. The two panels I organized included one on curriculum that was trying to ensure artists were in the driver's seat as universities were beginning to develop classes on arts projects that directly engage with communities. The other panel was anchored by the question: "What if the transformative power of performance became integrated in municipal governments as a way of addressing challenges?" For me it was an idea just beginning to form after my years developing Abundance.<sup>1</sup> The panelists each said interesting things, but we were all just on the cusp of trying to figure out: "*Well, what might this possibly mean and what could it make possible?*" Several years later, my question turned into the Art At Work Initiative.

But that was 13 years ago when I'm not sure the idea of targeting a specific issue and figuring out an arts-based solution or intervention even existed outside my head. And I don't think *solution* is the right word because the work is all about process, a discovery of inequities, assets, and possibilities.

**JS:** Right. Exactly!

**MP:** How about you? What were you observing at that time?

**JS:** In 2005, I had just finished undergraduate school and started to get into social entrepreneurship and into figuring out what that meant. Even in my early ideas of entrepreneurship I knew I wanted to do work around art, culture, story, community, co-creation—elements like those.

*“I tell people “I think my grandmother did social practice...” but she didn’t have a name for it.”*

Over the last 10 years, I’ve created my own development track of sorts, really identifying my communities of practice—the teachers, people, and institutions that I want to learn from. Groups like Alternate ROOTS and Urban Bush Women have been core to my development. What I appreciate about these organizations is that inquiry has always been central to their creative processes and cultural organizing.

I’ve seen the shift you talk about, and I’m really struggling with it as a practitioner. Where do I fit in that work? Sometimes I wonder: *Did I miss the boat? Should I go back to grad school for this?* So what you said about this idea of *professionalizing*, or creating degree programs for things people have been doing for a long time, resonates with me. I tell people “I think my grandmother did social practice...” but she didn’t have a name for it.

And co-opting isn’t synonymous with institutions, *en masse*. They also create space and opportunity for a breadth and depth of cultural work to happen.

**MP:** I think both things are happening, clearly. And universities are not ones to pass up the opportunity to make a new field and become new experts.

I met Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza from Animating Democracy in 1998. They were developing learning exchanges, which focused on the work of art and civic engagement. They were doing the invaluable work of gathering artists, practitioners, and community members together.

It was the first place where I was able to have conversations about the work and learn about what other people were figuring out. It gave me a whole new sense of what was possible and also the significant work that was already happening. Art has always been used to make things better, to inspire people, to bring people together. But this new way involved identifying very specific challenges, envisioning possibilities, and then inventing or designing a way forward with art at the heart.

And art—and the process of creating it—does function differently when you're actually identifying a very specific social or community issue and designing a project that uses creativity to address it.

**JS:** I agree, art functions differently when in service to a social or community issue. And we have cannons of examples of ways art and culture have shifted policy and transformed communities and neighborhoods. I'm interested in those histories and cultural amnesia. As cultural workers, I believe that we are all informed by something, someone, *somebody* in our work. Yes, we bring different and new elements to it, but I believe we are also drawing on some collective imagination.

**MP:** But do I think there's a healthy percentage of what's happening with art and communities that is certainly new in the United States. Where art is living in a very different way. I don't think making murals is new, *per se*, but there's an increasing clarity that the making of a mural is a tremendous thing. It opens up tremendous possibilities for a community and a group of people. To

build relationships, to sort out identity, to form a connection that will be available for the future.

*“The art, and our making of it, created a space for connection and listening.”*

I learned something after 9/11. I lived a mile away and watched the building fall from my apartment roof with my neighbors. The day after the towers fell, I knew I had to do something that would help people individually, but also as a community. My friend Tony Giovannetti, who worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, donated a 28-foot piece of blank canvas. I wanted something permanent, you know, more than chalk on a sidewalk or a cardboard sign which had their own place and power.

Our ad-hoc group of four artists gathered a block north of Canal Street, as close to the World Trade Center site as we were legally allowed, and rolled the canvas out on the sidewalk. When it became too dark to see, we shone a car’s headlights on it. I knew that the world’s media would be assembling in New York City, and I wanted to let the world know that New Yorkers wanted peace, not war. A quote from Gandhi made a powerful statement on the banner: “Peace will not come out of a clash of arms but out of justice lived.” So many people came by. One man had 80 co-workers who had been killed. Firemen came by, construction workers volunteering at the site, and a lot of people from different countries. The art, and our making of it, created a space for connection and listening—in the face of something really, really terrible that we were all experiencing both alone and together.

That’s when I learned the difference between public art and making art in public. And by making art in public, on the street, it created a space similar to the kind of intimacy and possibility that’s present in a live performance, even though we weren’t performing at all.



That experience showed that there is capacity and possibility. There are impacts and outcomes that weren't necessarily thought of ahead of time that reveal art's power in a different way than what is typical. So, there's an integration, an expectation, and a conscious design going on that I do think is new.

**JS:** You just touched on what I'm getting at around integration and consciousness. We're living in a time where there's a raised consciousness around creativity. You were informed by *something*—and this goes back to consciousness. For example, you didn't use paper. You could have. It was important to use canvas for *this* project, with *this* community, because something in your experience told you that the permanence of canvas was significant to the issue, right?

We need to think about new ways of creating and being in the world. I think we also have to ask the hard questions of ourselves and our work. Do we really want to shift the systems that leave us with winners and losers? Haves and have nots? Are we ready to deepen coalitions and build a new world? So, maybe history is only in our periphery? I'm being dramatic, perhaps, but I wonder if there is room to learn from elders while we are thinking about new ways of doing this work. That's something I'm always curious about. I feel like there are lessons that could help us along this journey.

What happens when there's a new generation of practitioners who might've benefited from stories like yours? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this idea of holding history and visions for the future as cultural workers. How do we do that?

**MP:** Well, I am uniquely hobbled.

**JS:** [laughter] I love that.

**MP:** I am uniquely hobbled, and it certainly has informed my life deeply. We've all been seared by various intimate and

systematic hurts and oppressions, right? My mix, my own recipe growing up made it more likely that I would just think of an idea and do it. When I was described early on as “maverick artist,” I didn’t have a clue what the writer was seeing. Now I get it. My experiences in family and in society were harsh enough to give me a ‘nothing left to lose’ relationship to life. It’s both a powerful and lonely perspective and oddly contradictory to my life that’s been full of collective collaborative engagement.

I’m more an activist and an organizer. I think of something and then figure out how to do it as a carpenter would, which was actually part of my experience as a young adult. Maybe there is a wonderful history I’m unaware of where people have actually attempted to integrate creativity and art-making as one of the tools of municipal government. That’s what I tried to do for the last 10 years working at the City of Portland, ME. I was certainly fed and strengthened by my relationships with other people in the field, but it was really kind of a head-down, keep-working endeavor.

And so now, getting to meet you this summer at the Director’s Institute, Jess, and *not* working at the city, I’ve had the chance to shift to a more expansive brain with more time to connect with other people. And to begin to integrate what I did learn at the city with what’s happening around me and in the field. So, that is particularly exciting. There’s lots to think about, lots of new approaches that I hope to learn about.

**JS:** The reason I’m excited to be in this conversation with you is because you are, in many ways, a pioneer. And I want to make sure my peers and colleagues know about your work. Ebony Noelle Goldmen, a dear friend and teacher, instilled in me the idea of knowing your teachers and students in this work. And when appropriate, lifting your lineage up in the room.

But I come from a particular school of thought. I see some socially engaged artist peers embark on projects that someone did 10 years ago—not seeing or realizing that person could be a source of insight or collaboration. I’m wondering how I can help make these connections or lift up making those connections in the work as an asset.

**MP:** Well, it’s the nature of humans to relish being the first to do something. For the past 10 years, I’ve traveled to different cities across the country, giving talks and meeting with people on the topic of integrating art into municipal governments and communities. Not just as lovely public art, but as a tool to strengthen governments and communities. And several of the cities are actually now doing a version of what I had talked to them about, including Boston and Broward County, FL.

After doing this for a few years, I realized that people—whole cities even—want to do their *own* version. They want it to be *theirs*, even if it’s a replica. But I realized that is great, actually. Talking about a history is very informative, and I do think it matters. But, at the same time, there’s a certain liveliness that can occur when people think it’s their idea and it’s their way of doing it. And so I say, “Yay! Go do it!” Go develop that idea and see what happens, because it’s likely you’re going to improve on some component of it.

**JS:** I would like to hear about some of your life and learning working across sectors, because you work with all kinds of folks, even police officers, right?

**MP:** Yes, several projects with police officers, also with union members, public works workers, politicians, city staff in parking, legal, treasury, health, and immigration affairs. In terms of Portland, ME where I live, one of the most challenging projects turned out to be the Meeting Place/Our Town project where I worked with four different neighborhood associations, each one unique and challenging in its own very special way.

**JS:** I was also wondering, when working across sectors and industries, do the outcomes change? Do you typically start with a collaborator and come up with an idea...or does it emerge over time? And do the outcomes typically look different if you were working, with say, an artist?

**MP:** That's a lovely thing to think about.

My work always begins with a question or an opportunity. With City Water Tunnel #3, a community arts performance project<sup>2</sup> I began working on in 1993, it was right away. As soon as I heard that New York City was involved in a 60-year-long public works project, bringing water to the five boroughs, building a third tunnel to help do this...it was clear that it was a perfect living metaphor for the kind of scale, vision, and commitment necessary to actually shift the inequities that surround us.

I already knew the world and culture of construction work, having been in it for 20 years. I also knew I wanted to learn about the banking industry and the financing of the project, as well as the engineering and the political side. And then it was *water*, Jess. How does it get better than that, right? For a metaphor and for something that's absolutely grounded in life.

And then for Abundance, my project about American money, I interviewed both multimillionaires and minimum wage workers. The project grew from constantly reading the papers and both knowing and living the fact that the U.S. makes international finance policy and has tremendous influence and control over money throughout the world. And also, in practical terms, very few people are able to talk or think clearly about money in this country. I knew that drawing people into conversation about money could be useful in moving us forward from a place where we are not very clearheaded. And if my project got even a couple newspaper articles that talked about these issues, then that would engage more

people in thinking about the silence, the taboo of talking about money, and breaking that taboo.

And I took the same approach with Thin Blue Lines, the first project I did with police. The officers in Portland, ME were experiencing historic low morale, which any person of color, or Mayor, can tell you is not a good situation to have. I wondered, what if I just met with a lot of the officers in informal ways—sometimes more formal, obviously you don't really talk to the police chief informally—and just ask them about the issues they're facing. I wanted to know if they had a magic wand, what would they change?

I had interviewed Mayor Villarosa's Chief of Staff in Los Angeles a few years back. She had just stopped by to tell me that she was too busy to meet, but I asked one question, and slowly she sat down and talked for the next 20 minutes. "I'd like to know if you could change one thing about the way Los Angeles is run, what would it be?" And then I listened. Listening was key.

In all of these projects, I would think about what form of art would fit best. The work I've been doing has been really tailored to fit the questions of: "What's the capacity here? What's possible?" For instance, there was a significant increase in racism-based lawsuits filed against Portland, ME from workers in the Public Works Department. These are people who work with their hands. Whether they're in sanitation, construction, landscaping, traffic, engineering—working with their hands is a skill that they already had. So I designed an arts project that was co-led by a local artist, Daniel Minter, who brought the wisdom from growing up black in southern Georgia, artistic excellence, and a working-class expertise.

We started with story exchanges that I led. Obviously all people can tell stories—working-class men can tell stories. So, we focused on stories where they had to reclaim their actual heritage to contradict the notion of whiteness and

the blur of whiteness as an identity itself. We focused on paying attention to the fact to they're German, Russian, Greek, Italian, French, etc. Daniel then taught everyone how to carve linoleum blocks of images that referenced their work lives and their

*“They helped awaken what I call a rational pride in who we actually are, rather than a manufactured pride that’s rooted in oppression.”*

heritages. The men then made prints using this accumulated ‘dictionary of images’ that were framed and hung in the garage, at the landfill offices, in the budget office, and in the office lobby. With that, people actually had an ongoing remembrance of both their own creativity, but also their own and everyone else’s stories. The prints are still there seven years later. They helped awaken what I call a *rational pride* in who we actually are, rather than a *manufactured pride* that’s rooted in oppression.

**JS:** Is there a community that you have not worked with yet that you’d be interested in working with? And if so, who or what is it?

**MP:** Well, I’m currently working with veterans who are battling PTSD and professional graphic novel artists. I’m pairing them up to create five comic books, each one about a very, very different vet battling PTSD—how they’re taking on that battle, how they’re winning, and what winning looks like in that situation.

**JS:** Wow.

**MP:** So, that’s a community I’ve never worked with and one in which I’m finding deep connections and resonance with.

I’m also beginning to work with college students from the University of Southern Maine (USM) for the first

time on a project around gentrification and homelessness here in Portland, ME. A sociology professor invited me to co-teach a graduate/undergraduate class. It's a huge issue—our city is number two for rent increases percentage-wise in the country.

**JS:** Really?

**MP:** Portland is not that big, but it's really affecting people. We just had a whole one-day conference where 200 residents came to discuss Portland, and where things are in terms of those issues.

There were all sorts of panels and conversations. I got to facilitate several listening exchanges where people were able to connect with another person and think out loud without interruption. And this is where the students came in: about 15 of them conducted around 100 interviews with realtors, bartenders, landlords, people who have been evicted, people who didn't have housing, politicians, and city councilors. They got a chance to do something that was—for them—scary and meaningful. They're social work students, but they weren't used to interviewing people, certainly in that sort of context. With the help of USM's art department, we then built a 30-foot-long by 8-foot-high listening wall, which was covered with chalk paint. We installed it during our May First Friday where we had hundreds of people write on the wall, many pop-up performances, and the USM students did listening interviews with another 100 people.

One of the things that was unexpected was that out of the 15 students I worked with, 65 to 70 percent of them had personally experienced homelessness. And this is a group that didn't know that this would be the focus of the class when they signed up. That's just stunning to me.

**JS:** Wow.

**MP:** It's these snapshots of what's really real and what's really going on in the world that are so precious, so informative, and so upsetting. Getting to work with all these different people and building lasting relationships and friendships is very moving.

My interest lies in relationships. They are what

I think is primary, what is key, what is exciting. So my projects aim to bring people together in genuine ways to help tackle issues that people haven't yet figured out how to tackle. Because of that, it's never smooth sailing...but the process is always so worth it.

*“My interest lies in relationships. They are what I think is primary, what is key, what is exciting. So my projects aim to bring people together in genuine ways to help tackle issues...”*

Somehow I accidentally made a career out of going where I'm not wanted and making art there. But when it's time for me to leave, most everyone reports that they'll never forget what happened and that their lives have been changed for the better.

And what about you, Jess? What have been some touchstone moments of Art in Praxis? Times you saw partnerships in action, or a glimpse of what is possible?

**JS:** I've definitely seen a glimpse of what can happen when art and culture become resources for capacity building and social change. Recent moments that come to mind include designing and embedding an Artist-in-Residence program in the 2015 DC Acumen Social Innovation Festival. The theme of the festival was mass incarceration, and artists served as provocateurs, using poetry, hip hop, and visual art to spark conversation and reflection.



We also worked with the Interactivity Foundation and Open Society Foundations to produce Black Moms Matter, an arts-infused community dialogue about myths of black motherhood and gender-based violence. We brought artists and community provocateurs—mothers, scholars, and policymakers—together to interrogate and explore the consequences of those myths. At the end of the event, Errol Arthur, panelist and magistrate judge for the DC Superior Court, said publicly that he was changed by the dialogue. The whole event was very powerful.

And our recent work with Cultivating South Phoenix (CUSP), a coalition of community-based organizations determining the best model and practice for their place-based work. We embedded community mapping and story circles into the planning process.

And I've got another question for you, Marty: What do you want to have happen for your work?

**MP:** I think the nice thing would be to have a team, Jess. That would be different.

**JS:** I want a team, too. I think that's a worthwhile conversation.

And I just want to go back to that statistic you gave earlier about the students experiencing homelessness. I think the kind of work you created gave space to even have that conversation. These are students who might have been with each other a lot, seen each other on the quad, in the cafeteria...but you created the environment for them to even make intimate connections. That's really powerful. I can only imagine if I had an opportunity to use arts and culture in this way when I was in school and how that would have informed my practice.

**MP:** That's true. You're right. They definitely would not have known that about each other. We started every class with listening exchanges and that changed everything.

**JS:** And even for them to face it. You created a safe space for them to even process their experiences. That's really powerful.

**MP:** Right. And going back to wanting to work with a team...I've continued to work with three of those students. Two of them are working with me on the homelessness and gentrification project. One student is one of the vets battling PTSD. He served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*"I can only imagine if I had an opportunity to use arts and culture in this way when I was in school and how that would have informed my practice."*

And with my work with the police department, they're also a team in a way. When he was still chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman came to town, and I wanted the police to do an excerpt of their performances for him. And these guys are busy—they're working, they're parents, they volunteer for nine different causes. And they all show up, Jess. Whenever I've needed them, they've all shown up. So, I guess that's a team of sorts.

And one of the neighborhood groups I worked with, we ended up doing a whole other project together putting up poetry that we'd gathered from a neighborhood called Libbytown, which is really struggling with its identity after an interstate was put through it. We've been putting up the poetry via 8-foot by 4-foot stencils. And now it's getting painted on sidewalks and sideways all over that neighborhood. So, I guess I do have a team. It just looks like that.

But it would be nice to have that other kind of team you and I are talking about, too.

**JS:** Yeah, you're right on the different variations of a team. People show up because they get fed from the experience.

**MP:** Right.

**JS:** What makes the work you do—we do—*work*? Is it different now?

**MP:** What is happening now—a huge variety of work—is absolutely inspiring and very new. For the last few decades, I've worked to find language that supports what I was exploring with art-making, performance, communities, civic dialogues, and social justice. Just last week, I was sorting out whether to create a performance that was a spectacle or in an actual theater at the Painted Bride in Philadelphia.

The piece is about climate change, and it will premiere on Earth Day, April 22, 2016. I decided to go the theater route because for me, that is where our human mechanisms of transformation are engaged, in that intense focus that live performance creates, that brew of intimate vulnerability, communal listening, and expectation. I think there's a good deal of work being made that contains some of the confusions that operate in the traditional arts world, but that's to be expected in anything this new and might lead to something wonderful/powerful/essential 'accidentally on purpose.'

NOTES

1. Abundance is a community arts performance project gathering stories and exploring ways that people of different classes, races, and ages negotiate economics in their daily lives.
2. City Water Tunnel #3 has included gallery exhibits, live multi-media performance, onsite performances at construction sites and NYC government offices, video, two fairs for the public and tunnel building community, and has toured internationally.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

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**Marty Pottenger** has worked since 2007 as the founding Director of Art at Work in the city manager's office of Portland, ME, exploring how arts projects can deliver solutions to problems that have everything to do with relationships and nothing to do with the arts. Marty has worked with hundreds of local artists, municipal employees, elected officials, and residents—together creating more than 500 original works and engaging tens of thousands of Maine residents. This work has demonstrated the powerful impacts that art-making can deliver with police, public works workers, health service workers, elected officials, and neighborhood associations. Marty is currently working as a consultant to Boston, MA; Holyoke, MA; Broward County, FL; and Portland, ME.

**Jess Solomon** is an organization development practitioner and cultural worker with roots in Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC. As the Director of Art in Praxis, Jess partners with organizations and communities to build their capacity to be more intentional, strategic, and creative. Her work typically features a mix of organization development theory and cultural practice. She holds a Masters of Science in Organization Development from American University and B.A.s from the University of Maryland, College Park. Jessica is a National Arts Strategies Creative Communities Fellow, serves on the Executive Committee of Alternate ROOTS, and is the Chief Weaver of Social Fabric at the U.S. Department of Arts & Culture.

## THE POWER OF “ARTS AND”

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Between 2015 and 2017, Americans for the Arts will look past the here and now and well into the next decade with a concentrated theory of change we call *Transforming America’s Communities Through the Arts*. Community development was a foundation of our sector, and the pursuit of healthy, vibrant, equitable communities has been the impetus behind Americans for the Arts’ work for 55 years. This work, collectively, embraces and advocates for what we’re calling the “Arts And” frame, and aims to, in collaboration with different stakeholders on a state, local, and national level, provide the tools and services to help communities map a path forward and integrate the arts to get where they want to go.

The **New Community Visions Initiative** is one of the major, outward components of Transforming America’s Communities Through the Arts. The New Community Visions Initiative is designed to *surface new knowledge* and *create new systems and tools* for arts agencies, presenters, artists, and supporters, along with public and private policymakers, including civic leaders, so that they can encourage use of arts and culture to help create healthier, more vibrant, more equitable communities over time.

We are hoping to do this by:

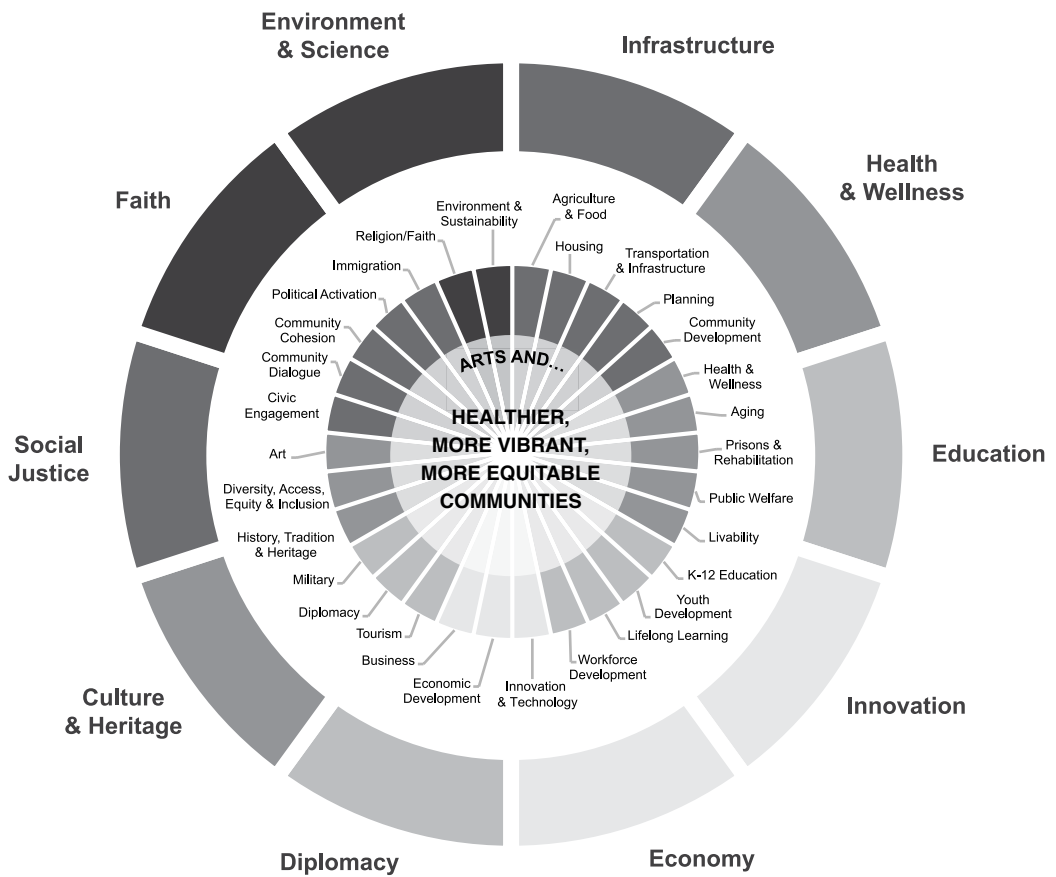
1. *Curating cross-sector and inter-sector “think tank” conversations*, and *encouraging new relationships*, that end up being useful to those in the room as they return to their communities to pursue their own work of building visions and plans.
2. *Detecting the common systems and barriers* that facilitate or impede community progress (community-defined), and figuring out how the arts can be of service to larger societal and community shifts as they occur.

3. *Strengthening and amplifying those common systems* with national-, state-, and local-level arts agencies, arts organizations, foundations, and artists throughout the country through the development of programs, services, and tools that can help communities embrace the arts to make progress.

Americans for the Arts designed this initiative with the goal of enhancing the health, vibrancy, and equity in places, both within the arts and through the arts within the larger community. The people who come together in meetings across the country are invited to explore together what the end result might be, how they might move toward that result, and how we all might make that movement easier.

## **The Theory of Change**

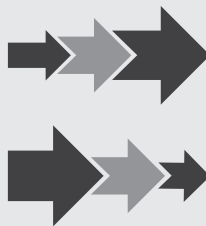
The theory of change that underlies this project has to do with the ways that a set of interlocking, overlapping contributors to communities interact, and the role that the arts can play in those interactions over time. Americans for the Arts has identified 30 linked-but-separate contributors to healthy, vibrant, equitable communities that relate to social justice, the environment, faith, culture and heritage, the economy and workforce, innovation, education, health and wellness, the military, and infrastructure, and that together strongly inform the life and experiences of individuals and the communities in which they move.



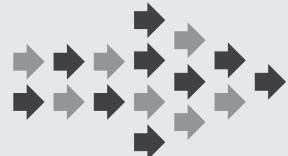
*When integrated fully, the arts can:*



Transform systems by working at the intersection of different sectors, individuals, and communities



Amplify positive impacts and mitigate negative impacts by providing alternative common ground for thinking and communication



Increase participation, opportunity, and access by reducing barriers, encouraging creativity, and celebrating multiple points of view

By encouraging the “Arts And” integration of the arts into the vital work of all of these contributing components of a community, we believe that we can help transform America’s communities through the arts over time.

All of this work echoes and reinforces the strategic goals of Americans for the Arts:

- to lead and serve individuals and organizations to help build environments in which the arts and arts education thrive and contribute to more vibrant and healthy communities.
- to generate meaningful public and private sector policies and more resources for arts and arts education.
- to build awareness and appreciation of the value of the arts and arts education.
- to ensure the ability of Americans for the Arts to continue to stably exist and creatively serve and empower a dynamic field.

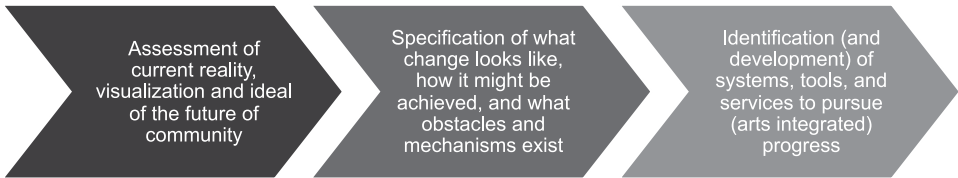
## **The Mechanism**

We will pursue this integration with an 18-month set of activities that move from vision and ideation, through specification of outcomes and obstacles, to the identification and ultimate creation of systems, plans, tools, and services that are deeply practical and can be used by all community stakeholders. What starts as a general interrogation of what each individual in the room thinks is a more ideal community eventually transitions into a collective conversation about the mechanisms that can be crafted and deployed at a local and national level to ensure that, as we pursue our more idealized communities, we are:

1. Ensuring that the arts are seen as a necessary tool and artists are active partners.
2. Building a deeper understanding of the role that arts and culture play in the creation of healthy communities.



3. Assembling a set of examples about the ways in which the arts are currently working with other sectors to carry forward critical community progress towards equity, health, and vibrancy.



### **Why “Healthy, Vibrant, Equitable Communities?”**

We chose the words “healthy, vibrant, equitable communities” deliberately, because they speak to our goal that this work explore the impulses driving people from their most basic to their most complex needs. Health, equity, and vibrancy each exist in tandem with each other. Inequalities manifest within each area, and this work aims squarely at those inequalities. We hope we are making spaces where Americans for the Arts, as well as the others assembled, can listen to challenges communities face, surface visions communities are moving toward, and begin to explore what arts-based tools might help that movement.

We recognize that “community” is a concept with more than one meaning, but in this context we view community as a collection of affiliated individuals, which may be geographic, or not. Community identity is fluid and sometimes impermanent. With this project, we seek to learn from the relative agency, expertise, and idiosyncrasy of the individuals in the room as it pertains to every community through which they move—and to determine if there are common tools, skills, and systems that can help move communities in a more desired direction.

## What Else?

The New Community Visions Initiative is just one way in which we are Transforming America's Communities Through the Arts. As we carry forward the visioning work, we also continue to educate and empower decision makers and advocates through programs like the pARTnership Movement (tailored toward business leaders), the Arts Education Navigator (focusing on providing online strategies for those invested in advancing arts education at the local, state and national levels), strategic partnerships (with non-arts entities such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Lieutenant Governors Association, The Conference Board, the National PTA, and many others), and the National Initiative on Arts and Health in the Military (working with the Army, Veterans Administration, American Legion Auxiliary, and others to demonstrate the healing power of the arts to our returning veterans).

These and many other programs are critical to helping our nation's leaders understand the transformative power of the arts as a community development tool and problem solver.

Visit us at *[www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CommunityVisions](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CommunityVisions)*.

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# EVERY DAY THE ARTS TRANSFORM AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES THROUGH

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EDUCATION COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ECONOMIC IMPACT HELPING AT-RISK YOUTH

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HEALTH AND WELLNESS CELEBRATING DIVERSITY BUILDING A CREATIVE WORKFORCE

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ENVIRONMENT CRIME PREVENTION TOURISM RETURNING MILITARY AND VETERANS

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NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION POLITICAL ACTION INFRASTRUCTURE ACTIVISM FAITH

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*The arts transform America by working with other sectors to contribute  
to the health, vibrancy, and equity of communities nationwide.*