Artists & Communities

Conversations on Passion, Practice, and Engagement

RISK IS A LIFEFORCE
Liz Lerman & Deana Haggag

EDITED BY
Alicia Gregory
with Elizabeth Sweeney
Artists & Communities: Conversations on Passion, Practice, and Engagement

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About the New Community Visions Initiative, part of Transforming America’s Communities Through the Arts

*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

This project is made possible through an ever-growing list of funders, partners, and advisors.
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Support as of April 30, 2015
## New Community Visions Advisory Committee

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
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.

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**Regional**
- Arts Midwest
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- 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
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Collaborators and Voices

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
- Maryo Gard Ewell
- Ian Garrett
- Talia Gibas
- Deana Haggag
- Brea M. Heidelberg
- Christina Sanchez Juarez
- Liz Lerman
- Clayton Lord
- Robert L. Lynch
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- Constance Y. White
- Laura Zabel
Risk Is a Lifeforce
— Liz Lerman & Deana Haggag in Conversation —
— Edited by Alicia Gregory, John Borstel, and Elizabeth Sweeney —

About the Conversation

Liz and Deana connected by phone—Liz from a residency in La Jolla, CA where a version of Healing Wars, her latest work is being performed, and Deana from Baltimore—the city both women call home. What followed was a vibrant conversation that wondered about, questioned, and affirmed the important role of the artist in a challenged and changing Baltimore.

Throughout the conversation, Liz and Deana touched on key themes of:

- Leadership—both as a positive factor in creating change, and as a challenge
- Action—how to progress the same, repeated conversation toward change
- Collaboration—who owns a collaboration and how true collaboration can exist

At time of this publication, The Contemporary was preparing to collaborate with Lerman to produce a retrospective of her work and influence in 2017.
About the Contributing Authors

Liz Lerman has been making choreography everywhere, with all kinds of people, animals, and machines, for decades. She founded the groundbreaking ensemble Dance Exchange in 1976, was named a MacArthur “genius” in 2002, and is in-demand as a teacher, speaker, instigator, and facilitator at institutions around the world. She has also written three books and is at work on a fourth.

Deana Haggag is the Director of The Contemporary, a Baltimore-based nomadic museum that expands the idea of a museum as an incubator. The Contemporary commissions site-specific and subject-oriented projects, engages diverse audiences, and advances contemporary art through projects and educational programming.
What are you working on right now?

I am working on sustaining my nonprofit. I’m trying to treat that more as a goal rather than a daunting task. I went to a conference recently called Hand-in-Glove in Minneapolis that was run by independent, non-commercial art spaces and looked at ways we can think about advancing the field.

It was remarkable to remember that every region, every sector is so different. Artists living in Minnesota are very different from artists living in Texas or New York. We talk about being global and open, and yet things are just really different for people in their own worlds. I’m really thinking about Baltimore. I’m thinking a lot about sustaining. And how we are helping artists get their work done in a way that is meaningful.

It’s important to get out and come up against other ideas or assumptions. This helps you re-investigate your own purpose in such a great way. I’ve lived in Baltimore since 2008 and I really feel it’s different here. Our city has some very particular challenges in that some of the usual ways you could sustain your institution, or I could sustain my work, just don’t work in Baltimore.

Yes. What is it like to travel now, for you? You travel a lot. Do people ask you about Baltimore?

Well, it’s not that people ask. It’s if I identify and say, “In my city, Baltimore…” Sometimes, depending on what I talk about after that, it has a certain weight. If I’m talking about Black Lives Matter and I’m coming from Baltimore then people sit up sharp. I think now, since the uprising in response to the death of Freddie Gray, people are very interested.

In researching my stage piece Healing Wars, I read Race and Reunion by David Blight. He looks at the United
States 50 years after the Civil War and lays out the emancipation narrative and the reconciliation narrative. He said the country couldn’t do both. And so the country picked reconciliation, and emancipation was left behind. That really spoke to me when I read it. And in relationship to after the uprising, the speed with which some people said, “Let’s get back to normal,” felt to me like, “Let’s reconcile.”

I want to say, you’re missing the point. Normal is terrible for a lot of people in Baltimore.

DH: It’s weird how many industries tried to go back to normal. It was everywhere. If you were in a public health conversation or law conversation or policy... all of these sectors. I wonder if that’s how the arts can be the most effective. The industry that will be the first to stand up and go, “No, maybe normal is not where we want to be anymore.” I was hearing it more in the arts than I was in other areas.

LL: I think your point is very powerful because it’s one thing to just say, “Let’s not go back to normal.” And it’s another thing to hold the curtains open long enough to try to understand what’s always happening. The arts do that.

DH: At The Contemporary, we are working on a project at Johns Hopkins University called Ghost Food with artist Miriam Simun who’s dealing with biodiversity law and climate change as it affects food systems. We’re teaching a class of 18 undergraduates—environmental science students, political science students, business students, history of art students.

For the first time ever, for many of them, they’re able to have conversations about climate change and biodiversity laws that are hyper-personal with strangers on the street, and with this artist, and with the community. They say, in many ways, it’s activated their research. It’s just fascinating to me. They’re sitting here going, “Well now we can have a conversation about this thing.”
LL: Yes, and most scientists are very personal. They just don’t talk about science being personal to them. Whereas artists talk about it all the time. That’s been our territory. Sharing the ways in which artists allow themselves to be personal in relationship to their material is one of the really great things that artistic process and product both allow. If we investigated the community arts projects over the last 20 years, what you’ll consistently see is all the ways we bring the personal to bear on the larger context.

Research is just another word, in a way, for artistic process. We see that a topic can be researched if, for instance, you understand how your body moves in response to an idea, or it can be researched through whatever methods this wonderful artist is using at Hopkins. Of course the students are enraptured because they’re being asked to bring their whole selves to bear on this project. We have to bring our whole selves to bear on these issues or else we’re not going to get anywhere. It’s weird—as artists we too have siloed our knowledge, and I am advocating for a permeability, so that it is possible to make change.

DH: What is your favorite part of artistic process? You have talked a lot about why you are so interested in process, and I think—if I may be so bold—it has been lifelong, and you’ve done it in so many different ways.

LL: I don’t know about favorite, because I think with each step in the arc of a project—or, in my case, the arc of a life that I’ve embarked on—there’s always something that emerges inside that gets me all excited, which is how I can keep going. Early in my work it occurred to me that I was likely going to spend more time with the people I was working with than with the people I love at home. When I thought about that, I realized that first I need to understand these
varieties of love, which I know we hardly ever talk about, but I really think that there are lots of ways to love.

Love can be that love of discovery when you discover something you didn’t know. It can be the love of noticing that a person doesn’t think the same way you think, and then that burst of new awareness that comes to you because of that, because you’re open to influence, which is an important part of the artistic process.

I started to really think about that around the same time I was changing the way I worked with dancers. I moved from, “I’m going to show you the movement, you do what I’m doing and then you practice it and then I’ll figure it out” to an approach where I was asking, “What is the movement that you do in relationship to this question? Let’s figure that out.” There were a lot of reasons why I started to do that. One was that the dancers often came up with much more interesting material than I was making. Beyond that, I discovered that they would remember it better, they would commit to it sooner and faster, and the room was alive with the ideas, both physical and mental.

**DH:** Has it been hard to convince people?

**LL:** Yes!

**DH:** Has it been harder in the arts or not in the arts?

**LL:** In the arts.

**DH:** It’s art people. Isn’t that weird? Isn’t that so strange?

**LL:** In the early days I would tell people that I had one foot in the dance world and one foot in the community world. I had to because I love being around artists. I love the conversations and the depths of what can happen. But I did not feel it useful to live only in that world. How about you, have you found that to be true?
DH: Yes. We have so much formal training in the arts and so many perceived expectations that I think the biggest shocker, when I first got this job, was how much more time I needed to spend convincing people in the arts to take risks than people in every other industry that we partner with. That realization was new for me.

LL: If you think about risk, once we have a profession...we can get confused about what we’re trying to sustain. The other day I said, “You know, using the phrase creative artist is not redundant.” Not every artist is creative, and certainly not every artist and arts institution is risk-taking. In fact, quite the contrary. It’s hard to do.

In choosing to establish the Dance Exchange away from New York City, in choosing to keep one foot in community, I took a certain pleasure in being off the radar. In some ways, nobody cared. I could do whatever I wanted. And what I was teaching other people? Who cared? On one level that’s liberating, but then there’s another level where you begin to rattle the cage and say, “Look you guys, it’s got to change. It’s got to change.” But you—being who you are, how young you are—how is that for you? Being both female and young in the world that you’re operating in? What happens to you?

DH: It is actually very easy to be dismissed. It’s not that I can’t get people’s attention. It’s just much harder to maintain it. I also came to my job as a young woman of color and there was so much wrapped up in the public perception of that. I think people got really, really excited, and because they got so excited about those “-isms,” they sort of forgot to pay attention to the work. And then it became harder to keep people interested. People made it much more about my person than about the work. I know sometimes that’s hard to differentiate, but I don’t think people would have been as interested in my person if I had been a man or older or white. I understand completely that being a young woman has both afforded me opportunities and excluded me.
I even remember once being in a meeting with a male colleague. The person we were in the meeting with—who was an older woman, actually—kept talking about The Contemporary but directing all of the conversation toward my male colleague and not to me. At one point, he had to remind her, “She’s actually the boss.” It was just this woman’s training to look at the man in the room. I will also say that I grew up in a generation where we were told that things were better, in terms of equity, and they are. They definitely are. But I think we were told so much that things were better that I was shocked by how much women and people of color are still underestimated in the workforce.

**LL:** I think the question about female leadership is really complicated in this world right now. I experienced it. You are experiencing it. The fact that you are both a woman and a woman of color, and how that plays out in our world these days, means that there’s an awful lot for you to navigate at any given time.

**DH:** Yeah. And what’s really frustrating is being a person of color who can easily occupy a white space because I’m very fair-skinned. Hearing what colleagues go through is really challenging. There are others—our friends, our peers, other women, other young people—who have to face far more discrimination than I’ve ever had to. For me, it is more the experience of being fetishized. I know we’ve spoken a little bit about this, about what happens when you are recognized with a huge award or a prize. In that, you’re being marked as someone, then being fetishized. That can actually be disruptive and divisive between you and all the people you want to serve.

**LL:** You know, there’s a whole part of my aesthetic related to that, specifically the way dancers’ bodies are objectified, and the assumptions that people make about how dancers move, for example. It drove desire to be seen as a person, not as a dancer. It also led to part of my desire to have
very different people on stage, too, so you could see how they move and relate. There’s an artistic side to that question about moving through the world.

And I think we need to assume the leadership that we have, but also the leadership that we’ve bestowed upon ourselves in order to do this work. Then we have to be able to shed it when it’s irrelevant and actually an obstacle to people in the room.

DH: Yes and for example, The Contemporary recently won a small award in the Baltimore City Paper for a project we worked on. In winning this award, my name was peppered throughout the article far more than the artists’. No one else on our team was mentioned. It was very much, “Under the direction of Deana Haggag, who is 26....” They still can’t forget my age, or that I’m a woman. They mentioned me constantly. It builds division in a way that’s so bizarre. I love what you’re saying about knowing when to take it and knowing when to shut it. It can just be so unbearable when you want to shut it out, and the world around you won’t let you because we’re in this monolith culture where we still don’t know how to think collaboratively. Even in the way that we praise.

One of the hardest parts of my job is getting everybody to think collaboratively. The board, the staff, our consultants, our external team—just getting everybody to be in a room not thinking about curatorial work in a hierarchical space at all. The hilarious part is that the hardest part of getting my entire team to think like a collective is me.

LL: You’re talking about changes I’ve been thinking about: that is, how do we honor individuals in an art environment for their strengths? How do we explain in a collaborative environment when there have been mistakes?
How do we continue to build that community of people who are working together where we can have roving leaderships, have roving ideas and still understand how those things could be pulled together into one? It is true that you are a very special leader and also true that you do not have to be the leader all the time.

That’s one of the reasons why I left the Dance Exchange. We’d been working hard toward these different leadership models but no matter how small I made myself, I still cast too big a shadow. I could make myself practically nothing and the shadow of Liz Lerman was looming over everybody’s work there. I didn’t want that.

Maybe one of the things we could do in our own project together is to think through where collaboration lives. If we could cite how it works or track it to notice its nuances. Because in our relationship with this retrospective project coming up, I’m really looking forward to how you want to do things. I want to hear your ideas. I want to see how you’re thinking. I want to understand how you’re arranging things.

DH: I think that you and I may try to keep an open environment but still understand that at the end of the day, things have to get done. To some extent, there is someone ushering that process along. The current team at The Contemporary has never worked with an artist where true collaboration was also their process. It’s always been an artist who was waiting to be navigated by us. Or we took the backseat because the artist navigated. We just knew that we had to deliver X, Y, and Z within a certain time frame. The collaborative level of our project together will be something else.

LL: I’ve been thinking about how the communities we’re navigating for this project are our own. One of them is the community of artists that will join us in what we’re building, and then of course there’s the larger relationship...
to the public that’s going to come. Just the research process is going to place us in any number of new situations. If we add to that that our canvas is the city of Baltimore right now, we can see that we’re going to be faced with some very challenging moments.

**DH:** Do you ever worry?

**LL:** When collaborating with other artists sometimes I worry about asking them to rethink, yet again, what is it they’re trying to do in that particular moment, to make the work achieve what they want. In Baltimore, it’s just so hard to even get your work up, that by the time your work is up, people are just exhausted.

**DH:** At The Contemporary, we’ve only had tremendous mutual respect with the people that we’ve worked with, but sometimes it does get challenging. We’ll get to this place where the finish line just seems so far away. We get to work with artists at such an intimate level. We get to spend so many months and years with them—and not just their objects, but with their person. I think it is simultaneously beautiful but also really challenging to grow to profoundly love and respect the person you’re working with.

The other challenge for The Contemporary is that most times we’re doing something for the first time. We’ve never orchestrated a large retrospective. We’ve never renovated a building before. We’ve never had to buy a food truck. There’s no learning curve. It’s a brand new project every time.
and know how to operate within. In the most successful projects we’ve had, the artist also is doing something for the first time, so we get to build this thing together and the collaboration tends to happen naturally.

It’s been a little bit more challenging when one party has never tried a thing before and the other party has. It feels like someone’s playing catch-up the whole time. I’m excited because it feels like the kind of project you and I are embarking on together—and thus, our teams and our people—is really new for everybody.

**LL:** What do you think The Contemporary’s relationship is to Baltimore? What are artists’ relationships to their city?

**DH:** I think that Baltimore really needs to meet new people right now. Since running a small organization, I end up being in so many meetings about how we can effect better change, and I see too many of the same people in every meeting. The city is 600,000 people. We talk about Baltimore like its small and dwindling, but it’s not. It’s still a city of 600,000 people, plus all the other people who commute in to get their work done. Sometimes I feel like my world is too small. That was really evident after the uprising.

Our world, as reflected in these meetings, was 40 people, and it was the same people every time. When we wanted to have a conversation about race and equity, we picked the same type of people. When we wanted to have a conversation about art and public space, we picked the same type of people. I understand why things like that happen…but it’s not okay. The conversation needs to be bigger.

I’m also wondering about the place of collaboration, and everyone’s responsibility to a change, and knowing what your role is. I wonder if it’s really The Contemporary’s role to say something like, “There’s a tremendous amount of inequity,” or, “We need more blank.”
Every time I make one of those statements, or every time I hear a colleague from another organization or institution—our size and larger—make those statements, I worry. If we’re the ones having that conversation, who’s the person doing the work? I wonder if it’s not our responsibility to have that conversation because we are the ones who should be doing the work. If we’re thinking that organizations need to work more inter-generationally then why aren’t they just doing that? If we know and believe there needs to be more equity and diversity—just go do it. We talk so much about these issues in the arts and because we’re talking about them so much, maybe we think we’re doing the work, but we’re not.

When I came back from the Hand-in-Glove conference, I found myself asking, “Whoa...what is my organization’s job? What is our actual function?” Not our mission. Not our core values. Not any of that, because that’s the stuff we talk about a lot. It is literally, what is our function? What do we do on a day-to-day basis, literally, for the people of Baltimore that we can point to as an action? What do we do that if we stop doing it, people would be affected? This is distinct from our values, like equity. Of course we care about equity. But why am I having that conversation? I should just be making sure the artists we work with reflect the equity we believe in.

LL: The quality of the talking is a factor, too. If the topic is race, or the city’s problems, we need to actually bring people in contact with each other to dig down into those issues. I think something the arts can do is to hold that forum open...but I think we’ve got to ask tougher questions and go deeper than we’ve been wanting to go.
After the uprising and since, it was almost shocking to me that my friends of color in the city who I talk to deeply about many, many things, not just race...have all gone back to talking about slavery in relationship to what’s happened in Baltimore. These are people I’ve known for a long time. And I can’t get that out of my head. That’s why my thoughts keep going back to reparations, to shame and forgiveness. There has to be some reckoning.

DH: Yeah. I’ve been doing so much reading about these issues. I feel this idea of reparations has been repeatedly stifled in our history. We have a narrative in our country. We always pick that narrative: something can be amended, refined, and moved on from. Meanwhile, we’re just watching the issue bubble, and bubble, and bubble. I think we’re getting to a point where people just really want to have a conversation about reparations.

LL: Yes. I also think we could make these conversations. I keep imagining a public conversation about reparations between two people like Baltimore’s Ta-Nehisi Coates and Martha Minow, who’s done such interesting work on restorative justice at Harvard Law School. And then the audience would break out into small groups and spend one or two hours wrestling with these questions in artistic forms. Basically, we’re talking about coming to a different narrative, and perhaps another solution.

And I’ve been thinking about if I should start my own reparation movement. Do I start a movement among white artists? Is there some form of reparations I should be doing?

DH: I always wonder about that. It’s tricky. Maybe reparations is the one place where an individual person actually can’t make a difference. Because at the end of the day, there’s still a system in place that made it so that you have the money and have to allocate it to somebody else. How do you change the system? There are certain collectives and coalitions in Baltimore—like FORCE and the Station...
North Tool Library—that I love because they’re thinking about the system. I’m trying so hard to think about how my body, in all of its privilege, can help thwart that system. I guess the question is: How do you shift the system so that reparations are not just in gesture?

**LL:** This topic of doing vs. talking…it’s been a perpetual question for me, through my whole life. Particularly when an audience comes and sees your performance...what happens to them? Or if it’s a community project and so many people come together with so much effort and nothing happens...then what?

Dance Exchange did a two-year project in Portsmouth, NH, called the Shipyard Project. A couple years after that ended, the Southeast Michigan Community Foundation was in the process of moving its funding from conventional support of the ballet and opera to a more community-based practice. They wanted me to come and talk to the artists and help them understand what’s in it for them with this kind of shift. And they asked me to bring someone who I had worked with from the community.

I brought Charlie Lawrence, an African-American man who had been head of crane maintenance at the Naval Shipyard. He’d worked there his whole life and was just such an advocate for the Shipyard Project and an incredible performer. He had been one of the people who had really rallied the workers at the shipyard and helped build all the participation. When he spoke to the group in Michigan, he reported that the group of kids who were involved in the project as high school students were now coming into the shipyard as workers, and everyone felt that they were the best workers that they’d ever gotten at that age and level. It was because they knew the history of the yard. They’d been involved. They felt responsible, all because of their participation in the project. They understood something
much bigger than their job. And that made them really
good workers. I would never have thought that would be
an outcome from the Shipyard Project.

So, we don’t know what these participatory things can do.
We can hope for change, though we don’t always know
what it is.

You know, I want to come back to sustainability—you
mentioned it earlier. Are you talking about sustaining your
organization? Or sustaining staff members as individuals
within that organization as you struggle to keep it all going?

DH: I think all of it. On the most macro level: sustaining the
actual operation, financially and logistically, of this thing
we’ve inherited. That we’re tasked to take care of until the
next team can take care of it. At a more micro level, it’s
also about sustaining staff’s effort. We have to keep the
momentum and excitement up in a city that needs a lot
of momentum and excitement right now. We also spend
so many hours of each day doing things I don’t know are
entirely necessary to the work we want to be doing. That’s
more just the sector we occupy. So for me, I want to think
differently about sustaining the purpose of it. Think less
about mission. Mission seems so far away as opposed to
function. How can we actually function to help?

LL: And how does that functioning serve the mission, but also
the purpose? I think I’ve spoken to you about this, but
having talked to so many veterans as part of the research
for Healing Wars, I’ve observed that when they come
back—and my language for this is a little simplistic—they
are missing purpose. When they were deployed, they had
purpose even when they were playing cards. They were
together in the same risk. I really think risk is a lifeforce.
When these guys are not risking, they aren’t breathing the
way they need to. Risk causes you to [gasps]. It keeps you
sleepless. I think it is a lifeforce.
DH: I’ve been having national fundraising meetings recently and speaking to a few foundations. It’s been hard. I’ll ask them: What are your interests? Why are you considering funding Baltimore? They talk about how it makes sense when they point to a really massive institution like Johns Hopkins University or MICA\(^2\) or UMBC.\(^3\) But they never really figured out how they want to support smaller activity by smaller organizations and that’s just because it doesn’t seem—and I’ve heard this repeated—like Baltimore has the infrastructure yet. And they say to me, “We’re hoping that you, as somebody who runs a smaller organization, will help us navigate as we think about how to invest in this city.” But I always wonder in this larger, national conversation about the arts, and protecting them, and enhancing them—what does “infrastructure” actually mean?

LL: They’re afraid to take a risk. I think the perfectly good way to do it is to give money to individual artists who are working in ways that don’t make demands on the infrastructure. On the other hand, institutions like yours...well, you do need your infrastructure. You can’t do the work without it. You provide something quite profound.

DH: I think there is access to people right now in a way that’s really interesting. It’s not the same as access to resources; I think we’re still very far away from that place...but people are listening. My hope is that we are not only listening to the loudest people in the room, but also to the quietest people in the room. I get a little nervous when there are convenings, after convenings, after convenings to ideate, and then nothing really seems to come out of those.
LL: Yes, I share that with you very much. I know that I felt part of my job at the Shipyard, and I often feel this is part of my job in the country, is to carry stories from one place to another. It’s the idea of storytellers as traders. Not trading in material goods, trading in stories. “This is what people are thinking.” “This is how life is happening.” I do think that this is part of what I’ve been doing. I should just call myself a trader.

Deana, what if we each spoke about what we’ve just figured out in this conversation. What we’ll say to ourselves when we hang up the phone?

DH: I think that artists have been working collaboratively and across disciplines for a long, long time. You’re one of them. I think that we live in a world where there’s growing recognition, more built-in “infrastructure” for that type of intersection. But I like that collaboration is not something that we can prescribe and that it’s really specific to the people and the places and the things and the themes that are being put in conversation with one another. So what I’ve appreciated about our conversation is that we both have a lot to bring to the table. And that we’re in a city that has a really good table right now so that we can get some work done. I’m very excited about collaborating with somebody who has been doing it for so long and to learn from her.

LL: And I would say that I’m just moved by the way you hold yourself open and the way you challenge yourself with your own action, and also the action of others. Your perpetual questioning and—I felt it on the phone and I just love this about you—your insistence. There’s something going on with you like: Come on! Now! And I really yearn to be around that. I love it.

I am struck by the very particular place you can play by being a person of color in the arts field, a curator of color, and also as you describe yourself—you can be “seen” since you are fair-skinned, as moving between worlds.
And to some extent, I’ve moved between worlds quite a lot too, though not in the same way. I’m clearly white, but in many ways I’m a little bit of a shape shifter and I think that’s something curious for us. And as you were describing work where it’s most interesting when we don’t exactly know what we’re doing or heading for something…I find that really exciting. And yes, I sure hope we can do something for our city.

1. Dance Exchange’s residency culminated with a dance performance at the shipyard, featuring retired nuclear engineers, Rotary Club members, teachers, and real estate appraisers.
2. Maryland Institute College of Art
3. University of Maryland, Baltimore County
About the Contributing Authors

**Liz Lerman** is a choreographer, performer, writer, educator, speaker, and the recipient of numerous honors, including a 2002 MacArthur “Genius Grant” Fellowship and a 2011 United States Artists Ford Fellowship in Dance. A key aspect of her artistry is opening her process to various publics from shipbuilders to physicists, construction workers to ballerinas, resulting in both research and outcomes that are participatory, relevant, urgent, and usable by others. She founded Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in 1976 and led it until 2011. Currently, her work *Healing Wars* is touring across the United States. Liz conducts residencies on critical response process, creative research, the intersection of art and science, and the building of narrative within dance performance at Harvard University, Yale School of Drama, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and the National Theatre Studio among many others. Her third book, *Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer*, was published in 2011.

**Deana Haggag** has been the Director of The Contemporary since the spring of 2013. Prior to her work with the museum, she was the Curator-in-Residence at Gallery CA, which is also located in Baltimore, MD in the City Arts building—home to more than 90 artists. Deana received her M.F.A. in curatorial practice from the Maryland Institute College of Art and a B.A. from Rutgers University in art history and philosophy. In addition to her work at The Contemporary, Deana lectures extensively, consults on various public art initiatives, contributes to cultural publications, and teaches at institutions such as Towson University and Johns Hopkins University. Deana was named “10 People to Watch Under 30” by the *Baltimore Sun* in 2013 and a “Young Cultural Innovator” by the Salzburg Global Forum in 2015.
THE POWER OF “ARTS AND”

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.

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