2017 National Arts Policy Roundtable
Re-Animating Democracy: The Arts as a Change Agent in Changing Times
Briefing Book

September 14-16, 2017
The Redford Center at the Sundance Resort and Preserve, Utah
September 7, 2017

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 12th annual convening of the Americans for the Arts National Arts Policy Roundtable at Sundance. The Policy Roundtable was conceived of by Robert Redford, founder of the Sundance Institute and me as a gathering of high level decision makers and thought leaders that would catalyze new ideas, strategies and efforts for the arts in America. Since then, participants have recommended numerous policies and strategies critical to the role of the arts in advancing our society.

This year’s topic, Re-Animating Democracy: Arts As a Change Agent in Changing Times will focus discussion around the unique capacities the arts have to inspire, inform, promote, and contribute to civic, social, and community change. This topic came about from the idea that the arts can make significant contributions to the building blocks of participatory democracy and virtually every aspect of a strong community. When the arts and artists are intentional and integrated with practices of civic engagement and social activism, they can contribute as catalysts, conveners, and forms of social action. I look forward to deepening our understanding of how we as a field can advance meaningful policy, structural, and systems change, particularly in this challenging, current political climate.

I would like to thank Ann Stock, a valued Americans for the Arts Board member and Co-Chair of this year’s convening. Americans for the Arts also gratefully acknowledges the NAMM Foundation, and the Ruth Lilly Fund of Americans for the Arts for their ongoing support of the National Arts Policy Roundtable.

Finally, the key to the success of this event is you, the participant. The stories and perspectives that you share during the course of our discussion will launch us into new ways of thinking and viewing the topic. For your willingness to exchange and share your insight, I am deeply grateful.

Robert L. Lynch
Co-Chair, National Arts Policy Roundtable
President and CEO, Americans for the Arts
Introduction

In times of division, the arts provide unity; in times of upheaval and confusion, they can provide clarity and create meaning. They provide a vehicle for us to understand one another more deeply and to learn about points of view and philosophies of those with different life experiences. The arts can also provide a safe space for dialogue. Issues that are often too sensitive or controversial to address directly, may be more profoundly tackled through the arts. The arts can and should be disruptive, promote change, and encourage empathy and contemplation, whether addressing interpersonal relationships or national or global challenges.

The 2017 National Arts Policy Roundtable, “Re-Animating Democracy: Arts as a Change Agent in a Changing Time,” will focus on the unique capacity of the arts to inspire, inform, promote, and contribute to change at all levels — in society writ large, in communities, and within governments. The notion of “re-animating” implies action and change, and we will discuss the powerful work of the arts and artists in civic engagement and social activism. Furthermore, we will examine how creative skills can contribute to social innovation and activism and to deepening our understanding of how we as a field can advance meaningful policy, structural, and systems change. The arts have not only tangible, practical benefits, but also deeper, emotional ones.

One lens through which Americans for the Arts explores the arts and artists as contributors to social change, is its Animating Democracy Initiative, established in 1996 with a generous donation from the Ford Foundation, which demonstrates the public value of creative work that contributes to social change and fosters synergy across arts and other fields and sectors. In this way, we work to make the arts an integral and effective part of solutions to the challenges facing communities and toward ensuring a healthy democracy.

When artists are intentionally engaged in this work, they help make and magnify the case for the arts and culture as a tool to affect positive change. This practice makes an appeal for the power of the arts on a deeper, human level.

Issues emerging from discourses following the removal of controversial monuments in Charlottesville and elsewhere, highlight how important it is to engage artists in the critical social and civic dialogue required to tackle these issues. While discussions on these and other tough issues, like immigration, are evolving, and will continue long into the future, it is crucial to include artists not only as voices in the conversation, but as intermediaries who can provide common understanding in the face of instability.

The Value of the Arts

The arts are fundamental. Not only do they make the world more beautiful and foster understanding, they also impact us in more tangible ways. Incorporating arguments about the broad benefits of a vibrant arts and cultural sector into our advocacy messaging has proven extremely effective.

According to the National League of Cities, the top ten issues of concern to mayors and their communities in 2017 are:

- Economic Development
- Public Safety
- Infrastructure
- Budgets
As advocates, we know that the arts intersect with each of these issues in some way. One of our goals is to help decision-makers understand this, and make them aware that the arts can provide solutions to some of the most pressing civic challenges they face. For example, with regard to public safety: “Communities with arts and culture organizations are seen as safer by their residents; they bring residents closer together, and the arts act as a bridge between the community and police.”¹ When it comes to budgets, “the arts and culture generate tax revenue far beyond any government investment, adding dollars to city coffers and helping city budgets.”²

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² Ibid.
In making the case for how the arts intersect with, and can provide solutions to, challenges and concerns communities are facing, we can help decision-makers at all levels understand that the impact of the arts is not just social, but also concrete.

**The Arts as a Change Agent in Historical Perspective: The Great Depression**

The role of the artist as citizen, activist, and change maker is not a new one. Both during times of upheaval and of relative stability, artists in America have long been actively engaged in social change. Though at times controversial, arts projects, and the artists who create them, have played major roles during some of the most critical periods in our country’s history.

The period of the Great Depression serves as a particularly relevant case study given our current economic situation. At that time, Americans were living in a state of immense uncertainty, faced with instability at home – post-crash economic hardships, the Dust Bowl – and abroad – the rise of fascism in Europe and the coming war. As part of his response to the economic situation, President Franklin Roosevelt launched a “New Deal”: a series of federal programs intended to put people back to work and promote economic growth. Among these programs were the Public Works of Art Project and the Works Progress Administration, which commissioned murals, sculptures, new buildings, and roads, around the country. This period saw incredible and unprecedented support for the arts with artists playing a key role in rebuilding the infrastructure of post-war America.

In this context, we see the dual impact of the arts and artists. The program had a strong economic component – it tackled unemployment by putting 8.5 million Americans (both artists and unskilled laborers) to work, rebuilding thoughtfully designed infrastructure for the nation. WPA workers built schools and hospitals, repaired roads, and planted trees. Yet, there was also an emotional aspect of the art being produced during this period. President Roosevelt expressed the desire for Americans to have “a more abundant life” amidst hardship, which included easy access to art. Likewise, in producing these works, American artists could express their feelings about the uncertainty and threat they felt in the world.

Some of this art was deemed disruptive and controversial, and we see these artists as change agents. Some of the politically active artists hoped to use their art to prompt social change, or to express sympathy for certain political persuasions. Certain works of art were considered propaganda by the right, others by the left.

Later in the twentieth century, the Civil Rights movement also employed the arts as a galvanizing force to create community and common cause. Likewise, on September 11th, an otherwise fractured congress came together in tragedy to sing *God Bless America* on the steps of the Capitol, as a symbol of strength and solidarity.

In our current state of national turmoil, we can draw on these examples of times when art was intentionally integrated into the civic and social realms. The arts’ impact can be economic – generating employment revenue and bolstering infrastructure – as well as social. It offers an outlet for expression in a time of fear and uncertainty and allows us to find a common humanity.

**Economic and Civic Impact of the Arts and Artists**

“There is no discipline that nurtures and sparks the cognitive ability to imagine, and unleashes creativity and innovation, more than arts and culture. There is no approach that breaks barriers, connects across cultural differences, and engages our shared values more than arts and culture. There is no investment that connects us to each other, moves us to action, and strengthens our ability to make collective choices more than arts and culture.”

- Eric Friedenwald-Fishman, “No art? No social change. No innovation economy.”
In the face of budget cuts and other threats to cultural funding, arts advocates turn to arguments they feel will resonate most with citizens, legislators, and funders alike: those supporting the argument that the arts and culture are critical to a strong economy. Not only does the creative economy ensure our country’s economic well-being, it fosters growth.

According to the most recent iteration of Americans for the Arts’ Arts and Economic Prosperity Study (AEP5), in 2015 the nonprofit arts and culture industry in the U.S. generated $166.3 billion in economic activity – $63.8 billion in spending by arts and cultural organizations and $102.5 billion in event-related spending by audiences – supported 4.6 million jobs, and generated $27.5 billion in government revenue. A report by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) (which considers the full breadth of the nation’s art and culture industries – nonprofit, public sector, commercial, entertainment, etc. – as opposed to AEP5 which only accounts for nonprofit arts and their audiences) concluded that the arts and culture sector is a $730 billion industry, which represents 4.2 percent of the nation’s GDP – a larger share than transportation, tourism, agriculture, and construction.

America’s Arts Industries Represent 4.2 Percent of the Nation’s Gross Domestic Product

The arts and culture sector will only grow in economic importance as our focus shifts from manufacturing to innovation, requiring the cultivation of creative capital to remain competitive. Creative thinking will lead to new technologies that will help us tackle some of today’s biggest national and global challenges – such as demographic changes, the environment, and infrastructure.

When arts funding is in jeopardy, using an economic framework to argue for support can be immensely beneficial, but these arguments alone do not give a full picture of the impact of arts and artists.

**Emotional and Social Impact of the Arts and Artists**

“The major responsibilities of artists – and the idea that artists have responsibilities may come as a surprise to some – is to help people not only get to know and understand something with their minds but also to feel it emotionally and physically. By doing this, art can mitigate the numbing effect created by the glut of information we are faced with today, and motivate people to turn thinking into doing.”

- Olafur Eliasson, Artist, “Why Art Has the Power to Change the World”

According to Americans for the Arts’ “Ten Reasons to Support the Arts in 2017,” the majority of Americans believe the arts are crucial to uniting communities “regardless of age, race, and ethnicity” and that they help us better understand other cultures. This is because the arts appeal to our common humanity. A powerful arts experience can overcome linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries, and allows us to appreciate “art for arts' sake.”
Everyone understands what it means to be moved by a poem, novel, song, performance, or painting. There is something that speaks to us on a deeper, emotional level.

The arts build communities by helping us understand challenges that may not affect us directly — both within the U.S. and internationally — and bringing awareness to those challenges and the individuals facing them. Cultural diplomacy is a powerful tool to help build a global community, as evidenced in the New York Philharmonic’s visit to North Korea, and American Ballet Theater’s performances in Cuba, which allowed audiences and individuals from these nations to learn about other cultures and see each other on a human level.

One recent example of the arts’ power to help people understand those with different life experiences, and draw attention to, at times, underrepresented challenges, is Lynn Nottage’s Tony-nominated play, Sweat. Based on interviews with residents of Reading, Pennsylvania, Sweat examines the changing landscape of an industrial town and “chronicles the strains placed on a group of blue-collar friends when their jobs at the local factory are threatened.” It addresses inequality and racial issues, and offers a glimpse of a post-industrial America.

According to Sherrilyn Ifill, the President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, “People are looking for answers... People went out to see ‘Hamilton’ and it gave them a sense of purpose and hopefulness and pride in the project of America. But I think…it’s time for a...story that tries to help people find answers. Sweat has its uncomfortable moments, but there are enough to go around that nobody leaves unscathed.”

Another powerful example in which the arts are used to confront uncomfortable moments in our country’s history and project that onto social change today, is the Equal Justice Initiative’s (EJI) project to build a national memorial to victims of lynching:

“The memorial is more than a static monument. Just outside the main memorial structure will be a field of identical columns, one for each county where a lynching has been documented. EJI will be inviting each of these counties to retrieve their county’s monument and place it back in the county where the terror lynchings took place. This National Memorial hopes to have component pieces all over the United States where racial terror lynchings have been documented. Over time, the national memorial will serve as a report on which parts of the country have confronted the truth of this terror and which have not.”

The Evolving Funding Landscape

The awareness around the importance of the arts in social activism is reflected in the expanding vision of a number of funders to include social justice as an important component of their art and culture portfolios. It is important that foundations understand their role during challenging times to support decision-maker education around the value of arts and culture. Examples include:

- The Nathan Cummings Foundation, which is expanding its work in the area of arts and culture to acknowledge “the roles that artists and cultural workers play in stimulating social and economic justice in both traditional and non-traditional venues.”

- The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation has as its core mission statement the belief of its founder, that “art can change the world!” The Foundation is committed to this ideal and its programs include the Artist as Activist initiative, which “provides game-changing resources to artists of all disciplines...who address

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4 Arts and Culture Program – The Nathan Cummings Foundation. http://www.nathancummings.org/grant-programs/arts-culture-program
important global challenges through their creative practice.” The current group of fellows are pursuing projects focused on criminal justice, but past projects have engaged in many different facets of social justice work.5

- A number of other foundations, including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation, are currently funding important research and decision-maker education that will inform and encourage future systemic changes.

Civic Engagement of the Arts and Artists

Funders are not the only group who recognize the social impact of the arts. The arts make significant contributions to the building blocks of participatory democracy, and governments – both nationally and at state and local levels – draw on both economic and “art for arts’ sake” arguments in a number of initiatives.

On Americans for the Arts' Arts Advocacy Day in 2016, Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) announced new legislation to strengthen the creative economy. The Comprehensive Resources for Entrepreneurs in the Arts to Transform the Economy (CREATE) Act builds on much of Americans for the Arts' research in this area and “aims to more thoroughly serve the people, places, and programs that make our nation’s creative economy prosper in all its cultural, social, and commercial forms.” Harkening back to the New Deal, provisions of the CREATE Act include:

- Expanding programs at the Small Business Administration to increase microloans, business loans and technical assistance for artists;
- Requiring the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Administration ensure that traditional economic development tools, such as incubators and grant programs, support the creative economy throughout the country;
- Creating an Artist Corps to increase national service through the arts, as called for in the Serve America Act.

City governments also recognize the importance of integrating artists into their work. Among them:

- The city of Boston, for example, has an Artists-in-Residence program as “a way for the City to support our artists as agents of reflection, collaboration, and activism while learning new approaches to familiar challenges in city government. As social and civic practitioners, as well as community members, the ten artists are given time to research the needs of the community, deepen their creative practice, and develop a proposal while in residence. Attending workshops alongside a partnering cohort from...community centers and other City agencies, the artists and their City partners learn from each other and presenters in order to develop projects incorporating artistic social practice into government and community work.”
- Saint Paul, Minnesota’s City Artist Program has artists “creating a new artistic, social, and civic practice through an innovative public-private partnership between Public Art Saint Paul and the City of Saint Paul...Saint Paul is unique in that City Artists work within the walls of City Hall and ensure that art is considered as an integral part of nearly every civic discipline: parks, planning, public works and libraries; from early conceptualization of the City’s urban future through planning studies, capital project design, ongoing street and sidewalk maintenance, and the programming of public places.”

Conclusion

Arts that actively promote change allow us to explore sensitive and controversial issues, by providing a safe space for dialogue. When artists are intentionally engaged in this civic work and social activism, they help make and magnify the case for the arts and culture in two major ways: by highlighting the economic and practical benefits of the arts, and in making an appeal for the power of the arts on a deeper, human level.
About the National Arts Policy Roundtable

The National Arts Policy Roundtable assembles leaders from business, government, philanthropy, education, and the arts to Sundance every autumn to address issues critical to the advancement of American culture. It is a forum for national leaders to discuss timely issues, recommend public policies and private sector initiatives, and to identify research needs.

The National Arts Policy Roundtable was launched in October 2006 by Robert L. Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, and Robert Redford, founder of the Sundance Institute, on the premise that issues important to the arts are also important to society. Since its inception, the Roundtable has convened more than 350 top level decision makers and thought leaders from the fields of business, government, the social sector, education, and the arts in a unique cross sector forum designed to discuss issues—and propose solutions—critical to advancing American culture and vitality. Each Roundtable yields a series of recommendations on public policies and private sector practices that are necessary to move the issue addressed from thought to action, on such topics as the future of private sector funding for the arts, the role of the arts in building an internationally-competitive and creative 21st century workforce, fostering civic engagement, and strengthening global communities. Significant cultural policy achievements in both the private and public sectors have been the result. The findings and recommendations from past Roundtables have been distributed broadly via the Americans for the Arts website, publications and industry journals, op-eds, the media, and through Americans for the Arts’ National Arts Policy Network which includes more than 5,000 local arts agencies across the country and over 200,000 citizen activists.

This Briefing Book has been written and prepared by Americans for the Arts for the 2017 National Arts Policy Roundtable.

The 2017 National Arts Policy Roundtable is facilitated by David Grant.

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Further Recommended Resources

“Why Art Has the Power to Change the World”
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/why-art-has-the-power-to-change-the-world/

“No art? No social change. No innovation economy.”
http://www.metgroup.com/assets/No-Art.pdf

The Memorial to Peace and Justice – Equal Justice Initiative
https://eji.org/national-lynching-memorial

Art for Justice Fund
http://artforjusticefund.org/

CREATE Act

VIDEO: Arts Advocacy Day 2017: Senator Tom Udall
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLcXdW_Fbhl

“With Artists in Residence, Boston is Changing How the City Values Art”

“Tear Down the Confederate Monuments – But What Next?”

“8 Ways the Arts Can Boost Your Local Economy & Strengthen Your Community”
https://citiesspeak.org/2017/06/09/8-ways-the-arts-can-boost-your-local-economy-strengthen-your-community/