

THE GROWTH OF COMMUNITY ARTS: EXPANSION ARTS

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Friends, we are here today to celebrate the life of our dearly departed Expansion Arts. I hope to share just a little bit about this fine, fine lady, yes, Expansion Arts was a lady. She touched a lot of people, and a lot of communities. And we are here to touch on the principles that carried through to all her work and those she touched in her short life.

Expansion Arts had a wonderful Auntie. We all know the type, the one that nurtures you, protects you, gives you a little pinch when you do something you're not supposed to do, the one that advocates for you. In this case, the National Council for the Arts back in the late '60's impressed upon Auntie Nancy Hanks that the National Endowment for the Arts needed to address the voices that were expressing, in some cases loudly, that not everything in the arts happened in New York City. The Council asked Mrs. Hanks to look further into how the Endowment could support communities – geographic locations, as well as unique expressions – not just what was considered then to be “mainstream.” Remember that word?

Frankly, the Council was more interested in the support of the arts, but our dear Auntie Nancy knew it was also *politically* important. In the states, there was growing interest and agitation from those who were called “minorities” at that time. And once you were beyond the elite Eurocentric-defined arts, there were huge gaps. In many communities those gaps were supported by creative activities in community centers, boys/girls clubs, ethnic specific organizations and social service organizations. There was creativity everywhere and Auntie Nancy Hanks knew that if the NEA was going to get support at the national level in Congress, it had to have a relationship with states and communities.

The creation of Expansion Arts was political because there was pressure. The Civil Rights movement was in high gear, and disenfranchised people demanded fair treatment. We were still getting over Viet Nam. When Nancy Hanks traveled to Los Angeles, she was bombarded by two gentlemen who were prominent African American theatre artists---Topper Caruw and Vantile Whitfield. They impressed upon Mrs. Hanks that it was time for Black artists to get funding, too. That there was an aesthetic in communities that the established art forms did not appreciate nor understand.

And there were other voices. The voices from the Association of Community and University Arts Administrators. From the American Council the Arts (now Americans for the Arts). The Ralph Burgard book of 1968 (*Arts in the City*). Nonetheless, communities, people who are bound by values, aesthetics and mores due to location, had their own and the federal level should indeed pay attention. Nancy Hanks heard this loud and clear, not just from the National Council but from her top political advisors as well as from cultural workers. Again, it was about policy.

We never knew who Expansion Arts' mother was. Perhaps it was a conglomerate – a little bit of Appalshop, a little bit of Guadalupe Cultural Center, a little bit of Uptown Hull House, a little bit of Dance Theatre of Harlem, a little bit of the community arts council in Eutaw Alabama, a little

bit of the Old Creamery in Iowa. No, we don't know for sure who her mother, was but we are clear about who her father was: Vantile Whitfield.

Vantile Whitfield. He was an acclaimed stage designer and director in Los Angeles at the time when Mrs. Hank reached out to him and said, "Come East. Come and help me figure this out."

I had pleasure of working with Vantile and I asked where the Expansion Arts, came from, what it was really all about. If you remember Van, he had this deep, smooth voice. He told me in his nonchalant way, "because we were expanding the definition of arts at that time. We were going beyond what was accepted and expected as arts to include unrecognized voices."

So our dearly beloved, Expansion Arts was born in 1971. From a question and request from the National Council to Auntie Nancy. And she was smart enough to recognize that she needed the right person to make this work. Papa Vantile. And Papa Vantile was smart enough to hire Gordan Braithwaite and later AB Spellman. He said to me, "I hired them to go out and talk to the white people so that I could go out and do the work." They could talk to the white people within the Endowment.

In the 1971 Annual Report there is a quote by Junius Eddy. It reads, "As the Blacks, the Puerto Ricans, the Mexican Americans, particularly, began to seek out the roots of their ethnic and racial heritage, which the dominant society had systemically ignored or denigrated, the nature of the community arts movement began to change. The arts became an obvious and powerful vehicle in this cultural renaissance, a vehicle through which minority artist groups could begin to voice the social and economic concerns of their communities, to assert a newfound historical identity, to reflect a new sense of ethnic pride and awareness that they believed to be essential to their survival in white America.

This report goes on to say that citizens who had never entered established institutions were drawn to new meeting places – storefront studios, street academics, community centers, churches, coffee houses. These new centers became places that offered an outlet for community expression, demonstrating that people in socially isolated communities, whether inner city or rural, have an impressive artistic skill, and expressing those skills and talents contribute to the health and vitality of their community and of the nation. The national community arts movement was first recognized by the Expansion Arts leadership. Back then, they were called "arts councils" – not "LAA's" but arts councils. These organizations were skilled at presenting, advocating, and convening all types of people – from artists to "culture ladies" – remember them? They were convening all types of people. In some communities, they were professionally directed; in other communities, they were all volunteers. Community arts programs and organizations focused on local arts expression and ideas, they presented what was unique, in their environment, in their world. And they brought in other types of programs depending on where they were. Expansion Arts looked at geographically based and ethnically specific organizations – organizations that were deeply rooted in, and reflective of, inner city, tribal or rural community and ethnic communities.

In the 1993 Annual Report, Nancy Hanks wrote that from the need to support programs designed for urban and rural areas which might appear culturally disadvantaged, ideas and

projects were coming in from all over America, almost too fast to handle. The early budget of the Expansion Arts program was only a million dollars, and the categories back then were a response to where community arts was at that time, so we had categories like instruction and training, summer projects, arts exposure, neighborhood arts consortia, community cultural centers, service to the field. In the very first year of grantmaking we saw organizations like the Bronx Council on the Arts, the Milwaukee Inner City Arts Council, the Foundation for the Development and Preservation and of Cultural Arts in East St. Louis, the Federation of Communities and Service in rural Tennessee, Cultural Black and White in Mobile Alabama. These were among the few first grants.

Expansion Arts structure was in response to the field at all times. Programs and projects were supported through larger organizations that may not have had “arts” anywhere in their name, may not have had “culture” anywhere in their name, but those were the organizations that were supported. Community arts organizations were focused, very much focused, on what was going on in their own communities. The service to the field category became a technical assistance strategy for us and certainly those organizations were convening the right set of people. Organizations like ATLATL, the Native American arts organization, and people like Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, were leading advocates back then. The Association of American Cultures, even the National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies, or NAPNOC (Neighborhood Arts Programs/National Organizing Committee) – remember NAPNOC?? – these were organizations that Expansion Arts was funding in its early years and of course those that came along later. The field was a conglomerate of programs and projects that grew up to be organizations.

Expansion Arts changed, and decided to give general operating support. There was a huge explosion, sparked by the Civil Rights movement, the Chicano movement, the rural arts movement and others. Anthony Garcia, a playwright and professor of Chicano Studies at Metropolitan State College in Denver, summed it up this way: “This generation lived through lynchings, the KKK, the Great Depression, World War II and the Korean War. The 1950’s were marred with McCarthyism, and the concept of stepping out, of articulating a separate identity through the arts, was pretty much repressed. For Chicanos, there was a period of pre-Civil-Rights – when Mexican-Americans wanted to prove that they were white That was why what Luis Valdez did in the creation of El Teatro Campesino was so incredible. The condition of the 1960’s called for theater as a force for independent identity. This did not exist in the 20 years from 1945 to 1965. The Chicano movement caused all of this to explode in a very different way. The theater became their forum. For us, the theater was the streets – because that generation before us still struggled with the idea of an independent identity from the American mainstream. Because fear of marginalizing themselves. Luis Valdez started theater in a migrant field, toured that theater from the back of a flatbed truck. Of and about the people.”

Expansion Arts responded to the field by establishing discipline programs, categories. There was theater. There was music. Dance. So throughout her lifetime there were four pillars that guided her work:

1. Recognition of creative expression in inner city, rural and tribal communities who had, and still have, their own aesthetic.

2. Passing it on – the tradition, styles, the songs, the dance, through instruction and training.
3. Responsiveness. We believed that the field knew best, and all we had to do was to listen. All we had to do was to listen. And there were no greater listeners than AB Spellman and Patrice Walker Powell.
4. Sustainability. We encouraged the field to document their work. We gave grants to organizations just to film their dance concerts. We created an evaluation system that was a technical assistance program. We built community across the nation, across disciplines. And we opened sustainability doors through establishing endowments at community foundations for small organizations, that still exist.

The intent of Expansion Arts was to connect communities to communities, artists to artists, cultural warriors to cultural warriors. And most important, the staff of Expansion Arts believed fundamentally – fundamentally! – that it was *their* money, and our job was to give it back to them. That was our job: to give it back to the community.

So in order to do that, we had to build those connections. We took panel meetings to different parts of the country. We sent people like Tisa Chang, from the Asian American Theater in New York, to John O'Neal way down in New Orleans. We sent Louis LeRoy from the Yuma Arts Council to evaluate Uptown Hull House in Chicago. We were very deliberate in our work because we understood that it was about *expansion* arts.

And so the program began to have offspring. She had little children! The Technical Assistance program became the Advancement Program. Folk Arts was created. The Services to the Field category was adopted by every program at the Arts Endowment. The Neighborhood Arts Consortium and the Community Cultural Centers category program became City Arts. And this grew up to become the Locals Test Program. The Locals Test Program became the Locals Program. And in 1988 the Locals Program was on its way with 1.3 million dollars. The support of arts councils to hire staff to specifically focus on community arts and minority arts was very efficient and very effective. You see, we learned, even as late as 1992, that there were expansion arts organizations receiving their very first grant from the Endowment before they were even funded by their state arts council. As late as 1992!

Yet here we stand: local organizations that proudly called themselves expansion arts organizations, those who remained after the Locals program, those who remained after InterArts Program, who adapted that approach and understanding from communities of color, that we did not separate our art forms (so, you couldn't figure out what to call it if you didn't separate your art forms? You called it InterArts! Now, there's a discussion!). There were children along the way.

Unfortunately, those were, and are, organizations of color. Those who still have limited access. Those who are still ignored by the public sector, the private sector. Those who are limited because of who they are, whose aesthetics they stand for; those who are not tied to national Wunderkind artists, find themselves, still, circling. We hoped the rise of community foundations was going to make a difference. We hope now that giving circles will make a difference.

I hope the cultural warriors, those who are still out there doing the work, will find listening ears. And here we are, talking about community arts intending to be inclusive.

Our dearly beloved Expansion Arts departed this life in 1996, the victim of new leadership requiring change. Some say she lived past her time. But many of those that she funded in the last 5-7 years of her existence were gone two years after the close of Expansion Arts. I spent two months looking for them. They no longer existed. No longer existed.

Her core values were very simple. Recognition where you are. Valuing your own aesthetic expressions. The power to control your own. And the importance of teaching and lifting up the next generation. Expansion Arts in every community, as we continue to strive to find equity and equality in what we do.

May she rest in peace. But may her ideas of expansion live in all of us.

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