

The Wingspread Report

The State of the Field of Community Cultural Development: Strengthening the Arts at Their Community Base

A Report from the Wingspread Gathering
September 2016

By Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland

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Our Communities: A Symposium on the Arts
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INTRODUCTION

In September 2016, three dozen practitioners and thinkers in community-based arts gathered at Wingspread in Wisconsin, hosted by the Gard Foundation, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Robert E. Gard's "The Arts in the Small Communities: A National Plan" and to "acknowledge the past, understand the present and envision a future where the power of human expression through art defines and transforms our communities."

This essay will examine the documentation of the symposium and describe the "state of the field" based on those presentations and recordings. This writing is intended to be a companion piece to a report on a similar meeting: the CAN Gathering of 2004, presented by Art in the Public Interest and its online project the Community Arts Network (CAN), in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation. The event brought 27 longtime community arts practitioners and funders to North Carolina to ponder the state of the field. The [CAN Report](#) details its findings. The most significant discovery of that convening was the emergence of a new energy: an accelerated fusion of community-based arts with other fields of activity, such as community development, activism, education, aging, civic dialogue, cultural policy and globalization. "The center of activity, it concluded, is not a 'field,' but an intersection of interests and commitments."

The Gard Foundation's gathering at Wingspread 12 years later spoke overwhelmingly for supporting the arts based in local communities, and even more emphatically for strengthening and broadening that base across each community's social, political and economic landscapes with participation by everyone.

All the presentations envisioned a strong community base, networked across sectors, as the future for the arts.

It's a critical time for this discussion. When this gathering came to Wingspread in September, the participants were unaware of the massive cultural revolution the nation

would experience following the surprise election of Donald Trump and the political triumph of the conservative wing of the Republican Party. That wing has long had on its agenda the abolition of federal financial support for the arts as a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. It is not surprising that the attendees to this symposium have long been braced for the worst: the destruction of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as a countrywide support system for the arts and culture. Logically, they turned toward Gard's idea of local cultural support as the most reliable.

The symposium began with a look backward at the populism of Robert Gard and the Wisconsin Idea: that good things would arise from a support system that would encourage creativity locally -- in every citizen in every community of Wisconsin. He wrote:

The springs of the American spirit are at the grass roots. Opportunities must exist in places where they never have existed before. A consciousness of the people, a knowledge of their power to generate and nourish art, and a provision of ways in which they may do so are essential for our time.

Various speakers described Gard's Wisconsin Idea of the 1960s as an important influence on the NEA's development of funding programs in support of individual artists and local arts councils in every state. In 2017 that national spirit is in danger of being crushed in favor of a Darwinian philosophy that the United States and its government are a business, and only the strong survive. In this far-right view, the arts are not in the public interest.

At the symposium, several topics came up that spark particular interest.

HISTORY OF THE FIELD

There is much remarkable material in the symposium documents regarding the “history of community arts.” Maryo Gard Ewell’s account of her father’s work and the Wisconsin Idea needs to become firmly embedded in that history. Gard’s work was highly inspirational then, and still is. His unmitigated joy at bringing art-making into the lives of everyone is catching. Ewell and other speakers were able to credit Gard with informing a key change in the arc of the NEA toward support for art in small communities.

Robert Lynch’s extensive symposium review of U.S. arts support over the last 50 years is a key historical document for the community arts, detailing the dynamic growth of local arts participation and local arts organizations all over the country. In 1960 there were a few hundred arts councils and 7,000 nonprofit arts organizations, said Lynch. He went on:

Today there are 5,000 arts councils by many names: Gard would have been proud. There are 100,000 nonprofit arts organizations and over 600,000 for-profit arts-related businesses. There are 2.5 million artists who spend more than 50% of their time making art and many more who make art ‘for the love of it’ In fact, roughly 50% of the population told us [Americans for the Arts] in our public poll that they derive primary joy from making art themselves. So the field was built on the backs of many people.

E’Vonne Coleman added another thread to the history of the NEA’s engagement with local communities with her description of the NEA Expansion Arts Program (1971 - 1996), which she said was created to provide support to artists and organizations of color in their communities, and which, she said, introduced advanced thinking and innovations in programming throughout the NEA: the creation of programs like Inter-Arts and Services to the Field.

INTENTION

At a symposium like this, it might be assumed that all the participants are in agreement about the definition of “the field.” But after the presentations that variously interpreted art-support history, Michael Rohd asked a key question that arose many times: “Who is ‘we’?” That is, do all of us in this room have the same intention in their community-based work? All are concerned with the concept of artists collaborating with communities. But to what end? Some hope their efforts will bring about fees for working artists. Some hope to spark creativity in people who have never experienced it. Some hope to bring a whole community together to create a tapestry of itself. Some hope to bring people of differing ideologies together to practice listening and empathy. Some hope to revive lost community history or issues that are being ignored. Some find it paramount to focus on outcomes of social change. Rohd’s remarks implied that no one definition of “community-based art” could comprise all those intentions. The “Who is we” question came up several times without any outstanding resolution, other than an insistence on inclusion.

TRAINING v. FLUIDITY

There has long been a call for training in specific skills for community-based art as a bulwark against project failure and resulting damage to the community. The conversation about training has progressed in the last decade. Referring to the wealth of training programs proliferating in universities and arts companies, some wondered if standardization of method and skills was hindering the imagination and growth of community-based artists.

Younger practitioners like Tatiana Hernandez, Savannah Barrett, Laura Zabel suggested standardized training -- the “right way” of doing things -- may often be less useful than “fluidity” or “doing what the people need.” Experimentation and entrepreneurship are highly valued. Chaos should not always be interpreted as failure, but can be a steppingstone to breakthrough for a committed group. “Doing things right” (using firm

training guidelines) can be a stumbling block that paralyzes creative imagination. Carlton Turner described collaboration:

It requires patience, and values listening as an essential leadership skill, because in a democratic process where all voices are heard, and are naturally endowed with power, decision-making takes longer. It's messy, often chaotic. But don't confuse chaos with disorganization. They are not the same. In nature, chaos is a generative process.

In addition, the younger practitioners pointed to “relationship” and “a sense of belonging” as the grounding for any partnership effort. Once that connection is strong in a working group, they said, obstacles can be surmounted. David O’Fallon echoed others when he said:

Seth Godin stated that "the next economy will be the relationship economy," and my personal conviction that, ultimately, all we have is the authenticity and integrity of our human relationships.

Others spoke out for networking as a fluid tool for social change. In one prominent case where a community responded to a crisis (Ferguson, Mo., and Black Lives Matter), it became apparent that formal leadership training was less useful than networking -- calling upon various group experiences toward an urgent, common solution. In this case, the participants shared a culture and agreed upon what to do in the moment, whatever their level of training.

DECENTRALIZATION V. SCALE

Robert Gard’s “National Plan” was actually more of a suggestion, but its key principle was national support for decentralization. He hoped that fiscal support would be provided nationally but used locally to spread those resources as far as possible. He believed deeply

in the strength of local communities to create, support and thrive on the arts through participation by everyone, not just those with money.

Several local examples of community ecosystems of strength were put forth, based in equity and participation across sectors. Those at the symposium who had experienced the success of this type of local ecosystem naturally wondered whether such a framework might be “brought to scale,” a regional or national plan based on experience from the ground up.

Barbara Schaffer-Bacon talked about several community-based projects that have “gotten to scale,” such as V-Day and The Laramie Project. She went on:

We have to build OUT. We have a lot of models. We need to build out and connect a system of support. Local arts councils have played a huge role in creating employment for artists. Make community work local in arts agencies again. Create a commons for this kind of thinking without making artists so precious that we lose the sense of how it connects to community work. Less exceptional, more ubiquitous.

But again and again, a preference was voiced for the relative reliability of a localized system built upon relationships, not on guidelines or frameworks of a federal system subject to national politics. Our current system is hard to change, said Bill Cleveland.

My response is informed by my recent experience working some interesting cross-sector arts projects that involved questioning the assumptions, and notions of success that define existing systems and structures in various arenas, like education, community development, human services. These experiences have reinforced my belief that like many individual humans, most human systems are inherently resistant to fundamental change. ...So our approach has been to begin by considering where a constituency or community wants or needs to go as a precursor to considering the structures and processes will be required to advance

that journey. These guidelines or design standards then become armature upon which the evolving prototype social sculptures are based.

Most of the discussions supported decentralization of arts support, and the creation of local ecosystems responsive to local needs and values. So, in a sense, the conversation was already where it needs to be in 2017. If the NEA vanishes, it will fall to individual communities to create/strengthen their own ecosystems of support.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The Wingspread meeting and its documentation brought forth new ideas and energy about the field at its community base. Out of all this discussion, the group came to a common vision of a healthy local cultural support that includes:

- **Equity of access:** Access to resources and participation at every level of society.
- **Interaction:** Development of cultural ecosystems that operate across community sectors – across political, social and economic landscapes.
- **Support:** New and equitable strategies for supporting creation and presentation of art-making -- inside and outside of the nonprofit sector.
- **Respect:** Respect for the diverse cultural histories, values, beliefs and practices that define communities.
- **Accountability:** Accountability to the people and places that bear the consequences of community cultural development efforts.
- **Morals and ethics:** Recognition of moral and ethical issues inherent to the work.
- **Development:** Investment in professional development, research, network, policy and material support.
- **Interdependence:** Recognition of the interdependent nature of local, national and global cultural ecosystems.

- **Relationship:** The creation of a relationship among all participants must precede the creation of any program.

Let us hope that these aspirations can be brought to fruition in all U.S. communities, whatever their dominant political ideology.

APPENDIX I: Agenda

The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, Robert E. Gard Foundation,
and the Wisconsin Arts Board present

Our Communities: A Symposium on the Arts **Wingspread, Racine, Wisconsin** **September 7-9, 2016**

Amateur and professional artists transform lives and inspire change in every aspect of American life. We celebrate, experiment, learn, and mourn through the creativity of music, visual art, dance, theatre, film, opera, video games, public art, graphic design, poetry, folk arts and crafts, and other ways that American's express their culture and the human condition. This Symposium celebrates the 50th anniversary of "The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan" by Robert Gard. The vision and spirit of this publication and its author are reflected in the community and neighborhood arts movements of all peoples. Arts leaders from rural and small communities, urban neighborhoods, Native tribes and immigrant populations will come together to acknowledge the past, understand the present and envision a future where the power of human expression through art defines and transforms our communities.

Wednesday, September 7, 2016

4:30pm Cocktails

6:00 Welcomes by George Tzougros & The Johnson Foundation
Jane Chu, NEA Chair, acknowledges 50th anniversary of publication, The Vision of Robert Gard Through Poetry

6:30 Dinner

7:15 Keynote: Maryo Ewell, Robert Gard's Arts in the Small Community

12:30pm Lunch

1:30 Envisioning the Future: The Community of Practice
Systems that need to continue and be supported
Systems that need to change or be redefined
New systems that need to arise
Provocateurs: Bill Cleveland, Maria de Leon, Michael Rohd, Roberto Bedoya, Rosy Simas
Facilitated by David O'Fallon

Thursday, September 8, 2016

7:45am Breakfast (Guest House)

8:30 Recent Historic Ground: Where We've Been – Janet Brown

8:40 1900s community arts – Maryo Ewell

9:00 The rise of the institutions – Patrice Powell

9:20 Growth of community arts – E'vonne Coleman-Cook

9:40 Discussion – Questions – Janet Brown, facilitator

10:15 Break

10:30 Current Status – Where We Are – Janet Brown

10:40 Democracy for art forms and artists – Carlton Turner

11:00 Support for and from artists in community settings – Barbara Shaffer Bacon

11:20 Authentic Voices – David O'Fallon

11:40 Discussions – Questions – Janet Brown, facilitator

2:45 Break

3:00 Continue

4:30 Adjourn

6:00 Reception and Dinner– Artist performance by Bonk!

Friday, September 9, 2016

7:45am Breakfast (Guest House)

8:30 New ideas for a world in transition – Intro George Tzougros

8:45 Savannah Barrett

9:30 Tatiana Hernandez

9:45 Laura Zabel

10:00 Break

10:15 Synthesis by Robert Lynch

10:45 Discussion facilitated by Janet Brown

11:30 Closing remarks – Maryo Ewell/George Tzougros

12:00pm Lunch and adjournment

APPENDIX II: Symposium attendees



Our Communities: A Symposium on the Arts attendees - Wingspread, September 2016

Wingspread Confirmed Attendees

Lulani Arquette, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation
Ramona Baker, Director, MA in Arts Administration, Goucher College
Savannah Barrett**, Art of the Rural (S)
Roberto Bedoya*, Tucson Pima Arts Council (S)
Vickie Benson, McKnight Foundation
Janet Brown***, Grantmakers in the Arts (S)
Murray Chase, American Association of Community Theatres
Jane Chu, National Endowment for the Arts (S)
Bill Cleveland, Center for Arts and Community (S)
E'Vonne Coleman Cook, retired National Endowment for the Arts (S)
María López De León, National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, NEA National Council (S)
Maryo Gard Ewell***, Gard Foundation (S)
Tatiana Hernandez, Hemera Foundation, Boulder
Mark Lefebvre**, Gard Foundation
Robert Lynch*, Americans for the Arts (S)
Diane Mataraza, Mataraza Consulting (S)
Denise Roberts McKee***, Racine Arts Council
Patrice Walker Powell, Retired, National Endowment for the Arts (S)
David O'Fallon***, Minnesota Humanities (S)
Michael Rohd*, Center for Performance & Civic Practice (S)

Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Animating Democracy, Americans for the Arts (S)
Rosy Simas, Rosy Simas Danse
Erik Takeshita, The Bush Foundation
Carlton Turner, Alternate Roots (S)
George Tzougros***, Wisconsin Arts Board (S)
Roseann Weiss, Regional Arts Council of St. Louis
Ginger White-Brunetti, Denver Arts and Venues
Laura Zabel*, Springboard for the Arts (S)

Gard Foundation Board Members and Others

Hilary Amnah**
Jennifer Armstrong***
Caroline Beadle**
Doug Borwick**
Ann Brusky***
Karen Geoschko***, Wisconsin Arts Board
Anne Katz, Arts Wisconsin
Clay Lord***, Americans for the Arts
Gerard McKenna**
Mitch Menchaca**
Barbara Strauss**
Harv Thompson**

(S) = Speaker/Presenter

* Recent Gard award winner

** Gard board of directors

***Wingspread planning committee members

APPENDIX III: Authors Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland



Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland
Art in the Public Interest, May 2017