

Sustaining Voices From the Battlefront Conference
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Response to: 30 Years and Counting: Notes from the Battlefront
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I have chosen to respond to Jack's very comprehensive paper from the perspective of my two careers. The first is my more than 20-year tenure in the world of museums; and the second is my experience with foundations as both a grant seeker and a grant maker.

When and where we enter

From the late 1970s through the 1980's, I worked in several capacities at the Brooklyn Museum. In the mid-eighties, I also chaired the Museum Panel for the New York State Council for the Arts. Under the best of circumstances, local arts councils are supposed to represent the best efforts of the communities that they serve. Legislators pay close attention and raise concerns when arts programs are not being supported in their legislative districts. Though we are all aware of legislators who have targeted artists and generated publicity around conflicting values and symbols in our society, there are also legislators who have viewed the arts as valuable assets in resilient communities.

NYSCA panelists assessed submissions based on the fiscal stability of organizations. They considered the originality and "appropriateness" of programming ideas, an institution's past history of delivering successful programs, its relationship with its community, the qualifications of the experts associated with the project and we looked to see whether or not other funders had committed to the effort, thus making it more likely that a project would actually be implemented.

Within the context of these deliberations, it was understood that there were primary institutions, whose work often was not subject to such intense scrutiny. These were the cities great cultural icons. Most had been in existence for more than seventy-five years; and there was no doubt that they were stable since they had multi-million dollar endowments. Their leaders were the leaders of our city and their edifices were cultural landmarks. So

much had been invested in their long-term stability that it was unthinkable to judge these great repositories of learning and culture by the same standards. Though we vetted their proposals, it was acknowledged that these institutions made New York Great and they should be supported at all cost.

Nonetheless, from the 70s through the 80s, it became evident that these institutions were not representing all of the citizens of New York. Brooklyn has been touted as having the third largest population of persons of African Descent in the world. In the mid-seventies, The Brooklyn Museum, in response to the call for more diverse exhibitions hosted: *Two Centuries of Black American Art, Haitian Art, Of Women Artists and Hispanic Art in the United States*. Other, mostly urban institutions began to book or develop exhibitions featuring artists from diverse communities, or they created exhibitions that addressed the histories of their underserved populations. While funders supported these episodic special exhibitions, they were often reluctant to support comparable exhibitions that were being regularly exhibited at first-voice or culturally specific museums and cultural centers.

Marginalization of New Voices

Culturally specific or first voice museums rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, and they were often founded and conceived by individuals who were activists in the Civil Rights movement. Though these museums often aspire to meet the standards, and adhere to the practices of older, larger and better-funded institutions, they are much more likely to respond to the needs and demands of their constituent communities. While the more traditional museum mission statements have indicated that they are “dedicated to collecting, preserving, interpreting and promoting interest in the history, and/or art and culture . . . ,” of a particular local or national community, the missions of first voice museums tend to be more audience-focused.

The National Museum of the American Indian has taken on the task of dispelling stereotypes. Its mission declares, in part:

The National Museum of American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the western hemisphere by advancing – in consultations, collaboration and cooperation with Natives – knowledge and understanding of Native cultures . . . “ NMAI is one of the few museums that clearly articulates an active role for its constituents.

Since many first voice institutions were created because the stories of their peoples were omitted from the record or grossly misinterpreted, the telling of their stories and the exhibition of images that affirm the group become compelling imperatives for the communities in question. Additionally, many communities do not have a rigid notion of the roles and responsibilities of a museum. They see their museums as places of ritual where they can be married; hold traditional coming of age ceremonies; honor their elders; and as in the case of Mayor Coleman Young in Detroit, be laid in state. In many communities, town meetings are held in these museums and they often host the events of their community partners.

When and Where We Enter

During the late 80's and the early 90's several cities conducted studies to determine whether or not First Voice institutions were being fairly assessed by funders. In 1980 Jeff Jones and Russell Cramer analyzed San Francisco's funding of nonprofit organizations. These two researchers found definite patterns of institutionalized discrimination in arts funding. This study indicated that 80.9% of the City's budget went to nine large organizations, the opera, the symphony, the ballet, the repertory theater and several museums. Accordingly, there was very little money left, to be allocated to new and emerging institutions representing the Bay Area's diverse population. Similar data could be collected throughout this country. This study recommended a more transparent process and a more equitable system.

In 1996, Joan Hocky was commissioned by several funders to examine funding of diverse organizations in New York City. Her findings revealed that when considering funding organizations in communities of color along side those managed and staffed by whites, where the organizations had similar missions, budgets and staffing, funders were more likely to give the white organizations larger grants. Additionally, it was revealed that funders were less likely to have visited these first voice institutions; in fact they rarely made site visits outside of the borough of Manhattan.

Reports of this type have led to public funding programs for culturally diverse initiatives at local and state arts councils. Private funding initiatives have also been created to accommodate the needs of traditionally underserved communities. One of the most effective of these is the Multicultural Arts Initiative (MCAI) in Pittsburgh. The MCAI grantmaking objective is "to enhance the cultural landscape of the region by funding

consistently high quality African American and African-influenced arts programming, as well as targeted culturally specific arts programming that includes Latin, Asian, and Native American cultures.”

Over the years, MCAI has awarded close to \$5 million and over 400 grants. During this time period almost a third of MCAI funding was directed toward providing operating support dollars for targeted organizations.

When Global is Local

Jack informs us that the “The rapid shift towards globalization and new technologies has forced us to become aware of the emptiness of corporate life . . . which has led us to a quest for local connections, meaningful identities and spirituality. He also reminds us that though we may not have adequate money and political clout, we do have incredible resources.

First voice institutions have pioneered practices that build community, reveal untold histories, restore memory, affirm identity and they respect the cultural contributions of individuals who have not been able to gain purchase at “mainstream” institutions.

We are a nation of individuals whose recent and early ancestors have experienced both voluntary and forced migration. Many of us maintain relationships with family members abroad, while others of us, like adopted children, search for our families and our homelands. New technologies make it easier for us to be citizens of multiple geographical and theoretical communities. We can engage in real time conversations, gain access to news from different places and articles written by individuals with a variety of points of view. We can wire money to support individuals and causes and we can share research and scholarships with colleagues on different continents. We live in times were all that is global is local.

First voice institutions have the ability to bridge gaps and broker compassion and understanding. Many first-voice institutions have survived because their leaders understand the importance of brokering cross-cultural collaborations. These leaders have received support from traditional funders because their prose and presentations are framed in a manner that is clear, familiar and non-threatening. However, these same leaders are more than capable of using other voices and practicing their cultural traditions that enable them to sustain their communities both in the United States and abroad.

Culturally-specific Institutions as Feeder Institutions

In the funding community, an institution that has high turnover is considered to be fragile and unstable. Many culturally specific institutions present a profile where the senior staff and founding leadership may be in place for a decade or more; and the younger entry-level staff stay with the organization for three years or less. This level of turnover can often take a high toll on an organization that is more often than not, under funded and understaffed. Additionally, whenever a new staff member is trained, the institution pays for that training in time and money.

In the mid 1990's when I first joined the Foundation community, the trend was to support positions for young people who would design and maintain websites for culturally specific and community-based institutions. We provided funding for staffing, training, hardware and software. We created a class of highly skilled computer technicians who were young and ambitious. Within two years we recognized that this was a poor strategy as we watch these young people find higher paying positions at larger non-profits and in the corporate sector.

Nonetheless, a few years later many of us provided support for marketing and development expertise for some of the same institutions and we saw the same set of results. We learned a valuable lesson about our strategies and the roles that these institutions play within the larger cultural eco-system.

Culturally specific museums serve as feeder institutions. They train staff in environments where they have an opportunity to learn valuable skills in all facets of cultural practice. These institutions identify, shape and document the careers of artists that less adventurous institutions might completely ignore. They educate board members and work with them to strengthen the non-profit sector; and they cultivate audiences who may eventually become patrons of partnering cultural institutions in their communities.

Over the past twenty-five years, these smaller--relatively young, ethnic-specific institutions have trained a significant number of arts professionals who now work in larger institutions around the country. As mainstream institutions seek to diversify their staffs and programming, community-based institutions become feeder institutions that provide their larger counterparts with experienced staff, exhibition concepts, lists of artists of color, as well as patron and member lists.

Individuals who are trained in these smaller institutions are adept at identifying major collectors; they are trusted by the artists whose careers they have mentored; and they can identify audiences who value this work. The collaborative community practices that are the hallmark of culturally specific institutions are transported to the mainstream community by staff that are trained and mentored at first voice institutions.

Concurrently, larger institutions have brokered partnerships that have often resulted in an exploitation of the smaller institutions. They seek the expertise of leaders of first voice institutions, mailing lists for special events, and contacts. They often don't compensate their peers for their time and services. They don't think in terms of reciprocal relationships. Some include their colleagues in their proposals without their permission and fail to include them in planning processes at a point where they can have meaningful input.

These situations have been further exacerbated by funders creating multi-million dollar initiatives to encourage larger institutions to diversify their audiences, while completely ignoring the first voice institutions that have long track records of successfully addressing the needs of community constituencies.

The Gift of Meaning Making

Jack reminds us that these institutions are “communitarian places that sustain meaning-making.” Culturally specific institutions can often respond to new and topical work quickly. Their programs are often tactile and much more interactive; and unlike larger institutions that turn corners slowly and deliberately like mighty cruise ships; small, sleek institutions often maneuver like swift motor boats.

Larger cultural institutions are often stable enough to plan their programming three years before implementation; and in doing so they tie up institutional real estate for equally as long. Culturally, specific institutions can often act with shorter lead-time. If a topic takes on a sense of urgency because of contemporary events, culturally specific institutions are often able to be flexible and can create programming that speaks to the issue. Though fund-raising may be a challenge, these groups are flexible and often willing to allocate space and create programming with small amounts of support.

The Legacy/The Future

In his book, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960*, Claybourne Carson describes the following scene when relating the self-empowering transition of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee:

“Since the summer of 1964 [SNCC] had engaged in an exhausting search for a set of goals to replace those that previously guided the civil rights movement. Concluding that they could not depend on support from the federal government or from northern white liberals. Staff members debated whether they could build independent black political organizations without imposing greater discipline on the staff and moderation of the anti-authoritarian ethic that permeated the organization . . . The Black Power Slogan was both a means of appealing to discontented black individuals and a suggestion of their still only partially formulated goals. They would soon discover that their task was unexpectedly complex and their opposition more resourceful than any previously faced.” P211.

In 1968 when SNCC considered merging with the Black Panther Party, Carson indicates that a stronger communications strategy was a consideration for the Panthers. Huey P. Newton, a leader of the Panthers found the merging to be viable because they would gain “access to duplicating equipment and sorely needed materials.” They also recognized that funders support programs that they understand and value. They don’t fund programs that they view as threatening.

The current challenges for first voice institutions is similar to those encountered by civil rights organizations. They must synergy with individual donors, corporations and private foundations that share their visions and values. They must also capture and competently use new tools for participation in the digital age. Marketing pundits tell us that Generations X and Y cohorts have grown up craving active participation and the ability to make choices. Cultural institutions that have already established participatory practices are in an advantageous position to cultivate and engage these groups. If these institutions are to work effectively with this cohort they need high quality web-pages, on-line marketing of tickets and merchandise and the ability to get the message out about programming in a manner that is most appealing to this group.

One of present challenge for first voice institutions will revolve around cultural identity. Generations X and Y are more likely to affirm multi-racial identity in a society that has abandoned affirmative action in favor of new systems in some sectors that seek diversity based on class. Racial identity will need to be examined in all of its complexity and understood in a constant evolutionary context, and as the cohort of working poor grow, we will need to unite around issues of social equity and seek models in cultural communities that value interpersonal connections, spirituality, and collective responsibility.

Minding Our Money

Jack has also suggested that consumerism is the new colonialism. The Village Voice did a series of articles called *Generation Debt*, that examined the lack of financial security that members of Gen X and Y would experience, because of high tuitions, high interest rates on credit cards and rapacious levels of consumerism. The end result is a type of indentured servitude that leads to poverty amongst individuals with high incomes, a fear and insecurity around taking risks, fewer dollars to invest in quality of life issues, and silence in the face of immorality.

Community based and first voice institutions remind us of our origins. They document traditions and societies that lift us up and teach us humility as we contemplate the sacrifices of our ancestors and elders. They are the places of habit and heart. They fulfill us and encourage us to aspire to greatness, to accept challenges and to recognize the beauty in things great and small. They provide us with venues where we can explore hard truths that may shameful or embarrassing to others. They are places of truth and reconciliation; and they can and should also be places of atonement and accountability.

Cultural workers who have committed their lives to first voice institutions require the persistence of Sisyphus, for they are always moving heavy stones up hill. First Voice institutions are the homes of individuals whose muscles are taut because they are swimming against the current and actually making headway. They are the dwelling places of our memories, identities and most importantly, our possibilities.

If our institutions are to survive another thirty years they must be flexible in the face of change. The messages must be relevant and sound and the strategies for getting the word out must be varied and up to date. These

institutions must affirm audiences of all ages and broker multi-generational conversations that support both continuity and change. Managing assets, both physical and fiscal, will be key to the individual and institutional survival of people of color. We need not grow bigger, if we can figure out how to grow better. Partnerships will continue to be essential--both locally and globally. Most importantly, it will be important for the leaders of first voice institutions to groom their successors, provide them with opportunities to manage and lead, and honor new ideas.

“All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change.” Octavia Butler.