For Us, By Us.

How to create a collaborative arts agency for us?

Boseda Olawoye

the CHURCHILL fellowship



5 Introduction

13 Why Chicago?

14 The similarities and differences between the USA and the UK

16 International online interviews April 2024

- 17 Klaas Burger, School of Perception
- 23 Darren O'Donnell & Virginia Antonipillai, Mammalian, Canada, Worldwide
- 29 Asha Bee, Footscray Community Arts, Australia
- 35 Olivia Reschofsky & Alice Pons MOHA, Amsterdam
- 42 Ngiam Su-Lin, Artswok Collaborative, Singapore
- 49 Kathrin Böhm, MyVillages, Europe/Worldwide
- 56 Lina María Mejía Álvarez, Platohedro, Colombia

62 Chicago, USA one to one interviews May 2024

- 63 Jordan Campbell, alt_Chicago
- 70 Tricia Van Eck, 6018North
- 77 Media McNeal, Honey Pot Performance

83 What did I find out?

92 Contributors

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A huge thanks to all of my interviewees from not-for-profit artist-led projects, arts centres and spaces, working in community settings in Chicago, USA and internationally, for being so open and honest. I admire your resilience, vision, innovation and commitment to using creativity and the arts to bring about social change and transform lives.

Introduction

This report aims to demonstrate how and why the work of place-based arts projects working with, by and for communities and other under-represented groups, need more funding in the UK. It has been developed from some of the most profound, moving, inspiring and conversations I had with artists collectives, producers and founders using the model of co-creation to transform people's lives and neighbourhoods internationally and in Chicago, USA.

As an employee and independent creative engagement producer/consultant working within the UK visual arts sector there has been a fundamental shift from short-term to long-term, more in-depth working, particularly by small grassroots community focused arts projects.

Here, artists, participants are equally involved in the development and production of a project or creative work(Co-creation).

It's about what matters to people and from that starting point this is much more open, equal, positive way of working.

This is how I want to work in the future and the findings from my Churchill Fellowship will inform the set-up of a not-for-profit community-led arts initiative called The Us Agency, developing ongoing projects that respond to a particular need where people are living or have lived experience of a particular issue. As the founder and director of the Us Agency, it will be the first black-led arts project, working within and for communities of colour in Nottingham, UK.

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Introduction

My Fellowship looks at how US black-led arts initiatives and organisers, particularly in Chicago USA, are using radical approaches to bring about social change and transform diverse neighbourhoods. I also wanted to explore how arts projects and organisations are using the same model of collaborative working with a range of communities, under-represented groups and young people around the world. Between August 23 and March 2024 I researched, complied and approached thirty arts projects, collectives and organisations globally. Thirteen responded leading me to have online conversations with founders, producers, and staff about their ground-breaking work internationally in April and in person in Chicago, USA for four weeks in May 2024.

Why did I want to do this research? My background and why this is relevant to me

I am a Nottingham, UK-based creative engagement manager who brings together diverse communities, under-represented groups, young people and artists make art exploring a range of social issues. As a woman of colour, from a working class background with lived experience of the care system, I believe there are very few arts initiatives whose founders are from a similar background in the UK.

It is my intention to to use this research and its findings to demonstrate to the wider arts sector and funders that the most effective way to be of relevance to diverse communities is to be representative of them and co-created by them. If more investment went into funding community focused artist-led collectives and not-for-profit grassroots platforms led by people who are underpresented within the sector. I aim to replicate this model by developing and setting up the first black-led arts platform working with diverse communities in Nottingham, called The Us Agency. This approach would create a more inclusive and equitable arts sector.

As a result of my Fellowship, I aim to use the knowledge, experience and findings from my interviewees to inform how the Us Agency will be set up.

What questions did I want answered by my interviewees?

How and why were you set up? What were their core values or beliefs as an arts platform, social enterprise, organisation or collective?

- How do you connect and build relationships with the young people, communities or groups you collaborate with? Particularly over a long period of time?
- What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?
- What has been the impact of your creative work on participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?
- Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?
- How are your projects/the organisation funded and kept going?
 Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?
- Why do you think using the arts/creative approach to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

What were the aims of my research:

I wanted to discover how black-led arts community-based initiatives in the US and co-led models around the world are funded and sustained on an ongoing basis.

Move away from the more traditional model of art participation led by white-led arts institutions and organisations in the UK.

To establish The Us Agency - a new creative initiative, working with communities, young people and artists of colour supported by the findings of my Fellowship. It will explore new ways of co-design and co-producing arts projects created of by and for diverse communities and marginalised groups.

Use the findings of the research and practical advice to ensure best practice is embedded in The Us Agency in Nottingham

During these challenging times the research and findings can demonstrate to the wider arts sector and funders that the most powerful way to be relevant to diverse communities is to be a representative of them and co-created by them

That co-creation/ or collaborative working bringing artists, communities and a range of partners is ethical, inclusive and creates spaces for everyone's voice, opinion and ideas to be supported.

Showcasing international/US best practice in co-creation/socially engaged practice and its power to transform people's lives and why we need more investment in this way of working in the UK, now more than ever.

Objectives:

Working independently since 2013, I have used the co-production model to develop arts projects with communities, young people and under-represented groups of colour in Nottingham and across the Midlands.

This has enabled me to build trust and develop a strong network of relevant groups who could be potential partners, to co-create projects for The Us Agency.

Establishing a social enterprise to open up access a wider range of grants and produce pioneering creative projects for, by and with communities of colour.

Be proactive, create my own career opportunity and address the chronic lack of black artistic directors within the UK visual arts sector.

The benefits of my research:

Build a more inclusive and diverse arts sector by investing funds into not-for-profit collaborative arts platforms/projects and collectives by the very people who are marginalised and under-presented in the sector.

Represent the communities, artists and creatives I aim to collaborate with as a black woman from a working class background with lived experience of racism, poverty and the care system.

The research would support the development of new ways of working in community-led arts practice in the UK. It will lead to fresh thinking around how to engage communities in a creative but person-centred way, during these challenging times.

What is co-creation, collaborative working?

I use this term throughout my report so here's a summary of the meaning. Co-creation is:

- About listening, caring and responding to what people want
- Working with and for people and is not done to people
- Not working towards one fixed finished outcome, but being adaptable what can happen along the way

- Everyone has an equal say in what happens
- Brings together people from different backgrounds, views and professions
- Exploring, addressing, responding to a situation, theme or issue using different art forms or creative thinking
- When everyone involved has shared ownership throughout the development of the project or activity

Co-creation/collaborative working in the UK

In the UK there are a number of small-to mid grassroots arts organisations embedded in communities or place, developing organically over a long period of time with local residents different partners, businesses, artists and creatives. Many community-focused arts projects and collectives have started with just a group of people coming together, having a conversation, having a shared goal or ethos to take action and respond to a range of issues. These arts projects are led by and for working-class, queer, disabled, young people (18 - 30) black artists, creatives and organisers. They have ethical fair, flexible working practices, are democratically run, are inclusive and care about the well-being of their staff, freelances and whoever they work with.

Black-led arts projects in the UK

There is a lack of black-led of arts initiatives working collaboratively, with diverse communities across the UK. There have been ongoing conversations, research, consultation, programmes, funding priorities to make the arts more diverse and inclusive. There was a sharp focus on this issue in 2020 with the global movement/acts of resistance to systemic racism in response to the killing of George Floyd in the USA and UK who have lost their lives to police brutality. Countless online statements from the across the arts sector standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and committing to address institutional racism from within.

Unsurprisingly, these statements and discussions that followed did not necessarily lead to long-term action. And we are still waiting.

Black artists, community organisers and activists are setting up their own not-for-profit organisations. Here's just a few black-led arts organisations that are community focused.

Bright Ideas, Nottingham, a vibrant community-based business that is passionate about working with local people to effect change and improvement in their communities. They believe community voice should be heard and that it is the people from the community that can inspire and direct the most necessary and positive changes in the places where they live. Bright Ideas are constantly finding creative and empowering ways of highlighting social injustice and combating racism.

MAIA is a black led cultural organisation engaging radical imagination for liberation, based in Birmingham. Their work includes creating a community space called YARD to care for local people & artists in Ladywood, developing a cultural centre with accommodation called ABUELOS with local residents, artists, designers and other partners. MAIA's main funders are Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation who support arts organisations who are community-led and use the arts for social change.

People Dem Collective (PDC) is a registered CIC and community organisation, based in Margate, Kent. The collective was born out of a lived experience of lack of space, engagement and inclusion for black, brown and *diaspora communities (*people of cultural heritage other than the place they were born) members of which make up the leadership. In 2020 they successfully raised £35,556 via a crowd funding campaign to develop the People Dem Collective National Cultural Centre in Margate that will celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the town. PDC have no major arts funding to support their staff and work so are reliant on donations and crowd funding campaigns.

These initiatives truly reflect and are led by the communities they work with, compared to mainstream arts organisations and institution. It's time that the grassroots organisations who are inclusive, diverse and focus on marginalised communities are given more support and larger grants.

Co-creation requires time and funding for success. However, available funding often has rigid timelines, goals, and expectations, often clashing with the adaptable nature of co-creation, especially when working with marginalised people and communities.

Applying for funding can be difficult for inexperienced applicants, as it involves understanding guidelines, meeting funder preferences, and using online platforms. Improving application accessibility would benefit those new to this often challenging process.

Arts funding in the UK

Arts Council England (ACE), founded in 1946, are the major funder for the arts and culture across the UK. They invest public money from the government from the National Lottery to ensure we all have access to high quality cultural experiences. The different funding streams support small to large not-for-profit arts organisations, individual artists, creatives, arts managers, community and cultural organisations. Arts funding in the UK has been drastically cut in the UK in the last 10 years, so even the larger arts institutions who do receive the largest share of ACE grants are struggling.

The process of applying for ACE funding is not always accessible or suitable for grassroots community-led arts organisations or collectives. It can be admin heavy, is over-subscribed, very competitive and there is not enough money to meet the demand.

Funding for co-creation, arts for social change

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
Creative Confident Communities Fund

Supports work where local people can exercise greater power over their economic, social, cultural and environmental futures. Their three funding priorities are:

- Communities working together for change
- Community driven enterprise and regeneration
- Community-led art and creativity

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Arts Fund supports organisations whose work combines arts and social change. They support 50% of an organisation's core costs, so they can continue the work they are doing but must have a turnover of no less than £60,000 per year.

Why did I want to conduct research in the USA?

There are number of US black-led community-based arts projects that I have discovered and admired, who are running ongoing initiatives that focus on long-term, deep change, responding to poverty, lack of affordable housing, food poverty, supporting small businesses/local entrepreneurs, re-purposing buildings for community use, health and well-being.

These include Project Row Houses (Houston, Texas) an ongoing community programme (25+ years), based in one of the oldest African American neighbourhoods in the city. The site consists of five blocks and houses 39 buildings that are used for community enriching initiatives, art programmes and neighbourhood development. The Laundromat Project, Brooklyn New York based in a laundromat where artists and communities of colour use creativity to transform lives.

These ground-breaking projects have one thing in common: they have been set up and established outside of the more traditional confines of cultural institutions, such as art galleries and museums.

Why Chicago?

I was inspired to research, travel and conduct my in person meetings Chicago (USA) upon discovering and following the work of black-led arts initiatives Alt Space Chicago and The Rebuild Foundation. Alt-Space Chicago, a non profit that is dedicated to revitalising/improving communities through art and culture in a time of need on the south and west sides of the city. It has received national recognition for its groundbreaking work.

Set up by local artist Theaster Gates in 2010, Rebuild Foundation is a platform for art, culture and neighbourhood transformation. The Foundation is well known for innovative, ambitious, and impactful arts and cultural initiatives, hosting projects and programs that amplify the history, value, and promise of Black creativity at local, national, and international scales. Rebuild has transformed abandoned buildings and sites on the South side of Chicago in under resourced areas into beautiful cultural spaces, affordable housing and community gardens empowering black/diverse communities in Chicago. Its core values are Black people matter, Black spaces matter, and Black objects matter.

Chicago research

The black-led and community focused arts projects I met with are:

- Alt-Space Chicago
- 6018North
- Honey Pot Performance
- T.R.A.C.E Teens Re-imagining Art, Community & Environment
- Arts & Public Life

Similarities and differences between the UK and USA?

Both the UK and USA are facing multiple crises that impact and influence our everyday lives. We really are in a crisis with our food, energy, poverty, housing, environment and the rise in far right politics, racism and division. In the UK we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, local councils going bankrupt, cuts to basic public services. Libraries and community spaces are being closed in neighbourhoods, lack of affordable housing and anti-immigration protests. Despite the negative and toxic language around immigration, anti-racism movements and culture wars the UK is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society that actually enriches and benefits the society and culture.

The UK and USA differ in many ways including culture, political systems, social life and diverse demographics and approach to immigration. The USA is more diverse with a higher percentage of the population belonging to Hispanic, Black, Asian and multiple ethnic backgrounds. The US political system is known for more divisive with significant differences in opinion across parties regarding government spending and taxation. The UK and USA have very different approaches to arts funding with the UK more reliant on public and the USA relies more heavily on donations and philanthropy.

International research

My Fellowship enabled me to expand my knowledge and make connections online with arts projects, organisations and artist collectives across the world. They are;

- School of Perception based in the Netherlands use art to address social issues
- Mammalian Toronto/Worldwide who create place-based performances, theatre productions that bring people together in new and unusual ways

- Footscray Community Arts, Melbourne Australia
- MOHA Amsterdam. MOHA Who Cares? Is an artistic project that looks at the place of care in our society
- ArtsWok Collaborative, Singapore who are an arts-based community development organisation
- MyVillages an international artists initiative to advocate for a new understanding of the rural as a place of and for cultural production
- Platohedro Colombia a collaborative creative platform

I was drawn to the radical and innovative way they were using the arts to connect, collaborate and create projects I had never seen before. With the current pressures on the UK arts and cultural sector and global events there has never been a more pressing time to learn from new ways of working.





Camping Kafka a meeting inside the installation. Photo by Mike Harris

"Collaboration is a collective and mutual thing, it's about learning and opening up the toolbox to everyone. For this, I use the phrase "It doesn't matter what you are doing, but it does matter": you're welcome, no matter what, but after starting something, there are consequences, it's important to be loyal to each other."

Klaas Burger, School of Perception - 'Academie voor Beeldvorming'

School of Perception - 'Academie voor Beeldvorming'

Name: Klaas Burger, Artistic Director School of Perception - 'Academie voor Beeldvorming', 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands. **About:** School of Perception is based in the Netherlands and uses art to address social issues. We call our work artistic action research.

Website: www.academievoorbeeldvorming.nl

How and why were you set up?

"I was asked to run a community arts organisation with little funding that developed into the current model of the School of Perception. If you think about churches and museums these are institutions led by a specific group of people and the doors of institutional spaces are often closed, especially when important decisions are made."

"We work collectively in a very open way (open door) focusing on public issues, using strategies from (visual) arts, journalism, activism, research, policy advice and commoning. Because we work in public space, it makes no sense to make a distinction between the visual arts and other jobs. We just search for connections to work with the people who want change."

"In our program we use art as a catalyst in today's transition issues. We focus on three themes:
Energy transition and sustainability
Migration, housing and work
Diversity & inclusion
Within these themes we run several projects."

"Describing ourselves as an academy is a strategy, useful for building relationships. Because we do partner with more traditional power structures to make our work transmissible, to bring about possible change. That's also why I believe the frame of the individual artist is not enough." "Collaboration is a collective and mutual thing, it's about learning and opening up the toolbox to everyone. For this, I use the phrase "It doesn't matter what you are doing, but it does matter": you're welcome, no matter what, but after starting something, there are consequences, it's important to be loyal to each other."

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation or collective?

"When you collaborate, it's important to find a balance between people you don't trust, and people you trust. You need both. When you have distrust between people you have to find ways to create a new pathway, connection or bridge between everyone involved to develop that trust. But some trust is needed to build something that lasts longer than just one meeting."

"Lately, working on an ongoing project about the housing crisis in The Netherlands called Camping Kafka: lost at home. It's a collaboration with people who have to live in holiday parks permanently, but living there is not officially recognised by the government. People end up living there, due to the lack of affordable housing, for a range of reasons such as divorce, debts, or labour migration. But living there means you lose access to regulated society. Media and governments talk about these people as 'a problem'. Camping Kafka (produced in collaboration with a.o.Ruben Pater) is a collection of theatrical play, visual language and narratives, all starting from the lived experience of these people. What societal change is needed to rebuild connections?"

"We are currently working on several long-term collaborations that have been developed organically. (R)OMA: a (family) history is a filmed reenactment of the first Dutch group asylum in collaboration with one of the families who were part of it. Fair Jobs searches for ways to put the interest of migrant workers first in the process of labour migration and temporary work.

"House of the Future focusses on a sustainable and collective energy transition in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Rotterdam. Drag Up Family is a drag collective challenging people inside and outside the rainbow community to experiment with drag."

Can you describe how you connect and build relationships with the communities you co-create projects with over a long period of time?

"As a starting point, I go to an environment where people are living with or have lived experience of a particular issue and start conversations with or connect with them. For example, with the camping ground project (Camping Kafka:away in your own city), you start with an idea, but speak to so many people living and working there. This includes speaking to the one running the camping ground, residents, government officials discussing everything with them but keep returning to hear all these different perspectives and view points."

"Based on these meetings, an idea grows, a wish for change. Then we build the storyline – with the people involved. People want to collaborate themselves. Based on storyline we search for additional funding and build an artistic team."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"We worked on a ten-year collaborative project called *(R)OMA: a (family) history. Working with the Hopic family, they re-enacted how ministers and members of the House of Representatives debated their arrival – a group of Roma - in the Netherlands in the early 1970s. There had been media coverage and TV programmes made about them, exploring their experience as asylum seekers but not from their perspective, using all the racist stereotypes related to migrants, 'gypsies' and begging."

What has been the impact of your creative work on the participants, communities, place or partners you have worked with?

"The impact of different projects has been huge. Ranging from policy change to creating jobs and people gaining trust to award winning artistic productions. But the basic impact is always simple."

"How do people learn? Equality grows through learning, when we don't know the same thing. This brings curiosity from different perspectives. You can bring change through learning from each other. In this way we build a community, an audience."

Has your work made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"We work with people and are community-based and focused. For example, with the *(R)OMA: a (family) history project and film. The film was shown at a film festival, we were invited, but then they offer one room in a hotel and travel expenses for one person. But we worked with the family. So we had to find additional funding to also bring a family member to the festival. It's always like this. Institutions are not built to be loyal (to communities) and are more focused on what an artist produces."

How are your projects or the organisation funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis and post Covid-19?

"We receive funding from local and regional governments which is for four years and private funding from companies and organisations that are supporting projects about societal change. We also get commissions from governments, and our productions are bought by cultural institutions."

"In terms of our set up we have a core team of three paid members and work with many freelancers."

Why do you think using arts and creativity to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly working with diverse communities and under-represented groups.

"I think money driven systems are conservative, unable to adapt and change their way of working. You need something else when you want to find change. We use artistic strategies and the space of culture to practice change. We are dedicated to having long-term loyalty to whoever we work with. Institutions have a functioning structure that suits their audience. But what about the others? That's the people we try to be loyal to."



NWWT Bologna 2023. Photo by Margherita Caprilli

"With art and performance you can do anything. You can bring people together and create circumstances and permission to discuss things.

Why social issues? To make the world a better place."

Darren O'Donnell, Mammalian.

Mammalian

Names: Darren O'Donnell, Artistic & Research Director & Virginia

Antonipillai, Creative Producer & Operations

Who: Mammalian Toronto, Canada, Berlin, Worldwide.

About: Mammalian creates performances by looking for contradictions to whip into aesthetically scintillating experiences. They create site and social-specific performance events, theatre productions, participatory gallery installations, videos, art objects and theoretical texts to foster dialogue and dismantle barriers between individuals of all backgrounds by bringing people together in new and unusual ways.

Website: www.mammalian.ca

How and why were you set up?

"I studied acting in theatre in Canada and acting wasn't so interesting. A company was eligible for public funding and individuals weren't and it was easy to set up a company. I needed funding for a specific project so I could make my own work, writing and directing and make the shows I wanted to make. The company was essentially me and became a bit more serious when we worked with our first producer Naomi Campbell (1997 -2007). She set up the company, paperwork, formed a board and set us up as a not-forprofit to make work."

"I wanted to make work socially relevant, with more of a focus on social practice. Making relevant work that spoke about the world. I wanted to create performance with real people for example, *Haircuts by children in 2006 which was a hit and fun to work with a local public school and touring the work working with other schools. I made a bunch of projects with the same school with different students."

*Haircuts by children is a performance piece working in collaboration with children, given little training and paid to work in a hair salon and cut adults' hair.

"In 2010 I had a meeting with some teenagers at a local Burger King to discuss potential projects. Four of us met and formed a collective. Anytime I was in Toronto I would only collaborate with these four teenagers and the following projects were developed. I turned my apartment into a club house, parties as a practice and these kids are now involved in this practice. "

"In the UK there is anxiety around child protection so you couldn't do that. Canada doesn't have as strict boundaries. What I was doing was certainly out of the box and would be considered risky or ill-advised, but the imperative of getting these kids connected to the cultural scene happening in their neighbourhood seemed worth the risk and it paid off. Facebook is also useful and became friends with teenagers directly to organise things." Darren

What are your core values and beliefs as a creative organisation?

"Trying to use the work to bring people together. Working with children forces you to boss them around or the other way is to be an anarchist and work with them as equals. Most adults are authoritarian."

"Love collaborating, particularly with non-artists. We make performance for regular ass folks. Folks who don't get performance, so we just make work that everyone understands." Darren

*Can a walk with teenagers be innovative?" Virginia

*Night walks with Teenagers is created with local young people who plan, design and lead public walks through the city at night, exploring the urban landscape.

Can you describe how you connect and build relationships with the communities you co-create projects with over a long period of time?

"In Toronto it's important to just be there and work with people.

In Germany, Bokham, we had someone who supported our work."

"Working in Milan, Italy on the Teentalitarianism performance, we worked with local young people. Audiences were invited to enter a world where teenagers are in charge. Teentalitarianism is a suite of teen-oriented projects, which culminates in Ask for the Moons, where they make demands on us and the presenting organisation. We know that the teens will ask to work with us, so that's one way to start a long-term relationship."

"We have been engaging young people in Milan since 2018 onwards with our touring performances, for example Night Walks. With Milan kids no one else is helping with engaging with young people, so we worked with them on the various versions of Night Walks." Darren

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"Finding a local champion who care about young people and understand developing and valuing the long-term work."

"The effects of these relationships with young people have impacted my own life. If the staff in the organisations do not change because of the encounter then what kind of change is this? Particularly when it comes to diversity?" Darren

Darren asked Virginia: Did you consider my apartment a resource?

"It was a great space to hang out, brought me closer to my friends and I had a fun time. We were doing things with all these different art institutions (such as Art Gallery Ontario) where none of us would imagine ourselves in. Me and my friends never imagined working with artists and going to these spaces. Mammillion made us feel we have a space, there is art that is digestible and fun to participate in." Virginia

"Gentrification (in Toronto) kicks people out and spaces are created that are uncomfortable and don't belong (new galleries, boutiques etc). Breaking down barriers, having agency. I can go anywhere and feel empowered." Virginia

What has been the impact of your creative work on the participants, communities, place or partners you have worked with?

"Measure the impact on myself and the company. Has the company changed and has a better understanding of the world around us?"

Darren asked Virginia: Would you feel you belong to the cultural sector? How would things be different if you hadn't come through Mammalian?

"Through Mammalian we have the opportunity to travel, expand our horizons, including food, go to Taiwan and have the desire to find the best restaurants. If not, we would be working at a corporate job, having them decide our vacation days and restricted in that sense. Mammalian has had a major impact." Virginia

"You (Virginia) have Italian, English, German, Scottish, Korean and Australian friends who you have worked with on these projects. We have made projects around the world. Having networks of people who care about you via the company."

"I still get messages on Instagram from friends aged 16 to 30 who I have worked with and care about for a long time, that are so positive and very moving to remember. It has strong effects on your mental health. "

"Sexuality seniors project (2022) in Switzerland, there was someone in the cast who was male identified and by telling this story a few months later transitioned to female." "Haircuts by children, in the early days of collaborations with non artists, demonstrates you can do a performance that is important.

"You can do something out of the box for a festival and create something highly artistic. A lot of people have referenced it as an influence in terms of collaborating with non artists and young people." Darren

How are your projects and the organisation funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis and post Covid-19?

"In Canada we get funding from government, touring, per-diem money (to pay young people for their time) foundations and public money. We also receive strategic initiative funding to share our model. No cuts in Canada but it has affected us elsewhere with touring in Europe so we have less gigs for our performances." Darren

Why do you think using arts and creativity to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly working with diverse communities and under-represented groups.

"With art and performance you can do anything. You can bring people together and create circumstances and permission to discuss things. Why social issues? To make the world a better place." Darren



The Dreaming Project by Dylan Singh (Wiradjuri First Nations). Photo Gianna Rizzo.

"The community wanted to establish an arts centre with an agenda that is access for all. It has an activist lens around how we do our work."

Asha Bee Abraham,
Footscray Community Arts.

Footscray Community Arts, Melbourne Australia

Name: Asha Bee Abraham, Artistic Programme Manager

About: "Our main mission is around communities being valued as makers of our culture, with creativity and self-determination as the key drivers."

Website: www.footscrayarts.com

How and why were you set up?

"We were established 50 years ago, by local artists, the community and activists responding to the cultural need for an arts space. We are responsive to the area, that historically was an industrial centre for Melbourne. When the centre was first established it didn't have basic community infrastructure but it does now."

"The community wanted to establish an arts centre with an agenda that is access for all. It has an activist lens around how we do our work."

"The suburb is Footscray and we are quite close to the city but there is a river which divides us. It used to be industrial but it is has a really strong diverse community of Ethiopian, Vietnamese, South Asian, East Africa and South East Asian residents. So it attracts many migrants, compared to other parts of Melbourne. White Australians who come here are seen as the visitors."

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation?

"Cultural agency, ensuring representation, led by communities who are first nation, POC (people of colour), lived experience of disability, deaf and LGBTQ+"

"Cultural safety- communities and artists we work with can be fully themselves in the space. They are supported in the space by people with *lived experience." *Lived experience. Coined by the Maori community, talking about being able to access their own Maori approaches and how they do that work. It's commonly used in Australia.

"Center voices who have been excluded."

"Indigenous advisory group, staff, Co-CEO model from priority groups."

"Access and inclusion and cultural safety - internal and external."

"We are from our communities."

"You can never say you (as an organisation) are accessible or culturally safe. It's up to someone else to say that. You can strive to be accessible."

Can you describe the process of connecting, building relationships with the young people, communities or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"We wanted to connect more with the communities from the African diaspora, as those relationships have been established with members of staff but when they leave we have to start again. Reestablishing connection with this community doing a lot of codesign with them, the barriers and what they want. Then designed the program to fulfil those needs."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"Historical challenges between the African diaspora - historical mistrust. We did deliver using co-design, but we decided to hold back and reflect on how can we work better together with these communities. We have gone back to our funder to do this.

Realising that when working with community we are in constant reflection and it might not be what the community says that it wants from us. There might be other needs that we need to reflect on."

"We went straight into the 'what' but it's about 'how' we can do this together in a safe way. It's about the relationship building and the trust. Funding model is focused on doing the thing and we push back against this. But if we are going to do this well, we need to move at the pace of care and trust."

"Trying to reduce how much we are delivering and wrap around care with the staff and whoever we are working with. Hard to do less with the same amount of money."

What has been the impact of your creative work participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?

"It's hard to measure impact. I want to reduce the focus on numbers and go deeper. We do storytelling but not as well as we could and we could improve how we share them. We capture numbers etc for annual reports."

"We do have an impact on communities and the sector - pushing forward in terms of diversity and inclusion and diverse leadership."

"In Australia there's always issue of funding in the arts compared to sports, arms etc. We need to improve about the storytelling about the value of the arts in the sector through evaluation. As a sector, how can we talk about our impact?"

How has your work made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"Footscray Community Arts Centre is seen as a leader in terms of how the arts can work with its nation and under represented communities."

"It means we have to think about next practice and what direction we want to take things in? We are constantly self-critical. People who work here, are not just interested in the arts but have a passion for change and want to contribute to social change."

How are your projects and the organisation funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis and post Covid-19?

"Operational funding from state, federal and local government and we have relationships with philanthropists. We do venue hire and fundraise. Our main funding comes from a four-year cycle from the state/operational side."

"No funding cuts from the arts but a lot of additional funding came through during Covid-19. We received some of that. Cost of living is affecting ticket sales across the sector. Shift in how people are behaving and we need to adjust how we do our marketing."

Why do you think using the arts and creativity to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with working with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"I previously worked in the sustainability and environmental sector, so instead of telling people what to do, the arts create space to ask questions and give space to ask themselves about their deep values. This creates the deep change that we need to see."

"Instead of telling people what to do, change your behaviour, asking people to dig deep to find their own answers. The arts are the only sector that can do that."

"So we are exploring it (whatever that is) together, with the arts there's more space. For example re-imagining housing, what would that look like to you?"

"I think the arts can be the leader for social change and believe in cross sector collaboration. Bringing that creative approach into other areas."

"We are called MOHA, which in Hungarian means moss. Moss grows everywhere is supportive and grows in so many places and locations.

MOHA welcomes more people, it's not just us as a collective, everyone we collaborate with is part of MOHA and it's not one person."

Olivia Reschofsky & Alice Pons MOHA.

MOHA, Amsterdam

Names: Olivia Reschofsky and Alice Pons

About: MOHA Who Cares? is an artistic project and practice that examines the place of care in our society. MOHA delves into the work/collaborates with one professional group at six different locations that is involved with care in different ways, such as community caregivers, nurses, ambulance staff. Conversation, writing, illustrations, recordings conducted in an outdoor sitting room.

Website: www.whocares.mohaproject.com

How and why were you set up?

"We started in 2012 after graduating and wanting to work collectively as artists. There were major budget cuts in the arts in Netherlands and just needed to start something. As artists we needed to make our own way, we lived together and had to just help ourselvesInstead of looking at the impossible. We created our own possibilities so we could work. We want to connect to other fields and professionals as artists."

"Amsterdam (where we went to art school) has its own arts scene which can be limiting. Had to think about how I can keep working, sustain myself as an artist financially and get commissions and opportunities. We both took our graduation work to the street after graduating so audiences could experience it. It was also a way of understanding why people didn't want to go to or feel comfortable in gallery spaces."

"MOHA as a collective wanted to be very practical and be an organisation, or platform that is not just about individual work. We are called MOHA, which in Hungarian means moss. Moss grows everywhere is supportive and grows in so many places and locations. MOHA welcomes more people, it's not just us as a collective, everyone we collaborate with is part of MOHA and it's not one person.

What are your core values and beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"I came to research (the world of) work, but not what they do, but how did they get there?. Using performance we wanted to invite people to step into it. The process for us is also somehow a performance. It is a different outcome of the art work, like longterm, on-going, relational."

"We worked in the street with people, individuals and anyone who wants to participate/collaborate. We create art projects with people from so many different backgrounds and situations (we have worked with alcoholics and homeless people) who can be very unpredictable."

"Even in a chaotic situation something very surprising can happen. We are figuring out together how to make something happen, with people from so many different backgrounds and experiences. How can performance be integrated into everyday life? We want to make art more visible in daily life."

"We are always asked as artists to explain what we actually do and what art is? This is an ever growing discussion. What art is in the work you do or job? That could be a social worker, or a cleaner doing a job well done and being organised, or a cook choosing the colour of vegetables and herbs for a dish."

"Art doesn't have to be how you are taught at school or as an artist at art school. If you, a member of the public and don't understand visual art, you think you are stupid but you are not. This wouldn't apply to any other art form such as music, film, books or television, where you can just have an emotional, instant reaction or opinion about it without having to explain."

Can you describe how you connect and build relationship with the communities you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"MOHA worked with social workers exploring how both connect with people and open to learn from each other. Artists and professionals sharing and learning from each other's different approaches."

"MOHA/artists make connections and collaborate with people using creativity or in a creative way. Very different to how a social worker would connect with people but we had an opportunity to learn from each other. What are our tools as artists?"

"MOHA make sure we are being present. It's based on repetition, and working with professionals in their jobs eight hours a day, every day for months. We try to understand their lives by doing the work they do. It's also a soft way of building a connection and trust with people. This enables us to develop a performance about both our works and what connect both works."

"We worked with cleaners by doing their job alongside them. But in order to do more creative work, we had to invent ways. So we set up a van with a living room outside where the cleaners were working and asked permission to interview them."

"We worked with nurses who would walk from client to client and walked with them to get to know them during that time. MOHA also worked with street cleaners who we met when we as artists were doing performances on the street. We saw each other so often that it just made sense."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"What are the boundaries and how far can we go? All of us are working together, making mistakes, when we invite people to dinner in our home. We have to be careful about crossing the boundary between the personal and professional."

"On the street we have our office project, with seats set up outside so anyone can come to see us. People come to us with real problems."

"We really have to understand what our function is and manage expectations. We learn on the way or as we work with people. We are aware that everyone wants to participate or they may just participate in different ways. MOHA can accommodate different levels and invite people to step outside of their comfort zone, but always give them the choice."

What has been the impact of your creative work with participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with? "On an individual level, interested in the work of nurses, cleaners, social workers and carers. For example, we developed a project with nurses in Berlin where some of them, sometimes felt overlooked. People tended to reduce their job to washing the ass of old people and they felt it was a pity because it is much more than that."

"MOHA worked with cleaners and we wanted to look at this work as care. They didn't look at it this way until we started working together so it created an interesting perspective for them to look at themselves as care takers as well. On a small level it gave us and them time to reflect on work, life and choices."

"In Maastricht, we rented and worked from an apartment. We worked with social workers and it was interesting to see how artists are working with and making connections with people in a creative way. Very different to how a social worker would connect with people but we had an opportunity to learn from each other. What are our tools as artists?"

"Every two weeks we would walk through neighbourhood streets with treats in a golf cart and gave them to people. That really helped us to connect and talk to people in a fun way and because we were there on a regular basis our presence became the norm."

"But we are offering different initiatives and events using artistic thinking. We as artists are proposing something different, something that mixes different expertise and perspective together."

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"People who are interested in what we do think outside the box. We collaborate with arts organisations which are open to change and really want to make that move forward. Some institutions who like what we do and want to work with us, really don't want to change. "

"MOHA are proactive and reach out to different partners. For the project in Maastricht we had an office on the street in Amsterdam for four years, open for anyone to come and have a conversation with us. But we really want to be present in our own city. We have worked a lot in the Netherlands and have been invited to a variety of spaces to present and discuss the work we do."

How are your projects and the organisation funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"We are funded by co-producers, arts partners, grants, national funding from the Netherlands and touring work."

"Currently we have no funding so we are all taking on other jobs to support ourselves. We work as care workers, clear houses, and anything related to the research/focus of our artistic work. It's been interesting having the job of clearing houses and looking at the life of people."

"Care work has been mobilising and you find qualities you uncover through conversations with co-workers which connect to our artistic approach as well."

Why do you think using the arts and creativity to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"To be able to think through things differently, for example how to have a conference? Like looking at the how, instead of at the what and using artistic tools to influence how we do things. Shining a light on the skills we have that will be needed."

"What about experiences that are underrepresented? For example if we experienced a conference blind folded. If we could just slightly shift what we are used to, step out of our comfort zones to meet each other differently."

"Doing things differently and for the future. Re-imagining and taking risks."



Photo courtesy of ArtsWok Collaborative

"Art is a different kind of language.

Not everyone is comfortable with talking. Helps us understand others."

Ngiam Su-Lin, ArtsWok

Collaborative.

ArtsWok Collaborative, Singapore.

Name: Ngiam Su-Lin, Executive Director

About: ArtsWok is an arts-based community development organisation that recognises the creativity and agency within

individuals and communities to generate change.

Website: www.artswok.org

How and why were you set up?

"We describe ourselves as Creative Producers, intermediators. We focus on longer term practice, arts-based community work. It really resonated with me what you shared (my Fellowship research) and how we embed ourselves in residential communities. We are looking at other spaces as we only have a small office space to do our work."

"We use co-creation to explore all different issues and perspectives, for example a project about what it means to be alone."

"It's so rich when there is a space where people live, where people are at and how they contribute to their community. How can we advocate and support? Needing space to do the work and the context of Singapore. We are a democracy but the government still is involved in many areas and there is a move towards co-creation. It's a very top-down approach (in terms of government) in Singapore. So when we want to work with community there are a lot of gate keepers so we work through organisations such as health and family service centres."

"It's almost unheard of here, where an arts organisations has a space within a residential area. With *Both Sides, Now a community programme that encourages end-of-life conversations using artistic and creative approaches, we are working with partners and organisations. We are understanding our practice and embedding ourselves in communities and seeing the real impact. "It takes time for residents to understand arts processes but once they understand it, it's very magical."

"We are looking at community development. Looking at the poverty of relationships. How are communities affected where social connections are not strong? We can't have conversations about sensitive issues. We are a multi ethnic/multi cultural society so race is a sensitive subject because of the subject and politics. LGBTQ - Only recently the law 377A from the penal code that criminalises sex between two men was only repelled last year, so the issue is still taboo."

"In Singapore we still have art censorship here, or you would need a license or rating, particularly if you did a play about race and can amend a script by government. It's improved over the years between (and the) government body has learned to negotiate with artists. So this is the context we are working in."

What are your core values, beliefs as an organisation?

"Building communities that recognise the beauty of human relationships, discuss things that are difficult, collaboration on all levels."

"All of us as citizens have a stake and a voice. It's difficult to protest in Singapore so how can you bring about change?"

"Meaningful connection. We do it differently here because of the political context. Activism doesn't get you far here. ArtsWok is a response to that and it starts with individuals working together within and across communities."

Can you describe how you connect and build relationships with the communities you co-create projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"*Both Sides, Now came about at a personal time in my life, where there was a lot of death and care-giving, so it really called out to me. Discussing death and end of life is tough to talk about and taboo until about ten years ago. Embedding ourselves in a healthcare residential setting is hard, we are going to have a conversation about death and end of life."

"We do not shy away from the emotional and have conversations between healthcare staff and families. The elders do want to have these conversations. How do we create a safe but provocative space to have these discussions in hospitals and residential spaces?"

"A topic like end of life, is a wonderful in terms of bridging difference. It is that one common human experience no matter what your background. We experience, loss, ageing, illness, death and dying. It can be used as an entry way or a means to start a conversation: How do we live well and leave well? It is really powerful listening to each other's stories. After doing this for 10 years, I am amazed by the insights and stories."

"You can only move as quickly at the speed of trust, and trust takes time."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"Educating funders and partners about using the arts as a process and why we co-create? Funders want outcomes quite quickly so having to educate funders about why going deep is soo important. Co-creation (with people) this all takes time." "Citizens want to participate. It's doing with or by them. So participation and collaboration are absolutely key when it comes to community development. It's about them being involved in the process, through collaboration and giving them agency."

What has been the impact of your creative work on the participants, communities, place or partners you have worked with?

"Both Sides, Now is taking place in Yishun, but we are adopting a community development approach. Previous editions have been short term and it ends and then we leave. However, with the latest edition, we wanted to stay for years."

"But when you talk about impact, these eight women who went through this process (Both Sides, Now) with lead artist Salty Xi Jie Ng, it was intense. There were weekly workshops over almost a year, with some breaks in between. She had one-on-one phone conversations with them almost weekly. So there's really deep relationships formed, and all of it, you know, came out in the type of artworks that were made, which were eight different works. The stories that were shared were really amazing."

"For their generation as older women, actually it was really tough for them to see the value in their own stories. And then, realising that actually people want to hear my stories. You mean I can make them into art? You mean people want to come for this exhibition of my artwork and my stories? And, you know, that I can start, you know, thinking about these things, advocating for myself, thinking about my end-of-life plans. So it was a very empowering experience for them."

"They had conversations with people about end of life, took part as panel members for talks and one on one conversations. Discussions were about what living well and leaving well means and the meaning of life with the public."

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"We did some consulting work, those who wanted advice were arts organisations and non-profit who couldn't afford to pay. Let's demonstrate our work and impact and then just work with organisations who can pay us."

"We run the following programmes:

ArtsWok Learning Forum - engaging with communities, creatively. A time for convening and celebrating our practice. We wanted to have more voices in the room. It's our way of celebrating ten years anniversary. How can we curate this in a way so we can all learn from each other? There's been positive feedback on the way we curated the programme from practitioners. We had a range of voices from practitioners to voices on the ground. That's why we don't call it a conference but a forum."

"Green House sessions, a community programme mapping, working with stakeholders, so capacity building"

How is the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"ArtsWok is a national arts council-funded organisation. We are part of the major company scheme. So it means that we are fairly sustainable, so it goes beyond project funding. We have three year core funding but that's no guarantee - it only covers about 50% of our costs. So we get income from funding grants, earned income and foundations."

"There's a lot of support for the arts, so no cuts here. But there are other needs and groups. The art scene here has really grown. It's become quite competitive and national art institutions do receive more money."

"Our national bodies here are doing good work and inviting us into the space."

"But their objectives are different so they don't take risks. So I agree, smaller more grass roots organisations can tackle themes and issues and work on a long-term, more authentic way."

Why do you think using the arts/creative approach to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"Educating stakeholders outside the arts."

"Participants can explore issues that are tough for them. Good artists know how to support people (during workshops) and do that."

"Encourages conversations. Participants can share their stories through art."

"Art is a different kind of language. Not everyone is comfortable with talking. Helps us understand others."

"What new ways of talking about something can happen? What ways can we shape things?"

"Art making is collaborative, helps us understand to respect each other's agency."



"We believe that everybody knows something and has knowledge." Kathrin Böhm, MyVillages.

MyVillages

Name: Kathrin Böhm

About: MyVillages is an international artist initiative, founded in 2003 by Kathrin Böhm (Ger/UK), Wapke Feenstra (NL) and Antje Schiffers (D), to advocate for a new understanding of the rural as a place of and for cultural production. MyVillages' work addresses the relationship between the rural and the urban, looking at different forms of production, pre-conceptions and power relationships, whilst passionately questioning the cultural hegemony of the urban.

Website: www.ruralschoolofeconomics.info

How and why were you set up?

"As a collective of artists we met through our artistic practice, which at the time was socially engaged and we noticed that we would only think of the urban as a place for our practice."

"Why do the arts only focus on what is happening in urban spaces/inner cities?"

"We all come from rural locations as artists so why is there little support for socially engaged practice in a rural setting?"

"Urban and cities have all the infrastructure. We think about the rural location as place to work, but many curators weren't interested in working in the rural. We used each other and our close network to support each other. Formally easier to set up as an *NGO (a non-governmental organisation) in the Netherlands."

"As a community of practice, over the years we worked as individual projects in the rural."

[&]quot;We think about the rural and self organise."

[&]quot;Three of us tried to organise events and gatherings."

[&]quot;It's difficult to see what's happening in the rural, as it is not published."

"Always based on collaboration and co-creation."

"How as a cultural worker and artists position yourself in the rural?"

"With the rural aspect, there's an assumption there is no culture."

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"How do we place art or art work in a wider cultural context Cultural democracy, there's no hierarchy."

"That culture is produced in collaboration, so it's co-initiated or cocreated."

"Any cultural production is collaborative."

"Work is produced in our practice."

"Reproduction of values."

"We all give and take."

"We believe that everybody knows something and has knowledge."

Can you describe the process of connecting, building relationships with the young people, communities or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"Work with my home village, so I am local."

"But it needs to have a meaning locally and could be different to ours. In the local, culture doesn't have to be seen as art."

"To avoid cultural exploitation and harvesting others stories, we all learn and teach."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

Challenges

"If you are in different places. We (MyVillages) can only exist because of the internet. But it's hard for people to imagine life without the internet in the eighties. Because we don't travel we can meet online, be trans local."

"Generosity and trust which you only know after a while"

"Let's approach a problem as generosity rather than fear."

"Sometimes there are conflicts that are unresolved. Taking responsibility of the situation."

"Three artists working together or making sure the press discuss us as a collective, and include all our names and don't leave out anyone. The press does get this wrong often. But in the end what does it matter in the long-term."

"Money-wise, if we have money for projects we have a shared economy as we don't get core funding."

"We don't distinguish between one project or another or which is more important work."

What has been the impact of your creative work with participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?

"MyVillages, resonates differently with the local context." "Claiming the rural as a space for contemporary art."

"Claiming the local - feedback from students and cultural workers. The book allows for the above to think about the bigger community out there. There's more interesting questions and there are more artists and cultural workers working in the rural."

"Everything happens in big urban areas but the rural can be a place for meaningful work."

"There is a much bigger community out there. To know there's more interesting questions there"

"There is more meaningful work in the rural, particularly our practice as artists."

"Less visible place for you and artistically"

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"We took part in *Documenta 2022 during a peer to peer festival and event. We also connected with similar projects with a rural interest so it's good to meet with others via a global platform."

"Invited to do university research about rural development in the Netherlands and Germany. Transforming the rural. As a practice we have opened up the rural as a space and have worked with White Chapel London."

"We also worked with the Van AbbeMuseum, in the Netherlands, one of the first public museums for contemporary art to be set up in Europe, around the concept of how the museum can address and bring the rural in a meaningful way. The Van AbbeMuseum is funded through colonial practices as it used to be a cigar factory and sourced its tobacco from plantations in the Dutch East Indies. Van AbbeMuseum is named after Henri Van Abbe (1880-1940) the founder of the Karl 1 cigarette factory who was the biggest employer in the local area."

"Van AbbeMuseum is based in the rural area of Eindhoven in the Netherlands but they have never thought about their links with the rural. The Museum needs to connect to the rural in a meaningful way. So where do you start? Why have you (Van AbbeMuseum) never thought about reaching out to rural communities/regions?

Why are you based in this rural area and how do you want to relate with people? Don't jump to conclusions? Why assume from your urban perspective?"

"Who is deciding on the relationship, why look globally when you are not responding to the local, and rural? What's happening where you are? Why not address the rural through the local context? Don't always look elsewhere.

Give the rural relationships. Who is deciding on the relationship, what is the global context? Is this the creation of a new model, way of working?"

"We did an exhibition in Leipzig of MyVillages. We got the building over the two years showing what we have done but as a place where rural communities can meet. Used the institution as a space, getting them to question what they are doing."

"Thirty women from my home village came because they were cocreators. They came as co-producers and were new to the space. Everyone is intimidated by the museum and Director? They (the women) have never been there before. If you are not invited, involved, built a relationship, this is not a normal thing."

"They allowed us to have a longer exhibition and a place for cocreation. This is the way forward for museums and institutions."

How are your projects/the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"Projects are funded, or multi-year funded - example Village play, School of Economics."

"Initiated work/co-creation from adult education programmes. We have no core funding."

"We all have income outside of MyVillages and practice as individuals."

Why do you think using the arts/creative approach to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"The arts are exclusive of many things, culture, people and topics. But that doesn't mean you can't change it."

"A lot of the work happens knowing, other worlds are possible."

"We can organise differently, it has to be, do we want to or not."

"Systems are seen as a given, for example the top-down approach (Hierarchy)."

"Institutions focus on the radical but don't apply this for themselves."

"Important that work is not just shown. I want the work to be the space that is organised."

"Prefer to self organise and to put some of these ideas in everyday practice."

"I come from migrant communities in Florida from a difficult neighbourhood, so we can relate, empathise and have an understanding and don't judge others." Lina María Mejía Álvarez, Platohedro.

Platohedro, Colombia

Name: Lina María Mejía Álvarez, Director & Founder

About: A non-profit entity that functions as a collaborative creative

platform based in Medellín, Colombia.

Website: www.platohedro.org

How and why were you set up?

"I come from a theatre background, went to New York City and trained, graduated in drama aiming to become an actress. However, being in New York City I ended up becoming a professional waitress. I met and fell in love with Alex whilst there on a trip back to Colombia I was really dealing with my identity as an American citizen, originally from Colombia living in the USA."

"I went back home to Colombia, and Alex (partner/co-founder), who I met is from a marginalised area of the city and a survivor of the violence in Colombia in the 90's. He was a teenager during that time, and so was I."

"The area he is from he is one of three people who survived that time the other survivors work in social care. He studied industrial engineering and discovered film making. Alex was also stereotyped, you are poor you stay poor back and now you are going to study art? Who do you think you are?"

"During the 2000s visual arts became democratised when you could get access to camcorders and you didn't have to be trained as a filmmaker."

"So the story of the beginnings of Platohedro is about the actress and the director falling in love and having a deep sense of social change that was ingrained in us since youth. Arts, culture and being part of something really saved us. We use the arts as a tool for social change and to change your life"

"I came back to Colombia and set up Platohedro with Alex. Platohedro was born in 2004 where there was a tense political situation and violence in Colombia. In 2006, we set up Platohedro, when we bought the house. The house was cheap, it needed a lot of work and we were turned down for a mortgage/loan from various banks."

"Myself and Alex would go out to indigenous communities and show them how to use the cameras and record their stories for themselves. These communities know what stories they want to tell and we want to just serve."

"Usually with movie making there is a team of technicians, but with Plato we started with no money, a laptop and a camera. We operated on a skill exchange (that means if you work for us we will make a video for you) and that's the start of collective working."

"Platohedro started to be a project that collaborates with others, testing out, giving a voice to others, giving the cameras to others. We believe in you and that's how we set it up. In terms of the governance of Platohedro, who can we better learn from than the indigenous communities?"

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"We focus on issues of politics, gender violence in society in Colombia and cancel culture."

"I come from migrant communities in Florida from a difficult neighbourhood, so we can relate, empathise and have an understanding and don't judge others."

"Learning from things that didn't work or mistakes we made. We all learn together and nobody is an expert or holds the expertise." "Deep listening - What does the community want, need and desire?"

"Platohedro works with audio visual and a range of technologies. We describe it as level zero at a human level. It's the humans behind the technology."

Can you describe the process of connecting, building relationships with the young people, communities or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"Working with kids, letting them take pictures was a real learning situation for us as a team. Working with trust and coming from a similar background to young people really helped. We invited kids to take the cameras and film what they wanted."

"We told young people they had twenty minutes to shoot something with the cameras and come back. It was a very ballsy decision. What are the gang members going to say as this is a very dangerous area? But we accompanied the children and looked at them from afar. At one point someone taped a bullet that had gone through a window and the person who shot the bullet (who was a gang member) called to talk to us about it."

"Great learning situation - this was a way to set up a dialogue with the gang member. We explained it to the person, who was a gang member and he was interested in the project. He was also a musician and asked us to film and use some of his music. He asked us to take some pictures of him for his album."

What has been the impact of your creative work participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?

*Matinee is a children's project aimed at 5 to 12-year-olds. The group meet, learn and experiment with art and technology every Saturday.

"Young people met at the El Faro (community headquarters and school garden) and Buenos Aires (Calle 49a #36-93 (Platohedro) Neighbourhoods."

"One of the children who attended *Matinee is now a professional psychologist and works in the area with street vendors. We also support teenagers to stop them from getting involved in gangs."

"Our programmes working with children and teenagers, have resulted in young people going on to create their own start-ups. Also many fashion designers and creatives have come from our programmes."

"Half of our team are young people who have gone through this process and are now professionals. They are leaders, part of the board and right now there are eleven of us."

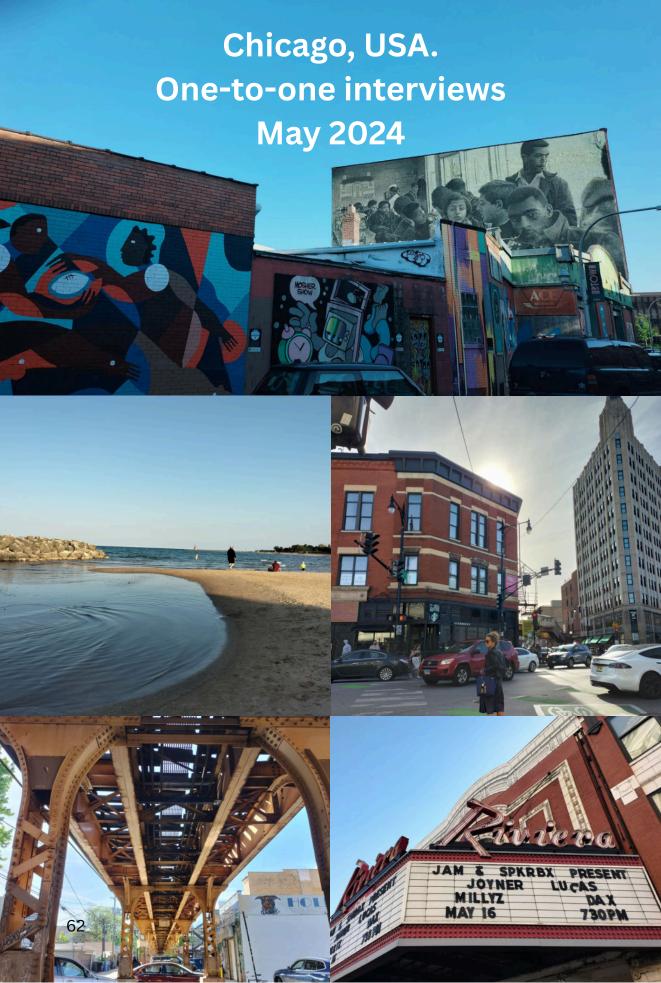
"Post Covid-19 was a really difficult time for our communities financially. Responding to community needs we set up a programme supporting the mothers of children, who attended our youth programmes, to also become entrepreneurs and develop business skills (jewellery, cooking and selling food). Some of the women have established sustainable businesses."

How are your projects/the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"We are funded by international co-operations, project and city grants. We are currently in a big economic crisis. But we have found a new way of funding what we do from digital literacy - i.e. providing digital skills for communities who don't have access or don't think it's relevant to them. Through this work we have found funding opportunities, as we are unique because we are a social enterprise. The people who usually apply are from the private businesses sector or entrepreneurs."

Why do you think using the arts/creative approach to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"Platohedro has stopped being a community centre to a more robust international organisation, that puts us in a position to transform ourselves (staff) and our community. It means we need to get better, learn or that we need funding."



"It's truly simple in my mind.

Art changes people's lives,
and it changed mine."

Jordan Campbell

alt_Chicago

alt_Chicago

Name: Jordan Campbell, Co-founder & Director

About: An artist-led, Chicago-based cultural non-profit dedicated to revitalisation, service, and empowerment through art, faith, and community. alt_ provides an alternative to the dominant cultural narrative, manifesting new opportunities on the South and West

Sides of Chicago

Website: www.altspacechicago.com

How and why were you set up?

"You are talking to a man who moved to Chicago because God told me to move here. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I wanted to help people. I'm a photographer, and I met Jon Veal (Co-founder of alt_Chicago), and the rest is history."

"It felt like a calling—intentionally listening to it. I am meant to be here, and I do have a purpose in this world that no one else can take away. I always ask myself, how can I use my gifts and talents to serve others? My presence on this planet is to encourage and uplift others with what I have to offer them."

"I met Jon on a bus in New York. We were doing a documentary; he was the Assistant Director. He woke me up and asked me to take a shot (I'm a photographer). Our relationship deepened after we had a conversation in a friend's kitchen in Baltimore. Jon was in the kitchen, and I asked him to help. We had a conversation about art—Jon didn't go to art school, study art history, or activism, etc.—he didn't learn this in high school."

"When I returned to Chicago in 2014, Jon had read about all the people I had mentioned. I met Chicago artist Theaster Gates (best known for developing abandoned buildings into community spaces that transform neighbourhood's in Chicago), and I had the idea of transforming disinvested buildings for community use in Savannah. A project I started in 2011 at SCAD."

"I introduced Jon to Theaster Gates and recommended that Jon look at the work of the Rebuild Foundation. Jon actually ended up working there. They became good friends, and when Jon passed, he provided some financial support for his family.

We (myself & Jon) really got to know each other as friends and brothers, most importantly as collaborators in the faith serving as artists."

What are your core values and beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"I'm an artist and a Christian, so our core values are art, faith, and community. People don't think you can be an artist and a Christian."

"Art doesn't just work in isolation. I admired Matthew Brady (photographer) and Alexander Gardner and how they collaborated, particularly how Alexander supported Matthew Brady. Using their skills in photography to shift culture."

"Jon was an amazing spokesman, but I am the designer and creative. We always supported, challenged, and learned from each other. It proved that we can work together no matter what, we bumped heads, disagreed, but always supported each other. It was a perfect partnership—learning from each other constantly."

Can you describe the process of connecting and building relationships with the young people, communities, or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"Listening. Listening not just with the ears but with the body. For us (Alt_Chicago), it's about taking the time to let them know I am here for them."

"Building trust, recognising that I am here for you in the best way I can. Being consistent and taking ownership but also valuing your input even when they aren't around.

Letting them (the community) know that they are being seen and heard."

"We are social beings; communities that thrive are social. If we want to do well, we have to build relationships and trust in this line of work. It's essential. I don't believe in forcing it. What is for you is for you."

"I respect what others are doing. For example: I spent time with the people—I went to the Austin Town Halls basketball court in Austin, Chicago. This is a safe zone for young people, free from gang activity/violence. I would go there and spend time talking to young people, and I even gave them my personal camera (worth £5K) to take pictures. The young people were surprised that I trusted them, but it worked. It's a simple gesture I do."

"I'm a people person—that's just what my family is like, and Jon was like that too. Understanding and caring are our organisation's values, etc. We put people first. We operate no other way."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learned?

Challenges:

"Co-leadership—We (myself & Jon) set up the company to be co-led. Now it's just me, and there's a need to find someone and empower them to be in the co-leadership role with me."

"Myself and Jon never planned for us to be the co-leaders of alt_Chicago forever. We always wanted to pass on the role of leadership to others. Times are going to change. 2024 won't be the same as 2030, etc and we need to have people leading the organisation who are sensitive to the needs of the time."

"There's an interesting example in the country of Bhutan (South Asia)—they change leaders/anyone in a position of power every two years. That keeps leaders humble. Time is limited and you can only be relevant for a certain period of time. I really think about how time is limited, particularly with Jon's passing, so the challenge is learning to be good stewards of it."

Highlights:

"I love seeing people's expressions of gratitude and recognising all the people around us who are responding to the challenges of the community of Austin. There are so many people working to shift the narrative of mislabeled communities. This inspires me greatly. It gives me hope that people are doing things in the community."

"My family is still in Ohio and is proud of me and their support means the world to me. My girlfriend is also part of this journey with me. That is a highlight not having to do this work alone."

What has been the impact of your creative work on participants, the community, location, or other project partners you have worked with?

"Inspiring people in Austin, Chicago. Being in Austin, working with people, creating the market, and creating something that becomes something else."

"Keeping things open and available to be shared—we do things transparently. For example, other people have created their own alt_Markets (an abandoned building turned into a free communal market where anyone can share and take food and essential items)."

"People come to us and trust us with their ideas—meeting people like yourself. This is a reflection of the impact. Once again, not how many we reach but how we reach them is what matters. It's a blessing to influence people and it's a great responsibility to me."

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally, or internationally?

"The credibility of our work (for example, *Redemptive Plastics) shows up in building relationships with other partners. We are not afraid to put ourselves out there. We take pride in and honour people's time and treat people the way we want to be treated."

*Redemptive Plastics—This project collects discarded plastic in the community and transforms the plastic into public benches and other functional artwork. Alt_ currently has volunteers to collect, clean, sort, shred, and create the raw plastic materials that will be transformed into functional art pieces.

How are your projects/the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post-COVID-19?

"Social, financial, spiritual capital, products, partnerships, renting out space, donations, consulting with corporations, responding to what the community needs."

"We think about what the priority is and not always focus on money. Sometimes money is not the answer. For example, when we created *Alt_Market, we were directly responding to what the community needed. People donated not just food but all kinds of things such as an air conditioning unit."

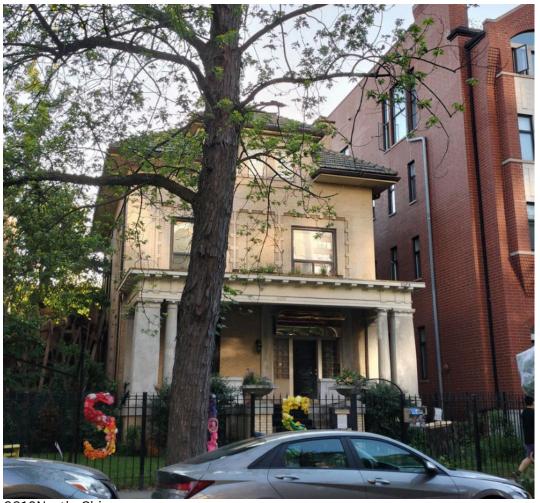
*Alt_Space Market is a communal, free food market in an abandoned building where members of the community can give and take, thus creating a temporary communal shared economy.

"During COVID-19 (particularly at the start of it) and the strict curfews, these restrictions allowed us to think differently and see others differently. We were forced to react, and now we respond." "With money, you can get stuck. I'm not saying we don't need money, but sometimes, it's not what's needed to respond to challenges. People want to be valued. It's not always about getting money to do what we do. Once again, what we do is a result of who we are."

Additional comments

"Art and creativity are an act of survival, expression, community, faith, love, curiosity and so much more. The work we create and cultivate is in direct correlation with the people we serve and our ability to put our gifts and talents for the edification of others."

"It's truly simple in my mind. Art changes people's lives, and it changed mine."



6018North, Chicago

"We need creative thinking to solve problems. Learn to work with others who are different from ourselves." Tricia Van Eck, 6018North.

6018North

Name: Tricia Van Eck, Artistic Director

About: 6018North challenges what art is, whom it's for, and where and how it's created. Founded in May 2011, 6018North is an artist-centred, sustainable, non-profit platform and venue for innovative art and culture. Located in a dilapidated mansion, at 6018 North Kenmore in Chicago's Edgewater neighbourhood, 6018North encourages artists to collaborate and reconfigure its space.

Website: www.6018north.org

How and why were you set up?

"I worked with Chicago artist Theaster Gates, whilst at MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago) when no one else was interested in showing his work and now he is one of the most well known Chicago artists. Also at the time, we had a community residence by the artist Mark Bradley who was an MCA community resident artist running community events and workshops with young people. He wanted to invite people to the MCA exhibition but was told no - the community would have had to pay. Mark said to me "If you want the community you need to invite them"

"I worked at the MCA in the curatorial department at that time and there wasn't much interest in community, compared to now. At the same time I had this house which I bought during the housing crash, when it was affordable in 2011. The whole space and building changed due to water damage from flooding and some of the walls came down and opened up the space."

"Chicago is a segregated city in terms of the demographics, the population of each of the different neighbourhoods. *There are 77 different neighbourhoods in Chicago. So what can one house on one street do?"

"The Edgewater area is one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in Chicago. Located in Edgewater's Kenmore-Winthrop dense corridor of apartment buildings home to trans-gender residents, and international refuges, as well as single family homes and condos, this neighbourhood is diverse on multiple levels - economics, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and education. Historically, Edgewater and Andersonville were a historically queer neighbourhoods."

"To connect with our neighbours on this street we put out a red carpet at the front of the house and steps and opened up the front garden space so local children could play and hangout in the summer. We had children coming here from the local area who from all over the world."

Sample projects

"We organised One Long Table an annual event that started in 2013 where we gathered a group of volunteer neighbours to see how we could bring local residents together by creating a community picnic in the middle of the street. If we had art, music, games, magic, and food, could we gather everyone together at one table? We selforganised a fashion show, block party and picnic. The local church now co-organises the block party."

"The Justice Hotel at 6018North, is an experiment where guests were invited to check into a real hotel, developed by BIPOC hotel staff/curators. The curators collectively developed a series of conversational dinners, performances and events about justice, equity and art. Employing a co-op model of ownership, we are experimenting with living and working together in ways that benefit all. Guests' experiences and participation all helped to shape justice."

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"Generosity, bringing people together."

"The arts and artists can make a difference in the world and need to be valued more."

"We would be in a very different world without artists, organisations and communities collaborating and supporting each other."

"We support risk. Unique experiences. See different ways of being"

"Don't become something that you are not."

"We challenge what art is and who is making it."

"We are a home, historical house museum, even when we work outside. We have had music performed on the beach and have used quirky spaces." *

*Full mission statement & values are available on 6018North's website.

Can you describe the process of connecting, building relationships with the young people, communities or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"When the school was closed during the summer, local children would come to the house during the day and hang out and use the free wi-fi. Neighbour's helped create and develop the Justice Hotel which then included neighbours."

"For over six years Bryan Saner, has taught wood working which attracted young people and neighbours, who learned how to build the wood floor. Larry helps and invited his niece, who invited her friends. He became a kind of doorman for the house during Open House Chicago and kids were guiding visitors around the house. We also employed neighbours to do various jobs."

"We have had a very transient neighbourhood where some kids who took part in the summer programme we might not see again. However we do have kids taking part from the local area and beyond. There is definitely a North South divide in Chicago amongst its population and young people. One young person (Cortez) who came regularly to the youth programme and was really proud of the house and came back years later to show his girlfriend around."

"The area has been affected by gentrification and the impact of the Trump administration views on immigration (such as the Muslim ban). The apartments and who rents them has really changed due to the internet and the immigrant ban. The house opposite us used to be one of the first place that supported and cared for people with AIDS and the trans community. With the rise in gentrification these services have changed or have gone."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

"Not everyone wants to collaborate. Time and money, having enough funds to pay artists well. We had a £5K funded programme that was used to prioritise and set up systems."

"In terms of community we have paid community members/partners to attend an event. For The Justice Hotel programming on the Southside we worked with five community partners and paid them \$2,500 each. We have always paid \$25 for people to contribute their stories over free food and drink. It's not a lot but at least it pays something."

"6018North community engagement strategy included developing the Justice Hotel into a co-operative. We are now thinking about what the next steps will be in continuing the Justice Hotel."

"There are so many problems in Chicago, we have to judicially consider who our partners and community are? Who should we respond to?"

"Sustainability - We are working with the *Art & Design Chicago (a series of events and exhibitions that highlight the city's artistic heritage and creative communities) on community engagement and with Edgewater Environmental Coalition to think about what is needed to be done on an individual and collective level."

"Applying for funding."

What has been the impact of your creative work participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?

"All our projects use sustainable materials. So that's eleven years of children and community involved in projects thinking sustainably."

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"Our Summer Youth Programme has been running for eleven years offering skills in everything from woodworking to video, film and editing. We would often have children and young people working directly with artists to help them make work. Young people worked with artists to build a prototype for large murals so they can be changed. Over the last two years young people have been making useful, beautiful objects, that can be used in the community such as a chicken coup, pavilion and picnic benches."

"This year our summer youth are again working in a garden and thinking about accessibility. Inspired by a conversation about the idea that everyone can become disabled in the future (part of our programming at pause for peace garden), young people have made wheel chair ramps from recycled wood from a Chicago Architecture Biennale project Sarazuma by Studio Chahar that the model design for the ramp could be used and built by anyone. The students also built accessible beds, learned about plants in the area and gardening."

How are your projects/the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"We receive funding from multiple city organisations, foundations, donations, commissions with 6018North. All goes go back to artists, curators, and our collaborators."

Why do you think using the arts/creative approach to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"Value – How can we raise the voice of the voiceless, the voice of the community, and have it be heard as music? We do not pay enough attention to the power of collaboration, the individual voice as well as the collective voice."

"The US is no longer an "us" we are an "I" and has left out people. We can't operate like that anymore. It's caused so much destruction and we are now experiencing the downfall, with things like climate change."

"We can't get out of this mess if we continue to rely on the privileged, the "I" the wealthy and the chosen few."

"We need creative thinking to solve problems. Learn to work with others who are different from ourselves. How do we demand more from our politicians? Creative thinking. We need to work together with others that are different from ourselves."



"The arts and performance, provide a different way of knowing and making meaning in the world and asking questions with a kind of fluidness and acceptance."

Media McNeal, Honey Pot Performance

Honey Pot Performance

Name: Media McNeal, Artistic and Managing Director

About: A creative collaborative chronicling Afro-feminist and Black diasporic subjectives amidst the pressures of contemporary global

life.

Website: www.honeypotperformance.org

How and why were you set up?

"We started out as friends wanting to make work together. So at that time we weren't called Honey Pot Performance then. Around 2000, we started making things and at that time we were called Thick Roots Performance Collage for about nine or ten years. Then I finished my PhD and moved to the to the east coast for a while. When I returned to Chicago we started working together as Ladies Ring Shout, a woman's creative circle that started with three women. Later in 2023, we would revisit that work to remake it for an ensemble of nine."

"In 2010 - 2011 we had been making things for a while and wanting to build something that had longevity. All of our work is long form and needs a half year for design experiments, story-telling circles and things to create with other people, ask questions and collect a lot of data."

"Our work focus is far-ranging, but typically about issues of importance to Black women and Black communities. Examples of prior works focused on black women's quality of life, state of the economy, how we think of labour, interrogating knowledge system (how we know, what we know so we have been building for a long time. We are all scholars, educators, researchers and teachers, so we wanted to create something out of the performance and beyond the performance work. That led to the public humanities arm that became the *Chicago Black Social Cultural Map (CBSCM) which is an archive that documents the lives of black Chicagoans from the great migration to House music."

"The CBSCM has become an important dimension of what Honey Pot is. We do community archiving, four programmes of panel discussions that are recorded and transcribed. A recent mile stone has been working with the First Church of the Brethren on the west side of the city. They are our community space partner and we have an office there, archive material, rehearse and perform there."

What are your core values, beliefs as a creative organisation/collective?

"We are a non-profit, but we continue to work in a collective fashion with a shared leadership and vision. We operate through values rooted in black feminist praxis, making space for the most vulnerable and trying to uplift them. Believe that knowledge comes from different places and are women-centred."

"We use performance as a tool for serious play and to investigate big social questions. Sometimes we take material from other stories and build a community cast."

"Invite people to come to a meal, share knowledge and stories that we record. For example we worked with film makers, On the Real film, to document stories of the ways that people practice and honour their individual and collective knowledge production (Ways of Knowing project – 2019). Those things ended up in the performance. As part of that project, we set up community meals to bring people together and share their stories. Black chefs have cooked the food and have also used props to encourage and inspire responses, memories."

Can you describe the process of connecting, building relationships with the young people, communities or groups you co-create arts projects with? Particularly over a long period of time?

"The Chicago Black Social Culture Map has been very organic and is an important way to preserve Chicago's black communities that haven't been heard. We started doing online research, but had to enlarge our circle by talking to people from house music culture."

"We hired a lot of Black women for that project to build relationships including an archiving manager, social media coordinator and marketing. Honey Pot is and has worked with 98% black women and that is our community and reflects it. We also have an intergenerational team who range in age from twenties to fifties."

"We are growing more to support black and brown artists and their performances that are centred in spirituality. We work with musicians, muralists, other performers and Honey Pot."

"We have also used a variety of spaces to perform around the city. They include the Experimental Station (on the south side), Arts & Public Life, The Stony Island Arts Bank, Links Hall, and Millennium Park. We tend to like using intimate spaces that are not traditional black box theatre spaces, or create a performance space."

What have been the challenges and highlights of working in this way? Any major lessons learnt?

Challenges:

"I'm from a dance background and now work in a multi-disciplinary. It has been challenging trying to define what we do for the purposes of funding. But our complexity is now accepted."

"Balancing full time jobs, family, partners, children and creative work."

Highlights:

"Working with this group of people who are more like family than just artistic collaborators and a community within itself. As we grow we have built in more infrastructure and others have really stepped into leadership."

"Increasing our budget from zero to £300K since 2019. Before having more staff I was holding a lot more things but with having the staff the team will deal with everything.

We now have an operations manager, director of production and marketing."

"In 2021 we were invited to and selected as lead public engagement artists by the Chicago department planning and cultural affairs, for a new city master plan which hadn't been done since 1966. Entitled We Will Chicago we were involved in the first phase of this. We appointed twenty artists using creative methods to interview people from across the city about living in Chicago and what needs to change. We covered everything from quality of life issues, transport, public health, community safety, infrastructure to the environment."

What has been the impact of your creative work participants, community, location or other project partners you have worked with?

"We are actively still making work as elder artists and connecting with younger artists who are emerging. Becoming unofficial mentors."

"Our community archiving work is building the muscle for understanding that your stories are valuable and it's important to have it and document it for yourself and that some of it can be shared widely with the community. It really captures the changes in our city. This is the reality of life in Chicago, resistance, equity and struggle."

Has your work/approach made an impact or influenced the cultural sector locally, nationally or internationally?

"Over the last few years of our community archive we have been approached and asked to take this format and bring it to other communities."

"We are seen and known as an organisation that combines community knowledge collection with an artistic service - and is seen as a valuable."

"We are now formalising our method and approach. By setting up a creative design lab - we are now breaking down our method that explore our work via workshops and facilitation."

How are your projects/the organisation itself funded? Particularly with cuts to arts funding during the cost of living crisis/post Covid-19?

"Mostly foundations, money from the city, State federal grants, relationships with private funders. We have also brought income from the services we have developed (for example, the archive work)."

Why do you think using the arts/creative approaches to explore and address social issues is so important? Particularly with diverse communities/under-represented groups?

"The arts and performance, provide a different way of knowing and making meaning in the world and asking questions with a kind of fluidness and acceptance."

"Acceptance. Not being okay with not knowing the answer. Getting other people to think it it's important and useful"

What I found out?

Overview of findings - key themes

Learning: Co-creation and collaboration – It's all about the long-term

All the arts projects, collectives and organisations I interviewed prioritised forming long-term, relationships with communities, cocreating artistic projects that empower local people to shape the work. The majority of their activities focused on some of societies most pressing issues. These included the housing crisis, work, immigration, death & end of life care, food poverty, climate change, redesign of public spaces with, by and for marginalised communities.

Both the international and Chicago USA arts initiatives I interviewed were funded by small grants, foundations, crowdfunding, donations, merchandising and fund-raising events. A few had larger grants that covered some of their operational costs (staffing, etc) from a national arts funder similar to Arts Council England in the UK. They were also commissioned by large arts institutions and the public sector to work as consultants due to their unique creative approaches.

Recommendations:

- Given the current state of the world and what the arts can be used for they remain undervalued, in terms of level of funding, and public recognition particularly in the UK.
- UK grants and foundations could create a grant programme exclusively for socially engaged arts projects or collectives that are doing community-driven or person-focused work. The funding would be open to not-for-profit small to medium arts organisations that have been running for a minimum of two years. It would support and enable those using this approach in the early stages to scale up their impact and support find alternative funding and help realise their vision.

Once The Us Agency (Nottingham UK) is established it would need to source income from a range of sources from relevant grants, trusts, foundations, crowd funding, consultancy work and develop joint bids with project partner organisations that align with its values. This is essential given the current cuts to arts funding so a creative approach to finding alternatives can be realised.

Learning: Innovative ways to meet, connect and build trust with people

The artistic project and practice MOHA Who Cares? Amsterdam examines the place of care in our society. They work with professionals involved in care through conversations, walks with individuals, writing, recording and illustration by creating an outdoor sitting room. Another method involves them working alongside professionals in their jobs eight hours a day, every day for months. For me this is a level of dedication and true appreciation of someone's job, that I have not seen before in the visual arts. It is the very definition of the saying - walking a mile in someone else's shoes.

6018North, Chicago an artist led platform operating from a rundown mansion in the Edgewater neighbourhood, one of the most diverse areas of the city. 6018North developed One Long Table an annual event that started in 2013, where they gathered a group of volunteer neighbours to find out how to bring local residents together by creating a community picnic in the middle of the street. Offering art, music, games, magic, and food it was experiment to see if they could bring local people together around one table. It resulted in a self-organised fashion show, block party and picnic.

Recommendation for the Us Agency:

• For the consultation phase and development of The Us Agency with my network of diverse community groups think about creative ways of meeting and gathering feedback.

- This phase will require additional funds to run creative sessions co-facilitated with an artist of colour, hiring spaces, materials, refreshments and to cover expenses for contributing time.
- Using a wide range of art forms and creatives such as crafts, creative writing, spoken word, design, film, music, photography, digital arts and media, theatre, cooking and gardening.
- Will work in partnership with the public, private and not-forprofit sector in Nottingham, depending on the nature of the project.

Learning: The reasons why arts initiatives are set up - ethics are more important than hard outcomes.

- Creating spaces and opportunities that were not there or voice to those who are under-represented.
- To make work with people that reflects the world around them.
- Use the arts to empower people to make positive change in their communities, giving agency to young people to express themselves and become future leaders.
- Local artists, the community and activists working together to establish an arts centre setting its own agenda that is accessible for all.

Recommendations for The Us Agency:

• Ensure The Us Agency has a clear mission statement, vision and values. Who we are, what do we stand for, why it exists, who we plan to work with and where?

Learning: How to build an authentic diverse and inclusive art sector from the ground up

Footscray Arts in Melbourne Australia centres the voices of those who are excluded and is led by communities who are first nation, POC (people of colour), lived experience of disability, deaf and LGBTQ+ They ensure they are representative with an indigenous advisory group, staff, Co-CEO model from priority groups.

Recommendations for UK and The Us Agency:

We need more arts funding schemes in the UK that are specifically aimed at supporting the work of independent producers developing collaborative arts projects. This funding would be aimed at people from global majority backgrounds who want explore a new idea for social change. Arts Funder Paul Hamlyn used to have a social art funding scheme, supporting individuals with the same approach, but aged between 18 to 30. I would use the finding from fellowship report to approach Paul Hamlyn to discuss bringing back this funding stream.

Ensure that The Us Agency is led by and has community panels that are POC (people of colour) that reflect the diversity of Nottingham as a city. Fundraise to pay for expenses and time for individuals to contribute and consult with US, so they are valued.

Learning: Designing an alternative version of a food bank

Chicago based artist-led alt_chicago created Alt_Space Market a communal free food market in an abandoned building where members of the community in Austin can give and take food and other much needed supplies.

Recommendation for the UK and The Us Agency:

• One in seven people in the UK are facing hunger and the demand for food parcels, banks and other essentials is at a record level.

- Grassroots arts, artist-led organisations are partnering with food banks, charities and community groups that create joint projects that address the issue or explore it through art.
- There should be more flexibility in terms of the criteria for charities offering grants to allow community focused arts organisations doing work specifically addressing the cost of living crisis to apply. The Us Agency can position itself to be part of this new partnership.

Learning: Building better futures for young people

"Our programmes working with young people (from children to teenagers) have resulted in young people going on to create their own start ups. Also many fashion designers and creatives have come from our programmes. Half of our team are young people who have gone through this process and are now professionals. They are leaders, part of the board and right now there are eleven of us."

Lina María Mejía Álvarez, Director & Founder, Platohedro, Columbia.

Learning: Ask young people what they want

Youth-led art programmes, projects and initiatives are more important than ever, particularly with the closure of many youth clubs. However, within the arts and cultural sector young people aged (14 to 25) from different backgrounds should be taking the lead in defining what creativity is and co-designing youth-led programmes for arts institutions and museums.

The Us Agency will consult with young people (13 - 25+) from diverse and under-represented communities in Nottingham to design a youth-led model for the Us Agency based on their lived experience and what matters to them. Young people can use creativity to connect with others, build their confidence, gain a range of new skills and reflect the world around them. They have the potential to be future community organisers, leaders, activists, artistic directors and creative entrepreneurs.

Learning: Citizen-led towns and cities

In 2021 Chicago's department planning and cultural affairs commissioned Honey Pot Performance as lead public engagement artists. They used different creative methods to interview people from across the city about living in Chicago, from community safety to transport and what needs to change.

Arts & Public Life in Chicago - a neighbourhood platform for the arts and culture is based in the historical black neighbourhood of Washington Park (South side of Chicago). The area has been subject to dis-investment or under-funding over the years. Their programmes supports and champions black and brown artists, creatives and communities. They have developed spaces such as gardens, lawns, performing arts centres (music, theatre) thereby creating a thriving local arts scene.

Recommendation for the UK:

- Diverse and under-represented communities should take the lead in deciding what they actually want and need in their neighbourhoods. Local authorities should meet with community, residents groups and place based artist-led organisations already working collaboratively with local people.
- With the closure of so many public spaces local authorities and could commission artists to facilitate creative workshops across towns, villages and cities that will enable people to re-imagine or come up with solutions to address these issues. This might include the creation of a new multi-purpose community spaces, re-using abandoned shops, buildings, developing new or changing spaces for growing food or community cafes.
- In the UK the Arts Council England needs to re-find what arts, culture, and creativity looks like and who makes it across the UK? Things have changed dramatically over the last 10 years or so. Also, who makes it could mean community meals across the divide, gatherings, knowledge or skill sharing and other activities that bring people together.

Why using the arts and creativity to explore and address social issues is soo important?

"Instead of telling people what to do, change your behaviour, asking people to dig deep to find their own answers. The arts are the only sector that can do that."

Asha Bee Abraham, Artistic Programme Manager, Footscray Community Arts, Melbourne Australia

"A topic like end of life, is a wonderful in terms of bridging difference. It is that one common human experience no matter what your background. We experience, loss, ageing, illness, death and dying. It can be used as an entry way or a means to start a conversation. How do we live well and leave well? It is really powerful listening to each other's stories. After doing this for ten years, I am amazed by the insights and stories."

Ngiam Su-Lin, Executive Director, Both Sides Now arts programme, ArtsWok, Singapore.

"I think money driven systems are conservative, unable to adapt and change their way of working. You need something else when you want to find change. We use artistic strategies and the space of culture to practice change. We are dedicated to having long-term loyalty to whoever we work with. Institutions have a functioning structure that suits their audience. But what about the others? That's the people we try to be loyal to."

Klaas Burger, Artistic Director School of Perception - 'Academie voor Beeldvorming', 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands.

Recommendation for the UK Prioritise investment and funding for community-driven grassroots arts organisations or collectives who:

- Are led by artists, creatives, community organisers from black and other marginalised backgrounds.
- Are working with hospitals, social care, immigration centres, women's refuges, support services for the homeless, those on low incomes, unemployed to create alternative ways to support the most vulnerable people in society - from their perspective.
- Are prioritising those who have lived experienced and been affected by racism, inequality and injustice within their projects and programmes.

What next?

Sharing my findings in Nottingham and beyond

Print hard copies (and share the digital version) of my Fellowship report as a zine, that can be used to share my findings with community and youth-led groups, organisers activists, local artists of colour who's practice is co-creation, arts organisations with the same approach, councillors, funders and influencers.

Meet and discuss my research with my network of community and youth groups I have previously worked with and my plan to set up The Us Agency a black-led collaborative arts project in Nottingham. This would include Bright Ideas Nottingham, youth-led Helping Kids Achieve, Heya (Self-led Arab Women's group), Inspire Urself Carnival Troupe, Open Arms and residents from St Ann's Nottingham, an area that has been underfunded and resourced for years.

Meet and discuss my fellowship report with funders Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation (Arts Education Funder), Paul Hamlyn and others.

UK arts organisations and specialists in the field of co-production discover how they are formed, funded and ethically led. These include In-Situ Pendle and idle women a social justice project for women (North West), City Arts Nottingham, and Counterpoints Arts (London), Climate, Justice & Displacement collective who have expressed an interest in my Fellowship Research.

Following the research, I will fundraise to deliver a series of in-depth creative consultation sessions with community groups followed by a period of reflection and evaluation of the process and impact of the work. This will then inform the ongoing development of Us as a creative and social arts agency that specialises in working with diverse under-represented groups over a long-term basis.

Formally set up The Us Agency in Nottingham with local artists, creatives or producers of colour with a similar approach and vision in 2025/26.

Final thoughts

I've been so inspired by all the artists, arts workers and organisers I interviewed for my Churchill Fellowship and the others I hope to meet in the future. As demonstrated in my research, I believe that artists, grassroots arts organisations and communities working together can change the world for the better. After all there is only Us.

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T.R.A.C.E - Teens Re-imagining Art, Community & Environment.

Arts & Public Life

This report is dedicated to Emma "Dex" Dexter Thinker & Tinker, Adventurer & Superwoman 1971 - 2024