



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement

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Abstract: This is a transcript of the panel “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement,” which was conducted on February 18, 2023, at the College Art Association. This panel discussed the increasingly prominent practice of museums convening community advisory groups to guide their community engagement.

Keywords: Museums, Community Advisory Groups, Community Engagement

Introduction

This is a transcript of the panel “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement,” which was conducted at the College Art Association annual conference in New York City on February 18, 2023. Daniel Tucker moderated the panel, and Martina Tanga, Alyssa Greenberg, Laurel McLaughlin, Gabriel Sacco, Rob Blackson, and Abigail Satinsky participated in the discussion.

Transcript

Daniel Tucker: This panel was co-created with several members of the College Art Association’s museum committee, including Monica Andrews, Daniel Tucker, Sarah Magnatta, Margaret Pezalla-Granlund, Roma Madan-Soni, and Gwyneth Shanks. I just want to give a shoutout to them as they helped conceptualize this panel and select the submissions that we are going to hear from today.

This panel will focus on the increasingly prominent practice of museums and also various kinds of art galleries, other arts organizations, and convening community advisory groups. In recent years, many museums have revised their staffing structure, mission statements, budget allocations, and training practices to focus more substantially on incorporating community, public, civic, and Indigenous engagement work alongside their historical areas of practice surrounding collections and research.

In 2010, Nina Simon released her book, *The Participatory Museum*, that spread many of these tactics into the museum field. In 2015, the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) report on museums, libraries, and comprehensive initiatives outlined some attributes of these new community engagement practices, and they identified a couple including deeper time commitment and an extension of the time commitment of research and preparation for projects, focusing on different levels of embeddedness within existing community networks (Walker and Lundgren 2015). They outlined this in their report to explore some of the approaches that exceeded the kind of episodic and limited partnership models of previous eras.

Following many years of experiments in this direction and increased urgency in the field for relevance more generally, we believe that this is an important time to take stock of these efforts toward engagement. We want to know how these ships are occurring, how they are being assessed, and what the future might look like in terms of their developmental trajectory. Something that particularly interests me, in particular, as somebody who has both convened these groups and then also been a part of them and sat on them, are some of the micro decisions that these examples will highlight. I think we will have a nice range to learn from across five different case studies.

Martina Tanga: Alright. Thank you, Daniel, for convening this panel, and I am grateful to be in dialogue with the panelists Abby, Laurel, Gabriel, and Alyssa.

Today, I am going to talk to you about the curatorial process for the exhibition, "Touching Roots: Black Ancestral Legacies in the Americas," currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston. This gallery presents the work of Black artists in the Americas who explored connections to the arts of Africa. It is about how artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries turned their gaze toward the continent, and through traditions, aesthetic expressions, and spiritual practices, how they negotiated notions of identity, ancestral legacy, and memory. While this is not a Boston specific story, it is one told at the MFA and for Boston audiences. The city has at once been a place of great innovation for Black artists and a place where institutions have consistently undervalued their contributions. By giving the show a Boston focus, it forged relationships with artists that the museums sought to nurture and recognize their critical long-term contributions.

In doing so, it is vital to recognize these efforts in the broader historical, cultural context. Edmond Barry Gaither, for instance—pillar of the Boston art community and the director of the National Center for African American Arts in Roxbury, just about a mile away from the

MFA—held a special position at the museum, curating many exhibitions, including the groundbreaking 1970s show, “Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston.” One of the major themes of that exhibition was Black artists engaging with the arts of Africa.

Placing audiences at the center of our exhibition, our goal was for Black visitors to feel that their cultural heritage is represented, creating a sense of inclusion and belonging, more specifically to connect to Black Bostonians. To do that, I brought in four curatorial collaborators, Chenoa Baker, the artists Stephen Hamilton and Napoleon Jones-Henderson, and professor of Art History and Africa and African diaspora studies, Kyrah Malika Daniels. I thought carefully about how to build my team—which voices needed to be at the table, who brought invaluable knowledge of Black art and cultural practices, who were new arrivals to Boston and long-term community organizers. I also thought carefully about what it means to make an invitation like this. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make sure that there was space for them to bring their creativity, their thoughts, and their ideas into the curatorial process. I had conversations with area museum professionals and learned from their projects. What I wanted to avoid was the curators presenting a project so underway that it feels that there is little room for those invited to have a genuine input without an awkward process of first dismantling and then rebuilding together. I also wanted to avoid the situation where you invite in collaborators and then you give them very little agency. Fundamentally, I wanted to co-curate touching roots with my collaborators.

How can this be done with individuals that are not part of your institutions, have busy lives and other responsibilities, and can only give so much to a project? How can we share authority, build trust, and co-create the space where everybody feels that they belong?

Between October 2021 and January 2022, we met only three times, and we met in person and on Zoom, as Covid resurgence allowed. We met for two-hour sessions, and each participant was paid a thousand dollars. We can, and should, have a conversation about financial transparency when museums work with community members.

Our first meeting focused exclusively on exhibition goals. We started right at the beginning; it was important that we all got onto the same page about what we wanted this exhibition to do. These were goals that I had set out, but we needed to discuss them together to see how they resonated. We needed to discuss how the MFA specifically was going to address the show for the Black Boston community. I had a preliminary checklist drawn out of artworks from the permanent collection, which were brought to the meeting. We passed it around as single pages so that everyone could leaf through. They had no particular order presented in this way. There was nothing fixed or already predetermined, and there was plenty of possibility to create the show together.

Our second meeting focused on floor plans and layout. We looked at how to arrange this material in space. With the complex theme and many artists’ works that span geographies and temporalities, there were many ways to organize the show. What themes? Which ideas needed to come to the forefront, and which needed to recede into the background? I did not

bring one plan to the meeting; I brought two very different options. This way, the group could see that things could be arranged in different ways, and there were many possibilities in how to work through some of these questions.

When we met to talk about interpretation, we discussed the framing of significant themes like “ancestral spirits,” “Africa and the imagination,” “Pan-Africanism,” and “dance and performance.” We also considered individual artworks. This meeting was important in that we ended up, for example, dropping a couple of artworks from the checklist, like a Robert Colescott painting. I created the first draft of the gallery text from this conversation and others, and then we copyedited it internally and shared it with the group so that they could shape the content. It felt important to take on the responsibility of the heavy lifting, like baking a cake, and then for Napoleon, Stephen, Kyrrah, and Chenoa to work on the frosting, so to speak, to give it the final shape. There was transparency throughout the process.

Some of the things I want to highlight that came out of the group collaboration were, for example, the importance of the theme “ancestral spirits,” which made visible the connecting link between the arts of Africa, whose function is to converse with the those in the spiritual realm, and the importance of continuity of those traditions in the Americas; a connection the trans-Atlantic slave trade sought so vehemently to sever. By foregrounding the theme “ancestral spirits,” the exhibition then becomes a place of healing and restitution.

As the MFA is an encyclopedic museum, we discussed bringing in art from the African collection into the gallery space. I reflected on my own apprehensiveness of past examples like the 1984 primitivism show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), but here, talking through that process, we displayed Ashanti weights next to Hale Woodruff's painting, “Ashanti Image,” from 1946, giving equal context to both artworks. Elsewhere in the galleries, we made connections to the arts of Africa on display elsewhere in the museum building, inviting visitors to explore other parts of the museum.

Overall, I want to end with the fact that throughout this process, we stress the *we* in creating this exhibition. We each took on different roles and contributed different areas of expertise, but we worked together and each one with a stake in the success of the show's outcome.

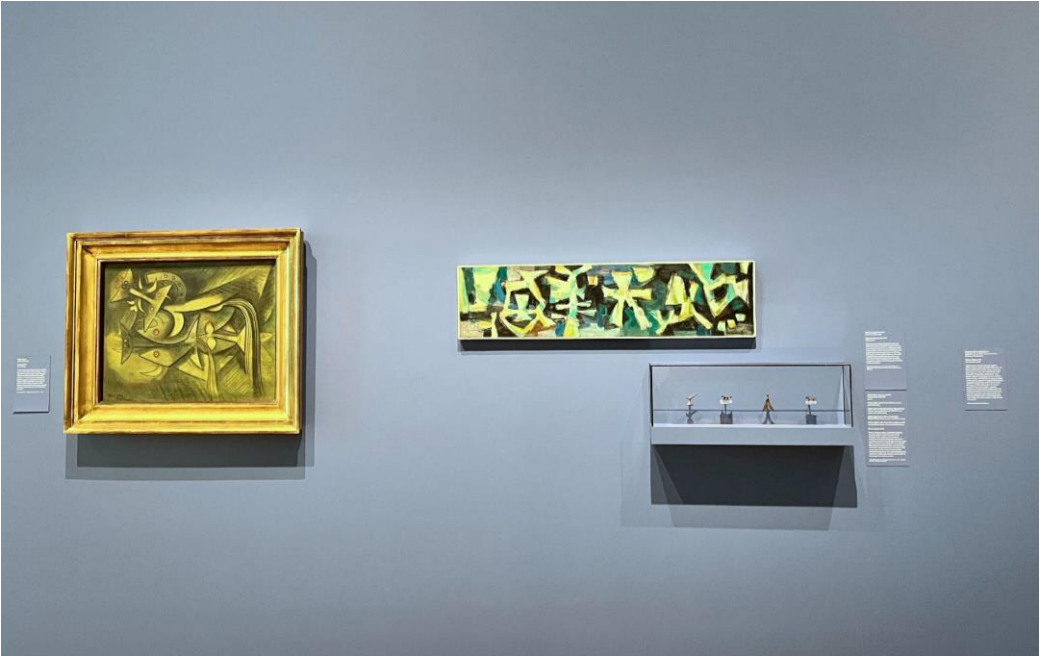


Figure 1: Installation of “Touching Roots: Black Ancestral Legacies in the Americas,” May 26, 2022—July 30, 2023, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Showing: Wifredo Lam, “Untitled,” 1943, oil on burlap, A Shuman Collection—Abraham Suman Fund, 2007.4; Hale Aspacio Woodruff, “Ashanti Image,” about 1946, Oil on panel, The John Axelrod Collection, 2011.1828; Asante Weights, “Bronze,” gift of George Abrams in memory of Maida Abrams, 2009.5197, 2009.5201, 2009.5207, 2009.5245.

Alyssa Greenberg: Good morning, everybody.

Before I start, I want to say that I am not speaking on behalf of any institution today. I am speaking purely about my own experiences in the field. I also want to note before we start that I have never had any professional training in community engagement or advisory committee organization. These are all things that I learned on the job through trial and error through experimentation, so join me on this journey.

Show of hands, who here has been to Toledo, Ohio? Oh, that is so many hands. Community is super important to Toledoans, but there is not much structure for community partnerships within the infrastructure of the anchor arts institutions in Toledo. There is not much familiarity about community partnerships and community engagement, and there also is not a lot of familiarity about the idea of advisory committees guiding institutional practice. There are, however, a lot of assets including the fact that there is a lot of access for these anchor arts institutions. All of these anchor arts institutions are located close to where local residents actually live. That is something that stands out in Toledo compared to places like Manhattan or Chicago, where the encyclopedic art museums are a little bit farther from where everyday people live. Everyone is in really close proximity, so you can have a lot of those “room where it happens” type conversations where leaders and decision-makers can come together.

First, I am going to talk about a case study of a program at the Toledo Museum of Art followed by one at the Toledo Opera. Then, I have a few words about the professionalization of community engagement.

In 2017, one of my first opportunities as a Leadership Fellow at the Toledo Museum of Art was to reseat the board of the affinity group Circle, which was designed as a pipeline for engaging new donors in their thirties and forties with the museum. Their flagship program, believe it or not, was a Kentucky Derby party. What does the Kentucky Derby have to do with an art museum? Exactly. It was a popular program. It was revenue generating, but it was not a mission-aligned program. (Talk to me after, if you want to see how I got in trouble for appearing in the society page of the Toledo Blade in a horse-and-jockey costume.) I was tasked with reseating the board for this affinity group, and to make it more mission aligned, more culturally relevant, we seated the new Circle board with artists and activists, people of color, students, and early-career-professionals as well as mid-career professionals and organizational leaders. It was a mix of born-and-raised local Toledoans as well as transplants such as myself. Our opportunity was to create programming that had a “show don’t tell” approach—doing the work to show what culturally competent programming looks like in the museum so that hopefully other museum staff members can pick up where we left off and hopefully rely on that affinity group as a low-key advisory board.

The local healthcare company, ProMedica, engaged a group of Black barbers as men’s wellness advocates. The idea is that these barbers are leaders in the community, not just because they are trusted advisors but because they are artists. The barbering that they do is an exquisite vernacular art form in and of itself. The medical team would train them to have blood pressure cuffs at their stations and educate their clients about when it is time to go get your colonoscopy. We brought the barbers into the art museum to have a meeting with our affinity group, and it was very clear from the onset that the barbers wanted our collaboration to be not a barbering competition but rather a showcase for all of their artistry and a celebration of their artistry. We toured the art museum together, and they put together designs of haircuts that were inspired by works at the museum; the haircuts were inspired by the museum and mission driven. The funding was provided by the [CEO of the] healthcare company that was also on the board of the museum.

We invited the barbers to the art museum *as artists*. We had sixteen Black barbers doing haircuts. There was—all of you have been to Toledo, so you all know about the Glass Pavilion—this beautiful venue. We had a stage set up in the middle with four barber chairs. We had a DJ; we had a barbershop quartet; we had a slushy machine, a red one and a blue one that was swirled to look like a barber pole; and we had the performances of the haircuts happening live. There were over 450 attendees, and it was the first free event at the museum where people were even reselling tickets to the event. This continues to be one of the museum’s signature events, widely recognized by Black audiences in Toledo, and was one of the first major public events that the museum reconstituted after the pandemic. Circle is still active today.

At the [Toledo] Opera, I did two strategic shifts in terms of how I convened an affinity group there. The first was to emphasize thought leadership and guidance for the advisory committee members over work that was displacing staff duties and also compensating advisory committee members. That was a crucial difference; we wanted the expertise of our community members to be recognized financially.

We were doing an opera called *Blue*, which told the story of a Black family in Harlem where the father was a police officer, and the son was a social justice activist. It was really critical that we connected with the right community members for that programming, including a documentary film that we made interviewing Toledoans about their lived experiences with law enforcement. We convened a subcommittee of our Advisory Committee where we had many meetings about who in the community we should invite to tell their stories, how we can ensure that this will be a safe experience for them, how to ensure that they also will be compensated, to and review multiple drafts of the film and all of those things in order to make sure that it really was an authentic representation of the stories to be told. We had so much programming. We commissioned work by a local artist that would paint a mural downtown and more. This opera had, you know, the highest attendance of any [Toledo Opera] production post pandemic. The Advisory Committee was named an official Board of Trustees committee by Toledo Opera, and it became a pipeline for the Board of Trustees. Four advisory committee members have been named trustees since 2020.

Last but not least, community engagement has been valued in non-profit settings for a long time, but it is still relatively rare for a position and a salary line to be specifically dedicated to this work. These roles have proliferated, especially post pandemic, because of responses to demands from audiences and funders, but there is no publication. There is no professional organization or formal network for community engagement workers in arts and cultural institutions as there are for educators or curators. I hope that this panel can be a step in that direction.

Laurel V. McLaughlin: Good morning, everyone; my name is Laurel McLaughlin, and I am the Director of Curatorial Affairs at Artspace New Haven [former position as of March 2023]. Along with my colleague Gabriel Sacco, Visual Culture Producer, we would like to begin our swift co-presented case study by thanking Daniel Tucker for convening the round table and our fellow presenters for your work. We would also like to acknowledge the lands upon which we conducted this research and worked with an advisory group, namely those of the Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Niantic, the Quinnipiac, and other Algonquian speaking peoples in what is known to settlers today as New Haven, Connecticut. We offer respect to tribal members, their ancestors, and their future descendants. We also could not have organized this advisory group without our former Executive Director, Lisa Dent, who provided key guidance and care.

Finally, we would like to honor those that served on the advisory committee by naming them here: Doreen Abubakar, Michael Angelis, Diane Brown, Alisha Crutchfield, Lee Cruz, Lizzie Donius, Mistina Hanscom, Pamela Monk Kelly, Greg Ledovsky, Linda Lindroth, Eric March, Mary Elizabeth Marvin, Maria Osorio, and Steve Roberts. I will begin by sharing the historical and contemporary context for the festival, the composition of our advisory group, and our reconfigured festival structure—the latter of which aimed to recognize extant collective art organization in the city. This context will be followed by an analysis of the immediate and longer-term challenges presented by Gabriel Sacco. The City-Wide Open Studios Festival, as it was formerly known, emerges from the forty-year artist-founded nonprofit organization of Artspace New Haven as a means to exhibit local, regional, and national contemporary art. Under former Executive Director Lisa Dent's tenure, the board adopted a new mission to support art that engages experimentation and civic discourse.

Artspace planned to demonstrate that support through its annual festival intended to gather diverse audiences to view art in exhibitions and studios for a set period ranging from two to four weeks and punctuated by programming. Based on archival research in the Robert R. Haas Family Arts Archive at Yale University, which houses the Artspace archives, I observed how the festival historically functioned. My findings recognized an alignment with gentrified and racial divisions, thereby keeping it from reaching its former titular promise, being "citywide." I also learned how much of the board and staff minutes focused on promoting arts sales, which does not align with the mission of a nonprofit according to the new mission. Through conversations with community leaders, we as a team began to understand how strong the idea of tradition and holding fast to the status quo was ingrained within arts communities of New Haven.

With this knowledge, Artspace staff met to review how to reconceptualize the festival for eight months. Our planning built upon the crucial work of the 2020 iteration of the festival, which adopted the New Haven Cultural Equity Plan. Created by the New Haven Director of Cultural Affairs Adrian Jefferson and her own community advisory group, the plan reckons with history, acknowledges neighborhood culture, reallocates funding and resources, and deepens continued practices and accountability (City of New Haven 2022). We adopted it as a guiding principle for our work in considering the problematic history of the former festival. In our initial conversations with an external facilitator, other factors arose such as the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and larger communities in New Haven, Yale University's extractive presence in the city's ecosystem, and the pervasive presence of colonial histories that continue to sow racial divisions in the wake of 2020 social justice uprisings. With these factors in mind, we convened a community advisory group consisting of artists from participating artist studio buildings, community leaders, city council representatives, and organizers of arts adjacent organizations, representing seven key neighborhoods in the city. Together, we configured the newly named Open Source Art Festivals into a four-pronged expansive art experience in New Haven: (1) a downtown

informational hub adjacent to Artspace New Haven, (2) neighborhood platform exhibitions organized by local curators and artists in each of the identified neighborhoods, (3) open studio days across the city, and (4) a professional development programming for ten days.

Gabriel Sacco: Thanks. Now that Laurel has gone through and established the foundation for which we began planning, I will move through some examples of successes, failures, gray areas with our advisory group, the continuing motives for New Haven for hosting advisory groups, and goals for future advisory groups in New Haven and beyond. We continue to hear feedback from the advisory group, registrants, and audiences. First, previous festival structures were limited in physical scope across the city without an advisory group in play. With their help, we were able to secure community spaces that already serve our communities, such as community gardens, libraries, and community centers. For instance, we paired artists with advisory group members who volunteered to produce exhibitions in the Stetson Branch of the New Haven Public Library. These sites provided platforms for engagement that already functioned as such in their communities rather than erecting a sterile gallery simulation or a rented studio. The work of the advisory group provided greater capacity within a bureaucratic process that, when collated, produced a scaled-up festival.

Another aim we accomplished was to pay members for their commitment by providing compensation for community knowledge. Although this position was paid with a modest honorarium of \$250, members had to prioritize private and personal wage or salaried work that supported them financially for a longer term. We realized the low compensation meant that some members lacked the ability to join meetings if the meetings jeopardized another paid job. We opted to invite members based on their experience through meetings rather than with contract agreements. However, we found that some members dropped out, which impacted our capacity as full-time staff. In retrospect, pay and time commitments seem to be prioritized to a greater extent. Based on feedback, allocation and agreement of responsibility and transparency of roles among group members will create a higher functioning and consistent group.

These acute structural challenges of collaborations, payments, and commitments were attended to while forming and correcting the formation of the group as our planning evolved. In addition, there are existing continuous macro societal challenges in New Haven inciting much discourse within New Haven artists and humanities professionals generally. First, the legacy patron pool of Artspace consists of artists, many of whom participated in the festival for income stability whether or not they had a job outside of their art practice. This creates a microcosm of dependency of for sale/for profit art production. Subsequently, artists create artworks for sale and speak about their practice, but few consider critical social discourse in New Haven. Money and welfare are increasingly jeopardized by art makers who rely on an antiquated once per year model for income, which in fact failed some people this year. Advisory groups can help mediate between cultural creation and commercial approach.

Much like the convening of disparate ideologies, the second issue we came across is one of generational rifts. We found advisory groups were helpful in bringing demographics and discourse together in older and younger generations. Adriane Jefferson in conversation with Matthew Jacobson, the co-director of Public Humanities, described that one of the largest challenges in New Haven is that a convening of ideas is largely disregarded by the older generation. Established New Haven artists feel offended by emerging artists' space taking and are reluctant to "pass the baton" (Public Humanities 2022). With the advice of members working in the community, we are able to come together and better understand these differences. It is important to recognize that our analysis is short in timeframe and limited in results. We would like to recognize this as a case study of failure in some ways and as a site of experimentation when resources are sparse. As an artist upon conclusion, I would like to offer a toolkit, which we have here in the hopes that new formations are as generative as they can be. Thank you.

Rob Blackson: Thanks for coming out. I work for an organization called Philadelphia Contemporary, where I am the Co-artistic Director, but what I am going to speak about this morning is about an advisory council process and model that I created when I moved to Philadelphia in 2011 as the Director of Temple Contemporary at Temple University's Tyler School of Art. When I moved to Philly, I came from the UK, and I did not know anyone. I really felt like I was at a loss to try to come up with exhibitions and public programs without a knowledge of what people cared about in the city. I just spent the first six to seven months of my tenure back then, over ten years ago now, just listening to people.

For these introductory conversations it did not matter if I was speaking with an artist, block captain, politician, activist, etc. I would just sit down with them and have a coffee and listen to what they felt was important and going on in the city. I soon learned that one conversation led me to be introduced to the next. I had what turned out to be over sixty conversations with different individuals throughout the city. Eventually, I came up with what I thought would be around thirty people. This thirty broke down into ten Temple University students of different academic majors, ten high school kids from around Temple Contemporary, and then there were also ten of what we will call civic and cultural leaders from around the city. To get to some point of gel, what I decided to do was to invite them all to just one meeting a year, but they all had the same homework assignment. They all had to come with one question that they cared deeply about but that they did not know the answer to.

What I inevitably got to was this moment where all these people from all these different interests were coming together around one table. We were just going around the room and everybody was talking about something that they cared a lot about, but they did not have an answer at hand. You would get questions like, why is it that half the world's population goes through menopause, but we rarely as a society ever talk about it?—things that, me, as a 43-year-old guy was, never going to come up with. It was this way that things that people really did care

about were coming to the fore. Then, all these people, as a group, debated each other's question and talked about it. At the end of every meeting, they all got one vote to vote for the question that was raised that they felt had the greatest local relevance and international significance.

You can imagine me as a sort of curator of contemporary art on this white knuckle ride, not knowing what the questions are going to be or who was going to vote for them, but it was important that no question that just got one vote was going to go forward. It was this idea that people from all these different interests in their lives were voting for one question. You got a multiplicity of perspectives coming to the surface. Then, it was my job, as a director of this kind of thing, to come up with a way to creatively reimagine that question into something more powerful for more audiences. Doing that as much as possible in collaboration with the people who put their hands up, you got all different kinds of questions. You know, some questions would get eight votes and some would get three, and you would go with the ones with the most votes.

It was just a two-year term, so you only had to come to two meetings per term. After that I would say, who is doing something that is kind of interesting? They would sort of pass on their seat to somebody else that they thought was doing something cool. It was through this process that one of the advisors raised their hand and asked the question—this was in 2013—if the walls of a closed public school would speak, what would they say? Again, a question I would never come up with, but something they came up with, and it got a ton of votes. That is because the school district of Philadelphia that same year had closed over two dozen schools throughout the city. This school, which is the closed Fairhill school, is still closed about a half a mile northeast of Temple University where I was working at the time.

An artist named Pepón Osorio, who biked to work every day at that time, would bike by the school, and as you can see, it has a for sale sign on it. This raised us the possibility of, okay, so Fairhill is really closed. Is this the kind of neighborhood that we could work with? It turns out all those things started to fall in the right direction, so the advisory council on the youth side of this was this crew. These are all students that were deemed to be failing from the school district but who wanted to get involved and wanted to become a part of our youth advisory council, which was another big facet of the art council and the advisory council. They worked with the artists and got back into their old school, and they actually kind of salvaged everything from water fountains off the walls to trophies that were left in the cases after the school was closed. They built an installation with Pepón Osorio directly in the Tyler School where I was working. It was this sense of the people who cared deeply about a question, doing something more with that question to create a larger opportunity for the public around an issue that was central to Philadelphia that began this snowball of advisory council led programming getting done through Temple, where I was working. This relationship has grown, and now we are working on another project called "Convalescence," which is equally in many respects guided by an advisory council process of families, all of whom are of color and all of whom have unfortunately experienced institutional racism through the healthcare system predominantly in Philadelphia.

[The people on the advisory council have gone through] some kind of life-threatening illness situation, and all have gravitated toward this project, including myself, to create another large installation that will respond with colleagues from Jefferson University, who are here; to think through the ways in which this idea of inequity, which is deep within the healthcare industry, can be somehow creatively reimaged for a project in Philadelphia with Philadelphia families and individuals who all deeply care about this issue and are thankfully doing something creative about it; and to think about healing as a creative process, not just for the institutions but also for their own lives. Thank you.

Abigail Satinsky: Happy to be joining you all today. Until recently I was the Curator and Head of Public Engagement at Tufts University Art Galleries, and soon I will be transitioning to be the Program Officer & Curator at the Wagner Foundation. I am very excited to be part of this conversation and to learn from everybody else. One question that is animating my work and these projects I am going to talk briefly about is how can universities and, by extension, institutions be resource generators for our communities to recognize and amplify the culture they are already making without demanding that they come to us to be validated?

Today I will talk about “Art for the Future: Artists Call and Central American Solidarities,” an exhibition I curated with Erina Duganne, which originated at Tufts University Art Galleries and traveled to the University of New Mexico Art Museum and to DePaul Art Museum. The exhibition focuses on the 1984 artist-activist campaign Artist Call against US intervention in Central America and its ramifications in the present. This campaign, where artists mobilized against President Reagan’s interventions into Central America in the 1980s, originated in New York City, where over 1,100 artists participated, and there were twenty-seven chapters of the campaign across the country. For this exhibition, we drew from work that was exhibited at that time period as well as commissioned and exhibited artists responding in the present, alongside a bilingual publication with Inventory Press, to draw attention to this moment of transnational solidarity amongst artists.

In exhibiting this work, we wanted to connect with Central American audiences in Boston to engage with this history and to feel agency to participate in generative ways for them. To do this, I worked with Curatorial Fellow Geovani (YOBA) Cruz, a BFA student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) at Tufts, who is currently interning with Martina at the MFA Boston, to conduct a citywide interview with Latinx organizations and Central American artists and organizers to talk to them about what solidarity meant to them, how they imagined their own futures, and to think about that as a resource that was ongoing. These interviews, which took the form of edited videos, took place in the lead up to the exhibition at Tufts and then were interspersed throughout the exhibition as QR codes, and we made available printed resources of information on the organizations interviewed.

This was meant to be a process of welcoming. If you know the geography of Boston, our Central American communities are primarily located in East Boston, which is very far from

Tufts main campus in Medford. We were building these relationships from scratch, and as we were making our invitations to come visit the exhibition, we also wanted to figure out a way to have their voices already present at the onset. In addition to that, we wanted to make a potential resource for them that was not contingent on them coming to us.

These interviews, which highlighted organizations such as Maverick Landing Community Services, City Life/Vida Urbana, Amplify Latinx, Sociedad Latina, and The Welcome Project, resulted in some generative conversations and new relationships. In particular, the East Boston organizers from City Life/Vida Urbana, a housing justice organization, came out to see the exhibition as well as exhibiting artist Muriel Hasbun, who conducted her *Arte Voz* workshop at Maverick Landing Community Services in East Boston. In those workshops, Hasbun invites recent immigrants, first-generation Americans, and anyone with family history to share their migration stories as she guides participants through a process of looking at her archive of Salvadoran art and reflecting. Maverick Landing really brought the audience for this; we had to depend on their outreach for folks to attend. It ended up being a really great experience; we shared Salvadoran food, Muriel conducted the workshop entirely in Spanish, and there was a lot of participation, with many sharing deeply personal experiences. This was only possible because we were able to establish these relationships through the video process. It was very step-by-step because mostly it was myself and Geovani working on this project, and I was also the curator of this multi-site exhibition.

To echo a lot of what other people are saying is that this community engagement work is not fully resourced within our institutions. In the case of universities, they are most focused on their internal communities or adjacent neighborhoods because they have vested economic interests there, and yet we as staff at university galleries also want to reach who the work is relevant to. There is not much trust between neighborhoods and universities, often because universities can be extractive and gentrifying. With this in mind, how am I going to welcome people into this space? How am I going to be honest and transparent about these power differentials, and what is my commitment to these communities going forward? We must be also committed on a personal level to have one-to-one relationships that are based on a mutual understanding of what is possible, that transcend what the institution wants. We cannot commit on behalf of our institutions because leadership changes and priorities change. I am interested in the redistribution of the resources of the university, but we have to know what we can offer. Honesty in our relationships and building slowly on a personal level is what centers this work and makes it meaningful.

Briefly, another project that helped extend our thinking about the university gallery as a resource generator for our local communities was launching the Collective Futures Fund. This fund is part of the Regional Regranting network of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and we give out \$80,000 a year to public and community-based artist-led projects in Greater Boston. We were able to launch in 2020 with emergency relief and now have this ongoing project support for our community, which really helps the galleries be connected to the ecosystem locally and to build trust and relationships where there was not

much connection before. This has been a beautiful program, and we were able to partner with the publication *Boston Art Review* to amplify the work of our grantees. It is really wonderful to see new collaborations arise out of this project. To end, how can we utilize these opportunities to create an ethos of redistribution and meaningful, non-extractive exchange within our institutional frameworks? This is the ongoing question and concern.

Daniel Tucker: Thanks so much everyone. At this point, I would like to begin the Q&A. A prompting question that I would like to offer is that nearly all of you talked about the context that you were working in where either your job changed, the leadership changed, or if that was not the case, then the project was changing. You were working across the timeframe of a specific project launch or conclusion. With that in mind and with the folks in this audience inevitably either doing a similar kind of work or contemplating a similar kind of work in their fields, I am wondering what is something that you would advise folks who are considering this kind of work with regards to working across time and doing planning in the future. You all shared case studies that are great and rich and that we can reflect on but also look forward to either in your own work or to other folks in the room. What kind of advice would you offer in terms of working across those kinds of organizational transitions or time more broadly as far as the kind of planning that would make the most successful work in the future? Any advice?

Martina Tanga: Invite people in as soon as possible. Do not wait for your project to be fully formed. As a curator, I was in a moment where I was like “I got this, I could probably do this by myself.” No, you want to get people in right at the beginning before you have consolidated much of your ideas because they will change, and it is better to do that sooner rather than get far along and then have to move, figure things out. My advice is to get people in from the very beginning.

Laurel V. McLaughlin: I will also just add, seeing as Gabe and I were new to the institution, we relied on community feedback, which we know was also one of the challenges we presented since the feedback was so widely varied and intertwined within fraught political and societal concerns in the city, but it was crucial to just get a sense of what historically had been done, especially throughout numerous director and institutional changes in recent years. Researching in the archives enabled us to fill in gaps and also recognize erasures that had not formerly been considered.

Gabriel Sacco: I think in times of change we noticed that it is this practice of care, and I would advise to keep that at the forefront as well.

Abby Satinsky: One thing I would say is to talk with your staff about being okay with things not being resolved through your community advisory process. Working with community advisors, you really do not want to mess up. I have found that staff or leadership want to feel like something concrete resulted or that the institution was able to move in a progressive way,

but sometimes what these processes may open up are unresolved things. We have to grapple with past failures, institutional harm, or neglect or how impossible it feels to move forward in the face of social emergencies or when our most marginalized neighbors and community members do not have time or capacity to advise us. This is all hard work, and prepping our institutional contexts for the unresolved tensions of what the community process brings up could be helpful for future and long-term work.

Rob Blackson: I would just say that it is important to move at the speed of trust, and if you have already got coming down the pipe from your institution, “this is all for this show that is going to happen in the spring slot or whatever,” you have got to know that this is not the time to try to involve your community advisory council on a new level because you cannot really fit that kind of a conversation into a slot.

Alyssa Greenberg: I think this existed before the pandemic, but especially, at this stage, there still is a real scarcity mindset in the arts, especially when it comes to funding—this idea that all of our jobs are hanging on by a thread because we are all still traumatized by the wave of furloughs and layoffs in 2020. I think that keeping the funding flowing is really important; as long as this work continues to be funded, it will continue to be sustained by our organizations. Also, what can we do in the meantime to institutionalize this work so that multiple staff members have this on their portfolio—that the board of trustees is engaged and that there are trustees who are active in this work as well as staff and community members—and to make sure that this work is synonymous with your organization’s identity in the community, not just internally?

Daniel Tucker: Thanks all. I can keep going with questions, but I want to hand it off to you all because I know there is a lot of experience and curiosity in the room. Any questions from the audience about this work or any of the presentations that we heard today?

Audience Question: Thank you all for sharing so generously all of your work. This idea of institutionalizing the partnerships and relationships is something that I have been considering just because I know that sometimes what happens [is that the organizer tries] to manage who is giving advice in order to then instrumentalize community partners as a way to reinforce the ideas or the plan that is already in place. I’m wondering if you have thoughts or suggestions about how to navigate that.

Alyssa Greenberg: Sure. I will jump in. That is a real concern. That is very, very valid. I think that for me the process has always been an open application pool, ensuring that we have as wide the diversity of people as possible, that this opportunity is available to them, and then grassroots recruitment to make sure that people that you really think can make a difference are at least putting their names in the hat. I think that, honestly, the more you can stack the applicant pool with really exciting candidates, the greater your likelihood of having a robust advisory committee.

Martina Tanga: Your question is really asking about how the institution is instrumentalized; it is the hierarchy of people higher up, so let us call it what it is. In my particular case, I am a curatorial research associate. I am operating way above my title and pay grade. I thrived in being a low-ranking person. I fit this project—the work that I did with my curatorial collaborators—into a program at the MFA that had, at that moment, a lack of leadership. It is a program that is called “Table of Voices,” but there was nobody running it. I used the program but could use it in the way I wanted without much oversight. I could just do what I wanted with the people I was inviting in, and I just took as much agency as I could without having any kind of higher-ups. Trust your gut in the work that you want to do and try and find those pockets of absence of power and kind of move within those.

Abby Satinsky: The only other thing I wanted to add is that often the folks that get asked to be on community advisory boards are often attuned to the idea that they are going to be instrumentalized by the institution. I think maybe also part of institutionalizing relationships is, again, figuring out in an ongoing way what the institution is giving back to their organizations or their communities. Then, they can participate, and they have agency; they know what they are getting into, and the institution has a commitment of exchange.

Audience Question: Thank you all so very much for your presentations and your willingness to, as one of you said, share your case study failures; that is really wonderful. I am really struck by how different all your institutions are in terms of the size and the nature of the constituents. I have been thinking a lot about how this work is bold, very individually driven, and institutionally informed and contextualized. I have a question that you could take either way, whether it is thinking about if you were to do your projects again, what would you do differently, or if you had a magic wand that you could wave and change something that was structural or institutional that you think would have been a good pivot point, what would that be?

Abby Satinsky: My magic wand would be community advisory councils that the university at the highest level actually listened to and felt accountable to, so all of us at the lower levels of staff could feel that there was a progressive vision from the top-down, and that progressive vision would include accounting for past wrongs and resourcing partnerships and exchanges that benefit both students and the city we exist within. That would enable this to feel like it was not all on the individual level, though also having resourced staff positions who are able to do long-term relationship building would also be really helpful.

Daniel Tucker: Other magic wands?

Alyssa Greenberg: Right. Thank you for that really challenging question. What can get an institution to listen? That is really interesting. Actually, this could be a time to drop some professional news. I am actually starting a new position in a couple weeks, and I will be doing

community engagement and audience engagement there. What I am really hoping to do there is pull in staff from all departments, pull in leadership, pull in donors, and pull in trustees to be engaged with this work and hoping that by sharing what we are doing and creating opportunities for cross pollination between all those different stakeholders and not keeping it contained to the people external to the organization, maybe some of that cross pollination can breed some solidarity. I have seen trickles of that being a potential possibility in my work in Toledo.

Laurel V. McLaughlin: To kind of echo that, cross-pollination is super important. I think for us, it would have been a game changer if that community advisory board could have spoken directly to our board because seemingly, they met with staff, and we would relay that to the board. I often found that sometimes our board was resistant to changes that really needed to take place. The magic wand would have been bringing those two entities together in direct dialogue, to be honest.

Rob Blackson: Maybe I am just too salty and pessimistic, but I would never want that. I would always want the separation because I have never really trusted the upper administration to really want to listen. They might want to seem to be listening, but I never really trusted that they would or did., I always kind of protected the community advisory process that I ran at Temple from Deans and upper administration because I thought that the more they knew, the more they would want to screw around with it and get more people that they knew on it which are ultimately not the community members that I really wanted to really ask a question that they care deeply about, so, yeah, I took a different approach.

Martina Tanga: I have two wishes for a magic wand at a place that is a big encyclopedic museum, like MFA Boston. I think there are about forty curators on staff and each curator runs their own projects. One initiative does not necessarily impact the whole institution. Everything is very segregated and siloed. As much as you can be an advocate for your ways of working, it does not necessarily impact other staff. As much as we are collaborative, work still feels segregated by departments, by discipline. Breaking down those barriers is a magic wand. Then, the other, once you build a relationship, you build community, you come back to the problem; that programming is always temporary. How do you impact an institution in a way that has longevity? That is through collection building. Again, I have benefited from having a kind of very low position within the institutional hierarchy, but I also have disadvantages. I am not a full curator, and I cannot just collect from my show. I have to work with other curators to do that, and they have their own competing priorities. There is a lot of politics, always, so that would be my other magic wand—to be able to bring the changes from programming into deeper strata of encyclopedic museums.

Audience Question: [To Abby Satinsky] I am wondering if the university can find a way to amplify your project throughout the university because you created this wonderful resource that has legs, and that is what I am trying to do at my university as well. I guess I am asking, is there a way that you were able to keep those resources going and keep that project continuously running as a way to build that community?

Abby Satinsky: That is a great question. One thing that really served the “Art for the Future” exhibition project, which led to the Collective Futures Fund as well, is external funding. We received exhibition and publication support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA). We were invited to be a Warhol regional regrantee partner and launch the Collective Futures Fund because they had first supported the exhibition, so there was a preexisting relationship there. One relationship led to another. Universities really value that outside support, and it gives a project more room to grow. Then, to Rob’s point, I measure success based on folks involved like Geovani—the students that he worked with to curate an exhibition of Central American students at Tufts, Gaby Cartagena from City Life/Vida Urbana or Rita Lara and Kaylee Aguilar from Maverick Landing Community Services—that they all had a good and generative experience, that their interests are served. Because that to me is why we made this exhibition—to create a multivocal and intersectional space of scholarship and engagement with Central American history, art and culture, art activism, solidarity, and transnational encounter. Within the university context, that is harder to see and articulate, so the external funding allows the university to understand this as a field-wide endeavor that reaches our students and our communities and that galleries as an entity can and do generate new scholarship outside the classroom.

Audience Question: My question, beyond institutional buy-in, beyond resources, beyond staffing, we in the museum field tend to move positions a lot, right? Building partnerships is a highly personalized endeavor and often beyond our day-to-day job duties. In your experience, how have you passed the baton onto others to ensure that these committees or projects continue to run the way that they did when you were on staff? What failures have you experienced when you have left institutions? What has been your overall experience?

Martina Tanga: Well, I think the big question is why do people move around so much in the museum field? They are not paid enough. They are not given the support. There is a sense of having to move jobs to move up because they are not nurtured. I think that is the question. Then, I think the important thing when you are doing this work is that you make it your own. You cannot hand off a relationship and expect it to continue in someone else’s trust. They have to make their own. Relationships are not going to stay the same; they have to keep evolving.

Alyssa Greenberg: That is a really good question; we are going to see how it goes at Toledo Opera. They have shifted the responsibilities that I had to other staff members and to board members, so we will see how that goes without a dedicated position to do that work. The work is never going to be someone's first priority unless it is in their job description, right? In addition to all the labor equity issues, it is also about a recognition of the expertise in community engagement that we hold. We are kind of like the marketing department in that way: everyone thinks they can do your job just as well as you can, but it turns out...maybe not. Until the recognition of what it means to be a relationship builder and a community connector, until that kind of expertise is valued professionally in our field, we are going to keep leaving these huge gaps in our stead.

Audience Question: Thank you all so much for these presentations, for sharing your expertise with us. I would just piggyback on that to flip the question and say, you talked a lot about proof that you started the process beginning the conversation. In cases in which you stepped into a new role and inherited a group or a system that someone else has developed, as it seems like several of you are about to do, do you have recommendations for strategies for building trust with the previously existing group and helping to bring them to the next level and work together?

Gabe Sacco: I think that happened in a really concrete way for us at Artspace because this group was conceived early on, and I came into it while it was being formed. I just simply took a backseat, really listened for like the first four sessions even. I was also fairly new to the city and the cultural organization of the city as well, so I think that just listening for a good amount of time before acting on anything was helpful for me.

Laurel V. McLaughlin: As the festival continues to shift, I think kind of getting rid of assumptions about how it functioned in the past could be really useful. Going back to the drawing board, especially if the group is new, without the given that the same structure will exist, is critical in an initial convening with the advisory group. As you put it, Martina, things can and should evolve, especially if you are convening a new group.

Audience Question: I have a friendly question and the discussion centered around more external national funding, like the Warhol Foundation, the NEA, but it is clear that your programming really highlighted how much the creative arts really do contribute to the social, cultural, and economic life of the community. I guess my question is did that translate into any kind of expansion of civic funding, like civic art agencies or even social programming funding? Was the community paying attention to what you were trying to do?

Daniel Tucker: Maybe also just to add a layer to that, if you have any other reflections on other ripple effects?

Martina Tanga: The ripple effect, I think, is this ongoing relationship building. What was really important to me in building an authentic relationship was not just having my group come to the MFA but to show up in their community. When Stephen was having a show at Regis College, for instance, I went to the opening. I was there to be present and to nurture these individuals in their spaces. This forms a basis of reciprocity, which I think is really important to any relationship building.

Alyssa Greenberg: One thing that I think your question gestured toward is this idea [that] these are all really interdisciplinary projects, right? These are not strictly, by the books, art history type projects, right? I think that that opens you up to a lot more funding opportunities. At the opera, a lot of work I did was funded by the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] through Ohio's humanities council. Any kind of public humanities, that type of funding stream is open, we got money from the city, and we got money from arts foundations as well as, just more generally, the community foundations locally. In my experience, it is the local and regional funders that then build up to those national funders.

Abby Satinsky: Another interesting partnership that emerged out of the "Art for the Future" exhibition project was with the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA), which is an amazing entity building new opportunities for university partnerships to study Latin American artists as well as producing great exhibitions themselves. I highly recommend checking out their programs. Through that initial relationship of funding, they then donated some significant works to our collection. This included a suite of prints from the Argentine artist Edgardo Giménez as well as a selection of video and mixed-media works by Argentine-American artist Jaime Davidovich, who was tangentially involved with the "Artists Call" campaign when organizers did a segment on his weekly public access tv program *The Live Show!* While that was not an expansion of other funding per se, it built a new avenue to expand our collection and invest in our ongoing stewardship of these histories and legacies and making new scholarship available to students and our publics.

Rob Blackson: Thanks, Abby. I think something else I might be able to add is this is something that one of the panelists—I have forgotten now who—sort of introduced this work as a culture of care. I think that that is something to really highlight in this work because at least through some of the projects that I have been involved with, thankfully, it publicly exposes this need for care within our cultures and within our institutions. I can just use an example. I was involved in a project called *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra*. Within that project, we could have very easily and quickly fixed all of the broken instruments that existed within the school district of Philadelphia. That would have just been it; we could have just done it, but instead, we decided to sort of publicly open this opportunity for care. Through that, people not only in Philadelphia but around the country, internationally, saw their

opportunity to care about the broken instruments in the district of Philadelphia and individually adopted instruments and all this kind of stuff. It opened up this possibility of them, the public, getting involved in a process of care and feeling as though they were contributing to that care, which in fact they were. I think the sort of dialogical process of advisory councils and community councils and all these kinds of things opens up a conversation where people can start to imagine how they could present care and how they could perform care for themselves but also for others. I think that is integral to this work.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE PANEL

Daniel Tucker (Moderator) helps artists and activists create impactful work. He has done this through the creation of independent publications, academic programs, dynamic gatherings, and critical exhibitions. His writings and lectures on the intersections of art and politics and his collaborative art projects have been published and presented widely. As a curator, his exhibitions have toured nationally and internationally, and his latest co-authored book *Lastgaspism: Art and Survival in the Age of Pandemic* was picked as a "Best Art Book of 2022" by Hyperallergic. His current work is focused on how artists are engaging conservation and industry to inspire the bioregional and infrastructural imagination. Tucker is Associate Professor and Director of MA in Museum Studies at University of the Arts (Philadelphia, USA) and is the Arts in Society Research Network Chair. See more of his portfolio at miscprojects.com. Email: dt@miscprojects.com

Martina Tanga is a curator, art historian and educator interested in art that engages with social and art institutional concerns, feminism, and the built environment. She is a specialist in Italian twentieth-century art, and her book, *Arte Ambientale: Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, released by Routledge, examines radical artistic practices sited in Italy's 1970s urban landscape. She has also published peer-reviewed work in the museum studies field, such as "Let's Imagine a New Museum Staff Structure" in the *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*. She held positions at the Worcester Art Museum and deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, and she is currently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tanga earned her BA and MA in the History of Art from University College London and a PhD in the History of Art and Architecture from Boston University.

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Alyssa Greenberg is an academic, facilitator, and organizer. Until recently she was the Community Engagement Director at Toledo Opera. She recently completed a postdoctoral leadership fellowship at the Toledo Museum of Art, where she served on the museum's executive team, expanding the porosity between the museum and the local community through initiatives including relaunching Circle as an affinity group to engage new audiences and establishing The Art of the Cut, an event partnering with local Black barbers as artists. Dr. Greenberg is a founding member of Museum Workers Speak. She received a BA from Oberlin College in 2009, an MA from the Bard Graduate Center in 2011, and a PhD from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2017. She is currently the Audience Engagement Manager at Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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Laurel V. McLaughlin is a writer, curator, art historian, and educator working at Tufts University Art Galleries as a Curator and the Director of the Collective Futures Fund. She is completing her doctorate at Bryn Mawr College, writing a dissertation concerning performative migratory aesthetics, and has shared her research in conferences ranging from Performance Studies International, Calgary to the College Art Association, New York and the Association of the Study of the Arts of the Present, Hong Kong. She has published with *Art Papers*, *ASAP/J*, *BOMB Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Contact Quarterly*, *Women & Performance*, and *Performance Research*, among others. Forthcoming writing from McLaughlin will be published in the edited volumes *Bare Bodies—Thresholding Life* (De Gruyter GmbH) and *Women's Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance* (Bloomsbury's Methuen Drama), and she is co-editing the multidisciplinary reader *Tania El Khoury's Live Art: Collaborative Knowledge Production* (Amherst College Press, 2024). Further, McLaughlin has curated exhibitions, programming series, and symposia at institutions and collegiate galleries such as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania; Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with the ICA Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, North Carolina; the Center for Contemporary Art & Culture, Portland, Oregon; and forthcoming at MASS MoCA, Massachusetts.

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Gabriel Sacco is an interdisciplinary artist who performs for video, sound, images, and writing. Sacco holds an MFA in Visual Art from the Rutgers Mason Gross School of the Arts. He is an educator and learner who develops ideas surrounding social responsibility and the role of usefulness in art making, inclusive and processual pedagogy, and generative production models for artists. His personal works access ideas such as accepting change and learning limits of human perception. From 2022–2023, Sacco served as the Visual Culture Producer at Artspace New Haven.

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Rob Blackson is the Curatorial Director of ArtPhilly. Prior to this role, Blackson created Temple Contemporary, a research and public program initiative at Temple University's Tyler School of Art. As Temple Contemporary's founding director for over ten years Blackson's curatorial work included *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra*, *Funeral for a Home*, *reForm* (with Pepón Osorio and the Fairhill community), as well as numerous artist-led initiatives with Indira Allegra, Polly Apfelbaum, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Shaun Leonardo, among others. Prior to this, Blackson was based in the UK where he served as curator of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle/Gateshead, curator of public programs at Nottingham Contemporary, and curator at the University of Sunderland's Reg Vardy Gallery. His writings have appeared in numerous monographs and journals including *Art Journal*, *Labyrinth*, and *Cabinet*. He is a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design and Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies. He currently serves on the board of Site Collective, Isle of Skye, Scotland.

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