

## Chapter 6

# A Foundation's 20-Year Experiment in Art and Civic Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*In 1994, four family foundations in San Francisco launched a grantmaking program to support Bay Area artists by providing them with project grants for the creation of new work through collaborations with nonprofit organizations. Creative Work Fund grantees may collaborate with any kind of nonprofit organization and many choose to work in community settings. This chapter explores five projects awarded grants between 2008 and 2013. Each focused on a distinctive goal: increasing cohesion among a community of recent immigrants from Africa, exploring a city's recovery from the economic downturn and foreclosure crisis, promoting literacy and reading in an inner city school district, incorporating public art into the development of an historic waterfront, and achieving better health and mental health outcomes for women infected with HIV. Project research is based on grant proposals, reports, media coverage, and interviews with artists and their principle nonprofit partners.*

### INTRODUCTION

Philanthropic foundations can foster civic engagement by awarding grants to programs that explicitly focus on community arts and civic engagement or by supporting artists who collaborate with nonprofit organizations to identify community needs and bring the arts to new audiences. Over 21 years, the Creative Work Fund's project grants for artists' collaborations have generated many examples of arts-based community engagement. Success depends on how genuine the artists' partnerships are, their willingness to learn from and adapt to unexpected circumstances, and funders and participants' recognition that processes for making artworks may be as important as finished products. Five case studies follow, each illustrating arts and civic engagement in a different context and with different constituents: African immigrants, foreclosure victims, young readers and literacy advocates, residents planning their small town's future waterfront, and HIV+ women.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7669-3.ch006

## **ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND**

In 1994, four family foundations in San Francisco launched a program to support San Francisco Bay Area artists by providing them with project grants to create new work by collaborating with nonprofit organizations. The Walter & Elise Haas Fund was one of the original program supporters and administered the pooled funds and grant selection process. For the first few years, funder partners met frequently to review the program's development, modify policies, and weigh in on selecting outside panelists. Once the Creative Work Fund (<http://creativeworkfund.org>) was running smoothly, the Walter & Elise Haas Fund became fully responsible for its operation.

In its tenth year, the Creative Work Fund hired outside evaluators M. Melanie Beene and Holly Sidford to assess its quality, effectiveness, and reputation. Their report gave the program high marks, and the Walter & Elise Haas Fund decided to continue it, even though the other three founding partners were ending their participation after 10 years. The Fund recruited new funding. Today, the Walter & Elise Haas Fund provides lead support, and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is also a generous supporter.

By late 2015, the Creative Work Fund had awarded 323 grants, limited geographically to San Francisco and 13 nearby counties. That region includes urban, suburban, and rural counties with vastly different social, demographic, and economic characteristics and challenges. Creative Work Fund artists may collaborate with any kind of nonprofit organization, and 33% of them have chosen to work with partners outside of the arts. Funded projects have developed artworks that draw attention to urgent concerns, link people through common purpose, and, sometimes, solve practical problems.

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

Each year, the Creative Work Fund invites artists to team up with nonprofit partners and submit letters of inquiry in two of five broadly defined categories—literary, media, performing, traditional/folk, or visual arts. Professionals in the invited disciplines evaluate the letters of inquiry, and 25–30 artist/nonprofit partnerships in each disciplinary category are eligible to submit detailed proposals. A national, five-member grants panel reviews these proposals, which include work samples from the artists, and each panel recommends between six and nine projects for funding. The maximum grant amount is \$40,000.

The Creative Work Fund's mission is to encourage genuine, challenging collaborations and creation of new artworks. It was originally designed to respond to declining local and federal resources for artists. Program elements were meant to help artists (two-thirds of any grant must be spent on artists' fees and their direct expenses for making the artwork), to assert that artists should be paid to fulfill their purpose (making art), and to strengthen their networks (through collaborations).

While the artist was the program's primary focus, the Fund hoped that the collaborative projects might bring the arts to new audiences, engage with the nonprofit partners' constituents, or draw attention to community needs. Civic engagement was not named as specific goal, but collaborative practice has drawn a number of Creative Work Fund grantees into civic life—their work has identified community concerns, fostered debate, and influenced public systems.

Observing five very different projects in which artists demonstrate civic engagement identifies qualities that lead to success, but it also raises questions: How do community members see artists and what do they expect from them? How does the artist, who may be an outsider to a setting, navigate his or her fit to the community setting? In gathering people with a shared concern, is the process of developing

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