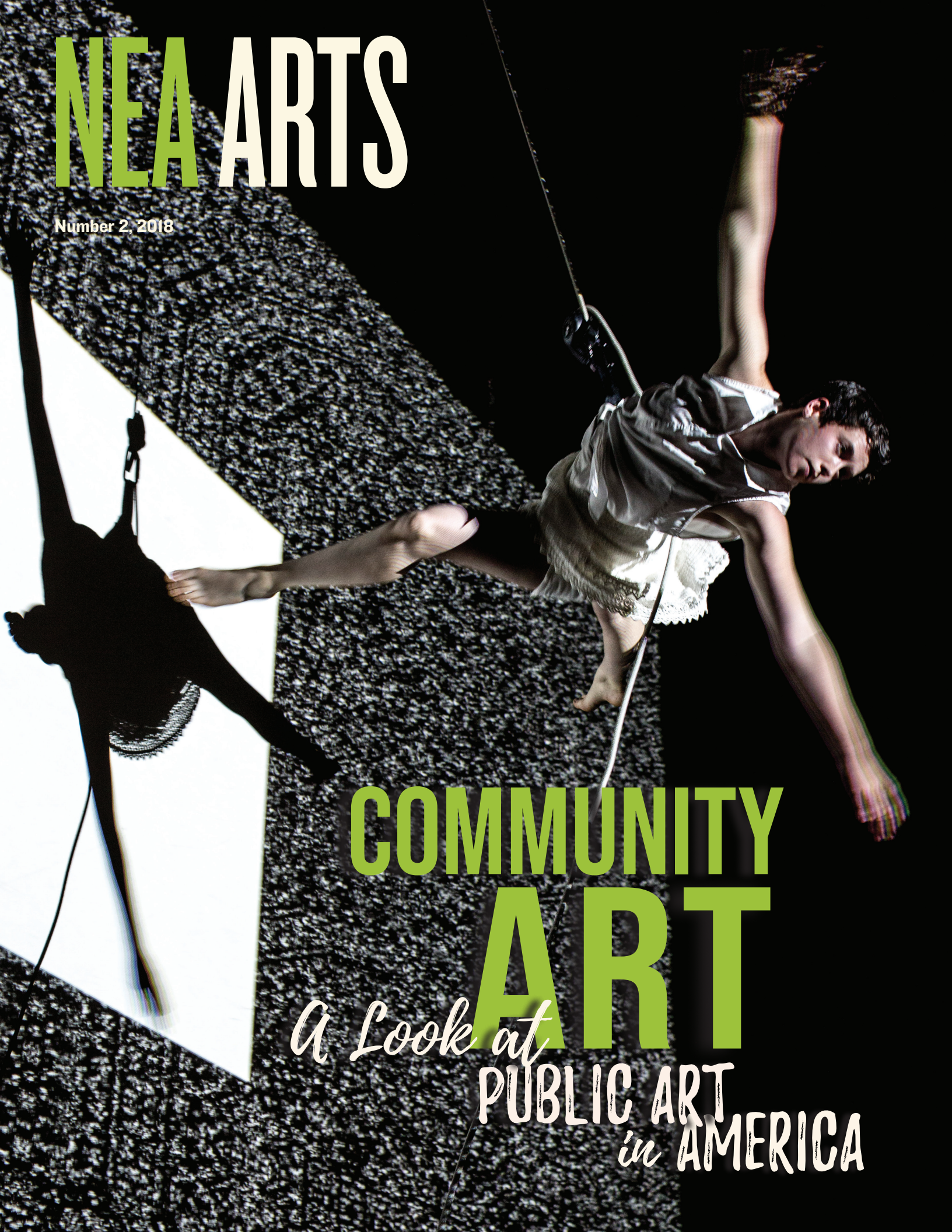


# NEA ARTS

Number 2, 2018



# COMMUNITY ART

*A Look at*  
PUBLIC ART  
*in* AMERICA

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When most people think about public art, they think of a mural on a wall or a building, or perhaps a large sculpture in a park. While murals and sculptures are certainly public art, they are far from the only ways that public art can be expressed. Perhaps a better term for public art would be community art—by, for, and of the community in which it is presented. Sometimes the art can be practical, integrated within stormwater management systems for example, or a health-related public space. But it doesn't even have to be visual art. Citywide sings are public art, as are dance performances in national parks, or orchestras playing in local bars. Public art also can be a source of community healing. A poignant example was the 2005 performance of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in two New Orleans neighborhoods devastated by Hurricane Katrina, a project that was supported by the nonprofit Creative Time. As the organization's then-Executive Director Anne Pasternak noted, "[The themes] seemed so central to people, whether waiting for relief efforts, electricity to come back on, insurance funding, [or] schools to reopen."

The National Endowment for the Arts has supported public art since the agency's earliest years. One of its first major undertakings was the creation of a public art initiative, whose initial project was Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which helped revitalize the city's ailing downtown. The NEA's Art in Public Places program funded the creation of more than 700 works from 1967-1995, and the agency continues to fund public art as part of its regular grants and partnerships with state arts agencies, and to advocate for it on the federal, state, and local levels.

While public art by its nature encourages dialogue with the public, the dialogue is at its fullest when the community is engaged in a project's design and creation from the very start. As former NEA Visual Arts Director Brian O'Doherty once noted about the relationship between the community and public art, "Without this sense of identification, a case could be made that the work remains sealed in an invisible museum, withdrawn from that dialogue through which the community clarifies its needs, educates itself, and defines the work's appropriateness."

In this issue, read how communities throughout the country have invested in the public art in their neighborhoods, making it truly community art.

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**About the cover: The dance  
company Bandaloop's  
#PublicCanvas project uses  
material gathered from the  
community they are working in  
to create a public performance  
for that community. Photo by  
Stephen Teixeira**



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# MURAL ARTS PHILADELPHIA

## EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ART



BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos by Steve Weinik, courtesy of Mural Arts Philadelphia

**F**rom the first hospital established in 1732 to the first meeting of the U.S. Congress in 1789 to the first zoo opened in 1847, Philadelphia has long been a city of national firsts. According to a 2007 *New York Magazine* article, the City of Brotherly Love was also the birthplace of modern graffiti, with the earliest examples appearing there in the 1960s. Fast forward to the 1980s, by which time graffiti had spread to many urban centers across the U.S., prompting politicians to react punitively toward both the graffiti itself and its makers.

Wilson Goode, Philadelphia's first African-American mayor, took office in January 1984. Not surprisingly, among his many campaign promises was a pledge to reduce the city's graffiti blight. What made Goode's solution exceptional, however, was that he saw an opportunity to empower the youth of his city by harnessing the outlaw energy of their graffiti writing to fuel mural projects aimed at beautifying the city.

To that end, Goode authorized a small program, then known as the Anti-Graffiti Network, tapping a young artist named Jane Golden to run it. "I suddenly had to very quickly think about, 'Why are young people writing on walls? And how do we create a program that is not punitive, that's supportive, and can help achieve the mayor's mission, which is to make

▲ *How to Turn Anything into Something Else* (2012) by the Miss Rockaway Armada on 207 North Broad Street, part of the Mural Arts Philadelphia program.

Philadelphia a more beautiful city?” recalled Golden, who had previous experience working with murals on the West Coast.

In the 30 years since, that small clean-up program has bloomed into Mural Arts Philadelphia: part city agency, part nonprofit, and longtime NEA grantee. Through the organization’s work, the city itself has bloomed with thousands of murals and other public artworks. Murals run the gamut of styles, sizes, and messages, from the colorful dreamscape of *How to Turn Anything into Something Else*, a collaboration between the artist collective Miss Rockaway Armada and local schoolchildren; to *Legacy*, which was partially completed by incarcerated men using portable materials; to a mural honoring the late *60 Minutes* journalist Ed Bradley, a Philadelphia native son. On the sides of restaurants, above community gardens, and in countless parking lots, the murals celebrate Philadelphia’s neighborhoods and the power of community.

While Mural Arts has roughly 70 ongoing community mural projects, the citywide

initiative is actually about much more than murals. Golden, who is now Mural Arts’ executive director, and her 54-member team are also shepherding a floating art and ecology lab as envisioned by artist Meejin Yoon for the Schuylkill River; *Radio Silence*, a podcast and radio series by Michael Rakowitz created in tandem with the city’s Iraqi refugee community; and Porch Light, a collaboration with the city’s Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services to provide programs at the intersection of arts, recovery, and healing. Mural Arts also has programs addressing arts education and the criminal justice system, and offers city tours through which visitors can explore what Mural Arts calls “the world’s largest outdoor art gallery.”

Despite the diversification of its activities, the organization’s core mission remains the same, according to Golden. “We’re addressing the need for creativity in people’s lives—the opportunity to look at some of our city’s more intractable problems and address them through a creative means,” she emphasized.

▼ Mural Arts teaching artist Brad Carney and students from Philadelphia’s Northeast High School install a panel of artist Joe Boruchow’s *Smoke Signals* at 448 North 10th Street.





Golden also acknowledged that public funding support has been crucial to fostering and growing Mural Arts. “We have been honored to receive funds from the NEA, and feel that it is invaluable.... Government funding for us is a platform and a catalyst.”

Through her work with Mural Arts, Golden has developed an understanding of the utility of art. Yes, public art can make a community more aesthetically appealing. But even more essential, however, is the way in which the process of making art can powerfully give voice to community members. When the people of a community are actively engaged in creating the artwork that beautifies the built environment in which they live, they can see their own hopes, dreams, and concerns writ large on their local landscape, which in turn empowers them to ask for and make change at a deeper level.

Golden explained, “We’ve created over 4,000 works of art since 1984. It’s really like holding up a mirror to people and saying, ‘Your life counts.’ We’ve seen people who were engaged in a public art process be impacted in a profound way because they have not been used to seeing their voices count or matter in a public way.”

That impact is not merely anecdotal. As Golden explained, a four-year evaluation of the Mural Arts Porch Light program by Yale Medical

School noticed a phenomenon called “collective efficacy.” In other words, the study revealed that after collaborating in large-scale public art projects, participants felt ready to tackle other changes. “It seemed to have an effect of awakening people to possibilities,” said Golden.

James Burns, a Mural Arts staff artist, has seen that awakening firsthand. Through a partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Burns has been collaborating with a group of military veterans for the past year on a mural that will emblazon one wall of the city’s Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center. Most of the veterans in the group are dealing with some degree of post-traumatic stress—as did Burns’ veteran father—in addition to other health issues resulting from their military service.

Though some of the veterans were initially skeptical about engaging with the arts, all have come to agree that working on the mural has been transformative. As Operation Desert Storm veteran David Allen affirmed, “This mural makes us feel like we matter. I think that’s important to our mental health.”

Burns thinks that the power of the project comes from its collaborative ethos. Even though he was ultimately responsible for drafting a design, everyone in the group had a say in what it should look like, and had the power to

▲ A performance of *Radio Silence* by Michael Rakowitz at Philadelphia’s Independence Mall on July 30, 2017.



▲ Military veterans work with youth to paint the city's Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center.

reject Burns' initial drafts. Through a series of workshops that included a communal cooking class, terrarium-making, and lessons in how to use color, Burns was able to tease out from the nearly 20 participants what they wanted as the central themes of their mural. As Allen explained, "Part of the workshop process was to determine how best to display our internal wounds, whatever we are going through in the process of recovery."

Many of the group members also appear as recognizable figures in the mural, further acknowledging that the artwork is about them having their say.

As with all Mural Arts projects, the VA mural also enabled the initial group of participants to engage with the larger Philadelphia community. Once the initial design was completed, Mural Arts hosted a number of "paint days" where the public was invited to learn about the mural, meet the workshop participants, and help paint individual sections of the mural, which had been sectioned and simplified so that everyone regardless of age or skill could help. After some additional detail work by Burns and a small cadre of artists, the mural will be installed at the hospital, prompting yet another community celebration.

Several of the workshop participants acknowledge that working on the mural has made an indelible impact on their lives. Former Army Reserves and National Guardsman Sandra Smith, said, “It’s like a new beginning for me. It’s a breakthrough as a matter of fact.... Some of us have become tour guides at the art museum through this.”

For many, the mural is also now part of their family legacy. “It’s like a baby to us. This is going to be ours. My family, my grandkids can pass by this wall and say, ‘There goes Pop Pop.’ That’s what I like about it. It gives me something to look forward to,” said Ronald Brooks, a Vietnam vet.

Mural Arts’ projects would not be possible without partnerships. In addition to working with community members and private partners, the group has worked with many city departments over the years, from the Department of Recreation to the Department of Prisons to the Department of Commerce. Golden noted that she is continually surprised by the city’s openness toward “creativity and innovation and artmaking.”

“We all feel like public servants working on behalf of the citizens in Philadelphia. And that is really so important to us,” said Golden. “In a sense our work has become almost the visualization of democracy. It’s about people’s lives in the city in the deepest way possible.” 🏠

▼ Mural Arts Philadelphia Executive Director Jane Golden (third from left) at the mural dedication at Roxborough High School.





▲ One of Bandaloop's #PublicCanvas performances in San Francisco, California. Photo by Stephen Teixeira

**A**s people gathered below the building and looked up, a dancer sprang out from one of the windows. Tethered by mountaineering ropes, she completed a graceful and joyous arc before landing feet first on the side of the building, using it as a stage to catapult herself again into space. Spectators' faces showed gaping wonder, smile-busting delight, and a touch of terror. The dancer was soon joined by others, and together they created stunning currents of movement that gave a whole new identity to a public building. This is the work of the vertical dance company Bandaloop.

Since 1991, the company—which is led by Amelia Rudolph and long supported by the

National Endowment for the Arts—has literally scaled the heights of structures and surfaces around the world with its unique blend of choreography and rock climbing. In addition to dancing with buildings, Bandaloop has presented its work on historic sites such as the stone parapet of a 16th-century fort in southern India; in natural environments including cliff faces in China and Yosemite National Park; and in arenas, stadiums, and unexpected indoor spaces.

The dancers, secured in special rock-climbing harnesses anchored to the top of the “stage,” are suspended over the side of a structure. This unusual relationship to gravity allows them to fly, leap, float, and jump with extraordinary amplitude to spectacular effect.

Rudolph described her company's impact as both an amplifier and flypaper “because we amplify so many different things—especially



*From a*

*Great*

*Height*

# TRAVERSING A PUBLIC CANVAS WITH BANDALOO

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

what is possible, and a change in one's perspective. We draw people to the space and to an idea and to dance." This happens not only through performances but rehearsals as well, as people on the ground going about their daily business stop to watch dancers and choreographer work. The spectators "get drawn into the process of rehearsal. They see me directing, making changes, giving the dancers notes, and trying ideas. So they get drawn into the actual process of choreographing."

As a form of public art, seeing dance at this scale combines the intimacy of human bodies in motion with vast natural or built environments. Bandaloop's work draws people to a public place and can transform their relationship to that place, as they see it not as a building or site but as an artistic canvas.

But vertical dance in grand spaces places dancers and audience members at a great

physical distance from one another. If public art means easy access or proximity to the art, then does dance taking place on a seven-story building diminish its power to connect on a human level? Rudolph suggested that even though far away, the movements and relationships among the dancers translate to spectators below. "A lot of the choreography is very interaction-based, and intimate. You can feel the relationship. And even in the group pieces you're feeling the relationships, and that's very human. Honestly, I don't think it's as different as people think it is to dance on a building or to dance in front of a big house [auditorium] where you can't see the people in the balcony. But it is important that whatever we do from the building expresses our humanity."

In June 2018, Bandaloop will return to the Utah Arts Festival in Salt Lake City. Lisa



▲ Bandaloop performers on the Oakland City Hall in California. Photo by Jorg Badura

Sewell, the festival's executive director, said, "Bandaloop is clearly above and beyond what anyone else can do with regards to accessing and using public space." The festival is held downtown at Library Square, where Bandaloop will use the library's gently curved glass and steel surface for its stage. Sewell added, "I think what is really cool is the architecture and the public space around it is very open. That the entire plaza can watch them perform is such a unique and different experience for our community and for festival patrons."

Even when Bandaloop performs in remote, natural environments such as cliff faces, the company engages the public by filming these dances and sharing them as short films and as visual elements integrated into their performances in urban environments.

For example, in 2001 Bandaloop performed *Crossing* in the landscape of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, starting at the Sawtooth Ridge in the east and ending at Hetch Hetchy in the west. The NEA provided funds to restage the work in 2013 and 2015, this time going from west to east,

beginning in Yosemite Valley and ending near the Dana Plateau, with the almost 3,000-foot Mt. Watkins as the centerpiece "dance floor." The dance was filmed, becoming a short feature called *Shift*, which was shown as a section of the performance *Dances from Thin Air* in the company's home base of Oakland, California, and toured to film festivals worldwide.

In addition to using natural, historic, or architectural sites as choreographic inspiration and performance venues, Bandaloop is exploring the social and cultural landscapes of communities in an initiative called #PublicCanvas. This socially grounded melding of dance, music, spoken word, and visual art tells the story of a community through the people who live and work there. The company does a deep dive into each place, going to schools, churches, community centers, arts organizations, and other venues. At each stop, they ask the question: "What change do you want to see?" The stories gleaned from these conversations inspire a work by Bandaloop that amplifies the voices of the community.

The first #PublicCanvas event took place in San Francisco's Tenderloin District in 2016 using the exterior of the University of California, Hastings College of Law building as the stage. Media artist Jonathan Rowe of the Village Impacts and his producing partner Illuminate joined with Bandaloop to produce a piece that featured composers Ben Juodvalkis and Gideon Freudmann, singer/spoken word artist Tassiana Willis, and poets and singers from Youth Speaks and Campo Santo.

Conversations with the community inspired both the choreography and video projections. The latter involved a canvas of shifting images reflecting the history of the neighborhood and the people who live and work there. Dancers performed on this kaleidoscopic backdrop, while singer/spoken word artist Benjamin Turner walked down the wall reciting his work as musicians sang from the ground.

Bandaloop's 2018 NEA grant will support the development and presentation of

#OaklandPublicCanvas, which will include some of the artists involved in the San Francisco performance as well as Oakland-based collaborators. Using materials gathered from Oakland community members to create the work, which will include spoken word, music, and video projections, #OaklandPublicCanvas will focus on identity and displacement. A largely working-class, African-American city, Oakland is changing dramatically as technology companies like Pandora and Uber move in, driving up housing costs.

The #PublicCanvas events do what all Bandaloop performances do: offer a new vision for the public in a shared space. "It's this lovely, elegant, simple fact of redefining what a stage is, what a building is, what performance is, what dance can be," Rudolph said. "All of those things are doing the transformative piece of what public art does in public space." 🌱

▼ Bandaloop founder Amelia Rudolph dancing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains as part of the filming of *Crossing*. Photo by Braden Mayfield



# CULTURAL IDENTITY through PUBLIC ART

## Haida House Post Project

BY MORGAN MENTZER

All photos courtesy of TJ Young



Hydaburg village members assist in moving a log into the carving shed to work on for the house posts.

**I**n Hydaburg, located in southeast Alaska at the southernmost point of Prince of Wales Island, public art has long been an integral component of local culture and identity, particularly through the form of totem poles. The village of roughly 370 people serves as the seat of the Haida Nation and houses one of only two remaining Haida tribes in the United States (77 percent of Hydaburg’s population are Haida). Throughout history, the Haida have been known for their carvings, and are recognized around the world for their impressive totem poles, featuring shapes and figures that portray social identity and family connection in the community. As TJ Young, a native of Hydaburg and master carver, noted, “The art form [of the totem pole] was our written language. We were able to read them like a book. We knew exactly who that family belonged to just by looking at the design.”

But like most Native-American tribes, the Haida Nation has faced a number of hardships that have drastically affected their population and the survival of their cultural traditions, including smallpox epidemics in the 19th century and government-run residential schools designed to sever connections between young people and their cultural customs. The people were, Young said, “discouraged to do anything cultural. They got in trouble for everything, especially the art form. They were punished for it.”

So the inclusion of traditionally designed and carved ‘house posts’ (interior totem poles) in the construction of a new cultural center in Hydaburg was significant. The Hydaburg Cooperative Association (HCA) is overseeing the construction, and selected Young to serve as the head carver of the house posts for the project, which received funding from a 2017 Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

One of the most important aspects of this project is that it serves as an educational program, providing the next generation with the carving skills and cultural knowledge to carry on the tradition of Haida art. As the master carver, Young works with three apprentices—two youth and one young adult student. HCA partnered with the Hydaburg City School District to assist with the selection of young apprentices.

The carving classes are held twice a week at the Hydaburg carving shed in the middle of



▲ Lead carver TJ Young supervises his daughter as she chips away on the house post.



The killer whale post prior to attaching the double fins.



▲ Clarence Peele and Joe Young assist with installation on the killer whale fins.

town, which sees heavy foot traffic. The classes are open to the public, and the local community is encouraged to participate. Young stated, “On average we get maybe 25 to 30 people, and lots of kids zoom down here right after school gets

out. A lot of kids are very excited about the carving classes.”

Young believes that the apprenticeship program and the carving classes are crucial for educating locals on their heritage. He noted that the community is able to “appreciate all the hard work that goes into the totem poles. People are really curious and interested in the art. This community project provides people with a place to come and share with each other.”

The conversations that are spurred amongst the participants go well beyond art. Because of the designs of the house posts, Young said, “People are far more likely to talk about their families, their clans, and their crests. I’ll overhear people discussing what family they belong to and what village they came from. You can see people leaving the carving shed with a better sense of their cultural identity.” Through the research Young has conducted for the designs, he has spent time studying each family crest represented in Hydaburg and was surprised by how many crests there actually are.

Members of the Haida Nation are divided into two groups: the Raven and Eagle families, which are further separated into clans. Historically, each constituent of the Haida displayed crests that represented their clans and families.

► TJ Young (left) adds the finishing touches of paint to the house post.



“Many of us in the community didn’t realize how many different crests there were,” Young said. “People are discovering which crests they belong to and are able to connect with members of their family they otherwise wouldn’t have, if it weren’t for making the totem poles together.” The participants are excited to not only learn about art, but also learn about themselves and their community. Perhaps the biggest benefits of this community project are the intangibles offered—finding identity and a sense of belonging.

With the house posts, Young is determined to feature every crest represented in the Hydaburg community to ensure no families are left out. “We want to make sure we incorporate and include as many clan crests as we can and to pay homage to some of the families that have passed on.”

For the future of Haida art, Young hopes that the apprenticeship program through HCA continues to progress, as it has been so important for his own development as a Haida artist. As a budding artist, Young apprenticed for four years under Robert Davidson, a Canadian artist of Haida heritage and a leading figure in the renaissance of Haida art and culture. Although Young has been practicing Haida art for 20 years, he does not consider himself a master at his craft just yet—it is a status he is working towards achieving. “If I can become a master Haida artist, then someone else can too, and it will branch out from there,” Young said. “In the meantime, while I am working towards this status, I will show everybody I can what I know and my techniques.” By passing down his skills to his apprentices and community members, Young will ensure that the art of Haida carving continues for another generation.

The Haida house post project will conclude with a dedication ceremony to unveil the nine-foot, carved, cedar totem poles that will be mounted in the new cultural center. These posts will be on display for local tribe members, the community, visiting artists, and tourists, telling the story to all its viewers of the rich family history, traditions, and artistry of the Haida Nation. ▲

*Morgan Mentzer was an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in 2017-2018.*



Completed house post, waiting to be installed the newly constructed cultural center in Hydaburg, Alaska.

# Making Connections

## THE PROCESS OF CREATING PUBLIC ART IN MARTIN COUNTY, FLORIDA

BY DON BALL AND ANGELA KOERNER

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hen a decision is made to create new public art in a community, it doesn't happen overnight. The process from the beginning of the idea to the final

mounting of the work often takes years, involving fundraising, community interaction, and working with various contractors and government agencies and officials. It requires serious time commitments for everyone involved: the artists, the government, private organizations, and community members.

Take the example of the Old Palm City neighborhood of Palm City, Florida, located on

the banks of the St. Lucie River in Martin County. In the county's Community Redevelopment Area Plan for Old Palm City, inadequate stormwater management was a key issue, impacting the quality of the water supply. The community's location near the Florida Everglades provided an opportunity to not only address the stormwater management problem, but also to tie the project to the community's relationship with the St. Lucie River and surrounding environs. Four neighborhood sites were cited as primary spots to treat the stormwater drainage. This was the beginning of the project known as *Ripple*.

"The location of the project is right next to an estuary, which has much biodiversity but also is prone to flooding," noted Susan Kores, manager of Martin County's office of community



development, which oversees *Ripple*. By adding an artistic element to specific engineering necessities, the project has engaged the community as part of the solution, soliciting input on how the project is done and how it looks. The idea is to use attractive landscaping and green infrastructure, as well as public art such as sculptures and murals that reflect the community and environment. Eventually, the project will transform the stormwater treatment area into an aesthetically pleasing public space, one that is poised to become an integral part of community life. In addition to project funding from Martin County, the county was awarded two National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grants to implement the artistic component of the project.

In 2014, Martin County and the Arts Council of Martin County (another partner in the project), with input from the community, selected environmental artist Lucy Keshavarz to work on the *Ripple* project. “[She] is definitely the leader of the project,” Kores said, noting the unique occurrence of having an artist rather than a civil engineer lead an

ecological/engineering project. “She truly understands the logistical side and the artistic side. Lucy is married to an engineer, so she really understands the engineering aspect and its function as well as being an artist. She’s done other projects like this before, so that also plays into her total conception of how the project should work and what it should look like.”

The founder of Art & Culture Group, an arts consulting company, Keshavarz specializes in arts projects that reflect the needs of the community, such as *Babbling Brook* in Palm Beach County, Florida. That project increases water quality by circulating stormwater from the Central Lake across the street through the brook structure as it snakes along the detention basin and returns the water back into the lake. The remaining portion of the area is landscaped with more than 70 species of native Florida plants that provide food and shelter for migrating birds.

Keshavarz began the Old Palm City project by visiting the neighborhood and meeting with residents to discuss her approach. She



◀ Lucy Keshavarz's eco-art project *Babbling Brook* in Palm Beach County, Florida, uses a cut stormwater pipe for the fountain and recycled sidewalk slab as the retaining wall and edging for the brook that circulates the stormwater. Photo by Lucy Keshavarz



▲ Martin County and artist Lucy Keshavarz held a community potluck to engage with residents about the public art project in a less formal setting. Photo by Jesse Etelson

sees community engagement gatherings as a crucial component for the success of the project. “When *Ripple* is built,” she said, “the community will have an aesthetically pleasing stormwater treatment area that they have had a hand in creating—this sense of empowerment for the community will be grand.”

On the logistical side, Keshavarz worked with Martin County to interview engineering and architectural firms to work on the project. Giangrande Engineering was selected as the design firm and Chen Moore & Associates was selected as the landscape architecture company.

The initial phase of the project, which was supported by the first NEA Our Town grant, involved preliminary planning, coordinating various county agencies involved in the project, hiring contractors, and developing conceptual plans. Keshavarz noted that she takes her artistic inspiration from the community’s story rather than forcing her ideas onto the community. “It’s about the needs of the project, not about my art,” said Keshavarz. “I hold back on any art-related

concepts until I have the feel and story of the people and place the work will integrate with. I call this ‘embracing the unknown.’ For a project like *Ripple*, community engagement is so important in taking me from the unknowing to the knowing.”

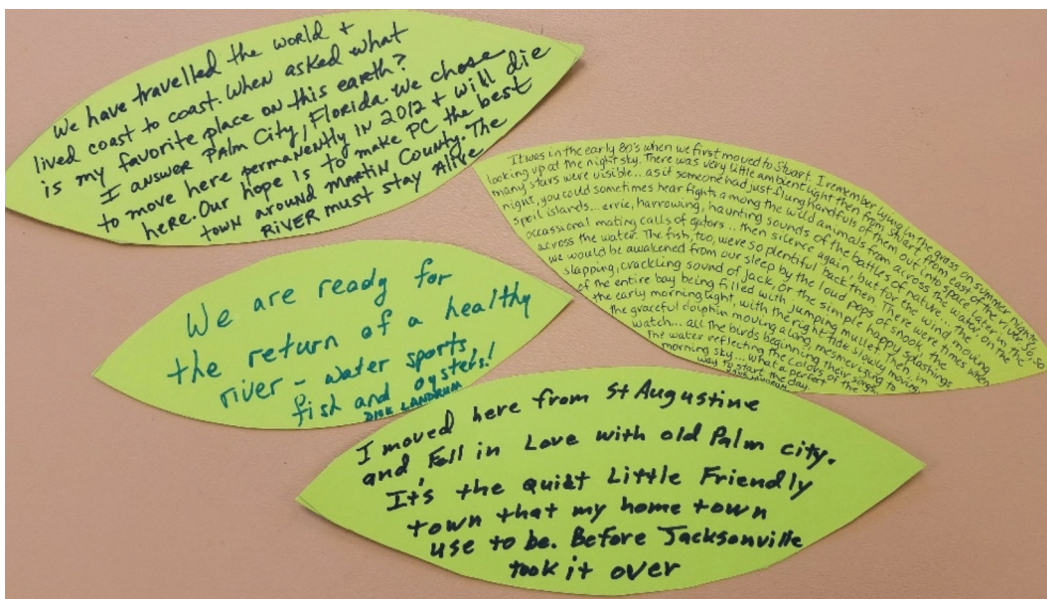
Engaging with the community involved many meetings, including a community potluck to talk about the project in a less formal setting, as well as community charrettes, or workshops, to gather information, questions, and suggestions regarding the proposed project. Keshavarz even created a “community tree” as a vehicle to gather information. She provided prompts for Old Palm City residents to respond to in order to learn more about how they thought about their neighborhood. Residents could then write their responses on leaf-shaped pieces of paper and attach them to the community tree. The information gathered from these community gatherings was then synthesized to build conceptual design drafts, which married artistic proposals with environmental protection, all tying back to the community’s connection to the river.

The conceptual designs will be reviewed by the community before they are finalized, but Keshavarz suggested that “some of the ideas are to create walking trails within the stormwater infrastructure...and to integrate interpretive messaging in the art forms and functional amenities that speak to the history, environment, and sustainable efforts unique to Old Palm City.”

The second phase of the project, supported by a second NEA Our Town grant, will focus on additional community engagement to finalize the plans, as well as on the development of an implementation plan for completing the construction of the project. Since it is about halfway through the process, it could be another few years before the public art project is completed.

The important thing is the involvement of the community every step of the way—after all, they are ones who will be living with the final result long after the artists and contractors leave. “My big-picture philosophy is about facilitating connections: our human species connections to each other and to our natural environment. With eco-art projects such as *Ripple*, I am illuminating connections that bring solutions for a particular community and place, and then documenting this through the art form as a result of the process.”

*Angela Koerner was an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in 2018.*



▲ In a workshop at the Old Palm City project, Keshavarz used a “community tree” to gather information from residents on the history of their community and what they would like the artwork to look like. Photo by Elise Raffa, Arts Council of Martin County

◀ Samples of feedback from Old Palm City residents. Photo by Elise Raffa, Arts Council of Martin County



# Nourishing a Community

The Poetics of Gardening in Buffalo, New York

BY KATY DAY

▲ Teaching artist Christina Vega-Westhoff leading a workshop at the International School #45 Community Garden. Photo by Joel Brenden

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uffalo had, for far too long, a narrative of being just another Rust Belt city,” said Barbara Cole, artistic director of Just Buffalo Literary Center (JBLC). “Despite that overarching narrative of Buffalo being a city of decline, the arts and cultural community has always been vibrant here, and Buffalo has always been a destination for artists of all kinds. So the arts have taken a leadership role in trying to help change that narrative.”

JBLC has been one of the arts organizations on the frontlines of challenging that narrative by providing multiple points of entry into the world of literature and helping ensure Buffalo maintains healthy literary roots. Its programming ranges from its acclaimed reading series, BABEL, that brings the world’s most significant authors to Western New York; to the Writing Center that houses summer camps, literary programming, and free after-school writing workshops for teens; to LIT CITY, a public art initiative highlighting Buffalo’s renowned literary legacy. The National Endowment for the Arts has been supporting many of these programs since 1989.

But with new narratives come new challenges. While Buffalo has experienced a “resurgence” in recent years, JBLC wants to make sure the city’s renaissance story isn’t leaving anyone out. “We’re really trying to remember how many people have been here for a long time, or how many people might be invisible in that story of resurgence,” Cole said, adding that the center is also concerned with “making sure that underserved populations are getting the services they need and the attention they deserve.” In recent years, JBLC has turned its attention to public art. “We’re very aware that some people—for a variety of reasons—don’t necessarily want to come hear an author read,” said Cole. “So we’ve been thinking increasingly about public art and how we can bring literature to people rather than asking them to come to us.”

This led to READ | SEED | WRITE, a project of JBLC in collaboration with Grassroots Gardens WNY, an organization dedicated to community gardening. The goal was to make the literary arts more visible, inspiring both gardeners and members of the community through the written word, while also raising awareness about the importance of sustainable gardening and the need for urban access to healthy food.

As JBLC Executive Director Laurie Dean Torrell noted, nourishing a community or an individual includes “access to healthy, community-based, sustainable food, and also access to poetry and literature.” The project, which was supported by an NEA Creativity Connects grant, involved holding writing workshops in community gardens, using the garden as a metaphor for participants’ writing, and erecting permanent sculptures in each garden with words inscribed onto the leaves of a rising stalk.

READ | SEED | WRITE was dreamed up during a brainstorming session. For years, many of JBLC’s staff had been interested in food politics and were passionate about health and wellness within the

city. They had been thinking about how those interests intersected with JBLC’s literary mission and were conceptualizing possible projects when a volunteer, George DeTitta, walked into the room. A retired scientist, DeTitta had been volunteering at both JBLC and Grassroots Gardens WNY. He thought the organizations’ respective missions aligned in many ways, and suggested the two organizations collaborate.

“We still didn’t fully know what the project would be until we started talking to Grassroots Gardens,” said Cole. Grassroots Gardens’ mission is, according to its website, to “enable community-led efforts to revitalize the city and enhance quality of life through the creation and maintenance of community gardens that bear both beauty and healthy foods and help strengthen neighborhood spirit.”

Together, JBLC and Grassroots Gardens identified four community gardens for programming: Black Rock Heritage Garden, Victoria Avenue Community Garden, Seneca Babcock Community Garden, and International School #45 Community Garden. “These neighborhoods are primarily food deserts and oftentimes impoverished communities that don’t have access to healthy foods,” said Cole. “So we were simultaneously trying to raise awareness to the larger community about why these community gardens are so important, why it’s necessary to have access to healthy food, and also to use literature as a way to bring those communities together, to inspire people right where they are.”

▼ A participant of Just Buffalo Literary Center’s READ | SEED | WRITE project looks through the magnifying glass attached to the garden journal made as part of the project. Photo by Joel Brenden





▲ **READ | SEED | WRITE** participants making seed paper. Photo by Joel Brenden

Because each garden is its own microcosm that serves communities with different demographics, programming catered to the needs of each garden community. The Black Rock Heritage Garden, for example, is the oldest community garden in the city of Buffalo, and the site of many historic battles from the War of 1812. Melissa Fratello, Grassroots Gardens' former executive director who worked on READ | SEED | WRITE, called this garden the organization's only "binational peace garden, and one that celebrates history

► **A READ | SEED | WRITE** participant planting seed paper at the Seneca Babcock Community Garden. Photo by Joel Brenden



through the plants grown there, as well as [through] sculptures and neighborhood activities." Seneca Babcock Community Garden is primarily a community center with various programming for youth and seniors. International School #45 is exactly what it sounds like: an elementary school that serves diverse immigrant and refugee populations on the city's West Side.

Teaching artist Christina Vega-Westhoff worked at International School #45 as part of a summer school program for recent immigrants and refugees. "For most of the students, it was their first time

in the school's garden. They were all English language learners, and some students were just beginning to learn the alphabet," Vega-Westhoff said. "Plants became a touchstone for storytelling and multilingual word sharing. We read words and poems aloud together, and used list poem strategies and word boxes."

Participants at all of the gardens made garden journals with book artist Joel Brenden. Each journal was adorned with a magnifying glass "to look more closely," Vega-Westhoff explained. Groups used their senses to become familiar with the garden, which helped prompt words to describe what they found. "We heard soil buzzing, mint dancing, broccoli singing a sad song, peas playing the drums," she elaborated.

Two students at International School #45, a kindergartener and a third-grader, had recently passed away when the READ | SEED | WRITE program was in the planning stages. The community expressed a desire to pay tribute to those students and one of the teaching artists suggested making seed paper. For the project, each student made their own paper embedded with marigold seeds, wrote a poem on it to their lost classmate or someone else in their life they wanted to honor, and planted it. "When the other gardens heard about that project, they said, 'Oh, we want to do that too, we've lost members of the community,' and that quickly became something we decided to do in all four gardens," Cole said.

Another project that also spread to all four gardens was a community cookbook. Gerldine Wilson and other members of the Victoria Avenue Community Garden wanted to make a

cookbook with recipes using ingredients from the garden as a way to help educate other gardeners and members of the community about healthy cooking. Other gardens were excited by this idea and wanted to join in. Ultimately, the cookbook included recipes from all four community gardens, as well as writing and artwork that came out of READ | SEED | WRITE workshops. This way, Cole said, “[the cookbook] would really tell the story of the whole project and the whole city as opposed to a fractured, divided city.”

The program’s culminating event was a Harvest Celebration, which brought together members from more than 100 community gardens in Western New York and included cookbook contributors reading their work.

While there aren’t definite plans to continue READ | SEED | WRITE programming, the cookbook and garden sculptures will serve as lasting mementos and sources of inspiration. Cole is also hopeful that literary organizations from other cities will be able to replicate the program. After serving on a panel called “Everywhere, A Poem: Poetry as Public Art” at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference this year, Cole talked about READ | SEED | WRITE to a packed audience. She thought many organizations were intrigued by the project, and felt that they could duplicate it in their own communities. In that way, the project might grow to bear fruit all across the country. ▲

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Raena McIntyre  
Black Rock Heritage Gardens

▲ A “found poem” by Raena McIntyre from the Black Rock Heritage Garden was included in the community cookbook. Photo by Joel Brenden



◀ To celebrate the READ | SEED | WRITE project, a Harvest Festival was held for the community. Photo by Jeanette Chwan

▼ Focus: HOPE students proudly show off their photography on a vacant neighborhood building in Detroit, Michigan. Photo by Annette Vanover



**ART WORKS.**

**In our special online audio features for the magazine,** we look at Focus: HOPE in Detroit, Michigan, which teaches photography skills to youth and installs public exhibitions of their work, and we examine the Missoula Children's Theatre in Montana, which engages youth on U.S. military bases to put on performances for the community.