

Testimony from Mark Rossier, New York Foundation for the Arts  
February 27, 2017

Thank you Chair van Bramer and members of the committee for holding this hearing.

Sixteen years ago, NYFA was involved in the creation of a cultural blueprint, which was completed in September of 2001 and, as a result, ended up receiving little traction as the city dealt with recovery issues. Therefore, we are thrilled that the city has embarked on this cultural plan and we have been actively involved in a number of ways.

We have distributed announcements of town halls and other information sessions, we are working with partner organizations such as Dance NYC on their initiatives and on March 27, we will host an "Office Hours with the Commissioner" session specifically for immigrant artists.

Additionally, in January, we held 7 discipline-specific focus groups with individual artists in 3 boroughs. The two concerns voiced most frequently were about financial stability, specifically the difficulty many artists are having remaining in the city, and the need for a greater investment in arts education in schools. I have attached a copy of the full report, which provides details on both of those subjects.

I also wanted to mention two other ideas raised which might be of interest. One was that every city council member have a dedicated Arts Ambassador. This would be a person who knows the artists and venues in the district, understands the needs of the community and can help with match-making and creative programming to ensure that cultural activities in each district are created organically, by and for the people who live there. I know some members already have such ambassadors on staff, but it would be wonderful if every member did.

The second concerns artist compensation. Artists spoke of their frustration at being paid wildly different fees from 3rd party sources for doing the same work. They wondered if the city could contract with individual artists for services directly or through a fiscal sponsor or create salary bands to be used by any organization contracted by the city to hire artists. This will ensure them a uniform salary, some control over their lives and careers, and make it easier for them to support themselves.

As for the planning process, I have been impressed with DCLA's openness, their willingness to engage new partners and to accept invitations to talk to be about the plan and hear from New Yorkers their feelings about arts and culture.

Obviously, we don't yet know what the plan's recommendations will be, but I hope the Council will remain committed to supporting the initiatives by granting additional funds to DCLA or other agencies, if appropriate, to ensure the recommendations are realized in a timely and effective manner. Thank you.

**Report to the New York Foundation for the  
Arts (NYFA):**

**Artist Focus Groups for  
NYC's Cultural Plan (CreateNYC)**



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## BACKGROUND

In 2016, New York City began developing its first cultural plan, known as CreateNYC. This plan will act as a roadmap for the evolution of arts and culture in NYC in the coming years. Currently, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and Hester Street Collaborative (HSC) are soliciting the input of artists, cultural organizations, other city agencies, arts and culture experts, and community residents on such questions as<sup>1</sup>:

- **Equity**—people's right to develop and practice their traditions
- **Access** to cultural activities throughout the city
- **Affordability** of live, work and presentation space
- **Social and economic impact** of arts and culture
- **Arts education** in public schools
- **Public art** and selection of art and artists
- **Citywide coordination** across city agencies
- **Neighborhood character**—planning and community development to prevent displacement of culture and communities

To that end, the New York Foundation for the Artists (NYFA) convened a series of focus groups to help ensure that the city hears from individual artists and factors in their input as it develops the cultural plan. Questions asked were on artists' living and working needs, particularly ones that the city might help address, and other ideas they would like the city to consider, as listed in Appendix A.

In January 2017, NYFA hosted 56 artists in seven 90-minute focus groups, representing visual, literary, performing, mixed media and multidisciplinary artists, whose names were drawn from NYFA's own database and from 15 arts organizations and one associated individual, ensuring a diverse group. The groups were held in 3 boroughs to encourage participation from as wide a cross section of NYC as possible. While most were organized by artistic medium, the focus group in the Bronx was for Bronx-based artists in a variety of artistic media. (Please see Appendix B for demographic information on participating artists; Appendix C for focus group dates, locations, and type; and Appendix D for referral partners.)

In the focus groups, participants gave their own responses to questions, built upon other's ideas and fed each other's thinking. By its nature, the focus group format makes a quantitative analysis difficult. Instead, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Topic list and descriptions from CreateNYC website:  
<http://createnyc.org/en/about/the-issues/>

following report, we present the themes and ideas that generated the most agreement or interest among participants. While the artists were grouped according to discipline, we did not find many differences by discipline, except for the few instances noted below.

## ACCESS TO THE ARTS

Since a number of the issues the city is exploring pertain to equal access to culture, community development, and art and culture at the neighborhood level, we began by asking how artists are working in their own communities and the extent to which they are reaching communities with little to no access to the arts. Answers varied widely, but we found that many are:

- Living in communities with little access to the arts.
- Intentionally seeking out opportunities to engage with their own or other underserved communities, through initiatives that they are leading, sometimes at their own expense, or through other organizations.
- Working—often episodically—as teaching artists in the NYC public school system.

Participants expressed the concern that the difficulties surviving financially as an artist in the city make work in or with underserved communities quite challenging, for those who want to do that. *"Self-run programs are difficult to maintain"* without a funding source to compensate for artists' time spent building community partnerships and planning and holding events, some participants noted. The grants that are issued for working in underserved communities go to arts organizations that absorb the majority of the funding and pay artists *"terribly,"* as one participant put it.

As a result, *"helping underserved communities is privilege"* or *"luxury"* that many said they cannot afford. *"Artists can't serve another community if they themselves are deprived,"* as one participant put it. Overall, most participants would like to see the cultural plan include some kind of support to local artists who want to work with underserved communities.

Finally, those artists from Staten Island and the Bronx wanted to see these sometimes *"forgotten"* boroughs included in the cultural plan because access to the arts is limited in both boroughs. Both can be cut off from the rest of the city due to transportation challenges and geography, so participants would like to see a special effort made to ensure that community members have access to the arts in their home boroughs.

## INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS' NEEDS

Across the board, participants said **their single biggest concern is financial stability.** **"If artists can't afford New York, then what does New York become?"** one asked. When asked about their needs as individual artists, most answers, therefore, centered on affordable living and workspace and adequate income.

### Affordable Space

Key to financial stability is affordable space, participants said. **"If you can afford space, then everything flows from there."** **Without affordable space, many artists are forced to "flee" the city.** Participants cited a variety of space needs, including living space, studios for visual artists, rehearsal and performance space for performing artists, desks or communal tables for writers, and exhibition space. Plus, participants noted that **the demand for existing subsidized space for artists far exceeds the supply.**

### Pay for Work

Overall, participants noted that much of the work that they do is either unpaid, unevenly paid or paid on an inadequate scale. **"We are a skilled, undercompensated workforce,"** said one participant. **Participants bemoaned the "assumption" that artists will do their work for free or for very low pay simply for the exposure or love of what they do,** on anything from performances to published poetry to public art. In addition, many participants have worked as teaching artists in the public school system and found the pay so low that many can't afford to continue doing it, they said. As discussed below, the pay from arts organizations, the recipients of city or private funding, is similarly low, with widely differing pay for the same work.

### Employment or Other Benefits

As freelancers, artists do not have access to the types of benefits that employees do, many participants noted. Given their struggles to earn a living, participants said they particularly need support or subsidies in such areas as:

- **Healthcare:** While acknowledging that access to affordable health care is a larger, national issue, participants said they need help in this area, much like other low-income populations.
- **Income Tax:** Likewise, while also a state and federal question, some artists spoke to the burden of paying self-employment taxes and of managing feast/famine cycles of income.
- **Travel:** Some participants work as teaching artists, traveling from school to school, or live in one neighborhood but work in another, so transportation costs are high. They said they needed subsidized Metrocards or other vouchers to defray these costs.

- **Admission to Cultural Institutions:** Some participants spoke of their need for free or subsidized admission to museums. While they acknowledge that the NYC ID does provide this for some institutions, it is not widespread enough, they said.

## "BIG IDEAS" AND OTHER PRIORITIES

Participants were asked what they thought the city should prioritize in the plan and offered up a range of ideas, big and small, that addressed the above needs and also supported the arts more generally and at the community level, in particular.

### Real Estate

**Given how much the arts feeds the city's economy, "the city has an incentive to keep us around,"** as one participant put it, particularly by making living, work and presentation space more affordable and secure:

- **Housing Development:** Just as some housing development deals require a certain percentage of space be set aside for affordable housing units or parking, the city could require a percentage be set aside for artists' live/work spaces. Moreover, the spaces that are reserved for artists should be distributed on a lottery basis, some said. As discussed below, artists would like a seat at the table when housing developments are being planned, so they may voice these concerns, as well as share their perspective on community impact.
- **Zoning:** Artists often need combined live/work spaces to keep costs down, but often rezoning, driven by housing developers, forces them out of space that might have previously allowed a live/work or small manufacturing. As results, artists end up either staying in an illegal space or being forced out of their neighborhood, again looking for affordable space.
- **Mortgages:** For those that might be able to afford a mortgage, they said they were unable to attain one because their income is derived from a patchwork of sources and varies dramatically from year to year. Some wondered if the city could provide backing or somehow advocate on their behalf with banks.
- **Work for Space:** Some suggested a barter system for space, in exchange for work in underserved communities, thereby helping artists and improving access to the arts.
- **Unoccupied Space:** They suggested capturing unoccupied space, such as in schools after-hours, libraries (as below), offices and other "empty real estate sitting around"—as one participant put it—for artists to use, particularly in underserved communities.

### Cultural Hubs

Several of the focus groups felt the city needed **more cultural hubs, both as venues for their work and places for residents to access and enjoy the arts.** Some thought of cultural centers per se, while others spoke of piggybacking off of an existing network, the NY Public Library system:

- **Cultural Centers:** More cultural centers throughout the city would enable collaboration and networking among artists, as well as more access for local community members to art and culture. One participant cited the example of the NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative's work to secure more cultural space in the city and advocated that the city do more of this type of work. For Bronx-based artists, the ability to gather at a hub was perhaps greater, given how scattered they are throughout the borough and the Bronx's transportation challenges.
- **Public Libraries:** A few of the focus groups spoke of expanding use of libraries as such cultural centers, piggybacking on an existing system, during their working hours and off-hours. Since they are free and accessible to anyone in the community, libraries are a great place for artists to reach local audiences, participants said. Plus, assuming the city or others could provide funding, artists could do more work with and in libraries to run public programs (workshops, classes) and showcase their work. Given their original mission, libraries could be encouraged to promote local writers' work, participants in the writers focus group said.

### Public Art

Participants wanted to see many **more opportunities for public art, to boost access to the arts and increase opportunities for artists to show their work.** Their ideas included:

- **Public Art Advocate:** This person would advocate for and coordinate all public art in the city. Among the roles this person would have would be to expand the city's conception of what constitutes public art and where it can be shown, as below.
- **Corporate sponsorship:** The city could encourage or broker deals with corporations to sponsor public art throughout the city.
- **Compensation for Public Art:** For the work they provide, artists should be paid, over and above costs such as materials and installation.
- **Venues:** Most participants spoke of the need to expand the current conception of public art, particularly in the locations where it is shown:
  - **Decentralization:** More public art outside of midtown, in communities "where people actually live," as one artist put it.
  - **MTA:** More public art throughout the MTA system, such as in the Second Avenue subway.
  - **Temporary or "Pop-up" Space:** More "pop-up" public art in abandoned or otherwise unused space, such as empty



storefronts or lots. Some suggested that this "reclamation" of space would be comparable to community gardens in unused lots. To do so would require that the city loosen regulations or permitting requirements for such temporary use.

### Grants

Participants had a range of ideas on the types of grants for the arts and the grantmaking process itself, including:

- **Application process:** Some suggested that the city create a central listing of all of the city's grant opportunities and calls for work. Further, they advocated for a city-wide common application procedure, so artists wouldn't spend as much time adapting applications to each agency's requirements. Plus, some suggested that the application process should focus on an artist's past work, not on what the artist will do with a grant, which is "*antithetical to the creative process,*" as one put it.
- **Direct grants to artists:** Many complained that the bulk of city funding for the arts goes through intermediary organizations, rather than directly to artists. This means they are subject to the vagaries of the intermediary's pay scale and the "*middle man*" ends up with funds that should really go directly to support the artists' work, participants said.
- **Common pay scale:** A number of artists noted the widely varying pay scale for artists' work, using city funds, and advocated for a consistent and standard pay scale.
- **Support to smaller companies:** Some performing artists noted that the bulk of city grants go to the largest companies and felt the city should provide more resources to smaller companies, which are frequently community-based and working in underserved communities. In fact, the city should "*think of each artist as a small company*" and provide funding directly to them, as above.
- **Longer-term support:** Existing grant opportunities are often for short-term projects and don't sustain longer-term artistic endeavors.
- **Beyond education:** Many funding opportunities tend to focus on arts education or require an educational component, so some participants said they feel compelled to include something educational in their applications "*just to receive some kind of funding.*" (That said, those that are involved in arts education complained of the paucity of funding in this area too.)

### Representation

A number of participants said how much they **appreciated being asked for their thoughts on the cultural plan—"It's a respectful process"—and asked, "How can we keep this conversation going?"** Overall, participants said they want their voices heard, offering such ideas as:

- **Arts “ambassadors” or “strategists”:** Embedded throughout the city (perhaps in each City Councilmember's office) and paid for by the city, such representatives would act as advocates for both artists and the community. They would know and represent the artists in their district, speak to policies related to the arts and artists, advocate for artists' needs in community or housing development and encourage cultural planning at the district level. Finally, they would also act as the voice of the community, articulating the neighborhood's wants and needs with regard to cultural activities so that the activities are organic rather than imposed by outside organizations. When appropriate, they could create partnerships between artists and community members to see these ideas through to fruition.
- **Representation at housing development/zoning meetings:** Because they feel the impact of housing development or zoning decisions acutely, artists would like a seat at the table where such decisions are made.
- **Public art advocate:** A public art advocate could create an expanded public art program and advocate for it, both with city agencies, potential sponsors, and others.

#### Arts Education

Finally, many participants, particularly teaching artists, would like the city to **invest more in arts education in public schools, particularly in an ongoing way.** They see the impact of arts education—and exposure to the arts through teaching artists—and wish the city had more extensive arts education in public schools.

<b>CONCLUSION</b>
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Overall, many participants were concerned that while the city benefits from the arts (economically and culturally), it does not seem to value artists themselves. They **hoped the cultural plan would underscore the importance of art to the city and, therefore, the importance of individual artists to the city's future.** They hope that this importance would be expressed in greater support to artists and their work, as well as greater investment in community access to the arts.

## APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

### **About you**

- Introductions: Name, Discipline, Gender Pronouns
- Do you have an outside space where you make your art (in addition to your home, where you may do some of your work)?

### **Community/Access**

- Are you working with or in communities that otherwise have little access to the arts or are underserved? (By communities, we mean geographic or other type of community—socioeconomic, racial or ethnic identity, etc.)
- What do you think the city could do to help you and other artists reach underserved communities or increase their access to the arts more generally?

### **Needs/Relationship with the City**

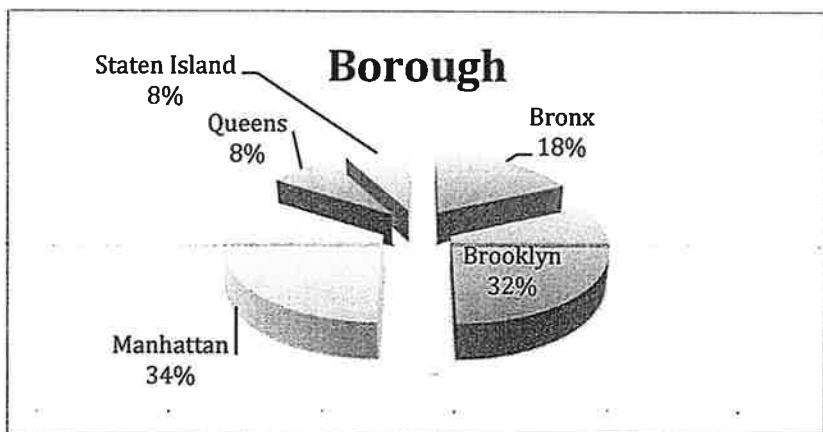
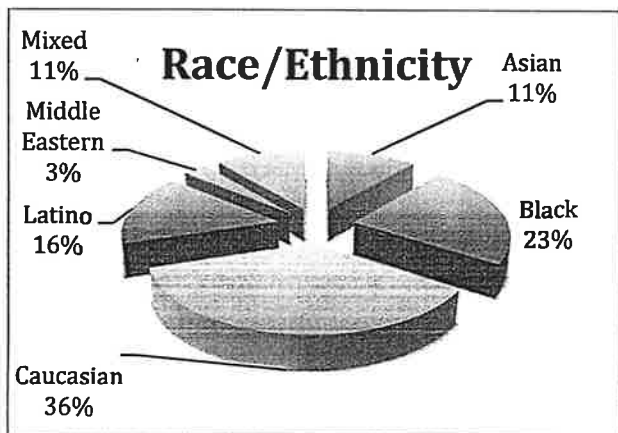
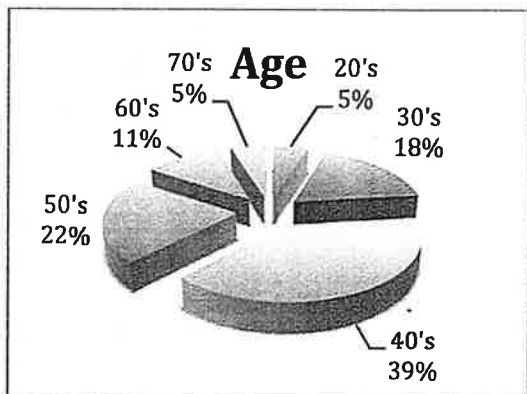
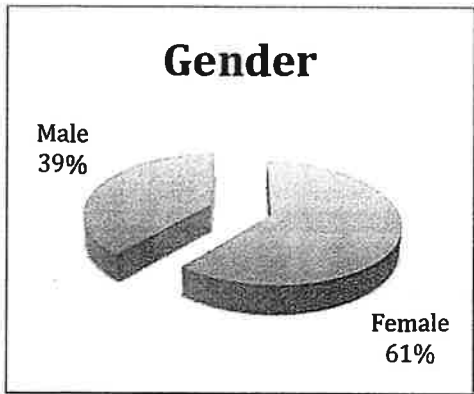
- What do you need from the city to be able to do your work?

### **Big Ideas**

- What big (or small) ideas do you have to offer the city as it thinks about its plan for arts and culture?
- If you were in charge of the budget for arts and culture in NYC, what's the one thing you would fund?

**APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS**

At the end of each focus group, participants provided the following information on themselves:



## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP DATES, LOCATIONS, TYPES

Thursday, January 5, 2017

*Location:* NYFA, 20 Jay Street, Brooklyn

- 10:00 - 11:30 am - Literary Artists
- Noon - 1:30 pm - Performing Artists
- 2:00 - 3:30 pm - Multi-disciplinary/Media Artists

Friday, January 6, 2017

*Location:* The Actors Fund, 727 Seventh Avenue, Manhattan

- 10:30 - noon - Visual Artists (two-dimensional work)
- 12:30 - 2:00 pm - Visual Artists (three-dimensional and time-based work)
- 2:30 - 4:00 pm - All disciplines

Monday, January 9, 2017

*Location:* BAAD! (Bronx Academy of Art and Dance), 2474 Westchester Avenue, Bronx

- 10:00 - 11:30 - Bronx-based artists in all disciplines

## APPENDIX D: OUTREACH PARTNERS

In order to ensure that we had the rich diversity of voices, we asked 27 organizations throughout the 5 boroughs to recommend 5 artists to participate in the focus groups. We received responses from 15 of the organizations (and 1 associated individual), including 7 in the Bronx. Every artist recommended was invited and at least one artist recommended by each of the following organizations attended the sessions:

1. Asian American Arts Alliance
2. Bronx Academy of Art and Dance!
3. Bronx Council on the Arts
4. Bronx Music Heritage Center
5. Bronx Writers Group
6. Brooklyn Arts Council
7. Casita Maria
8. Center for Fiction
9. Creative Capital
10. Dancing in the Streets
11. Gibney Dance
12. Lark Theater
13. Pregones Theater
14. Queens Council on the Arts
15. Staten Island Arts
16. Sarah Yuster, an artist recommended by Staten Island Arts, who was unable to attend, but recommended several other Staten Island artists.