

## **Nathan Cummings Grassroots Grantee Convening Summary**

### **Convening overview, goals, and outcomes**

The Arts & Democracy Project joined with the Nathan Cummings Foundation to organize a convening of the foundation's grassroots arts activist grantees and their allies. The 3-day gathering took place from November 19-21, 2008 at three locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn, New York: Nathan Cummings Foundation, Pratt Center for Community Development, and New York University ITP. Forty-one people participated in the convening which connected people from across the country to discuss the opportunities, challenges, and exemplary practices of linking arts and activism and to share examples of their communication strategies. (See attachment 1 for participants.)

The convening had the overall goal of strengthening the field of work that links arts and social justice by identifying what is needed to increase the impact, effectiveness, depth, and sustainability of the work. It focused on three primary intended outcomes:

1. Participants, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Arts & Democracy Project gain a deepened understanding of the work. This includes learning about:
  - The progress groups have made in realizing their goals over the past five years
  - The skill sets that would enable them to be more effective
  - Coalitions that have strengthened their work
  - Approaches to generational and demographic shifts
  - Issues that they see themselves addressing over the next five years
  - Strategies for achieving their goals
2. Groups strengthen their work by becoming resources for one another through peer learning and increased sharing of skills and resources.
- 3.
4. The meeting provides a needed space for reflection, visioning, and strategizing following the 2008 national election.

Prior to the convening participants completed a survey asking them to identify their challenges, best practices, skills/resources, needs, and opportunities. The results of the survey helped shape the convening agenda. (See attachment 2).

### **Engaging the historical moment**

The convening took place soon after the presidential election as an opportunity to strategize with one another about how to most effectively engage the changing contexts in which we do our work across the country. On the first evening we invited an additional group of allies including funders and seasoned organizers to join us in a future-focused post-election debrief. The themes of this session continued in the next two days, particularly as the group discussed strategies and opportunities for movement building.

#### *Key points and questions*

- Assume that Barack Obama is a result, and not a cause; the culmination of many years of organizing and activism.

- There is a sense of being at the cusp of something great and/or terrible with the excitement of the election and the harsh reality of the economics of our communities. Hope and excitement are mixed with concern about the change being realized and continuation of grassroots participation. Strong action is needed to push the administration to do the right thing. It's positive that someone like Patrick Gaspar from SEIU could become political director, but it's an open question whether the capacity of the movement will be advanced as a result of the organizing prior to the election. Challenges to democracy remain at a local level, as in the case of the NYC Council and mayor deciding to extend term limits without a vote.
- It is important to be proactive in policy and strategy: "We don't want to be invited to the table, we want to set the table and take the table home." How can grass roots conversations be heard in Washington DC? But being proactive and engaging the difference between protesting and participating in and negotiating with government can be difficult; when you're used to being the opposition it's a different task to make the government work for you. Are we ready? Do we have the strategies to proactively engage? "I have a sense of paddling – what would it feel like to catch the wave?"
- Sense of empowerment: this was the "first moment when I felt inside the conversation." This moment can be a profound shift in our relationship to power and exercise of it. Keep in mind both "the sunshine and the shadow of power; it doesn't need to be negative, it can be transformational."
- Take time, stop and breathe slowly to free our imaginations. How do we sustain ourselves and be creative in this moment?
- Establish what is meant by change. We don't have a common definition of change: "Is it change in leadership, paradigm, or relationship to politics?" Develop a deeper understanding of what organizing is, "defining the characteristics of movements of transformative change vs. movements branded with change." We need to gain clarity about our definition of transformational change and social justice.
- Be clear about what you want and articulate the value of grassroots arts activism (for example, a model for understanding the other without dehumanizing them and a platform for participation and problem solving). Other groups are already making their cases. "Who speaks for us? It is important "to speak from our work in an affirmative way – so a single story isn't being told."
- Building unity – How to reach communities, for example, in southwest Virginia who did not support Obama and involve people who aren't the usual suspects?
- The lines are getting softened; the campaign created the idea of shared stakeholders. Examples include artists of color and communities of color joining around affordable housing, the blurring of art / public media and activism, and a discussion about the responsibility of artists.

## **Opening charges**

Claudine Brown, Nathan Cummings Foundation, raised the question of how arts activism is presented to the world. She presents her grantees as “problem-solvers, collaborators, people who have a fundamental understanding of joy.” She urged the group to clearly articulate what they want, noting that others know what they want and go after it, for example banks wanting a bailout and people lobbying for war who will profit from it. “There are going to be arts contracts. You need to be very clear – what you want, who you want it from, and strategize how you are going to get it. You are leaders, central leaders; you are the people who should inherit the work done before you. There are new people, new organizations, new foundations and you will turn your organizations over to others. Be very clear if you can take your vision to another place, what you offer to one another, and to help each other, collaborate with each other to make effective change.”

## **Recommendations from the small groups’ reports on impact**

- Determine our own metrics that are accountable to our communities, both statistical and anecdotal and find ways to integrate the two. Relate everything back to mission. Consider how to measure trust, sovereignty, wellness for the world, joy and resiliency, and self-determination.
- Support the institutions that support the organizing. “Too often institutions don’t think they need to stand, but we need them: we’re not going to see equity for a long, long time.” “It’s important to shore up the institution’s capacity to do its own work. These institutions support the next generation, there is a need for capacity-building.”
- Develop criteria for organizational support: “Are the organizations dynamic and generative: do they become more powerful, or build power in others?”
- Understand the concept of life cycles of different organizations.
- Create structures for knowledge to be passed on as models for the field.
- Claim seats at policy tables across sectors and value participatory models for policy creation and democratization of voice.
- Share campaigns and messages between communities, when possible.
- Develop networks and collaborations, share local successes, using cross training and popular education. Decide what the decision-making process is up front, and what the victory is. Use a memo of understanding.
- See your work as part of a larger movement, not just to have impact, but as a way to be more effective.
- It is time now for “a significant shift in strategy from campaigns that are centrally-developed, to where we meet people where they’re at to co-develop policy.”
- Good facilitators are needed and to capture goals in writing, being clear about our language.

## **Recommendations from small groups’ reports on skills:**

### *Strategic Planning*

- Involve everyone in the organization from the beginning in overall goal setting, vision, audience served, operations. Include staff, maintenance staff, board -- everyone involved in the organization.

### *Leadership Development*

- Given the importance of intergenerational conversations, find ways to bring together elders and emerging leaders.
- Develop skill sets for framing experience, managing expectations, budgeting.

### *Working Across Cultures*

- Create an advisory team with people who you want to connect to the organization. When hiring or creating an advisory team, have a genuine desire to connect: choose people who bring communities with them as well as skills.
- Make language translation/interpretation as well as cultural translation a priority in budgeting.
- Grassroots Fundraising Training Institute- GIFT program is a good resource for people of color for fundraising skills.

### *Undoing Racism:*

- Share models and resources. (See resource list, attachment 3)
- Organize a conference that puts art at the center of this work, “Art puts us in the land of transformation rather than information.”

### *Creative Process*

- Take work deeper, from media literacy to political education, from three-day workshops to year-long commitment
- Consider what forms of aesthetics might be most effective for stimulating change in what context: for example, linear narrative or the narrative form of quilting.  
Develop key skills in:
  - Being clear about definitions and roles
  - Inspiring people
  - Listening and letting go of ego and control
  - Basic interviewing and technology
  - Competence in community facilitation.

### *Documentation and archiving*

- Recognize the urgency around documentation: few groups have time or access to preservation and documentation.

### *Political Education*

- This group posed a key challenge for people who are bringing a spiritual/religious position to their political analysis- how to engage, give information and hear things that you disagree with?

## **Recommendations from small groups' reports on strategies:**

### *Developing leadership for organizational transition*

- Understand the different needs and styles of leadership across generations.
- Look at models, such as Project South, that are not corporate top-down models.
- Get help from an outside facilitator.
- Keep the founder close by, but the new leader has to be given the space to put her/his own stamp on the organization.

### *Creating Spaces for Interaction*

- Don't rush into an ownership relationship.
- Use spaces that people are already in as a gathering point, instead of making them come to you, or creating a space for space's sake.
- Investigate the land trust model.
- Learn about and discuss sustainable and collective ownership of land.

### *Policymakers*

- Need to be engaged in public policy locally, statewide, and nationally.
- Educate people and make accessible information to increase political transparency about decision-making.
- Power dynamic between funder and fund-seeker needs to be undone. This convening is a good, small first step.

### *Large group discussion about what we want and how we're going to get it*

- Mentorship and leadership transition, "a template for blue collar young people out of the 'hood to transition into a life that's not where they're from."
- National cable / radio network – new infrastructure, for example, strategy of Public Radio Capital of buying stations to keep them public.
- Participatory democracy respected by the president with overlap between participatory democracy and social media.
- Erasure of barrier between arts and organizing, "being brave enough to do arts in organizing."
- "Government workers and policymakers making art on a regular basis, working with artists in the communities, as a way of doing business, as a way of doing what government can do – bring out the best in a community, keep the connections deep and real."
- Artists running for office. Artists recognized as a constituency, being more demanding about our vision and desires for the future.
- "Dream of having the "right to the city" space, land ownership, all these intersections, make that a dialogue that goes somewhere, creates a space for all people to live and eat and survive. Change success from individual gain to mutual gain. God did not intend my gain to come at another's expense."
- "Having the ability to work angry."
- "What I want most now is balance. How good we are at metrics, rules, skills, leadership. I wonder what would happen if those of us responsible for organizations, people, lives -- if we balanced those things with intuition,

reemergence, good old fashioned love. Enough love in our hearts to be courageous. I wonder how our organizing strategies would change?”

### **Recommendations following communications presentations**

The communications presentations from eleven organizations were varied, with both high tech and low tech approaches to strategic communications, storytelling, organizing, policy tools, social networking, viral marketing, and games for change.

- Network the networks – examples of people coming together at the Allied Media Conference, and use of NAMAC’s resources.
- Make sure that people outside of the arts know about these powerful tools
- Be conscious of technical and language barriers.
- “Use the resources we fought for” – public access, libraries, let’s not lose these institutions. Labor unions also as resources and partners.
- Partner with each other on email blasts, swapping banner ads, defining ourselves better as a field.
- Identify economies of scale.
- Go deep, with extended time together. It doesn’t necessarily need to be collaboration, can be complementary work of aligned groups that push each other strategically, can be critical of one another, and hold each other accountable.
- Other ways to connect: open source design charette where you can collectively design creative strategies, skype, virtual worlds, google worlds, nonprofit commons in Second Life. But remember, “it’s less about tech, more about organizing, taking a step back and think through partners, collaborators, needs.

### **Recommendations for the future (closing session)**

#### **Summary of themes:**

- ✓ Continued networking and face-to-face gatherings, on different scales.
- ✓ Technical assistance, including sharing of analyses.
- ✓ One-on-one sharing and consulting, facilitated by small, flexible pools of funds.
- ✓ Encouragement of cross-sector dialogue.
- ✓ Create space for collective political training and action.
- Contract with each other for services, without going to the for-profit sector. (An example that grew out of the convening is Appalshop raising the funds to hire the Citizen Engagement Lab to consult/partner with them on building an online community for the criminal justice field.)
- Involve the young cultural workers and those organizations with directors are their 20s; “they don’t know how to get in the game.”
- Include voices of the elders, as well as voices of the young people
- Break out of the silo of arts foundations and make the case for our work inside nutrition, economic development, and other sectors.
- Create another resource pool, outside of an immediate grant -- a pool of in-kind support (TapRoot), or a separate pool of money, outside of programming dollars.
- Help identify, nurture, and train good facilitators and strategic planners of color.
- Support the documentation and archiving of the work.
- Conduct a market analysis of the youth landscape, or progressive landscape.

- Analyze how to meet increased demand, with less money.
- Maximize this meeting by creating small, aligned groups of people to take the conversation deeper.
- Share an analysis of the Farmers Union post-Civil war and the '60s – how do we learn from what they did?
- Set up cross-experiential, peer site visits.
- Clarify the mechanics of AmeriCorps, Service Learning Initiative and other cost-sharing strategies like work-study students.
- Consider our community work from a business development standpoint: Convene a social entrepreneur/social capital gathering that could help us find sustainable streams of money outside the foundations.
- Create times for people to come together, to sustain each other.
- Strategize/train on how to run a “YES” campaign, rather than a “NO” campaign. For example, Yes We Can..... (fill in the blank).
- Figure out how to have our constituencies' voices heard; explore combined political action (like ballot initiatives).
- Create a circle of peers and elders with synchronicity: “we need space that allows for risk, creativity, discovery of our own resources...” (Anasa Troutman has been moving this idea forward).
- Keep involved with the Arts & Social Justice Funders group.

**Summary of Recommendations from post-Gathering evaluations (See attachment 4):**

- Create a collaborative piece of writing from the meeting.
- Email everyone's contact information. Share the notes.
- Be in regular contact: Create a Facebook page or a network to enable the ongoing sharing of partnership and program opportunities, creating a support system during challenging times, and a peer-to-peer mentorship network.
- An annual or bi-annual e-newsletter that would share highlights from each group (suggested by more than one person).
- Quarterly check-ins.
- Share notes, develop new opportunities to connect and continue the dialogue, and ways to share strategies and knowledge.
- Meet at other events that are happening and re-convene there – support this with travel grants, small stipends.
- Another gathering, with resources to bring young people/others within organization and partners.
- Encourage and support programs to visit each other.

## Attachment 1

### Contact sheet

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**Attachment 2**

**THE NATHAN CUMMINGS FOUNDATION  
ARTS AND CULTURE PROGRAM  
Grassroots Grantee Meeting  
Wednesday, November 19 - Friday, November 21, 2008**

**Full Agenda**

**Wednesday, November 19**

**6:00-9:00 pm**

**Location: Nathan Cummings Foundation, 475 Tenth Ave. Manhattan**

Reception/Dinner with convening participants and invited guests  
Greetings: Lance Lindblom, President of the Nathan Cummings Foundation and  
Claudine K. Brown, Dir. Arts & Culture Program  
Discussion: Looking ahead post-election

**Thursday, November 20**

**9:00 am - 5:00 pm**

**Location: Pratt Center for Community Development, 379 Dekalb Ave. 2<sup>nd</sup> Fl.  
(entrance on Dekalb), Brooklyn**

**9:00 - 9:30am**

Breakfast

**9:30 - 10:35am**

Welcome, meeting goals, and introductions

**10:35 - 10:45am**

Break

**10:45 – 12:30pm**

Impact discussion (small and large groups)

*Some questions to consider:*

- How do you know that you are making a difference?
- How can you reach more constituents effectively?
- How do we tie this work to larger social movements?
- How do we have an impact on policy with our work?
- How do we develop more effective collaborations

**12:30 - 1:15pm**

Lunch

*(Includes the selection of afternoon small groups - see attached options drawn from surveys – you will also have the option to suggest a group)*

**1:15 - 2:50pm**

**Skills discussion** (small and large groups)

For report back:

- Topic discussed
- Resource discovered
- Challenges identified
- Recommendations/actions

**2:50 - 3:00pm**

Break

**3:00 - 4:50pm**

**Strategies and action discussion** (small and large groups)

**4:50 - 5:00pm**

Closing

**Friday, November 21**

**9:00 am - 2:00 pm**

**Location: New York University ITP, 721 Broadway (corner Waverly Place, 4<sup>th</sup> Fl south elevators) Manhattan (check in with security guard)**

**9:00 - 9:30am**

Breakfast

**9:30 - 11:00am**

Presentations on communications strategies by participants

**11:00am - 12:00 noon**

Open discussion: Communications strategies

**12:00 noon - 2:00 pm**

Working Lunch

Open discussion - Recommendations and next steps for:

- Growing and strengthening the field
- Identifying resources that might be shared
- Sustaining momentum after the elections
- Advancing actions and ideas growing out of this convening

## Attachment 3

### Resources

Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership (Jossey-Bass; Oct 08) by Frances Kunreuther, Helen S. Kim, Robby Rodriguez. Looks at leadership transitions/generational shifts in nonprofit.

Resources mentioned by small Impact groups

- Template of Memo of Agreement, from Adrienne Marie Brown of Ruckus Society
- Margaret Wheatley: *Leadership and the New Science*
- Writings by Grace Lee Boggs on quantum physics and organizing
- Article on the relationship between power and foundations (reference Kathy Engel)

Resources mentioned by Working Across Cultures group

- Grassroots Fundraising Training Institute

Resources mentioned by Political Education group

- Education for Liberation Network
- Beloved Community of Greensboro NC
- New York Coalition for Radical Educators (curriculum design)
- Stone Circles in Durham, NC

Resources mentioned by Undoing Racism group

- *Traces of the Trade*
- *Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege*
- *Bill t Jones: The Artificial N....*
- *Color of Fear*
- *Matrix Reloaded.*
- *Aware*
- Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond

Resources mentioned by Creative Process group

- Appalshop's guide to community facilitation

From closing

- Book mentioned by Linda Bryant about the Farmers' Union
- Performing Arts Alliance position paper submitted to Obama's Arts Transition Team (MK)