Making Meaningful Connections

Characteristics of arts groups that engage new and diverse participants

Holly Sidford, Alexis Frasz and Marcelle Hinand

[ ] HELICON

Foreword

The arts provide a distinct, powerful contribution to a vibrant, inclusive and compassionate society. Supporting The James Irvine Foundation's mission to expand opportunity for the people of California, the goal of the Foundation's Arts program is to promote engagement in the arts for everyone in the state.

Critical to reaching this goal is the ability of arts organizations to engage new participants — beyond the audiences, artists and others that benefitted from the work of many arts nonprofit organizations in the past. Providing engagement in this way makes arts organizations more responsive and valuable to their communities, as well as more resilient.

We're pleased to share new research about the qualities of arts organizations that are successfully engaging new and diverse participants. These characteristics, transferable and applicable to a wide variety of organizations, reflect the different facets of an organization that can build, strengthen and deepen connections to California's communities.

Making Meaningful Connections: Characteristics of Arts Groups that Engage New and Diverse Participants is a report authored by Helicon Collaborative, the research and strategy group that conducted this study. This, and related reports, offers valuable field-based research and expert analysis along with tangible ways for arts groups to expand arts engagement.

In the months ahead, we look forward to adding to this knowledge base — and growing the conversation with arts organizations, arts funders and all who share a stake in the future of arts in California.

Sincerely,

Josephine Ramirez
Arts Program Director
The James Irvine Foundation
July 2014

Resources for Practitioners

ARTS ENGAGEMENT FOCUS: AN IRVINE RESEARCH SERIES

The goal of The James Irvine Foundation Arts program is to promote engagement in the arts for all Californians. The arts provide a distinct, powerful contribution to a vibrant, inclusive and compassionate society. To create and sustain this value, arts organizations must be relevant to the increasingly diverse populations of our state.

Irvine Arts program grants support organizations and initiatives that aim to expand arts engagement. We also commission research that deepens our understanding of effective arts engagement practices. Toward this end, we present this three-part research series intended to help open timely conversations within and among arts organizations. The series brings to light information from practitioners regarding key questions: Who participates in arts? How can we engage new participants? Where can arts participation take place?

Access the series at irvine.org/artsengagement.

Getting In On the Act
How arts groups are creating opportunities for active participation

By Alan S. Brown and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard, with Shelly Gilbride, Ph.D.; WolfBrown

Making Meaningful Connections
Characteristics of arts groups that engage new and diverse participants

By Holly Sidford, Alexis Frasz and Marcelle Hinand Helicon Collaborative

Changing the Scene (working title)
How arts groups are reaching new participants through new venues

By Adrian Ellis and Brent Reidy AEA Consulting

See report findings at a glance in this easy-to-share infographic

Also from Irvine: We support research to advance knowledge of current trends in arts participation and related practices in the arts sector. In 2011, we released findings generated by Markusen Economic Research on *California's Arts and Cultural Ecology*. In 2014, we are releasing companion research that underscores the gap between traditional arts programming and arts participation in an increasingly diverse California. Conducted by NORC, this survey-based study is titled *California's Changing Landscape of Arts Participation*.

Introduction

Successfully creating meaningful and sustainable relationships with diverse participants is not unlike making new friends. It takes intention, curiosity, flexibility and time. It also takes realizing that we can't make new friends without being changed by the experience.

For the last two decades, arts organizations of various kinds have focused increasing attention on participant development. Many have become more customer-centered in their practices and have successfully attracted more or different participants to their programs. These efforts have produced a growing body of knowledge on effective arts engagement techniques — the specific programming, marketing and social media strategies that organizations are using to attract participants.

Research by Alan Brown, Kevin McCarthy and others has also enhanced general understanding of the different levels on which people engage with an art form or organization, as well as the processes of deepening arts engagement. Reports on work by grantee-partners involved in The James Irvine Foundation Arts Innovation Fund and case studies of projects funded by The Wallace Foundation, among other materials, have contributed to a growing library of engagement methods and success stories.[1]

It is still the rare cultural organization whose regular participants truly reflect the socio-economic, ethnic or generational demographics of its wider community.

Smart programming and marketing strategies are critical, and they have helped many cultural organizations attract new participants for specific programs. Depending on the organization, targeted populations have included teenagers, young adults, African American professionals, families, Latinos, veterans' groups, low-income populations, Arab Americans and others. Yet overall, the participant mix for the majority of cultural institutions remains largely unmixed. It is still the rare cultural organization whose regular participants truly reflect the socio-economic, ethnic or generational demographics of its wider community.

Creating meaningful and sustainable relationships with diverse participants is hard and, like making new friends, it gets harder as we get older. There are some behaviors that help the process become easier:

- Deciding that we actually want new friends, not just more people in our life
- Committing the time it takes to build a new friendship, and weathering the inevitable ups and downs
- Cultivating trust with the new friend by being honest about differences of opinion, personal history and cultural assumptions
- Being genuinely curious to find common interests and mutual benefits in the relationship
- Respecting the friend's preferences and balancing our schedules with his or hers
- Sharing experiences and having fun together

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[1] See bibliography for references.

Despite concerted efforts, entrenched patterns of participation have resisted significant change. As the National Endowment for the Arts' most recent survey of arts participation shows, the majority of people who attend "benchmark arts activities" are white and upper-income.[2] In 2008, three times as many white people attended classical music concerts as did African Americans, for example, and there was a similar stratification by income — only 8 percent of people with incomes between $40,000 and $50,000 attended classical music concerts that year, while more than 22 percent of people with incomes greater than $150,000 attended. Few leaders of "benchmark" institutions are happy with these figures, and most want to see a more diverse range of people among their participants.

Numerous cultural organizations exist specifically to present and develop art forms based in African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Arabic and other traditions, or to serve specific age groups, such as teenagers, and many of these organizations attract people that do not regularly visit "benchmark" cultural institutions.[3] The attendance patterns for smaller and more community-based cultural organizations have not been studied comprehensively, but research by Ron Chew, Maria-Rosario Jackson, Mark Stern, Alaka Wali and others suggests that many such organizations are serving populations that are ethnically diverse and mostly moderate- to lower-income.[4]

There is growing awareness that achieving lasting engagement by participants who reflect our changing demographics involves broader organizational change.

While a number of these organizations choose to work exclusively with specific ethnic populations, many would like to appeal to a broader demographic and face challenges in doing so. Therefore, participant diversification is not only the concern of "benchmark" institutions reaching demographic groups that are outside of their typical participant profile, but also the work of groups that are rooted in demographically specific communities and that aim to connect with a broader community of participants as well.

Whatever their past efforts to diversify participants, many arts leaders are coming to understand that program, marketing and social media strategies are not the only pieces required to solve the long-term engagement puzzle. There is growing awareness that achieving lasting engagement by participants who reflect our changing demographics involves broader organizational change.

To date, research on the organization-wide practices and perspectives that facilitate or hinder diverse participation in the arts is thin. This issue is being explored in other fields, however. Many health care leaders, for example, now understand that being truly effective in reaching the entire population means changing the organizational culture of hospitals and clinics and the day-to-day behaviors of health care providers. The health care field has led the way in studying what it takes for institutions to become culturally competent because the consequences of not effectively serving people of different backgrounds is so severe. While the failure to effectively engage the diverse populations of its community may not represent life or death for an arts organization, a holistic organizational approach to inclusiveness is essential to reaching the goal of making arts organization participants in California — or any state — look more like the population at large.

2 *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,* National Endowment for the Arts, 2009.

3 "Benchmark arts activities" include jazz, classical music, opera, musical plays, non-musical plays, ballet, and art museums or galleries. http://arts.gov/publications/2008-survey-public-participation-arts

4 See bibliography for references.

This report offers an initial framework of key organizational characteristics for cultural institutions that are genuinely engaging participants who reflect their communities' changing demographics. It is not comprehensive, and the concepts outlined here may apply differently to different kinds of institutions. This summary is intended to spark thinking and discussion among organizations that are interested in better connecting with diverse participants and sustaining those relationships over time. It may also spur further experimentation and testing, and encourage leaders to deepen their understanding of the organizational dynamics that are essential to achieving more diverse participation in nonprofit cultural institutions.

This research sought to understand the underlying organizational characteristics of successful engagement of diverse participants by arts organizations. The findings presented are a synthesis of research from multiple sources.

CORE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which arts organizations are most effectively engaging diverse populations and what can we learn from them?
- Are there factors that indicate an organization's readiness to engage more deeply with a broader population, and how can this be supported?
- What are the points of leverage to propel change within individual organizations and the system as a whole toward greater engagement with diverse populations?
- What are barriers to change?

SOURCES CONSULTED

- A total of 28 interviews conducted in three rounds over the course of 12 months with experts on systems change, researchers on arts engagement, national and state arts funders, and national arts practitioners who have been effective at engaging participants; see Appendix for a list of interviewees
- A literature review of research on systems change, arts engagement, organizational change, cultural competency and networks; see Bibliography for a partial listing of these sources
- A review of Irvine program materials and past research
- Helicon Collaborative's experience designing, implementing and assessing numerous arts engagement programs over more than 20 years

Findings

The relationship between cultural organizations and their participants has never been a simple matter. It has always involved an alchemical mix of elements — the cultural context for the work, the appeal of the art being displayed or performed, the talents and reputation of the artists involved, the location and attractiveness of the venue, the price of admission, the novelty or familiarity of the experience, the role and perceptions of the sponsoring organization in its community and other factors. Attracting people and getting them to return frequently is not as straightforward as a lively program, a handsome facility, well-organized subscription techniques or clever membership appeals.

While never simple, the relationship between cultural groups and their participants has gotten considerably more complex in the last decade, as a result of demographic shifts, changing patterns of leisure time activity, increased competition for consumers' attention and technology.

These external circumstances have created a new context for producing and presenting creative work, and are inviting a reconsideration of the role of nonprofit cultural institutions within their communities. In an era when cultural options were relatively scarce, it was possible for a cultural institution to focus predominantly on perfecting "the art" and expect an exemplary product to generate an adequate audience. In today's content-filled environment, this is no longer a secure strategy for a nonprofit arts institution nor, some argue, an ethical one. The lack of congruence between the participation in "benchmark" nonprofit cultural institutions and the changing demographics of the country is becoming stark, as evidenced by National Endowment for the Arts' research on participation, as well as many smaller-scale audience surveys and analyses, such as Theatre Bay Area's Arts Diversity Index. This raises questions about the relevance of these organizations to the communities in which they work, and their long-term viability.

Changing external circumstances are forcing cultural organizations to adapt, and the ones that are adapting most effectively are becoming affirmatively integrated.

Changing external circumstances are forcing cultural organizations to adapt, and the ones that are adapting most effectively are becoming affirmatively integrated — blending a passion for their art form and a genuine engagement with their communities. Some groups — including many community-based cultural organizations — have always possessed this unified nature. Many others have had to make a profound shift in their internal mindset from a hierarchical framework in which "the art" predominates and "the audience" is secondary to one that recognizes that art and its participants are inextricably linked and interdependent. This paradigm asserts that art-making is enhanced by engaging community concerns, and the arts organization itself is strengthened by better reflecting the diversity of its community.

Of course, some organizations are satisfied with their current participant profile, and are not seeking relationships with more diverse populations. But for groups that are interested in relating to and better reflecting their communities' changing demographics, dismantling the old hierarchical paradigm is an important first step. Helicon's research suggests that organizations that are primed to expand their involvement with diverse publics have determined that their future success depends on becoming more relevant to and involved with the participants they seek to attract. These organizations believe that to remain dynamic and relevant, every aspect of their organizational practice, including their art-making, must acknowledge and engage the social and demographic trends in their locality and in the society as a whole.

CORE COMMITMENTS

Organizations that are successfully engaging diverse participants have made an explicit, sustained and organization-wide commitment to change, regardless of whether special grant funding is available. This commitment manifests itself in ways that both cut across the entire organization, and are expressed in specific components of their work. These include:

MISSION

Organizations committed to diversifying participants incorporate this intention in their missions. They regularly review their mission statements in the context of their evolving community, and have articulated a clear, compelling and relevant purpose that is evident in all aspects of their work.

LEADERSHIP

These organizations have strong leaders who sustain focus on arts engagement, and who are comfortable with risk and failure. They have staffs and boards that reflect the communities they wish to serve, and they have created explicit structures by which to solicit and use community input. They seek to engage their community throughout the organization, and include a critical mass of internal leaders committed to inclusion and engagement. These individuals have links to and expertise with the populations the organization wants to engage more deeply. At the same time, the organization does not expect any one person to speak for an entire ethnic or demographic group, and works to ensure that everyone in the organization is both culturally competent and culturally curious.

Leaders in these organizations also recognize that change is an ongoing process, not a fixed destination. They encourage staff to experiment, test ideas, learn from and share lessons from pilot efforts, and put that learning to work for the whole organization. They celebrate successes and make the most of failures — understanding that making change requires taking risks and not every effort will succeed.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The leaders of organizations that are effectively attracting and sustaining diverse participants are committed to enhancing their organization's cultural competence. They know that successfully engaging ethnically, culturally and economically diverse people requires shifts in the thinking and behavior of staff and board, and these shifts can be achieved only by examining assumptions, overcoming biases, dealing with people's fear of difference and implementing explicit plans for change. These leaders build trust in a better future by acknowledging what they don't know, treating differing views with respect, and sustaining internal and external conversations about the many dimensions of diversity and inclusion, including very difficult subjects such as racism, sexism, homophobia and economic inequality. Such leaders have led their organizations to conduct cultural competency assessments, create specific inclusion plans and implement internal structures to support diversity. These organizations sustain an ongoing, multilingual conversation about diversity and inclusion, both internally and externally.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

The core commitments are made real through a set of qualities seen in specific areas of organizational practice common to arts groups effectively engaging new and diverse participants. These include:

WELCOMING SPACES

Organizations successfully diversifying their participants recognize that there are spatial dimensions of inclusion that must be addressed in order to welcome people from diverse cultures. Spatial cues can signify to people that they belong or don't belong in a place, and often these cues are invisible to the "in-group" and glaring to "outsiders." Organizations that are serious about inclusion make an effort to understand how they are perceived by those who are not currently attending, and affirmatively create more welcoming and inclusive physical environments for various populations. This may involve making changes in physical spaces — for example, to the entryways, signage, lighting or seating protocols — or leaving the traditional venue and neighborhood to present art in community gathering spaces more familiar and comfortable to the desired participants.

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Organizations successfully engaging diverse participants understand the historical dynamics and the larger context in which they operate. These organizations see themselves as civic leaders as well as arts leaders and seek ways to contribute to the community in meaningful ways.[5] They recognize that all ethnic communities have rich cultural histories, and that there are many organizations and artists in these communities already providing cultural programming for neighborhood residents. Cultural organizations seeking to engage diverse participants respect the work and knowledge of such artists and community-oriented groups, and they understand their historical struggles for resources. They find ways to explore options for partnership, collaboration or aligned effort with community leaders in ways that will be mutually beneficial. Partnership is a complicated idea in some minority communities, many of which have been asked to help bring diversity to larger or more mainstream institutions without being adequately recognized or compensated. Organizations that are making true shifts toward engaging diverse participants respect the leaders already working in the communities where they want to deepen relationships. They share power and compensate partners adequately for their contributions to joint projects.

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[5] See Helicon's *Bright Spots Leadership in the Pacific Northwest* for fuller description of civic leadership and strategies for deep engagement with community. http://heliconcollab.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/BrightSpotsLeadership.pdf

RELEVANT PROGRAMMING

Truly engaging new populations isn't about programming something different to get "them" in the door with the hope of enticing "them" to attend regular programming. Organizations doing this work successfully shift their programming portfolio to include artistic work that is created by and speaks to diverse participants — people from different ethnic or racial communities, young people, low-income people and other groups — and they sustain these shifts over time. They want diverse people to see themselves in the organization and its programming. This includes hiring artistic personnel and working with artists that are members of the communities they hope to attract, and using other methods such as community advisory committees, market research, focus groups, one-on-one conversations and other means to understand the values and interests of different populations.

Engagement also involves understanding and honoring the complexity and fluidity of cultures, and not assuming that all people from a certain ethnic or demographic group are represented by one artist, art form or community leader from that group. It entails recognizing that someone from a culturally specific group may not be interested in work specific to their culture at all. Rather than adopting a generic view of what different ethnic or demographic groups want or like, successful organizations take the time to create a two-way dialogue about interests, values and needs with the specific communities they want to engage. They listen actively, and they respond to what they hear.

ANALYSIS FOR IMPROVEMENT
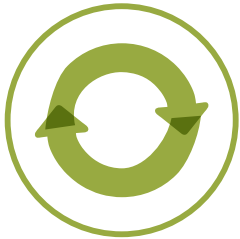
Organizations doing this work successfully are analytical; they measure their progress toward their goals, and they seek continuous improvement in their efforts. They have assessed themselves in relation to the demographic and cultural profile of their community. They have analyzed their participant base as well as their board and staff composition, and they have articulated the reasons they want to engage more diverse populations. They have identified the specific participants they want to connect to, and they know why engaging these people makes sense for their mission. These organizations have conducted research on their current and potential participants, including extensive face-to-face conversations with potential stakeholders. They have also learned from others by examining the underlying philosophy and everyday practices of organizations that are successfully partnering with more diverse populations, and they are knowledgeable about relevant research in this area. They also assess how their efforts are succeeding, through ongoing community conversations, participant surveys, focus groups, market research and other feedback mechanisms — and they use this information to modify programs for greater success.
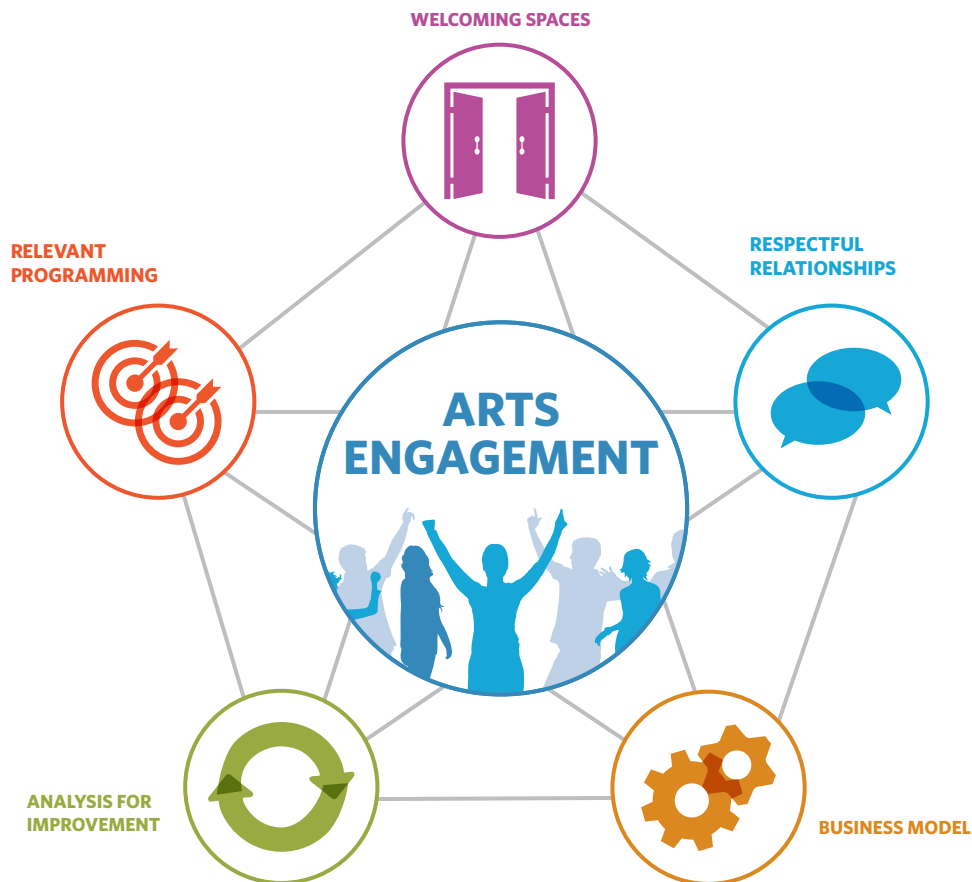
BUSINESS MODEL

Many organizations have been encouraged to undertake arts engagement through grants from funders. For the relationships with diverse participants to be long-lasting, however, the work must be consistent and sustained, and therefore it must be integrated into the organization's business model. This means budgeting for the programming and organizational shifts required to fully integrate this work into ongoing operations, and recognizing that there will be a learning curve requiring heavier investment in the beginning. It also means coming to terms with the fact that some current stakeholders, including funders and current audiences, may not agree with the changes and even pull away from the organization. In addition, some new participants may be price-sensitive, or may not have a tradition of donating to nonprofit cultural institutions. Organizations that are successfully diversifying their participants have committed fully for mission-related reasons, not expedient financial ones, and have accounted for these implications explicitly in their business model and long-term financial projections.

CONNECTED IN PRACTICE

These organizational practices are highly interrelated and interdependent. They interact with and influence each other.

WELCOMING SPACES

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

RELEVANT PROGRAMMING

ARTS ENGAGEMENT

ANALYSIS FOR IMPROVEMENT

BUSINESS MODEL

Conclusion

The challenges cultural organizations face in genuinely engaging diverse participants are many and they are real. We live in a society stratified by economic, cultural and educational differences, and in communities with long histories of social segregation. For half a century and more, the participants involved with most mid-sized and larger nonprofit cultural institutions have been predominantly Caucasian and upper income. Meanwhile, artists of color and cultural activists have created a rapidly growing number of arts organizations that serve the traditions and cultural interests of specific communities and lower-income neighborhoods. Re-mixing this divided picture and overcoming long-standing norms and expectations takes sustained effort. But recognizing a challenge is the first step to overcoming it.

An organization must make a wholehearted and institution-wide commitment to building meaningful relationships with people who reflect the diversity of its community.

One factor underlies all lasting success in diversifying participants: The organization must make a wholehearted and institution-wide commitment to building meaningful relationships with people who reflect the diversity of its community. This commitment must be evident in all aspects of the organization's operations — from staffing and board representation, to programming and marketing, to budget allocations and assessment efforts. It requires a candid commitment to examining the assumptions and cultural biases baked into previous practices, and continuous efforts to build organization-wide competence in dealing with cultural differences. This is a serious undertaking and cannot be achieved on the cheap.

Numerous benefits result from the sustained effort to be relevant and engaging to an organization's changing community — including new and enduring relationships with artists and community members, enhanced organizational capacity, unexpected and creative programming ideas, greater legitimacy in the public mind and new revenue streams. This work also helps a cultural organization to plumb the unique character of its particular locality and community, which can elevate each organization's distinctiveness in an increasingly crowded cultural landscape. Like making new friends, this work takes intention and imagination. It entails being vulnerable and taking risks. And it takes time. But as we all know from personal experience, new friends can open new vistas and new ways of seeing the world. And the very process of building new friendships makes our lives richer, more interesting and more open to creative possibility.

MAKING PROGRESS
The practices highlighted in this report are present in differing strengths in different organizations but come into balance as an organization works to achieve effective and sustainable arts engagement.

Sample starting point   In progress   In balance

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Appendix: List of Interviewees

Ashley Boyd
MomsRising

Adam Huttler
Fractured Atlas

Alan Brown
WolfBrown

Beth Kanter
Beth's Blog

Carlton Turner
Alternate ROOTS

Carol Gelatt
Gelatt Partners

Cora Mirikitani
Center for Cultural Innovation

Dana Kawaoka-Chen
Bay Area Justice Funders Network

David Feiner
Albany Park Theater Project

Diana Scearce
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Diane Ragsdale
Jumper (blog)

Esther Robinson
ArtHome

Jill Paulsen
Cuyahoga Arts & Culture

John Holden
Demos

Julie Fry
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Lucy Bernholz
Stanford University Center on Philanthropy
and Civil Society

Michael Rohd
Sojourn Theatre

MK Wegmann
National Performance Network

Nick Rabkin
Independent consultant

Peter Linett
Slover Linett Audience Research

Regina Smith
The Kresge Foundation

Ron Ragin
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Sam Miller
Lower Manhattan Cultural Council

Sue Coliton
The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation

Susan Misra
Management Assistance Group

Theresa Sweetland
Intermedia Arts

Warren Garrett
Ontario Presents

Stephan Richard
Center Stage

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