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Ideas and Information on Arts and Culture

## Funding at the Intersection of Art and Environment A Field Scan

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## Funding at the Intersection of Art and Environment: A Field Scan

*Alexis Frasz*

Environmental consciousness and activism are growing worldwide, sometimes arising from unlikely sources — Pope Francis issuing his recent encyclical on climate change, IKEA pledging to move toward 100 percent renewables, and Norway (a major oil-producing country) and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (a philanthropy built on the success of Standard Oil) deciding to divest from fossil fuels. People from across diverse sectors in society — religion, academia, business — are beginning to see both

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their responsibility for and their agency in addressing climate change and environmental sustainability. Activist and author Naomi Klein has called climate change the world's "meta issue" because it stands to impact every being and community on Earth. Whereas in previous decades, sustainability issues had been largely left to scientists and environmentalists to solve, it is becoming clear that the complex and interconnected challenges we face today require all hands on deck.

Arts and culture have always been a part of important movements for change, and environmental sustainability is no exception. Increasing numbers of artists and arts organizations are engaging with environmental issues, and a growing number of arts funders are thinking about and seeing this kind of work as both artistically valid and socially relevant. To explore this growing area of interest in our field, GIA commissioned Helicon Collaborative to conduct a scan of arts funders who are supporting environment-related work. By highlighting funders' practices in this area, GIA hopes to spark a broader conversation in the arts funding sector and explore its own potential role in this realm.

### Methodology

Helicon interviewed twenty people: seventeen arts funders and a few other leaders of arts organizations or intermediaries working at the intersection of art and environment. Some of the funders we spoke with are actively pursuing this cross-sector work, while others are only in the beginning stages of considering whether and how to do this. We were interested in answering these questions: What motivates them? What are they doing? What are they finding to be most effective?

### Art and Environment — Why?

The arts funders we interviewed expressed various motivations for supporting work at the intersection of art and environment. Some see environmental sustainability as a critical issue facing the people

and communities they serve, and feel called to address it using whatever means they have at their disposal, including the arts. Others are responding to the increasing number of funding requests they are receiving from artists and arts organizations doing this kind

of work. Still others believe that there is a powerful, and underrealized, role for art and culture to advance environmental goals in ways that other methods cannot, and are developing intentional strategies to further work at this intersection. This work is supported by growing evidence that art and artists play unique roles in movements and efforts for change by bringing awareness to issues in emotionally compelling ways, influencing people's opinions and behaviors, bringing innovative perspectives to complex challenges, and helping to galvanize people around a shared vision.

A growing number of environmental activists and environmental funders are also recognizing the role of art and artists in effecting change. They are realizing that a more sustainable future requires not only new technologies and policies but also a shift in underlying values and social norms. Art and artists can help catalyze these shifts because they appeal to people on the levels of emotions and meaning, helping to create new narratives and to move people to action.

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Taken together, this suggests that there are expanding possibilities for work at the intersection of art and environmental sustainability.

### **What Arts Funders Are Doing**

Each foundation we consulted approaches its art and environment work in a different way, in accordance with their values, working style, and priorities. Most funders doing this work are relatively new to it and are learning through experimentation. Many of these

grantees in different cities are likely to prioritize different things. While climate change is a global issue, its effects are felt in local communities in distinct ways. In Atlanta the priority might be addressing ailing sewage infrastructure, in New Orleans it might be about water management, and in Detroit it might be about land use. Starting with the community's needs, rather than specific sectors or a list of the foundation's priorities, Smith says, means that the arts become one of the "acupressure points" that

can be pressed to achieve community change. In one example of cross-program collaboration, the Environment, Health, Community Development, and Arts & Culture programs jointly funded PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone, an

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early experiments are promising, and all are eager to share their experiences and learn from others who are venturing into this territory. Here are a few examples of different approaches funders are taking.

### **The Kresge Foundation**

The "through line" for all of The Kresge Foundation's program areas, says Regina Smith, senior program officer, is "expanding opportunities for low-income people in urban communities." The arts and culture are one of many problem-solving strategies the foundation uses to create healthy places and address community needs, including policy, infrastructure, and education. That means, Smith says, "arts and culture isn't a silo for us, it is a dotted line that allows us to connect to and infiltrate other sectors." Increasingly, the foundation has recognized that community development requires multiple sectors to work together, and it is creating internal mechanisms to facilitate connections and collaborations between its different program areas toward this end. For example, program officers from different areas do site visits together. This helps them create a shared understanding of a community's own definition of its challenges, and brainstorm how the different program areas can work together to help the community achieve its goals. The different program areas are also helping each other with application language so that each program is relevant and accessible to organizations from multiple sectors, and are beginning to see more crossover applicants as a result.

The arts program now asks all applicants how their proposed projects will build community resilience in the face of climate change and recognizes that

effort to build a sustainable community and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a twenty-five-block area of the city.

Increasingly this cross-sector focus draws art program staff into conversations with others who are thinking about community development in holistic ways — New Urbanists, the American Planning Association, and smart growth proponents, among others. While interest in cross-sector work is growing across the board, each sector has its own language, structures, and processes. Kresge, among others, recognizes that there are some people (artists and others) and entities that play an important role of bridging these "language barriers" between sectors, but this role is still not well defined or resourced.

### **Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation's Art + Environment program supports artists and organizations that "reflect how creativity can spark sustainable solutions to the effects of climate change." Its most recent RFP focused on organizations foregrounding cultural strategies and civic engagement in their work to address climate change. The majority of the RFP's four hundred applicants and its resulting nine grantees are non-arts organizations prioritizing culture in order to advance climate goals. Risë Wilson, director of philanthropy, says of the rationale for the program: "This enormous challenge has been tackled through data and politics, but that hasn't sufficiently advanced us. It doesn't matter how right you are about the science, we need to motivate everyday people and policymakers to *care* in order to change the behaviors and value systems that got us where

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we are today. This crisis is as much about culture and imagination as it is about science and economics. As a movement, we need to have a greater understanding of human behavior and psychology — what does it take to change people’s hearts and minds? Art has been underutilized as a strategy to do this.”

While this work draws on the legacy of Robert Rauschenberg as an artist concerned about environmental sustainability, Climate Change is a new program area for the foundation. Over the past two years, the foundation has sought the wisdom of a diverse set of players in the climate sector — scientists, policymakers, environmental justice activists, scholars, and others — in order to understand different dimensions of the climate movement, what sort of support is needed, and the potential role of art and culture. And the foundation remains in a learning posture even as it launches its climate programs. Wilson sees huge potential but emphasizes that “this is version 1.0 of this work. Both funders and practitioners alike still need shared language, cross-sector networks, and an understanding of the best ways to deploy culture as a tool for creating environmental sustainability in order to be effective.” As it steps into this new arena, the foundation hopes its grants can catalyze a larger conversation within the environmental and art sectors about what role arts and culture can play in addressing climate change, while also beginning to foster the cross-sector networks necessary to make that work real.

### **The George Gund Foundation**

The George Gund Foundation is committed to making Greater Cleveland a better place to live. The foundation has both an arts program and an environmental program but considers climate change to be an urgent issue that cuts across all of its program areas. Starting six years ago, as part of its application process, Gund began asking all of the nonprofit organizations who applied for funding to outline what they were doing to address climate change. At that time, it also began restricting its capital grants to projects that meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. As a result of these two initiatives, a wide cross section of arts nonprofits who had not previously thought about sustainability started to make changes in their behavior. This includes recycling theater sets, encouraging bike riding among employees, not using disposable paper products, and conducting more online marketing to cut down on paper and mailing costs. The foundation is also attentive to the sustainability issues in its own internal practices, including working on reducing its energy use and considering a sustainability review of the investments in its stock portfolio.

The foundation also supports numerous arts organizations doing art-driven environmental work and is seeing an increase in this kind of activity, especially among younger artists and organizations. For example, the Upcycle Parts Shop, a community and art-making space, recovers surplus materials and connects them to people for creative reuse. Upcycle is part of an arts-based community revitalization strategy in a former industrial neighborhood and is also supported by ArtPlace.

### **Compton Foundation**

Compton Foundation’s work is focused on building movements for progressive and democratic social change. Several years ago the foundation found that despite its support of many environmental organizations and projects, progress was not occurring at the speed or scale that the foundation sought. Jen Sokolove, the foundation’s program director, says, “for a long time organizations have said, ‘if people only understood the data better, they would change.’ But very few people are compelled by science and data alone. People actually engage with issues when their emotions are engaged. We realized that if we were going to support movements, we had to start integrating creative work.” Compton’s research found that the most effective movements for social change consistently integrated storytelling and cultural strategies. Because art reaches people on the level of emotions and values, it can be catalytic, creating powerful consciousness and behavior shifts where pure data cannot. On this basis, the board decided to allocate its funds strategically toward the intersection of art and social and environmental change.

For Compton, this means supporting artist-activists focused on environmental issues, as well as helping movement leaders integrate artists and cultural strategies into their work. It means supporting both high-profile artists who have visibility and can reach large numbers of people, as well as emerging and local artists who are working deeply in communities on a grassroots level. Sometimes Compton actually functions as a matchmaker, connecting artists and movement leaders who want to do collaborative work but do not know how to find one another. They also support a growing field of intermediary organizations that perform this matchmaking function and help artists think about how to maximize the impact of their work, like Britdoc for film and Revolutions Per Minute for music. Sokolove admits that funding intermediaries can sometimes be harder to explain to her board than more “direct” funding to artists or environmental organizations but emphasizes that these groups serve an absolutely essential function as translators between very different fields with different languages and ways of working.

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While the foundation's motivation for funding culture is to have an impact on the progressive changes it cares about, it draws a distinction between art and propaganda. While Compton is willing to support both, Sokolove stresses the importance of supporting artists in a way that leaves their creative integrity intact. While this may make the specific nature of the work less predictable, it can lead to the most meaningful artwork, which, due to its creative power, is most likely to have the greatest impact.

## ArtPlace America

ArtPlace is a ten-year collaboration among a number of foundations, federal agencies, and financial institutions working to position arts and culture as a core sector within the context of community development. ArtPlace supports creative placemaking and the integration of the arts into policymaking related to place. While its grantmaking guidelines do not specifically encourage projects with an environmental or ecological focus, many applications in each grant cycle address environmental issues, including eleven projects in its most recent round of thirty-eight grants. ArtPlace-supported projects include environmental remediation efforts, in which artists are helping transform Superfund or other toxic sites; transportation and infrastructure planning; recycling, including projects dealing with biological and other waste materials; and community resilience efforts following natural disasters.

ArtPlace's experience reinforces the importance of a local perspective and local action in partnerships between the arts and sustainability, and especially the importance of connecting to the direct experience of individual people and communities on the ground. As Jamie Bennett, executive director of ArtPlace, says, "Relatively few people can really get their head around the big ecological concepts, like the shrinking of the polar ice cap. In fact, few people even really connect to environmental issues that are closer to them — like the concept of a watershed. But everyone has a connection to a river, or a park, or a favorite natural landscape — they have some positive association with such places. So working with stories that connect to people's personal experience with the environment can move people to action. And this is what artists do — tell the stories, visualize the issues — to help people see themselves in the bigger picture and understand the power of their individual actions to improve things."

## Some General Points about This Work

Our sample was small, but we heard a number of themes repeatedly:

- Place-based funders have a natural interest in this area of work, and it may be easier for them to

invest in it because they are oriented toward community issues in ways that cross sector silos.

- The quality and significance of the art as *art* matters; art purely as propaganda is actually less effective. That said, the art must be relevant to the audience targeted for influence, which may require art program officers to fund different mediums, art forms, or artists than they might otherwise choose for purely artistic purposes.
- Foundations need program officers that can speak multiple languages and work across program silos, and need to develop intentional structures and practices that support working collaboratively and across sectors.
- It takes time to build trust and a common frame of reference across sectors — for arts funders (and artists) to learn about issues, ways of working, and desired outcomes in the environmental field and vice versa. There is currently a lack of a common language and working methods between sectors, which needs to be developed for effective practice to evolve.
- Systems change takes a very long time, perhaps twenty to thirty years, and funders interested in this work cannot expect to see radical change in annual grant cycles. To some extent, investing in long-term environmental change involves taking chances and making informed bets. Those working in the environmental field emphasized that focusing too heavily on short-term metrics can lead to funding the wrong thing, which of course makes measuring impact challenging.

## Actions Funders Can Take

There are many entry points into this work, at various levels of complexity, and what is appropriate for each funder will depend on its mission and purview. However, because climate change and environmental issues increasingly affect all people and communities, any arts funder who wants to take action should be able to find an inroad that is mission related. Here are some relatively simple actions:

- As part of the application process, ask organizations what they are doing to prepare for and address environmental sustainability/climate change.
- Restrict capital grants to LEED-certified buildings.
- Provide links to resources about sustainability practices on your website.
- Develop an environmental policy for your foundation's own internal operations — start with reducing waste and energy usage.
- Sponsor workshops and other educational efforts for grantees about how they can adapt to climate change or become more sustainable in their practices.

- If your foundation has a separate arts program and environment program, create opportunities to identify shared goals and collaborate — make site visits together, jointly fund projects or organizations, and otherwise explore ways to get beyond sector silos.
- Share information with peers about what you are doing at the intersection of art and environment, and be transparent about both your successes and failures in order to advance field learning.

And here are a few more intensive strategies:

- Tap the expertise of funders and intermediaries already working in this cross-sector space, and at the beginning consider routing grant funds through those with more experience to regrant.
- Begin to seek information about and build relationships in the environmental and sustainability fields. This includes reading current research, attending conferences, becoming educated about policy issues and priorities, and joining relevant membership groups.
- Consider making more environmentally sustainable choices in the foundation’s investment portfolio.

## Next Steps for GIA

Arts funders working in this space suggested two places in particular where field-level action would advance this work.

## Information

The funders that we spoke with said that more information about practice in this area is needed. Useful information would include

- a directory of funders and practitioners doing cross-sector work;
- a better understanding of the different kinds of good and *effective* practice in this area, from

both the environmental impact and artistic perspective; and

- a how-to guide for funders interested in transitioning into this work, including memos for board members, how to put together a grant docket, types of grants at every funding level, how to conduct a sustainability assessment of the foundation’s practices, and so on.

## Networking

Funders doing this work expressed a desire to learn from their peers doing this work within the arts and in sustainability fields. Currently there are relatively few opportunities for environmental and arts funders to connect around this nascent area of practice, especially for foundations who do not have programs in both of these areas. Interviewees emphasized that opportunities to speak to other arts funders at a GIA conference would be a good start in building capacity for this work, but that an important next step is to create “safe spaces for exchange” where environmental and arts funders can come together to discuss strategies and share information across sectors. GIA might provide this kind of opportunity in partnership with the Environmental Grantmakers Association.

## Conclusion

While this work at the intersection of art and environment is still nascent, there is plenty of promising practice to build on. Environmental action is becoming more urgent and important every day, and the evidence that art has something important to add to the movement is growing. A supportive network of funders sharing information and strategies could go a long way toward advancing this critical work.

*Holly Sidford provided research support for this article.*

*Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford are cultural strategists and partners in Helicon Collaborative.*

## LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Jamie Bennett  
executive director, ArtPlace

Vickie Benson  
program director, Arts,  
The McKnight Foundation

Ben Cameron  
former program director, Arts,  
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Diana Cohn  
executive director,  
Panta Rhea Foundation

Anita Contini  
program lead, Art and Culture,  
Bloomberg Philanthropies

Scott Cullen  
executive director, GRACE  
Communications Foundation

Deena Epstein  
former senior program  
officer, Arts, The George  
Gund Foundation

Bill Fox  
director of the Center for Art +  
Environment, Nevada Museum  
of Art

Ken Grossinger  
cofounder and chair,  
CrossCurrents Foundation

Jamie Hand  
director of research strategies,  
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Cinny Kennard  
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Maurine Knighton  
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Judilee Reed  
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