



Grantmakers in the Arts
Proceedings from the
1999 Conference

**Strengthening the Arts
Through Policy, Performance and Practice**

November 14-17, 1999 San Francisco

**An Artist's View:
Ann Chamberlain**

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*Strengthening the Arts through
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In 1999 Grantmakers in the Arts celebrated its fifteenth anniversary and, as organizations periodically do, we took this opportunity to stand back, take stock of our work as grantmakers, and look to the future. As part of this process, we surveyed our membership and also asked a number of you to tell us what you were working on, how you were doing, and what was keeping you awake at night.

In fact, we found very few surprises. You talked about the need to sustain arts organizations and leaders, increase public participation, and support individual artists and their work. You also talked about your desire for more informed arts policy, better evaluation, and new linkages to the for-profit sector. These ideas formed the content of the 1999 conference.

But the spirit of the conference came from another place, another vision, that is equally a part of the essential GIA. John Gardner, the founder of Independent Sector, gave a speech in Oakland in 1998, in which he spoke of the immense promise and possibility of the work of philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. He said of our work:

We are allowed to pursue truth, even if we are going in the wrong direction – allowed to experiment even if we're bound to fail, to map unknown territory even if we get lost. We are committed to alleviate misery and redress grievances, to give reign to the mind's curiosity and the soul's longing, to seek beauty where we can and defend truth where we must, to honor the worthy and smite the rascals with everyone free to define worthiness and rascality, to find cures and to console the incurable, to deal with the ancient impulse to hate and fear the tribe in the next valley, to prepare for tomorrow's crisis and preserve yesterday's wisdom, and to pursue the questions that others won't because they are too busy or too lazy or fearful or jaded. It is a sector for seed planting and path finding, for lost causes and causes that yet may win. This is the vision.

Although he wasn't speaking of our work specifically, I have not encountered a more eloquent expression of what it means to be a grantmaker in the arts. The 1999 conference began with its content firmly in hand and with this vision offered as a guide. Hopefully along the way, we explored each other's best funding efforts, shared lessons from our failures, and drew courage from our commitment to artists, art forms, and community.

Cora Mirikitani

1999 GIA Conference Chair

Mirikitani: *Ann Chamberlain is a visual artist resident here in San Francisco who has worked in a range of contexts. From public art to printed books and installations, using text, photographic imagery, and found materials as source material. And whose public arts commissions have included a number of outstanding installations including the San Francisco Public Library in a collaboration with Ann Hamilton; the San Francisco General Hospital; and the University of California San Francisco Mount Zion Cancer Center. Now, she's working on the completion of a commission for the California State Supreme Court building and is also working collaboratively with Victor Zaballa on an installation at the Mexican Cultural Heritage Gardens in San Jose, which just recently opened. Ann Chamberlain's list of awards and grants is extensive. She has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, awarded a Eureka Fellowship, a Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Travel Grant, an NEA Inter-arts Grant, and an NEA Visual Arts Grant in photography.*

Ann is presently working as an artist and teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. And I hope you will join me in giving a very, very warm welcome to Ann Chamberlain.

I don't know what I thought I was doing when I said yes to do this. One reason it seemed like something I should do is that in a way it's a payback. I've been very fortunate, and I've been given a lot by this larger assembled group, anonymously or directly, and I'm deeply appreciative of that.

All I have to offer you is my own experience so what I have to say will be very different from perhaps what other artists' perspectives might be on granting and funding. But what I decided to do was look at my life as an artist, from your standpoint: what has it taken to support me as an individual artist? And further, try to think about what things have been really generative to me: what things have brought more ideas to me as an artist, have moved me ahead? looking at it almost in terms of investment and creative capital.

I also wanted to think about how that investment is returned or paid back, how artists give back to their communities or more largely to their culture. And how we artists can partici-

pate in the systems that surround us. What does it mean to be a citizen and to be an artist? What is it for an artist to be a full member of this culture? A lot of times we think of an artist as being a kind of international nomad – people who can easily be transplanted to a far away place and do their work and don't have families or obligations such as serious permanent jobs or mortgages or any of those things that hold us to the ground. And who have no sense of really being embedded within this culture. And I think that that's a bit of a myth. So I'm going to talk about my work in relation to these issues.

I want to preface this by saying that the work I do is very time-intensive working with community, doing research, and the process requires a long term investment: it's really about the quality of engagement that creates the end result. That's a hard concept to understand in a culture where everything is very much product and commodity driven: I don't create a salable commodity. The ways that I've been supported have been very important because like many other artists I haven't a steady income that comes from the sale of work, for instance.

I had a Fulbright Fellowship in Mexico about 10 or 15 years ago. And one of the things that I really loved about that fellowship is that it allows artists and all kinds of U.S. citizens to be citizen ambassadors. And the intention of that grant was really to break down the kind of isolation that exists within this country vis-à-vis other cultures.

The Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Travel Grant had a similar kind of intention, for me it really allowed a lot of change to happen in terms of my ideas about this culture and what I understand and what I knew about myself. So I want to show you a few slides of what happened there. And for those of you who don't know, the Lila Wallace program was an international exchange that allowed artists to go for three months to another culture and then to return and work with a community here and to share what they had experienced there.

I went to Oaxaca, Mexico because I was interested in the ways that people collectively shared stories and information there. It is a culture that is very different from our kind of storyboard-slash-television set that isolates us

from others. There was a lot of participation, people out in the streets doing things. Rituals, parades, celebrations, processions that brought people together. I was drawn to things that were going on in the zocalo at the end of the year. This was a ritual of eating bunuelos: you get a little plate with a piece of fried bread and you eat the bread and then once you have eaten the bread you break the dish by throwing it over your shoulder towards the church. It's an interesting ritual that speaks to our ideas about getting rid of the past, throwing it out, breaking with the past and so forth and so on.

I was interested in the litter of potsherds that accumulated next to the bunuelo stand. And so I started collecting this stuff and I washed it and I brought it back to the zocalo and decided to set up my own little stand and asked people what they were throwing out. I asked them to write it on these little potsherds. This *[slide]* is my stand next to the bunuelo stand. For about two weeks I was doing this. And at the end of the time when the bunuelo stand finally closed, we did a kind of an opening or inauguration of this shrine/installation in a gallery that was really to that ritual. And it was called "Breaking with the Past" [Romper con el Pasado.] And it includes both the pot shards and the bunuelos, as well a little series of candles that are similar to the kind that you would see in the churches in Oaxaca. So I took the faces of the various people who were the tenders of this tradition, these people who were selling the bunuelos and had done it for generations, and put their faces on to the glass jar lanterns. So it was really a shrine to them and their tending of that tradition.

When I returned to San Francisco, I worked in the Mission District with a number of different organizations, one of which was an alcoholism treatment center with women who were trying to become rehabilitated. And we did a number of projects that were ways of trying to reconstitute and tell their stories and give that credit. One of the things that was really stunning to me was realizing how they were wonderful story tellers and yet all of their stories didn't mean anything to them.

So one of the things I did was try and make objects that actually meant something to the women and related to their life stories, where

they had to share their stories and make them into something physical. This is a piece about trying to figure out a moment in their lives that was calm or where they were happy, because so much of their life was filled with tumult. I asked them to think of that moment and write a story on a tag about that, and then we found pictures that connected to that. And then we put those onto glass jars. These were called "remedies." The piece created sort of places they could go when they were having stress or difficulty. So it played on the notion of medicine or medication but was actually about their internal resources.

Another project we did together had to do with the bunuelo tradition. We took Goodwill china and broke it, and then I had them write their stories on the fragments and then reassemble it. And they were very attached to this, this was sort of like having something precious, a set of china, something that none of them had ever had.

The Lila Wallace Reader's Digest grant was a program that was only funded for three years. And it was a wonderful opportunity for me and probably for many other people. I'm sure it was a very complicated and difficult project to fund and to coordinate with host countries and with sponsoring organizations in other countries, but it provided a really deep and lasting experience. I think also that it offered a way to give back that experience in a very immediate way through the residency at home. Residencies are a kind of investment in the future and you don't really know what it's going to yield. It's very unpredictable. For me numerous projects came out of this experience.

When I was working at The Exploratorium, (an art and science museum) oftentimes residents would come in and they would do things and use the technology there, and sometimes it was rather awkward what they did. But Pete Richards (the director of the Artist Residency Program), would always say, further down the line, they've done some very interesting work using that same technology. So I think that it is the kind of creative capital investing in an artist and in their future that's a really important and wonderful thing.

This notion of giving artists experience – whether it's going away from where you normally live or whether it's opportunities to use technology that you wouldn't otherwise have – is valuable, hugely important. And the reality is that it costs a lot of money and time to set up that kind of program.

When I was on the staff at the Headlands, (artist residency program in Marin county north of San Francisco) I was often frustrated when artists would say, well, it's not enough money. And I thought, you know, you're so ungrateful, because it took us so much effort to raise that money. But then I recently was asked to do a residency, and I thought it sounded like a great idea until I found out how much money I was going to be given as a stipend. And I was on the other side of the fence. Artists are people who have responsibilities, whether house payments or rent or things that they have to sustain in their home country or home place and that becomes a reality in terms of how much money they need. So residencies are more expensive, I think, than one would imagine.

But, again, the notion of taking people out of the context of their life is both a plus and a minus in terms of thinking about what can be garnered from it. It can give you really fresh eyes on what the world is. But recently I've started feeling a little bit suspicious about this notion of putting all these artists together. I remember at the Headlands we were fond of calling ourselves a community. But Wes Jackson visited and said, 'You aren't a community, you artists all here together. You are a club. You know, you're just like a like-minded group of people.' He was right – there were no children, old people, or people in other kinds of professions. There's a tendency to want to isolate artists. It's certainly less complicated and costly. And with all the furor around the Sensation show, (in New York) maybe people think that artists are almost like a virus and that if you can contain them in these little colonies, then they won't contaminate the rest of the culture. I think that Lewis Hyde is absolutely right, we need to do a lot of contaminating, and, you know, we should spread like viruses. That role of an artist as a citizen out there infiltrating is really...it's a good model.

Probably the greatest catalyst for change in our work as artists is our lives – our life experience – particularly those things that come unbidden and force us to reassess what we are doing. Shortly after I concluded the Lila Wallace project I was diagnosed with breast cancer. So all of this, what I was doing and everything, got sort of turned upside down. I think that the notion of being in a foreign country and asking yourself questions about every single fundamental assumption you've ever had about your culture, is kind of parallel experience to having a life-threatening illness. It's like all of a sudden, my experience of my body became this huge question mark instead of something that I always relied on. And so it threw me into this whole sort of realm of experience and understanding.

This *[slide]* was a piece that I did at the end of the treatment for cancer. A giant changing gown, about eight feet high and four feet across or something like one of those things they have in the Macy's parade. On the inside are sewn images of white blood cells, something that I never thought about, blood – what it's composed of and how it provides this kind of shield, this invisible shield from illness. So I sewed these on the interior of the dress and then, all of my blood tests, my blood levels for ten months were sewn in there as well. It's the fortune and misfortune of everything in life, but it put me into this realm where I was thinking a lot about these kinds of landscapes: the interior of the body, a chromosome, how these kind of defects can transform your life. This *[slide]* is chromosome 17, where the BRCA-1 gene (the gene for hereditary breast cancer) is located.

I collaborated with my doctors on this particular installation. I did all these little tests that are kind of like what gene testing looks like. So I was imitating their process. What I did was four-inch squares of swatches of material silk-screened with a nucleotide bases and then stained and pinned on the wall with dissecting pins.

The installation Vital Signs was another, further development of this idea of body as interior and interior decorating. It worked also with the whole notion of women as those who decorate the interior but actually used biological and

genetic imagery as part of that. The wallpaper was actually blood cells, though it looks like Laura Ashley. These are white blood cells on pincushions. And this was a series of magnifiers that had images of fragments of family album images in them and then they were overlaid with an image from a histology slide. So it's sort of the macro and the micro combined, but also thinking about the notion of a tidy biological progression, and the abnormal growth of tumors and cells that won't turn off and that kind of aberrant growth. So looking at those two different realms.

As all of this was going on another part of me was longing to be in nature and to slow down and to be outside the realm of, you know, the kind of busy-ness of cities. And I started gardening, and I started working with the hospital on the possibility of doing a garden with them.

This leads into funding for publicly commissioned works and the zone between residency/research and commissions with expectations of concrete outcomes. I applied with the hospital to the Creative Work Fund here in San Francisco, through the Haas Family Fund, to transform a courtyard that was really unused, it had a lot of freeway plants in it that stayed the same color all year around, and just to make it really lush and beautiful and welcoming to people that came through there.

I worked with the people in the Infusion Center (where people are given I.V. doses of chemotherapy); we'd plant seeds and then grow them in the Infusion Center and then take them outside and put them in the garden. So there was this kind of direct relationship with the people that were actually there, being able to watch these plants grow as they'd come back progressively for treatment. It turned into this wild and crazy sort of like a backyard kind of place. We started taking the plants from the garden and pressing them into tiles for the walls.

The value of gardening for me was that people could come together and be together or be alone and be in nature. Stories and what people needed to talk about came up in the process. But it wasn't a contrived situation where people needed to sit down and tell their story. This all sort of happened in a slow way, but we started doing these tiles and using the tiles both as a

way to identify the plants but also as a place for people to inscribe their stories.

The garden became a place for rituals and a place for people to gather – we did summer solstice and concerts and memorials there. It was an occasion to break down the patient-doctor professional divide. We made up little rituals within the garden – tying wishes to the trees and throwing pennies in the fountain.

But the other part of it that I was interested in was how you could transform the physicalness of the hospital or this treatment center, which to me, had this kind of really antiseptic...

A lot of the posters on the walls of the entrance to the center used the ideology of war to talk about how they were going to cure cancer. And yet there was none of the kind of subjective experience of either of the doctors and nurses that worked there, or of the patients. All those people were very dedicated and had very important questions and issues that they were dealing with. We took these tiles and we tiled all the way down the entrance corridor. There were about 525 of these tiles, collectively done by people that were patients, as well as by doctors and nurses and people that worked there. Finally, I worked with Katsy Swan, who's a landscape designer, and we pulled up the cement and put in paths and sort of really softened it. There was an old nursing school that had fallen down during the last earthquake and we took some of the tile from that and designed a fountain in the back of the garden. It had this feeling of past-ness about it. We went to lots of places like the Berkeley Botanic and got plants that are medicinal from Eastern medicine, and also ones that are used in chemotherapy, imprinted into the tiles.

A lot of these were about what advice would you give someone – sing every day, eat chocolate for breakfast, you know, stand on your head, on and on. Others were people talking about what death meant to them.

The Creative Work Fund gave support to artists to work with a community for one year, developing a permanent project that would remain once the artist was finished. The hospital and I were funded by the Creative Work Fund for a year for me to be in residence. It took us five

years to finish this project to give you a sense of the gap between the aspiration to create a thing – this vision of it – and the reality of what it took in time and money to do it. I remember having a conversation with one of the administrators, and she was saying, oh, you were so over-budget. And I thought, boy, she got the deal of the century! Here's an artist who won't give up, I'm going to just keep going until I finish this thing.

Another part of it that is hard though, is that even now I get calls from people, saying, "I'd really like to do a tile." But you know, the tiles are done. And I would love for them to do a tile. I wish it could have been set up as an ongoing process that continued throughout this building, as something that people really felt like they could participate in, rather than this one that went on for a certain time and now is no longer.

I want to talk about another public piece that required a lengthy engagement with community. This is a project I did with Ann Hamilton in the new main library. It was a Percent for Art project and we decided, because it was at the moment where the library was going to go from a catalog system to an on-line system, to have the cards from the old card catalogue be the material that we were going to use. We paid people \$1 per card to write citations on the card catalog cards, ones that had been discarded. We asked people to write on them, and to write citations that were from books, books either that were directly referred to on the card, or in some way commented on the subject of what the card was. There were something like 50,000 cards that we wrote, and they cover three different levels of the core wall within the building, at the interface between the circulating collection and the closed stacks. The piece has that same relationship as a catalog is to a collection.

But again, what would have made this wonderful is if people could have actually come to the library, seen the cards, and then written a card. The quality of the cards actually would have been quite different if we could have had that opportunity. But the nature of public art is that it must be completed when the building is completed.

I'm going to talk about one other public piece just completed in San Jose. This is a collaboration with Victor Mario Zaballa, who's my partner. The research for this project took us to San Jose, once the center of agricultural fruit growing, and now the center of Silicon high tech industry. The landscaping that surrounds the high tech buildings are ornamental plum, this funny reference to what once was there. When Victor and I were thinking about this project, we went down and visited the neighborhood where this Mexican Cultural Heritage Plaza was going to be, and even though it was in the middle of the winter, we saw hummingbirds in these wonderful little neighborhood gardens that people were very carefully tending. We thought that was really interesting because hummingbirds have a tremendous symbolism in Mexican-American culture as well as in Mexico, and also in the Ohlone Myths, which was the native tribe that lived in the San Jose area. So we knew that the hummingbird image would probably factor into this in some way as a symbol. We created four gates, to the four directions. And we used Mexican glyphs or motifs for each one of the symbolic elements. Within the actual garden, we created a couple of walls that have hummingbird tiles on them, as well as creating a fountain that had hummingbirds on the surface of it. And we created four niches that were connected to the four directions, but dealt with principles of life and valued qualities within the Mexican community. These included ideas about history, ideas about heroes, and labor and family.

We asked people to bring to us their photographs of heroes and to tell us who those people were, as well as to bring us pictures of family, pictures of labor. We did a series of tile workshops with them, where they made the terracotta tiles, and we photographed all of their images from their albums, and put those on to tile as well. This is the family niche and these are some of the pictures that people brought. There were hundreds of little pictures. People brought things out of their wallets, key chains, and albums.

When the cultural center finally opened, it was the first Redevelopment Agency building project outside of the central corridor of San

Jose. There was this odd relationship the community had to this huge thing that had just moved into their neighborhood – it was like a chain store except it was a cultural institution – a bit intimidating. The public art provided something that people could go to and say, “See, I made that tile,” or “I brought that picture of my grandparent to be photographed,” or “This is about me, this speaks to me.” It’s become a destination, people go to these niches as if they were shrines. It gave people a sense of participation in the bricks and mortar of the building.

I wanted to conclude by talking a little bit about the notion of receiving cash grants and fellowships, because they have been really important and valuable to me, as well. I was thinking about the way, when I get a grant, I put it into a little account, and then I won’t use it for anything so I’m sure it goes into something about art. I know that other artists say, “Well, you know, my NEA fellowship paid for tires on my truck” or “My NEA paid my taxes,” or things like that. I can point to the projects where I took a piece of money and put it into a project. But what’s interesting to me is that I can’t point to a series of *ideas* and say, you know, that money generated these ideas. Money doesn’t necessarily equal creativity. It’s not necessarily generative in that way.

In thinking about the cash grants I’ve gotten, there’s the difficulty when you get a grant and all your friends don’t. And the way it singles out people within the community. You have three, three minutes of elation and then you start feeling guilty. Another part of it is there’s a way it encourages a kind of individuality where we’re all in competition with each other, rather than being in it together. Longing for *that*, I think, is as an aspect of what we are as artists and as citizens.

In this culture, we tend to be very prone to throwing money at a problem, thinking that will solve it. What are the more complicated or more interesting paths that support can take? It may be money, but it may have another form. I just wanted to end by talking about this whole notion of what it is to be an artist and to be a citizen. What will it take to bring artists in as full participants in this culture? What kinds of

roles for artists will enliven rather than institutionalize the way artists participate in whatever entity it is, whether it’s a hospital or a school or whatever?

I always love to go back to John Cage because I think that he’s such a generous and inspirational figure. He said that in art (western art) there’s been a lot of history of learning how to tell personal tragedies and personal expression, and he said what we need now is to be convivial. We need more inclusion. Bring in the artists, in other words. He said, “Here comes Everybody!”

Thank you.

**THIS IS ONE OF A SERIES OF PROCEEDINGS FROM THE GIA 1999 CONFERENCE,
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