



A Call for Building Deep Resilience in Arts Funding: The future of our field post-coronavirus

Dear colleagues,

I'm sending this letter now to rally the arts funding community during this difficult moment to not only react to crisis but also to be sure we treat this as moment to create our desired future. I write this letter as a follow up to the Grantmakers in the Arts webinar, [COVID19 and the arts ecosystem](#) and a pre-amble to ongoing programming throughout the year that will highlight examples of inspiring work that is happening now and of the future we can all create together.

The coronavirus crisis has revealed key vulnerabilities in the financial health of the field of arts and culture. This crisis has also illuminated great need and opportunity to create the future of the cultural community and its financing. Luckily, the ways we are coping and responding to this crisis yields insights that can inform the future of our field. As science fiction writer, William Gibson said, "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed." And fellow science fiction trailblazer Octavia Butler reflected in her time, "I have a huge and savage conscience that won't let me get away with things." Our consciences should be the guide for our distributing the future more evenly. I see several opportunities to create our preferred future: from re-centering those most marginalized and truly understanding a resilient system to building alternative economic systems, a future we want is neither unimaginable nor intangible. I offer some themes below illustrating how the seeds of the future can become our normative practices.

Resilience

What I've learned about resilience from environmentalists and urbanists is that a resilient system does NOT return to the way it was before a crisis but instead becomes different and less vulnerable in light of what we have learned from the crisis. The arts sector's recovery from this crisis canNOT be a return to what was, a state of extreme vulnerability. Prior to the start of this crisis, [an article was published in the Winter 2020 issue of the GIA Reader](#) written by our Capitalization consulting partner, Rebecca Thomas. Her key take-away in the piece is that the cultural funding sector did not learn from the Great Recession. As the nation recovered, the field did not adapt. Instead, organizations were financed in restrictive ways that did not allow for necessary flexibility to pivot in times of crisis. Ultimately, this article was published at this time due to the increasing concern about the possibility of another recession. I take no pleasure in its arrival. And yet, I urge us to take a critical look at this juncture at which we've arrived to choose a different path forward this time.

Resilience for the arts and culture sector must mean that we become a sector that behaves differently than it did before the crisis.

Interdependence, Anti-Racism, and Disability

Our field's responses to this crisis remind us that all funders can put our most vulnerable at the center of our work always, treating them as the leaders they are. This centering of oppressed groups – including people of color, people with disabilities and others – need not be charity. Funders can and should support self-determination by our communities, including investing in organizations that are founded by, governed and managed by and for impacted communities.

As a field interested in realizing a just future, we are recognizing that we are as safe as the most vulnerable of us. With our fellow residents continuing to work – stocking our shelves and ringing up our purchases, transit workers helping us commute safely, and education, health care, and emergency service providers foregrounding our communities’ wellness – while the middle and upper class are able to stay home, our connectedness becomes more visible. This kind of interdependence has always been the case. This is the moment for recognizing and centering it throughout our future.

For one, the precise opposite of this has become increasingly more common throughout this pandemic. For some folks, this moment is serving as an excuse to make racist and xenophobic attacks [directed at Asians and Asian Americans](#), a long racialized group in the U.S. Asians and Asian Americans have long been labeled the “model minority,” an extremely harmful misconception based in anti-blackness. The ease with which some of our fellow residents have turned to scapegoating these folks should cause us all to consider how quickly we scapegoat all racialized peoples. But as we witness racism, we witness anti-racism. Grantmakers are not only issuing statements in support of Asians and Asian Americans who are being targeted, they are making grants to organizations that explicitly support them through a racial equity lens.

And in addition, this moment creates an opportunity for the U.S. to embrace the social model of disability. As many of our staff members – administrators and artists – work remotely, we have the opportunity to consider how people with disabilities are seldom accommodated the way we have been in their attempts to work remotely. Other countries build social system in which all folks must adapt to accommodate its residents’ disabilities. As the [folks at Sins Invalid explain](#), “No body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.” The U.S. is seeing what that process looks like as our workplaces, our arts producers and presenters, adapt to a large-scale need to work remotely. We have the ability to integrate these lessons into our support for artists, administrators, and other stakeholders into the future.

Valuing art and artists

This crisis serves as a reminder that arts and culture are a part of everything and must be treated as such. As funders of arts and culture, we have long known their significance to our emotional and mental health learning. In this “new normal,” more and more people are coming to realize their necessity. [David Brooks even remarked in the New York Times](#) about the coronavirus crisis, “Have you noticed that music and art are already filling the emotional gaps left by the absence of direct human contact?” Arts and culture must be treated by philanthropy and by every level of our government as essential elements of mental and physical health, among other essential societal needs.

As a field that has often been conflicted about the role of new media for remote viewing, this is a positive development that must receive continued capacity-building and support into the future.

Policies that value arts & culture

Arts and culture are not just palliative but are also emotionally resonant means to illuminate social issues. More broadly, we must consider arts and culture as elements of broad social issues and as a frame for considerations and approaches to social issues. As we center the most vulnerable within our work, we also have the opportunity to interrogate and challenge the conditions that create this vulnerability.

U.S. Representative [Adam Schiff has advocated for creative industry workers](#) as workers who deserve our support, also making the point that so many of us are turning to their work during this difficult time.

As the cultural community continues to advocate for the arts, we are reminded by current proposed legislative responses to coronavirus that artists are vulnerable workers – often gig workers – and find common cause with our colleagues that advocate for and support all vulnerable workers. We are also reminded that these vulnerabilities are tightly correlated with race and class. Whole sections of the funding community are [publicly committing to putting the folks most affected](#) by structural inequities at the forefront of our responses to this crisis.

Policies encouraging giving

Federal legislation drafted in response to this crisis has included temporary provisions for universal charitable deductions. This is a key policy for the sustainability of the nonprofit cultural ecosystem and should be the case year-round. Our current standard tax policies make tax deductions easiest only for very large philanthropic gifts. Philanthropic giving need not only be rewarded when executed by the wealthy. Controlling for wealth, giving participation is higher in Black households than all other groups (i.e., percentage share of population giving to charitable organizations), despite Black households holding under two percent of the nation's wealth. For those who do give, the level of giving, measured as a share of median family wealth, is higher for Black and Latinx families than White or other families (i.e., charitable giving as a percentage share of median family wealth), despite Black and Latinx households experiencing higher rates of poverty than White households. This is not taking into account volunteerism. These facts should also inform our field's advocacy. This is just one example of how foundations can shift their foci to increasingly include advocacy and public policy and practice. As you can see, this kind of public policy change can in fact have a significant impact upon grantee organizations' financial health.

Trust-based funding

We are also learning that trust-based funding is possible. In response to this crisis, private and public sector grantmakers are allowing grantees to use formerly-restricted grants as flexibly as they need. Grantmakers are also embracing trust [in their applications for rapid-response grants](#). Some are even increasing their support to their current grantees without asking them to apply. Grantmakers' priorities in this rapid response moment are flexibility and trust.

This is not to say that general operating support is the answer in every instance. An organization that is unstable often just needs to pay down its debts and time and resources to modify its business model. All organizations need risk capital to take advantage of unexpected opportunities as well as an operating reserve. Our past fixations on endowments, facilities, and revenue-generating businesses should remain in the past.

Trust-based funding has often not been standard operating procedure because of our desire for impact and evidence of that impact. Yet, look at our country. Right-wing philanthropy has had considerable impact seeding the judiciary now being appointed throughout this nation's courts as well as this federal administration. How did they do it? Through years of general operating support to those who shared their values and vision. Not through complex strategies, theories of change, or schedules of outcomes but through trust in shared values and visions for the future. Ultimately, looking inward with a critical lens calls upon the need for new economic relationships between both grantmakers and grantseekers and government and nonprofit organizations.

New economic relationships: Not JUST non-profits

[Federal legislative responses to this crisis](#) remind us that the non-profit community can access the public services and benefits available to the small business community and that the small business community employs many artists and culture workers. There are no sectors in society in which artists do not work. Support for artists and the arts must be a part of all social supports.

New economic relationships: Valuing more than just money

GIA's capitalization workshops always include the point that the smallest organizations have limited fixed costs, often the result of their having few or no salaried employees. GIA argues that grantmakers should allow organizations to document the value of volunteered time as organizational assets and resources. These facts should also inform our field's finding new economic models (no longer viewing money as the only forms of support we leverage).

Our field must increasingly grow to become investors in culture – broadening the means and tools of support (from just grants to private investments, etc.), who makes those investments (not just arts philanthropy and public agencies but the full range of funders including public agencies that support residents' health, safety, educations, among other issues) and who/what entities receive support (from organizations to artists, businesses, unincorporated entities, groups of community stakeholders).

This change in investment behavior is not just the responsibility of others. Foundation funding can earn the public's trust by investing its corpus in social benefit rather than allowing social, economic and environmental harms caused by so many traditional investment vehicles.

“Arts and Culture Must be Supported as a Part of All Social Supports”

This crisis can help us illuminate our path toward the future we want to make – one in which our sector is resilient in the face of crisis. Arts and culture must be supported as a part of all social supports. Our cultural communities are impacted by social injustice and must be a part of working toward social justice and must be supported in doing so. Arts and culture are not exclusive to the nonprofit sectors and must be supported by and as part of all sectors. And our long-standing culture funders must expand the embrace of trust-based philanthropy to become standard practice.

Many will argue that the courses of action that we are seeing now are anomalies in response to a crisis. Many will argue that these strategies don't work outside of a crisis. Then why are our organizations and artists so vulnerable that we have to engage these strategies in times of crisis? Our making our preferred future will take courage as we change our normal operating procedures. But, we are revealing to ourselves and to each other every day that we have that courage.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eddie Torres', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Eddie Torres, President & CEO
Grantmakers in the Arts