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Investigating Inequitable Arts Funding and Collective Impact in the Creative Economy

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ABSTRACT

As the largest federal agency for the arts, the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) takes a distinct role in serving underrepresented cultural communities. After regulatory changes in the 1990s however, well-established arts institutions turned to individual philanthropists and continued to thrive, while smaller organizations confronted crippling budget cuts. This paper discusses how the lack of public funding and support for American arts and culture has depleted cultural institutions and historical centers – especially small, community-based art groups – of critical resources to preserve arts culture. This paper analyzes economic trends and data across the creative economy that reveal how disproportionate funding between arts organizations subsequently spiraled into an industry-wide crisis. This paper also reviews the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on arts and culture growth. Finally, this paper synthesizes the voices of professional artists to outline the decline of many traditional art forms and how collective impact has the potential to shape the future of arts and culture.

Keywords: Arts and culture, Arts funding, Creative economy, Collective impact, Racial equality.

JEL Classification Codes: J3, O4, Z11, Z18.

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1. Introduction

The arts industry faces several significant, long-standing barriers to financial stability, preventing long-term growth of the industry. By the late 2010s, the arts sector contributed 4.3 percent of national GDP to the American economy (Forbes). Within this scope, large cultural institutions with revenues of over \$5 million made up just 2 percent of all arts groups, but received the majority of private funding (Ragsdale 2017). These groups, most notably symphonies, opera companies, regional theaters, art museums, and ballet companies, disproportionately serve Caucasian, affluent communities. Groups with budgets of less than \$25,000 compose the other 98 percent of all arts organizations and reach an extensively greater total population as compared to well-established institutions (Horwitz). Most still struggle financially, despite the overwhelming responsibility and

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impact of small-scale organizations. Very little progress has been made over the past 30 years to provide adequate funding to smaller institutions, and the recent Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this state. This essay analyzes the emphasis on private funding for Westernized, long-standing, traditional organizations and the nation's inequitable and highly centralized arts scene through statistics from the BEA, NEA, and ASPCA data. This essay evaluates opinions and perspectives of artists, federal organizations, and local art organizations to investigate ongoing initiatives to combat demographic inequity that have been washed out by individual giving and foundational philanthropy.

2. Existing issues

2.1 Covid-19 affects the landscape

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, devastating the nation's arts scene. Between 2019 and 2020, the creative economy suffered shifts in demand and services, prompting record unemployment rates and industry-wide layoffs. In particular, nationwide lockdowns upset economic activity in industries heavily reliant on face-to-face interaction and large-scale physical events. With strict limitations and regulations on group gatherings, the performing arts sector combatted shifting demand and scope of activity. No other industry was as deeply affected as the performing arts, with both individual and group initiatives still recovering from the economic repercussions. Many institutions lost major sources of earned income generated through stage performances, exhibitions, concerts, and other in-house gigs. The number of workers in the arts and culture sector experienced a 12 percent decline from 2019, dropping from 5.2 million individuals to the current count of 4.6 million. By the third quarter of 2020, 27 percent of musicians and 53.4 percent of all actors, dancers, and choreographers were unemployed. In comparison, music sector unemployment in 2019 leveled off at just 1.1 percent (NEA, 2020). The national unemployment rate across all industries during the same period in 2020 was 8.8 percent, strikingly lower than the arts and culture estimate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Severe revenue losses are associated with surges in creative industry unemployment. The NEA and BEA's annual Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA) report outlines economic measures of value for arts and culture in the U.S. economy. These data reflect an economic tightening of 5.8 percent in 2020, nearly twice the national economic average in the same period. Specific industries were disproportionately affected, as construction of new cultural facilities fell by 24 percent, museums by 22 percent, independent creatives by 21 percent, and motion picture and film by 18 percent (Americans for the Arts [AftA], 2022). Industry data suggests a declining trendline in arts and culture, and reports of annual sales parallel this projection. Annual sales in the creative economy decreased 9 percent in 2020, while performing arts industry losses represented over 25 percent of lost sales in arts and culture (Florida and Seman, 2020).

Discrepancies among employment and revenue loss rates arose across the nation. Southern states were disproportionately hard hit, with areas such as Nashville, Tenn., New Orleans, Orlando, Fla., and Memphis, Tenn. reportedly experiencing employment drops greater than New York and Los Angeles. However, in terms of revenue, states in the Northeast and West endured the greatest raw sales losses (Florida and Seman, 2020).

By year's end, most industries began to recover from sustained phases of lockdown and inactivity. Arts and culture production, however, continued to suffer "large negative effects," with 61 percent of businesses in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sector experiencing lasting impacts (Guibert et al., 2021). Businesses and organizations are gradually reworking and adapting to new norms arising from increased reliance on technology and contactless events. Web publishing and streaming industries grew by 14 percent in 2020, highlighting the popularity of online tools and digital spaces (AftA, 2022). Performing arts organizations are eagerly assessing possibilities for virtual showings and events, which have the potential to expand capacity and flexibility. Advocacy groups have transitioned to online operations, holding all meetings online and allowing employees to work remotely. The impacts of Covid-19 on arts and culture were profound and overwhelming, eliciting a reevaluation of the production model for arts and culture and their role in society.

2.2 Technology on the creative economy

Technology may further reshape the financial landscape for artists and arts organizations. Developments in AI-generated art and digitally born forms of art have spurred heated debates on the validity and ethics of this emerging technology. Discussions over the implementation of AI in Hollywood movies and productions roused public interest in mid-2023. Complications arose between the Hollywood production representative Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) labor union during the ongoing contract negotiations. At this time, the full extent and implications of Hollywood labor stoppages are unknown. Beyond this moment in time, however, AI appears poised to represent an ongoing issue with the potential to fundamentally reshape the creative economy in complex and multifaceted ways. The SAG-AFTRA has repeatedly emphasized “informed consent” of the usage of actors’ names, voices, actions, and persona for production purposes. Their concerns stem from the fear that AI characters may replace human actors, generating revenue from preexisting content without corresponding opportunities for new work. This is an especially alarming issue for screenwriters, whose work is greatly vulnerable to script-developing AI tools. Contrary to visual media-work that can easily be identified for plagiarism or illegal reproduction—written work like scripts generally reference multiple sources, rendering it unlikely for screenwriters to receive credit or compensation (Bedingfield, 2023). Leaders and actors alike are also seeking increased pay and compensation, with the Directors Guild of America reaching an agreement of a 5 percent wage boost (Whitten et al., 2023).

AI experts caution that AI algorithms frequently depend on preexisting data and images, resulting in the generation of derivatives that reinforce popular styles instead of fostering innovation. The utilization of AI algorithms in art creation and curation could trigger an indefinite “feedback loop” of homogenous styles and images (Schrader, 2023). This raises concerns over the potential standardization of artistic expression, stifling the diversity and creativity found in art. Inevitably, the art market, flooded with monotonous, mass-produced images, may become “saturated,” as told by Perry Jonsson, a U.K. filmmaker and digital artist embracing AI (Harris, 2023). He believes that the infiltration of AI art on the market possibly connotes a decrease in the value of preexisting art. Experts also warn creative industries of AI inflicting shifts in the labor landscape. In fields such as advertising and graphic design, AI art may undercut and discredit the value of human practitioners as businesses outsource to digital technologies. This possibility would leave digital artists and graphic designers vulnerable to more competition and job opportunity fluctuations. Cem Dilmegani, an analyst at tech startup AIMultiple, has been investigating the legality of such works and questions regarding authorship of AI-generated art. According to Dilmegani, AI works are only eligible for copyright protection under the condition that a human author has contributed significantly to the formation of the piece. Copyright protection laws vary between different countries, so it’s difficult to ascertain whether a piece can potentially be protected by law (Harris, 2023).

The sudden influx of online AI tools and software signifies a major shift in the realm of arts and culture. Rather than resisting the concept and implementation of AI, some artists have chosen to openly embrace AI technology as tools to advance their work and take their craft to new heights. German digital artist Mario Klingemann has been exploring AI art for years, and is working on projects that allow AI to generate infinite portraits. To encourage deeper understanding of this complex and emerging technology, three institutions—Alan Turing Institute in London, the University of Edinburgh and the RIKEN research institute in Japan—have collaborated in designing a residency program called PATH-AI aimed at exploring AI art. Residents are encouraged to create their own AI art and explore AI-related content through hands-on experimentation with the technology (Harris, 2023).

2.3 Tech-based funding

The realms of technology and art have become intertwined, forging a relationship that will fundamentally redefine the creative landscape. In this discussion, Melissa Cowley Wolf, director of the Arts Funders Forum for private giving, adopts a new perspective on arts funding in the modern age. The funding crisis in American arts and culture is prolonged and unfolding.

Research suggests that total U.S. charitable giving declined in 2022, and within that, arts and culture initiatives don't make for the highest priority (Wolf, 2020). Emerging donors increasingly prioritize social, environmental, and governmental endeavors with measurable impact. The arts however, are geared towards more intrinsic objectives such as uplifting communities, stimulating creative solutions, and incorporating culture into everyday lives. In a formal sense, these goals may not seamlessly align, but philanthropists and creatives alike aim to solve the world's most pressing issues with the richness of culture. Wolf conveys that bridging the gap will require artists and creatives to instigate new sources of cultural philanthropy. She believes that artists and creatives must appeal to the social and entrepreneurial benefits of their work to successfully tap into Silicon Valley's superfluous capital (Wolf, 2020). Moreover, long-term, sustainable funding can be achieved if philanthropists are involved in the real estate, intellectual capital, and environment of arts communities.

2.4 The perceived value of art

In light of shrinking arts funding, the value of the arts has been repeatedly questioned. Policymakers, often those allocating government budgets and grants, are progressively viewing the "impact" of the arts as a means to measure their value. Art funders and investors adopt an economic focus-value based on economic growth and aid to policy-making. Instead, humanities are of greater significance to individuals and societies—they create liberal spaces, preserve culture and heritage, and inspire. The concept of "impact" has gained prominence in both the cultural sector and academia, presenting a compelling argument in justifying funding for the arts to government departments. However, despite 25 years of discussions about economic value, arts and culture have had limited success in defending public expenditure in supporting the sector. "Making the case" for the arts remains perplexing, and the plethora of statistics created has yet to bring financial stability. The use of "impact" to replace "value" in conversation and overstatement of the economic outcomes coincide with prevailing conformity and monoculture. It is necessary to shift the current discourse away from the "impact" of culture within political means and towards the value of arts in societies, communities, and individuals (Belfiore, 2014).

3. Methodology & discussion

3.1 Making progress towards racial equity

To become more efficient and equitable, philanthropic funding for the arts needs to transition from individual organizations to field-level strategies. In 2011, Stanford researchers John Kania and Mark Kramer introduced the concept of collective impact, fixed on five guiding principles: A common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a "backbone" team. They defined collective impact as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania et al., 2021). The team reenvisioned collective impact a decade later as a systematic and collaborative effort between individuals, organizations, and larger institutions that advances equity.

Kania and Kramer introduced five methods for centering equity through collective impact. In grounding the work in data and context, Kania and Kramer recommend replacing big data sets and aggregate data with visual data that is contextualized and easy to understand. The target population (community members, organizations and large institutions) would proceed to dissect and interpret how equity is incorporated, creating a shared understanding of "equity." Kania and Kramer also believe that change cannot be created by a single service or program, but rather, the operational systems, policies, and customs that a community holds. Coined as systems change, this model follows three levels of overarching structural change based on explicitness. First-level systems change means shifts in policies, practices, and resource flow that can be easily regulated. Second-level systems change tends to be more implicit, including changes in relationships, connections, and power dynamics. Third-level systems change involves the global perspectives, personal experiences, and backgrounds of individuals within a community. This level of change typically requires long-term efforts to reshape a community. Shifting power dynamics and reevaluating those in charge can better accommodate and benefit groups most affected. For example, involving leaders with backgrounds and experiences similar to the affected community can lead to more optimal solutions. Applying local expertise and first-hand experience recognizes community members as part of the solution rather than the problem. Connection based

change is most effective when members of the community are directly engaged in personal experiences and creating pathworks to achieve communal goals for equity. Community members are also responsible for connecting with backbone organizations that lead programs or reforms (Kania et al., 2021).

There are already successful examples of centering equity through collective impact in other fields. Led by Black female public health professional Zea Malawa, Expecting Justice is the backbone organization for a collective impact initiative improving the health of Black and Pacific Islander infants and mothers in San Francisco. The group tackles racial inequities in premature births and disproportionate birth outcomes. Expecting Justice aims to reframe the issue to those without firsthand experience by introducing a spectrum from racially marginalized to racially privileged, allowing governmental agencies and large organizations to better grasp the circumstances that women from each level on the spectrum have experienced. Along with disaggregating data, Expecting Justice incorporates several Black and Pacific Islander mothers into its steering committee to place integral data into an understandable context (Kania et al., 2021). The initiative also demonstrates commitment at all levels of systems change. The group has introduced the Abundant Birth Project to provide Black and Pacific Islander mothers with supplemental income—an example of structural change. Expecting Justice has also enacted relational change by prioritizing the opinions of mothers with lived experience in the steering committee decision-making process. At the transformative level, Expecting Justice is rewiring long-standing, heavily ingrained mental models based on white superiority and dismantling racial biases in San Francisco's health systems. A similar effort, Hope Starts Here (HSH), is a Detroit-based early childhood program working collaboratively with local families and parents to improve early childhood for children. Community outreach coordinators in seven districts and a team of specialists train parents on navigating early childhood, advising them on advocating for better childhood opportunities and education through public policy.

3.2 Collective impact arts funding

There are even some pilot projects that have shown the potential of centering equity through collective impact in the arts. Beginning in 2015, the NEA provided collective impact grants to redesign long-term arts education in communities across the nation, focusing on equitable arts access. The NEA sought transparency in arts education reporting data, hoping to target areas with insufficient arts education to boost arts participation in all students across schools and districts. They enlisted local art organizations, schools, nonprofits, foundations, and community members to form the collective impact backbone team. Backbone teams were responsible for amassing resources, which involves analyzing arts education data, defining coordinated strategies for programming, increasing & sustaining funding, and leading managing partners (NEA, 2021). Through collective impact, communities would develop tools for an arts education data reporting system, a common logic model, and an evaluation system measuring arts participation. Long-term commitment to the models and strategies suggested by the NEA would dramatically transform communities into hubs of culture and communities that actively promoted arts education in all students.

In 2009, Boston Public Schools adopted a multi-year collective impact plan known as Boston Public Schools Arts Education Expansion Initiative (BPS-AE) to expand equitable access to arts education among schools. The reforms came after only 25 percent of schools provided arts instruction to more than a quarter of students. Only 5 percent of elementary school students and 6 percent of middle school students received the recommended arts learning experience of twice weekly, yearlong arts instruction. Not even a third of students received arts instruction once per week. By 2015 however, over 90 percent of elementary and middle school students received weekly, yearlong arts instruction, a 23 percent surge. Significantly more high school students now receive some level of arts instruction, from 26 percent in 2009 to 63 percent in 2015. The number of elementary and middle school students receiving arts education twice per week also rose from 40 to 51 percent. BPS-AE also expanded public funding for the arts with Boston Public Schools reallocating its arts budget from \$15 million to \$26 million yearly (Arts Education Partnership, 2016). Schools like Fenway Pilot High School, unable to provide any arts instruction before 2008, greatly benefited from BPS' budget expansion. Fenway received an Arts Expansion grant and began providing one arts instruction period for all sophomores for 18 weeks. They built off their initial testing period by partnering with local organizations to secure

six additional instructors. Headmaster Peggy Kemp then pushed for a long-term arts instruction plan, and the school now offers two weekly arts instruction periods throughout the year. Students also receive graduation credits from art courses, diversifying Fenway's course offerings and graduation portfolio. More than 60 arts organizations are involved in arts instruction within the county, strengthening relationships between BPS and the local arts community.

In just seven years, the Boston Public Schools district radically reshaped the importance of arts instruction in schools and successfully advocated for the long term expansion of arts engagement in the community. BPS-AE's resounding success can be attributed to both public and private engagement with the plan. For example, BPS-AE's backbone team consisted of four main teams, the Arts Advisory Board, Executive Leadership Team, Arts Working Committee, and Arts Coordination Team that could mediate at different stages. BPS-AE also benefited from close collaboration between Boston Public Schools and private foundations such as The Wallace Foundation and the Arts Expansion Fund. This involved individual schools and central figures in the district's office to tightly monitor and guide the plan into action. Both BPS former superintendent John McDonough and Executive Director for the Arts were highly supportive of BPS-AE and prioritized efforts to incorporate arts instruction into the district's education offerings. Their dedication and enthusiasm towards BPS-AE bolstered communication and ensured transparency in monitoring, documentation, and dissemination of information and reporting data. Other cities and metropolitan areas are cultivating strategies and programs geared to increase equitable arts education within their school systems. BPS engaged similar organizations in cities like Dallas and Chicago to develop BPS-AE. These initiatives, along with city agencies, arts organizations, and private foundations, have collectively benefited 670,000 school-age youth (Arts Education Partnership, 2016). More equitable access to arts education begins with increasing equity in arts funding on a federal and state level. Debates over equitable funding have suggested that many structural and formative changes are necessary. In 2021, the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities (CAH), an independent state arts agency for the nation's capital, sought the reallocation of long-standing funding for well-established performing arts groups in the district. The D.C. Council agreed, transferring the \$7 million of these annual funds to a general fund of \$33 million accessible by all organizations in the district (Milloy, 2021). The reallocation will allow grassroots and minority organizations to vouch for their objectives and access funding or grant money. Both the commission and those that previously received the grants acknowledged that the funding program added to disparities across different areas of the district. The Commission's recent progress in equity and access to arts education demands engagement in public policy.

4. Conclusion

Historically, private foundations and public allocation of grants firmly backed funding for arts and culture organizations. With recent conversations questioning the role of the NEA and the worthwhile contribution of private investment in the arts, many organizations are experiencing economic tightening and reduced budgets. These issues are oftentimes directly overlaid onto artists, musicians, and all other creatives, crushing innovation and the creative sector. As funding for the arts proves volatile and unpredictable, establishing a greater emphasis on the arts within the nation's youth becomes of utmost priority. Recent social developments and a greater focus on equity suggest another foundational issue arts funding must address. Agencies and nonprofits seeking more transformative measures often prompt Congress in building legislation to support arts education. As recently as Spring 2022, Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA-13) introduced the Equity Through the Arts and Humanities Act (H.R. 7627) to establish a grant program supporting organizations that serve and are led by people of color. Nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and community efforts would be backed by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities (Lee, 2022). The program targets projects that actively dismantle discrimination and racism in marginalized communities. These efforts would include groups with social significance and aim to maintain cultural representation in the arts.

For years, private funding for traditional, well-established arts institutions has prevented minority and grassroots arts initiatives from contributing to local communities and uplifting culture in racially diverse neighborhoods. To promote equity, diversity, and access in the arts, cultural funding

should encompass a wider range of organizations and acknowledge the contributions of local, community-based initiatives that play a crucial role in preserving arts and culture.

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