

A close-up photograph of a person's face and upper torso. The person has white face paint, with vibrant rainbow-colored stripes applied to their cheeks, around their eyes, and on their lips. They are wearing a large, ruffled collar made of rainbow-striped fabric. Their hands are visible, adjusting the collar. The background is a plain, light blue-grey wall.

to fail and fail big

A Study of Mid-Career Artists,
Success and Failure

A PROGRAM OF THE FIELD

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Success and Failure

A PROGRAM OF **The Field**

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thefield.org



to fail and fail big

If you're afraid that the floor might fall out from underneath you, then how can you possibly leap?

Artistic creation is often instigated by a deep curiosity about the self and the world. It's also usually undergirded by the confidence that the floor will not fall out from underneath you.

A desire for success is the seed-start of any artistic process. "Success" for one artist might consciously or unconsciously translate as a desire for a clear artistic vision or tantalizing language or dynamic narrative line. For another artist "success" is a stellar review in *The Times*, a generous MAP Fund grant or enough box office income to pay back your college loans. Most likely, it's several of these desires rolled into one big mash of yearning.

Success's next-door neighbor, however, is failure. And he sits right next to you, glowering and taunting, hinting that the floor is about to collapse. For many artists, fear of failure wins out and they choose the safe path, the path with ok reviews, 65% house capacity, and a diminishing reputation with local arts presenters.

The desire not to fail is primal. It wins nearly every time.

This Study is about five artists who lean into failure, who push against it hard with varying degrees of success and sustainability. Their pathways to the now are full of heart, caution, desire and leaping.

This Study is also about the ways that success is often supported by privilege or thwarted by under-privilege; whether that privilege is economic, cultural identity, education, gender or class-based. These factors can make or break an artist's capacity to fail and fail big. Additionally, the divide between who gets to be an artist, who can afford arts school or who can afford not to have health insurance is getting wider and wider. We are losing people. We are losing their artistic revelations.

But we can do something about it. This Study offers concrete actions and distinct dreams about what we (the big we, arts administrators, funders, producers, other artists, audience, donors, presenters, agents, etc.) can do to help these five artists (and many more) feel the solidity of the floor underneath them so that they can leap unabashedly into artistic revelation. And for those of us who have some floor underneath us, we have a responsibility and a great opportunity to bring more artists up.

I am extraordinarily grateful to all the wise folks in this Study and beyond who push me forward.

Jennifer Wright Cook
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE FIELD

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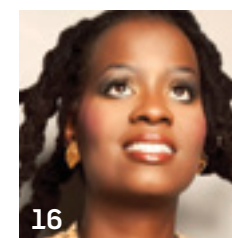
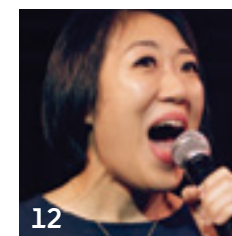
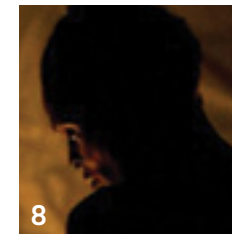
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INTRODUCTION

Why, what, who?

Why are we doing this?

Our goal is to discern the conditions that create success, so that we can replicate these conditions for more artists. In doing so, we can help more artists thrive.

What is this Study about?

How do mid-career artists succeed? What are the conditions that created their success? It's not magic but there are some unspoken truths and not so romantic notions that push one artist toward success and another toward invisibility.

Who is this Study for?

It's for The Field and it's for the field. For us at The Field, this Study is inward and outward. What we learn from

this Study will impact the services we provide, how we provide them and possibly, who we provide them to. Outwardly, the Study will impact our advocacy for artists to the larger sector.

For the field, it's for artists who want to examine why they are (or aren't) succeeding. It's for funders who want to have a stronger impact. It's for presenters, residency providers, donors and board members who feel like they aren't quite getting it right.

What was our process?

We did a focus group in mid-2012 with nine mid-career artists and those who work with and for them. We asked them what they needed from us, The Field, and from other stakeholders to help them succeed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SIX TAKE-AWAYS

- › **To funders:** focus more on the art and the art making; less on the grantwriting, 501c3 status or organizational chart
- › **To artists:** know in advance how much education debt you can afford and plan ahead (or find a more affordable way to meet the same goals)
- › **To presenters and residency providers:** give artists more opportunities to fail and fail big with extended residencies and low-risk showings
- › **To funders:** invest in the artist; give artist-specific grants, not project-specific ones
- › **To presenters:** give the "it" artists time to reflect; give the non-it artists a chance
- › **To all of us:** open doors for those with less access; create connections for people who aren't networked via alumni programs, family money or other privileges

Then, in late 2012 we created an Advisory Council of presenters, early career artists, funders and producers from all artistic disciplines. We asked the Advisory Council to suggest three mid-career artists for us to interview. We also asked them a variety of questions about success and how it is supported or thwarted.

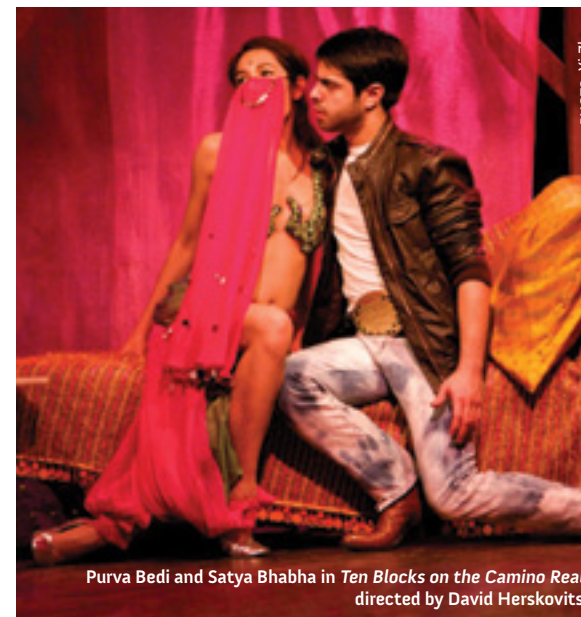
The Advisory Council suggested many artists from diverse backgrounds and practices, ages, and organizational structures. The Field then asked 13 of these artists to participate in our Study. Five responded fully.

Who are the artists and why and how did we choose them?

For the purposes of this Study we limited our scope to artists who make live arts and who live primarily in New York City's five boroughs. We looked for artists who make music, theater, performance art, dance, puppetry, performance poetry, multi-disciplinary and hybrid work.

A disclaimer on the scope of our Study

The Field works mostly with the world of "downtown" live art and "experimental" work. While our Advisory Council extends from Harlem Stage to the Chocolate



Factory, from LMCC to The Map Fund and beyond, it's all of a certain aesthetic. So this Case Study does not, in any way, purport to present art and artists from all of New York City. It's a small glimpse of a small world with distinct biases and frames.

ADVISORY COUNCIL

Moir Brennan, Program Director, The MAP Fund
Will Detlefsen, theater artist, Artistic Director of Multipurposeroom
Cynthia Gehrig, President, The Jerome Foundation
Beth Gill, Choreographer
Thomas O. Kriegsmann, President ArKtype
Brad Learmonth, Director of Programming, Harlem Stage/
Aaron Davis Hall, Inc.
Kristin Marting, Artistic Director, HERE;
Director of hybrid work

Sam Miller, President, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council
Georgiana Pickett, Executive Director, Baryshnikov Arts Center
Ben Pryor, Curator, Producer and Artist Manager;
Affiliations: tbspMGMT, MGPP, Abrons Arts Center
Brian Rogers, The Chocolate Factory Theater, Artistic Director; Video/Performance Artist
Mark Russell, Director, Under the Radar
Shanta Thake, Director, Joe's Pub at The Public

What does “mid-career” mean?

For this Study The Field used a subjective definition of mid-career with the following criteria:

- Time in business: 10+ years
- Body of work: significant (relates to time in business but is not analogous)
- Recognition/visibility: medium (receives a steady amount of shows, grants, tours, residencies and reviews; speaks on and/or adjudicates at panels, etc.)

Many of our advisors and artists challenged this simplicity.

“The term mid-career is so problematic. It implies a linearity that so rarely exists in our field.”

—**Moira Brennan**, THE MAP FUND

“I think the best artists are always emerging. They are awake and changing.”

—**Mark Russell**, UNDER THE RADAR

Brad Learmonth of Harlem Stage added that a mid-career artist is “...one who has a secure singular vision, has evolved into a rhythm of creation and development and developed a degree of comfort and savvy, or skill, in navigating the challenging terrain of making work and making it successfully.”

Our Advisors added that mid-career artists have been presented at multiple venues. They thus have more choices and agency in deciding where, when and how they want their work to be produced. Mid-career artists have a clear artistic voice and are committed to exploration and questioning.

Producer Thomas O. Kriegsmann said it well, a mid-career artist is “...one who embodies the position of a broadening sustainability based on a known or established body of work that reflects the presence of an audi-

ence or following, and whose core challenge is to prove their value through continued invention, sustaining the interest of the established audience, industry and funding bases, and attracting new ones.”

On the flip side of “mid-career” is “emerging.” Regarding a definition of “emerging,” **The Jerome Foundation’s Cynthia Gehrig** added, “Context is key. For example, place, gender, race, and the specific arts field affect the definition.” For instance, “emerging” in Minnesota (where Jerome is located) is very different from “emerging” in New York (where Jerome also funds). As one of the primary (and most vital) funders of “emerging” artists, the nuances of their definitions are essential to an artist’s pursuit of support from Jerome. Funding from The Jerome Foundation can last for 5-6 cycles if the artist is successful. In fact, Jerome’s support has seed-started two out of five of the artists discussed here and hundreds of other artists. They are vital! What happens though when you “graduate” from “emerging” funding from Jerome? What other funding steps in to replace that generosity? This is a big question for many artists transitioning from “emerging” to “mid-career.”

We asked the artists if they identified as mid-career. Why or why not?

Music artist Somi told us, “Yes, I do... Honestly, the fact that I do bothers me more than anything else...it presupposes that we have received recognition for the work we have done, but haven’t quite gotten to where we envision our fullest selves. I suppose there is beauty in that and it might simply be an accurate reflection of everyone’s (even the non-artists) larger Life Journey.”

Artist Miguel Gutierrez told us “...I don’t walk around with those words [mid-career] in my mind. Those words

are used “on” me or even “against” me. I think of myself as a constant beginner and lately I think of myself as someone who is afraid to be irrelevant and who feels the snapping of the young ‘uns’ jaws from behind.”

Artist Young Jean Lee who said, “Yes. Because you guys identified me that way. I have no idea what it means.”

What does success mean?

Our esteemed Advisory Council told us surprising and informative things. First and foremost they spoke of artistic control, agency, empowerment and getting to say “no” to offers. For instance regarding one successful artist our Advisors told us, “She’s her own woman....makes work on her own terms.”

Cynthia Gehrig of The Jerome Foundation told us that success is the “consistent production of work according to [the artist’s] own timeline.” This notion reverses the usual power dynamic and puts the artist at the center. Is it true though? Do “successful” artists feel like they have agency and control?

Many of our Advisors also mentioned that a successful artist can “gather the necessary resources” (e.g., human, financial, etc) to create the work they want. This means most likely that they are savvy, articulate and have a good reputation in the field. They are often also connected, charismatic, kind, gracious or cooperative.

Our Advisors spoke about success equaling active community engagement and support: having fans and peers, insiders and outsiders who value the artist’s art making with butts in seats, contributions, reviews, etc. And that a successful artist supports other artists’ and stakeholders’ work too. **Shanta Thake of Joe’s Pub** said that successful artists support the scene and “they influence and mentor emerging artists.”

Success means resilience! **Georgiana Pickett of Baryshnikov Arts Center** told The Field that a part of

success means “weather[ing] inconsistencies”; as in one less successful show doesn’t ruin your career. Many of our Advisors agreed. But does it bear out in reality? Does it feel that way for artists?

Recognition came up as a metric of success; like getting grants, tours, commissions, residencies and more.

What about financial stability or financial success? Only a handful of our Advisors or Case Study Artists mentioned money as a marker of success. But it’s implicit in almost all other metrics (i.e., grants are money and shows are money, etc.). But getting these things doesn’t equal financial stability or even income growth. In fact, three out of five of our “successful” Case Study Artists said they felt “very financially insecure” and that their income varied wildly over the course of their career. Are artists’ fees too small? Does The Field need to provide more budgeting or financial planning services? Both? Regardless, this kind of feast or famine is NOT sustainable. But what’s the answer?

Lastly, what about more ineffable benchmarks of success like happiness or contentment? These qualitative metrics came up in our Study but they weren’t primary or even frequent. Perhaps it is assumed that success equals happiness? Or we conflate success with happiness? Most likely it feels different on the inside. **Moira Brennan of The MAP Fund** said regarding one successful mid-career artist, “...he strikes me as being quite at peace with whether he is or is not anyone’s darling.”

Producer Ben Pryor (who many think of as successful) said, “It’s been a crazy struggle and always feels uphill. Is that what success is? Constant ongoing trucking uphill?” Yes, probably. Success is probably constant ongoing trucking uphill.



Okwui Okpokwasili

“I don’t know that I’m inspired as much as compelled. I perceive empty spaces and I want to carve out a particular voice or body.”

PHOTO: Chris Cameron

THE ARTIST SPEAKS

Do you feel successful?

I don’t know that I’ve ever felt successful. Perhaps, I also have an idealized vision of success that has more to do with **taking the time to think and explore without the pressure of producing....**

Success isn’t a term I use often...it indirectly suggests its opposite (failure) with every utterance, or [it] relies on some outside judgment without revealing the limits of that judgment. I do try to think about what is compelling to me. So if I can stay awake, keep my eyes open and hone my own sight and deepen my feeling about what I’m doing, I would be content.

Success would be an understanding of the system that I’m working within and how to marshal all of its resources to produce and sustain new work. I still feel that I’m not fluent in and do not have the infrastructure in place to do that.

And of course financial remuneration helps. To know that I can live on what I make as an artist is empowering. I can’t always do that, but when I can, I have to say I do feel a measure of comfort though I don’t know if that always correlates with a feeling of success.

A close friend, mentor, collaborator of mine is [choreographer] Ralph Lemon. And perhaps he’s “established,” but he defies categories or affixing terms in my mind. But as someone who is practiced in **getting work done at the scale his imagination demands**, yes, he does this. I also believe he has a deep and long history with people who present work, who view work, who talk about work—he has been challenging their

expectations while at the same time being an **incredibly fluent translator of his process and investigations** as an artist.

I think that is a marker of success. To be able to articulate what your investigation as an artist is—even if it is inarticulable, but to somehow articulate even the parameters of your search—

What’s your top current challenge?

....juggling the many projects that are in my view. My current challenge is managing my time—being with my family! Developing a stronger infrastructure to support my current project and projects that I want to make in the future. I feel stuck in bad time management. What could unstick me, an intern? A regular babysitter? Meditation? Or perhaps, acceptance that there will never be enough time to accomplish everything I want to accomplish. Perhaps I should learn to say “no” more often. (But that’s no fun).

Do you consider yourself “privileged”?

I have an amazing constellation of people supporting me spiritually and lovingly, my family, friends and artists. I don’t have a trust fund or a store of money waiting for me, but I went to a prominent University and I believe that **there are benefits that I derive from my education that I may not perceive**. What I can perceive is that the exposure to a wide range of ideas about art, performance, culture and critical viewing continue to help me find language to articulate my instinctive investigations and concerns.

David Herskovits

TARGET MARGIN THEATRE (TMT)



David Greenspan, Ugo Chukwu, Rachel Claire, Amir Darvish, Meg MacCary & Susan Hyon in *The (?) Inn*, directed by David Herskovits (ABOVE RIGHT)

What inspires you?

Oh, I can't not [make work]. Sometimes I'd like to quit, but it is the language I speak. Formative aesthetic experiences, and a shattering love of what is so poignant and ephemeral about theater drive me always to express theatrically what I can about our condition.

Overall do you feel successful?

Nope. I wish I did and sometimes I do but mostly I feel like I have not made the mark I hope to make. Yet.

Why? Why not?

I do feel like I have had a lot of influence and I have certainly had good reviews and some generous press and so on—so I do not mean to complain. But I am ambitious and I really do want my work to be known in a broader way.

This is tricky because I am aware that what I do is pretty marginal. I am trying to influence the conversation from the outside, so how can I complain

PHOTO: Erik Carter



for not being on the inside? You see my dilemma. But I just cannot mainstream myself.

What would make you feel more successful?

More fame. It sounds awful but that is the truth. I guess I am copping to my own egotism. I want to have my phone ringing off the hook with offers to create projects, bring work to festivals, visit and speak at universities, all that sort of thing. I do these things to some degree now, but I am hungry for more.

I am not talking about big worldwide fame. Obviously I have made choices that have nothing to do with that. What I really mean is the widest possible renown among the people in the field of theater. I do feel like lots of people give me an enormous amount of respect and take my work very seriously. If that group becomes wider and wider I think I will feel more successful.

Where do you feel stuck? What could unstick you?

Too many short term pressures for production and fund-raising. It is very hard to find the time to sustain big-picture thinking and new blue-sky initiatives, including new ideas for my own work. Handing over more of this to other people on [Target Margin Theatre's] staff will free me. I have been learning to delegate and staff well and this is essential. I want to build a more robust and autonomous institution—so I can step aside to do other things too. Target Margin has been an engine

THE ARTIST SPEAKS

for important work by hundreds of artists. I am very proud of that and I want it to be better recognized. I believe it will be the key to the company's future growth.

Do you consider yourself "privileged"?

Most certainly. I am a straight white male who went to Yale and got fancy scholarships to other institutions. I am connected to a world of privilege even if that is not where I come from. I know bankers and lawyers and writers and moguls and stuff like that.

I am also immensely privileged because in the last few years my wife has had a much higher income than I do. This allows us to actually have a family and security in our home life. If she did not make as much, I believe we would still be doing things that we are doing—but it would be much more stressful.

How has your privilege (or lack thereof) hindered or empowered your art career?

Connection [to] that world of privilege gives me a huge advantage with my board, my individual donors, and so on. My undergraduate class and friends from Yale have been the single most consistent and durable source of support for my work.

What are you most excited about next?

Making new work. Reading more and writing more, branching into other forms.



Young Jean Lee

YOUNG JEAN LEE'S THEATER COMPANY

THE ARTIST SPEAKS

What inspires you to make work?

It's like a disease.

What is success?

Success means being able to make work.

Do you feel successful?

Yes.

Why or why not?

Because I'm able to make work. I felt successful when I was making my first show for \$200 ten years ago.

How could you feel more successful?

I would feel more successful if my shows got better.

What's your top current challenge? Where do you feel stuck? What could unstuck you?

Combating burnout. I literally work 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. I haven't taken a vacation in over ten years. I haven't even taken a weekend day off for almost a year. And honestly, having to do stuff like this questionnaire is really what's killing me. People call me up and beg me and don't realize that I get several requests like this per day. [I feel stuck] in the unending barrage of non-artistic work that makes me unable to ever leave my desk. I have no idea [what could unstuck me].

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I'm not sure. All I know is that the current demands on my time and my work pace are not sustainable. I changed my artistic process to make one show every other year instead of one show per year, and it didn't help because all the extra time got filled up with touring and other projects. All I want is to make more cool stuff, and for my work to keep getting better, but I'm really straining the limits of what's healthy.

What do you need to get there?

A bigger staff.

Do you consider yourself "privileged"?

My dad was a small-town chemical engineering professor and my mother was a homemaker who had a Masters in photography from Berkeley. I was an only child. So it wasn't crazy privilege but more than a lot of people had.

How has your privilege (or lack thereof) hindered or empowered your art career?

My education, which my parents paid for, has definitely empowered my art career. The fact that I only went to public schools and didn't have any student loan debt was HUGE. I have no idea how I would have become an artist if I had to make student loan payments, since crucial to my success was the ability to only work part-time jobs. I lived in squalor, but I could live.

PHOTO: Blaine Davis



PHOTO: Ian Douglas

Miguel Gutierrez

MIGUEL GUTIERREZ & THE POWERFUL PEOPLE

What does “being successful” mean to you?
Overall do you feel successful? Why? Why not?
What would make you feel more successful?

first—depends on the time of day and how happy or depressed or desperate or hopeful I feel. when I am able to be grateful for everything that I’ve been lucky to “get”—grants, opportunities to perform, people’s admiration or respect, “name” recognition, press recognition, I realize that DUH, I’m successful. as successful as one could ever hope to be in this field.

but the hamster wheel nature of the field: people’s short attentions spans/memories, the obsession with who is new/young, grant support that is project specific rather than artist specific in that you start at ZERO with every project. every project must be a “piece” that you can describe neatly in a stupid grant. no room for sprawl, mess, true imagination, years-long support, or trust in the artist, the need to stay on the “liked” list of presenters, the randomness of those people’s tastes, people’s perception that

THE ARTIST SPEAKS

because you are “successful” you must be making all the money you need, getting all the gigs you want, having all the happiness you could want... **You feel like you’re always ready to be kicked to the curb** and written off, or maybe worse, “known” in a way that doesn’t address the reality of how you actually feel or are actually doing.

I think it’s probably built into most artists, particularly American artists maybe?? to feel insecure and like the floor could fall out at any point. that to want things for yourself or for your work is bad.

I think that this is at heart a spiritual question. **do you feel like who you are is enough**, like what you do is enough, and is that enough to bring you joy? again, the answer to this question WILDLY varies, and again, it can depend on whether or not I’ve had lunch yet.

What did you learn or do that helped you succeed?

Remember to take some time to notice the good things when they’re happening. I remember on my first tour to the Walker Art Center, I walked in as the crew was loading in and getting everything ready and it hit me so hard—holy shit all of these people are doing this so that I can do my show! I was overwhelmed with (useful and justified and humbling) pride and gratitude.

What’s your top current challenge? Where do you feel stuck? What could “unstuck” you?

my current challenge is how to deal with my fucked up mind cuz the only way that I survive being an artist is to travel constantly—I don’t know how anybody survives financially as a performing artist by staying in nyc.

I just got two major grant rejections and that bummed me the fuck out. I know it’s always a crap-

shoot but it’s hard not to feel like you could just fall off the map.

lately I am less and less interested in “playing the game” of how to do this career correctly, which I completely recognize as a result (luxury??) of having played the game for what feels like a long time although maybe it’s not so long. it does feel like in the U.S. you have to work FOREVER before people recognize you in a national way...

I keep being naively surprised to realize that it feels like you have to keep proving yourself over and over and over. to students, to presenters, to audiences, to writers, to funders... etc. you never get to just be like, a good artist. or at least this is how it feels because even as I write this I know it’s not true.

I feel stuck sometimes just in trying to find a way to create more breathing room for myself and for my imagination. feels like I spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to survive and maintain my lame yearly salary. I no longer have the luxury of youth, when I didn’t have to worry about my own/other people’s perceptions about my work, when I didn’t have to fill out surveys, write recommendation letters, respond to hundreds of emails, etc... it’s so hard to find time just to keep cultivating being weird and your own kind of artist. **everything in the field pushes you to normalize, institutionalize, professionalize.**

What are you most excited about in your upcoming art career?

Making the best fucking art ever. Being surprised. Meeting more amazing and exciting artists everywhere. At home, abroad, other cities. Everywhere.

Somi

What inspires you to make your art work?

Life. Truth. Pain. Joy. Love. Freedom.

What does “being successful” mean to you?

It means being able to sustain not only myself and my lifestyle through my art, but be in a financial position to offer support to my large extended family and community in meaningful ways. It also means showing up in any room in any city in the world and finding it full of strangers with open ears and hearts.

Overall do you feel successful? Why? Why not?

Sometimes. When I think about the many opportunities and support I’ve been given over the years, I am humbled and thankful and definitely feel like I cannot deny the “success” that is associated with those things. When I think about the always looming uncertainty of an artist’s life, feelings of insecurity can creep in to my heart. Usually, a bit of singing quickly washes those doubts out of me.

What would make you feel more successful?

Being on stage almost every night and being able to help any and everyone I love when they need it.

What did you do or learn that helped build your success?

Persistence, prayer, and marketing is everything.

What are you most excited about in your upcoming art career?

I’m excited about sharing a new body of music and art created on my recent 15-month creative sabbatical in Lagos, Nigeria. An album, a film, and possibly some prose about my experience there will be shared in the fall of this year.



PHOTO: Matthew Furman; Art Direction by Wangechi Mutu

THE ARTIST SPEAKS

What’s your top current challenge?

Having taken a bit of time away, my top “focus” is getting a sustainable financial flow and touring schedule going again... I often feel like I’m still working just as hard (if not harder) than I was when I started out even if I am in a more secure financial position.

Where do you feel stuck?

I wish I could afford to hire someone full-time to handle all of my administrative tasks/detail so I could focus on the bigger vision and more creativity.

What could “unstuck” you?

More funding!

Who is your current audience?

Thankfully, my audience is a wide variety of people from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. I definitely have also been granted a bit of room in both jazz and world music circles as well. And while I did not set out to be recognized as a “jazz” singer per se, it has been the jazz audiences/industry in particular [that] have granted me most of my touring opportunities in North America and Europe. Because I am from the African continent, I have a different sort of connection with the audiences there and find that that connection is driven more by cultural affiliation and less by genre-specific marketing. In the African context, however, my music is often seen as a “high art” and

therefore is mostly consumed and supported by the upper class in African cities. It is one of my professional goals to create sustainable institutions in Africa that offer opportunities for a more egalitarian engagement with all types of art and music.

Who is your intended or desired audience?

I’m mostly interested in connecting with those who personally connect with the music I’m making or stories I’m telling. I do believe it is important that artists place more importance on the commercial sustainability of the work we do. That being said, my desired audience is probably just a broader one that grants me opportunities to thrive both commercially and artistically in new markets. Right now, I’m interested in having a stronger presence in South Africa and Asia.

Do you consider yourself “privileged”?

Yes, but only in terms of education, nationality, and geography.

How has your privilege (or lack thereof) hindered or empowered your art career?

The short answer is that I know I would just not have the same opportunities had my parents decided to raise me in Uganda. That’s something I never take for granted. So definitely that privilege has empowered my career.

SNAPSHOT: Five successful mid-career artists

Who are they?

- › Five artists residing in New York City.
- › Three female and two male.
- › 31-50 years of age.
- › Asian-American, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American and Nigerian/American.
- › Two theater artists, one dance/theater, one music and one “makes shows.”
- › Number of years making work: 10-25 years.
- › All five are generative artists but two have significant early history performing and collaborating with successful artists (which had a strong impact on their success).
- › One artist is quite early career as a generative artist (i.e., making her own work) but mid-career as a performer and collaborator. The artist was identified, however, by our Advisors as on the cusp of mid-career.
- › One artist/company is the most “traditional” as regards organizational structure with a regular season of productions, a Governing Board, staffing, budget and robust funding from a variety of general operating and project funders. This artist is also the most tenured of the five artists portrayed here.

Organizational structure

- › Two out of five have 501c3/charitable status.
- › Two are fiscally sponsored.
- › One has neither 501c3 nor fiscal sponsorship.
- › One has an LLC.
- › Two have Governing Boards. One of which is inactive.
- › Three have no Board of Directors.

Staff

- › Four out of five have 1-3 part-time paid staff and three have 1-2 full-time paid staff.
- › One has no staff.

Donors and audience

- › Two have “many donors.” Two have “a few.” One has no donors (and hasn’t yet pursued this type of income).
- › Four out of five identified their audience as “educated, arts-goers, culture vultures.”
- › One added that the audience was “mostly white but that has a lot to do with the venue and whether or not [the venue has] done their work in reaching out.”
- › One artist’s audience is very diverse.
- › All want their work to be seen by anyone and everyone who wants to see it.

The beginning: early family life

- › Four out of five self-identified as being raised in a financially “secure” household.
- › One of them said, “My parents did a shitty job of giving me a financial education (re: loans, credit, money management, etc).”
- › One identified as being raised in a both financially “insecure” and “secure” household. “I suppose that fluctuating range of resources probably gave me the malleability and fortitude necessary to walk the artist’s journey.”

Education

- › All five graduated from high school.
- › Four out of five have Bachelor degrees.
- › Three have Masters.
- › One self-identified as doing a lot of “auto-didacting.”
- › One said that there was no family support in the beginning. “[The] beginning was stressful. I had big student loans that weighed heavily on me.”
- › Four out of five have participated in “professional arts development”—from Creative Capital Professional Development to grantwriting classes at The Field to ASCAP Advanced Songwriters Lab.

Family picture

- › Three are the primary breadwinners in their lives.
- › One has a partner who is the breadwinner.
- › One has a partner who contributes equally.
- › Two have children.
- › None mentioned having to care financially for elderly parents (though we didn’t ask directly).

Assets

- › Two have health insurance. Three don’t.
- › Two own apartments/houses.
- › One owns a car.
- › One self-identified “my legs and ass” as an asset.
- › All five artists have people they can rely on if they get in financial trouble.
- › Three have savings/retirement accounts or stocks/bonds.

Liabilities

- › Three have college/education debt.
- › Two have credit card debt.
- › Two have back taxes debt. One used early fellowships to pay it off.
- › One had education debt but paid it off! “At a crucial moment when I was in the middle of being [an] emerging [artist], I had help retiring my student loans. These loans were crushing and if I had not been able to retire them at that point (already well into my thirties) I am not sure I would have stayed with it.”

Current income picture

- › All five make most/all of their income from their art making activities (grants, ticket sales, tours, fellowships, teaching, commissions, performance fees, etc.).
- › Three feel “very insecure” financially.
- › These three also say that their income has “varied greatly” over the past few years.
- › One feels “very secure” (this is the artist who has the partner who is the primary bread winner).

- › One feels “secure” financially (but this artist works 16 hours a day and hasn’t had a vacation in 10 years).
- › Both of these artists say that their income has “steadily increased” over the past few years.

Recognition and visibility

- › All five have toured the world, received many grants, awards, reviews, commissions and fellowships.
- › They have all adjudicated on funding panels and talked on public dialogues all over the world.

Funding

- › Two out of the five have received significant support over the years from the major funders in the “emerging artist” marketplace: the Borough Arts Councils, The Jerome Foundation, The MAP Fund, the Greenwall Foundation (now closed to the arts) and the New York Foundation for the Arts.
- › Three have received “mid-career/established” funding: for example, fellowships from Guggenheim, United States Artists and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts; grants from French -American Jazz Exchange / Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, USArtists International/Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, and Africa Exchange/651 Arts/New England Foundation for the Arts.
- › One has received the large, multi-year “established” artist Doris Duke Artist grant (\$275,000 over 3-5 years with other perks).
- › One has gotten strong Corporate Sponsorship support from, for example, Lufthansa Airlines, Hennessy and Moët Chandon.
- › Government grants are received by three out of five artists. Of these three artists, two have gotten local grants from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, two receive ongoing state support from the New York State Council on the Arts, and two get ongoing national support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The artists speak



PHOTO: Carl Skutsch

Young Jean Lee's Theater Company's *Songs Of The Dragons Flying To Heaven*

The following are aggregated and quoted responses from the five artists to questions we posed to them.

Why are you successful? Because...

- › Of the work I've done.
- › Of the work I've done to make the work true to itself.
- › Of the work of my collaborators (artistic and administrative) to make the work as good as it can be.
- › I've made a focused body of work that has developed a unique vision for years.
- › I have worked like a dog and I am stubborn and ambitious.
- › The visibility of my colleagues rubbed off on me.

- › I've have diligently developed my craft, my brand, and my audiences both locally and internationally.
- › Of my positive outlook.
- › Of my luck.
- › Of my dumb luck.
- › People gave me opportunities.
- › People made invaluable introductions for me.
- › Of the kind and impassioned interest from many people (audience, funders, donors, presenters, etc.) who have supported my work throughout my career.
- › I started dancing professionally when I was 20 and I learned a ton "on the job."

Artist Miguel Gutierrez added "...it also must be stated here that I am a relatively decent looking person (who is still perceived as being "young") with a penis who despite my name, **generally passes as "white."** I think that this field is embedded, as the rest of the world is, in sexism, racism, looksism, ageism. I benefit either directly or indirectly from many of the field's inequities which deny access to many other deserving and capable artists."

When we asked artist Young Jean Lee why she was successful, she told us, "Education, ten years of Shakespeare training, being Asian-American female in a downtown theater scene that cares about diversity, **being willing to have a low standard of living** for a while (living off \$1000/month with rats and black mold in my apartment, etc.), being able to maintain that low standard of living because my father was a professor who could bail me out of a crisis (e.g., buying me a new laptop if mine died), being a hard worker, being good at self-promotion, my amazing staff, agent, manager, and press agent, my insane perfectionism and consequent ability to take a lot of harsh criticism and use it productively."

And theater artist David Herskovits told us, "For the first decade I struggled and worked many jobs. And then a crucial thing happened: my board of directors decided that they would create a finance committee, **pay me a real salary, and [that] I would have no part of that [process].** I was in my mid-thirties at that time. I am sure that if they had not done so I would have burnt out and quit. I would not have had the confidence to pay myself at a reasonable level and would have had to find other work to survive." (EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a nuanced situation that David talked more about offline. He told The Field that the Board that took this amazing step had at least one "non-profit professional" on it who understood the need to pay David if only because funders see that as a benchmark of professionalism.)

What did you do that helped build your success? I...

- › Thanked people.
- › Said "yes." And "thank you."
- › Asked for help and made sure that my helpers felt appreciated and well used.
- › Did favors for others when I could.
- › Always asked the people who worked for me what they wanted to get out of it, and I tried to help them get that.
- › Treated people well.
- › Worked hard.
- › Was professional.
- › Left a theater better than when I found it.
- › Learned! Service Organizations like ART/NY and The Field give artists everything from classes in arts business to high-impact residencies and performance opportunities.
- › Didn't do it alone. I got administrative help.
- › Fundraised diligently.
- › Schmoozed and pitched my work with confidence.

Artist Miguel Gutierrez said, "**LEARN HOW TO TALK ABOUT MONEY.** It's a business, whether you like it or not. Every artist can make their own decisions about how they want to deal with money but it's stupid to be afraid of it or afraid of talking about it." And then he added, "**PROFESSIONALS ARE JUST PEOPLE NOT GODS** (that I specifically learned from a Lucy Sexton interview in *Movement Research* [Performance Journal] many years ago where she talked about how artists have the power to talk to the Board of Directors at a specific venue if they feel like there's something they want/need from that venue.) this takes so fucking long to learn and I think it only comes after you've had a bunch of field-sanctioned "success" and after you just age enough i think."

The advisors speak to artists everywhere

The following are aggregated and quoted responses from our Advisors to questions we posed.

How can an artist succeed?

- › Build relationships. And build them genuinely and holistically. Network, find mentors, and support your artistic community. Find allies who can make introductions for you to new audience members, presenters, donors, funders, agents, etc. Find your people and activate them.
- › **Articulate your vision and value to stakeholders** and allies. Practice your pitch and build your confidence. Get helpful but real feedback and use it for your own growth.
- › Learn from those around you. If you are working in other artists' companies, pay attention to how they are managing their companies. Reflect on how they meet presenters, agents and funders.
- › Ask. Ask for an opportunity. Ask for money. Ask for advice. Ask to be an intern. Ask to speak on a panel.
- › Re-invent. Don't get trapped by your company or your "model."
- › Do it your way.

Collaboration and Coalitions of Support: Sometimes a group of presenters or funders rally support around an artist both formally and informally. There are so many examples of this but here's one: Artist Okwui Okpokwasili is being mentored and encouraged by many New York presenters who believe in her vision, and respect and like her. The presenters are investing time, opportunities and heart in her work. How did this happen for her? She has a vibrant and positive reputation from her years as a performer and collaborator. She has access to people via her work with established artist Ralph Lemon. She says yes to opportunities. And of course, she works very hard.

What conditions can tank success?

- › Too much too soon! Georgiana Pickett said, "The worst thing is being the "it" kid. Tons of pressure... Get the artist on a slower pace. Let her or him reflect."
- › **Beware the post BAM apocalypse!** Getting a season at Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Opera House has paradoxically hurt many artists. They naïvely assume that it will catapult their careers to international success. So they put all their human, financial and artistic capital into this one brief performance opportunity. Afterwards they are in debt and they have a show that's too big for any other venues. Thus, their touring opportunities are ruined. They spend the next three years recuperating.
- › **Put it away for a while!** Mark Russell, former Executive Artistic Director of Performance Space 122, said, "[The artist] does one thing...god forbid they do a 2nd thing and [the presenters etc] like it. They are curious as to what the artist might do next and they offer a commission. The artist had better have a drawer full of other ideas! I used to tell artists, "You've done this one, it was very popular, now let's put it away for a while, and get back into the [art]-making."

How can an emerging artist become a mid-career artist?

- › Compromise and make tough choices. The award-winning early career choreographer Beth Gill added, "I ask myself, Do I need to be doing more organizationally to support my work? Do I need to be networking more? Do I need to build a website, hire a manager, apply for this grant? I think the answer to all of these things is yes, but in general the ability to tackle any of

these things becomes a game of compromise dictated by time and money. Ultimately, staying connected to the work, the questions, the ambition to do something and say something should be the focus. **Keeping the heart within the machine is really hard and essential.** It can only be done by the artist themselves."

- › Our early career performance poetry artist, kahlil al-mustafa, said, "...be an active participant in your community, build and maintain long-term relationships and treat everyone well."
- › **Stay in the game and persevere!** Prove your value in many ways on varied terrains. Grow your infrastructure strategically. Sam Miller, President of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, added, "Understand how your work aligns and resonates with key resource and opportunity providers. Build relationships in multiple sectors and cultivate relationships with peers and press."
- › Early career theater artist, Will Detlefsen, said, "Save money! Do an internship! See as much art as you can. Apply to every directing opportunity!"
- › Moira Brennan of The Map Fund said, "Practice. Find a place—maybe Philly, maybe Memphis—where your

focus can be 90% your practice and 10% where you are headed."

What can a successful mid-career artist do to become an established artist?

Curator and producer Ben Pryor responded, "What divides mid-career from established? A BAM show? I don't think so. It isn't like there is a new funding level that one graduates too... and "success" as X number of touring weeks or something just isn't really viable for the type of artists working in NYC that aren't dance companies à la Graham or Ailey or something."

This was echoed by Brian Rogers, Artistic Director of The Chocolate Factory and Video/Performance Artist, "I don't even know what "established" means. Robert Wilson, Pina Bausch, Merce....I don't know that the world that enabled those artists to grow to that level exists anymore..."

Kristin Marting, Artistic Director, HERE and director of hybrid work, volleyed with a call to artistic arms: "...continue to craft fearlessly and aggressively capitalize on success to solidify support for future projects."

Artists and advisors speak

How can the arts sector help more artists succeed?

The Field asked our Artists and Advisory Council this question and we got many responses. The Field divided the responses into big buckets like "Advice to Funders and Donors," "Advice to Presenters, Producers, Residency Providers and Service Organizations" and "Advice to All." We then divided them into "today's dreams" (i.e., achievable in the near future), and "tomorrow's dreams" (i.e., achievable in the farther future).

Brian Rogers said, "We need to embrace failure and understand how important flawed / fucked up / unsuccessful work can be to the development of an artist and the development of the field as a whole. Funders / presenters love to talk about supporting research and development but 9 times out of 10 they/we are just simply too afraid to fail and fail big. We are too obsessed with making shows that can be "successful" and tour. Twenty-five years from now that will bite us collectively in the ass, big time."

Artists and advisors speak CONTINUED

Advice to funders and donors

Today's Dreams!

"In order to help more artists succeed, you should..."

- Give multi-year funding cycles that are artist-specific not project-specific.
- Make commissioning money REAL money. \$15,000? \$30,000! Make it enough for the artist to really make the work; rather than just, essentially, a subsidized rental.
- Offer general operating support for the unincorporated. Having a 501c3 doesn't equal being professional.
- Offer more career level specific funding programs à la Jerome Foundation's support for emerging artists.
- Launch more of the large money awards artists like the Doris Duke Artist Awards and Impact Awards for mid-career and established artists. The Fellowships from Guggenheim, Foundation for Contemporary Arts and United States Artists are also crucial but they are all once in a lifetime. Many artists use this money to re-pay old debt that they racked up for being "successful" or from school debt.
- **Stop relying so heavily on project narratives to determine funding.** Pay attention to the art work. Invest in site visits and see shows. (Many narrative applications require high-paid development directors and have little to do with the artist or the art making. Or they privilege artists with a strong academic education; often from privileged families who can afford these schools.)

Tomorrow's Dreams!

"In order to help more artists succeed, you should..."

- Create a global database where artists can submit relevant information (or have their assistants submit it) for a variety of grant opportunities once a year, and then have the grantmakers fish in that database for the

information they want. Reverse the power structure from funder to artist.

- **Nurture the producers!** Moira Brennan told us to "...pay more attention to non-artist roles in the ecosystem—producers in particular who have so few opportunities to learn, to stretch their own creative powers, to implement change. These folks are superstars and I think they have a lot to teach us as a field about how to get things done, and how gratifying it can be to be the "mechanism" rather than the product. From Barbara Bryan to Beth Morrison to David Sheingold and Ben Pryor—we need to clone these folks and nurture their talent."

Advice to presenters, producers, residency providers and service organizations

Today's Dreams!

"In order to help more artists succeed, you should..."

- Let artists "throw more stuff on the wall" easily and affordably as Mark Russell said. There are too few opportunities for artists to really put something out there and see what it is without fear of failure. There are opportunities at (to name a few) Catch, The Fire This Time Festival, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Food for Thought at Danspace Project, Green Space, pop up venues, AUNTS and more. But does "work-in-progress" really mean that the artist can show something raw and unfinished and learn from the audience and the performance?
- **Give multiple opportunities to experiment!** Moira Brennan added, "...the importance of Movement Research cannot be underestimated when it comes to artists Jennifer [Monson] and Miguel [Gutierrez] as well as to literally hundreds of other NYC-based movement artists. ...it has been an emotional, psychological, and sometimes financial home to so many, in particular

for the dance makers who are now in their forties and fifties. It's an arms-wide-open kind of place. It creates multiple, otherwise very rare, **opportunities to actually practice without the stakes being impossibly high...** I don't see a whole lot of other entities that understand this principle."

- Create more non-pressurized residency opportunities with more money attached. Baryshnikov Arts Center has residencies with no pressure to produce. The Devised Theater Initiative at the Under the Radar Festival aims to give artists creative time and finishing funds to develop their work on its way up to the Festival. There are more opportunities, of course, but this is New York City. We can do more.
- Give multiple opportunities to the outliers—not just the "it" artists.
- **Don't give the "it" kids too much too fast.** Give them time to reflect and digest. Give them time to grow their voice and vision.
- Give more money for artists' fees to create and develop complex projects.
- Pay a real fee to teach (to the universities and art schools in particular).

Tomorrow's Dreams!

"In order to help more artists succeed, there should be..."

- Some organization that could co-ordinate artist residencies with all the universities across the country that have empty studios for nearly 30 percent of the year.
- More extended developmental opportunities like HERE's HARP Residency. Young Jean Lee is just one of the many artists to benefit from HARP's holistic and long-range support.
- More long-term residencies and partnerships with presenters. Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Extended Life Residencies partner with major New York present-

ers to give artists more time to experiment with and learn from their work. This is a boon to an artist who has premiered a work but needs more time and space to understand it.

- More investment by the big, established venues in early career and mid-career artists. Can Lincoln Center bring more artists up with residencies and showings? Is the new BAM Fisher Space the pipeline to the prestigious BAM Opera House? Is Lincoln Center's LCT3 giving artists some real R&D time or is it too pressurized?
- **An embracing of diverse and challenging work.** David Herskovits said, "Everyone knows this and pays lip-service to it...[but] people are driven by what is familiar and comfortable to them. I mean this in the world of 'experimental' work in particular...really original artists are almost certainly going to be doing things that I do not immediately recognize as worthwhile, so the imperative is for me to attempt to come to terms with whatever their aesthetic criteria and goals are, while relinquishing my own."

Advice to all of us

Today's Dreams!

"In order to help more artists succeed, we should..."

- Erase the borders between disciplines from a funding and press perspective. Artists and audiences don't draw lines. The rest of the sector needs to embrace that too.
- **Stop focusing on the "innovative" or the "new."**
- Stop pushing artists to professionalize or institutionalize. Mark Russell said, "Sometimes the easiest part is getting the 501c3 status or the infrastructure; rather than go back in the dreaded rehearsal room and face the vast empty and terrifying space."
- Be flexible—listen to what artists say they need to make their own work, don't pressure them into assembly line art making.

Artists and advisors speak about privilege

How can we help more artists thrive?

What can the stakeholder community do to mitigate privilege factors in the arts so that more artists have the opportunity to work professionally?

Okwui Okpokwasili said, “Privilege is in exposure, in a network of relations, in the knowledge and mastery of cultural codes and language—it is concerning to live in such a diverse city and not see that diversity reflected in the most visible parts of the performance world.”

Today’s Dreams!

“How can we help more artists thrive? We can...”

- Get out of our regular spots! David Herskovits said, “...physically going out to different neighborhoods and buildings is the kind of thing that makes a big difference in offering opportunity where it is needed.”
- Give grants and opportunities specifically for artists who grew up poor.
- Create more residencies and creative incubator programs for young artists—maybe with a looser curatorial hand.
- Offer more spaces to work easily and affordably. David Herskovits said, “New York needs spaces, for instance, where people can just do some work without a rigorous pitch, without pleasing some gatekeeper. And these spaces must be available without up-front payment. Yes, that is a big demand but for me, finding places where I could just work and pay rent with a box-office split was crucial.”
- Throw open our doors to people who might not think “devised theater” or other experimental arts were possible for them to work in. Actively show them that these forms are not exclusive. Baryshnikov Arts Center started a youth education program with a production track

so that kids know that the arts are an option! There are more opportunities, too, but this is New York City! We can do more!

Tomorrow’s Dreams!

“How can we help more artists thrive? We can...”

- Give grants to support education debt (and to artists: please do a serious cost-benefit analysis before you take on that debt.) Is an MFA really going to move your career forward? Is there a more affordable way to get the time, information, space, networks, etc. that an MFA can provide? Maybe?
- Give access and exposure. Create real opportunities for kids in neighborhoods who have no access to the arts.
- Create mentorship programs for under-served communities. David Herskovits said, “There exist some mentoring programs but my impression is that they refer mostly to the world of privilege...I wonder about the kids I worked with at LaGuardia Community College. How do you find those kids who aren’t already inside the privilege machine? Perhaps we could create a network that actually gets out in the field and searches for people in smaller colleges, community organizations and disadvantaged neighborhoods.”
- Create open networks where none exist! Yale alumnus, David Herskovits said, “You cannot stop Yalies from talking to each other—but maybe you can help them include other groups in the conversation. The more contact people have with one another, the more comfortable they grow, the more they trust other strangers; tolerance for risk grows along with comfort, and they may offer support, work, [or] opportunity to those strangers.”

The Field speaks about privilege

How can The Field help more artists thrive?

If you’re afraid that the floor might fall out from underneath you, then how can you possibly leap?

The Field’s mission is to provide dynamic, creative residencies and small business services to performing artists or companies so that they can thrive. We do not curate. For the most part, we offer our services on a first-come first-serve basis or by lottery. When applications are vetted or adjudicated (by peer/applicant panel), it’s with reference to basic production experience, “skin in the game” or delineated need; it is with reference not to so-called artistic merit or excellence. This is because there are many, many gatekeepers in the arts world and because we believe that aesthetic judgment is often inherently influenced by privilege, both conscious and unconscious.

Since 1986 The Field has taken this stance and adopted these processes as a vital way to level the playing field and mitigate some of the privilege factors that can influence curation. Non-curation was a radical stance at the time. And, we think, it opened doors for many artists.

This is no longer enough. It seems now that non-curation and lotteries do not, in and of themselves, break down the underlying power of privilege. They are a start; but they are not the end. Rather we must assertively ask ourselves “Who applies to The Field for residency programs like Artward Bound? How do they hear of us in the first place? Is it from their robust network of artists at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts? Where did they learn to write the formal grant for our Field Dance Fund re-grant program with its questions about artistic vision and five year plans? Are we looking more at their writing samples than their art? What

does “good grantwriting” really mean in terms of one’s art anyway?”

With these questions in mind, The Field started making efforts toward diversity, equity and outreach a few years ago and we’ve grown in fits and starts since then. For example, our 2012 partnership with the Nuyorican Poets Café, The Fire This Time Festival and BAAD! is one example of how we challenged ourselves to provide more equitable opportunities to diverse audiences outside our usual reach. We learned a lot. It’s challenging work though. It takes time, trust and sensitivity. It’s often uncomfortable. And because it’s not an “emergency,” we prioritize other things. But it’s necessary and important and we have a responsibility to work on it.

So what will The Field do?

Today’s actions: We commit to:

- examine how we provide resources and opportunities to artists
- consider issues of equity in our service delivery
- look at the fees we charge and how they are implemented
- examine the salaries and fees we pay
- look at our staff and Board cultivation and hiring practices.

Tomorrow’s actions for today’s dreams:

These are deeply complex issues and questions. As artist Miguel Gutierrez told us, “I will say that the privilege stuff requires lots of conversation and openness and historical sensitivity.” We will aim to question our processes sensitively and openly. This is a long-term effort.

What will you do?

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