

A Report from Five Listening Sessions with Palm Beach County Artists November 2004

The Background

Early in 2004 three Palm Beach County visual artists—Mark Gierok, Caren Hackman and Terre Rybovich—decided to explore with fellow artists the possibility of creating a county-wide artists' association. Being familiar with artists' communities in other cities in the U.S., they knew that fewer opportunities existed for working artists here than in many other similar counties.

A major factor in the timing of their decision was the December, 2003 announcement that Will Ray had resigned as President of the Palm Beach County Cultural Council. Many artists in this county perceive Dr. Ray's tenure as one in which cultural organizations were given priority while the needs of individual artists were frequently overlooked. For the three initiators this transition seemed the ideal time for artists to join in conceiving their own form of association as well as their own priorities.

The initiators were also cognizant of the positive impact artists could have on this community. In an application to the Palm Beach County Diversity Venture Fund (which was not funded), they explained, "In Palm Beach County diversity, especially racial/ethnic and economic diversity, still eludes us. We need opportunities for people to cross lines and become acquainted. We need leaders to show us how. By creating a conscious community of artists we form a cross-section of every segment of this society. An artists' association will transcend barriers of race, language, class, sexuality, age and more. It will serve as a model of diversity. In the process, artists will collaborate on works of art reflecting that diversity and thus light the way."

After months of conversation a plan was devised to host six public meetings at which all artists—visual, performing, media and literary artists—would be invited to discuss what an ideal artists' association would look like. Delray Beach, Lake Worth, Palm Beach Gardens, Wellington, Belle Glade and West Palm Beach were identified as meeting sites, to reach artists in all parts of this large county. Sunday afternoon was selected as the meeting time with the hope that most working people would be available to attend then. The possibility of Spanish- and Creole-language meetings was also raised.

The Vision and the Response It Got

One of the initiators' top priorities—if not *the* top priority—was for the campaign to create as inclusive a forum as possible. It has been a common perception among artists in this county

that when resources have been made available to artists (whether by the Cultural Council or another entity), they were offered only to a very limited group of artists. And because it was not clear how this favored group had been constituted or how someone else might join (or even if such a group existed), a sense of resentment resulted.

The initiators, in their zeal to be inclusive, refrained from founding an association or even giving a name to their efforts. To some, this gave the appearance of disorganization. But for many artists it was an open invitation to engage to their heart's content. In either case the goal was to host forums in which every Palm Beach County artist could offer his or her sense of what needs to happen, free of someone else's preconceptions.

At a Palm Beach Institute for Contemporary Art's meeting of artists in early 2004 the initiators learned that Bess de Farber, in her role as meeting facilitator, uses a format for large group meetings called "The World Café." It is a recipe for breaking a large number of people into a series of randomly comprised small discussion groups, each with a host and a prepared set of discussion questions. This seemed ideal given the intention of engaging every artist-attendee in the conversation.

The initiators then composed a set of discussion questions (incorporated below). To jumpstart a discussion of possibilities, instead of dwelling on artists' negative experiences in the past, the questions were preceded by an introduction in which artists were asked to project themselves several years into the future, when a thriving association already exists.

From the start the greatest obstacle has been reaching the artists in this community. Joan Goldberg, Cultural Attaché to West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel, and Sonya Davis of the Cultural Council both graciously offered their mailing lists of artists. Unfortunately the lists were heavily weighted toward visual artists, and that of the Cultural Council was years out of date. Nevertheless they provided a starting point for the campaign. At the initiators' expense, a mailing was sent out to about 1,100 artists in April, announcing the first three meetings—in Delray Beach on May 8, Lake Worth on June 13 and Palm Beach Gardens on July 18. In time artists' "word of mouth" became a primary form of outreach.

By the end of the third meeting the initiators were discovering the limits of their own capacities and finances. The Wellington meeting was cancelled when the response did not reach a critical mass. The Glades/South Bay meeting received targeted outreach efforts yet the turnout was tiny though very enthusiastic. And then Charles Passey, music critic for the Palm Beach Post, wrote a story on the campaign in the Sunday, September 12 Post. The positive tone of the article captured the attention of many artists. In spite of postponements and miscommunications due wholly to Hurricane Frances, roughly 100 artists attended the September 19 meeting at the Kravis Center.

Beginning with the first meeting the initiators have been surprised and heartened by the seriousness of the discussions. Artists attending the meetings are readily aware of the resources provided to artists in other communities, as well as the benefits of associating with other artists both within and across disciplines. Each meeting was an eruption of enthusiasm, with artists eager to create the association “tomorrow.” And donation jars coaxed dollars and checks from artists, again surpassing the expectations of the initiators (who had financed the entire endeavor). In total, artists gave \$888.

Who Attended the Meetings?

At each meeting artists were asked to complete a form (see Attachment A), identifying their discipline and which resources they would most like to obtain, as well as what resources they were willing to contribute to create an artists association. Not all artists completed a form, and not all artists limited themselves to one discipline (hence the numbers in the table below may not add up to the totals).

<u>Location</u>	<u>Total # Artists</u>	<u>Visual</u>	<u>Performing</u>	<u>Media</u>	<u>Literary</u>
Delray Beach	22	14	4	3	3
Lake Worth	44	23	5	2	7
Palm Beach Gardens	32	20	0	1	2
Wellington	-cancelled-				
Glades/South Bay	7	4	3	0	0
West Palm Beach	100	51	13	12	9

There was no systematic effort to track age, gender, race or ethnicity. It is the consensus of the three initiators that the majority in attendance at every meeting was white and middle-aged—just like the initiators. Nevertheless at every meeting there were African-American and Latino/a artists. In fact the West Palm Beach meeting seemed to include about 20% artists of color. In addition, as many as a third of the artists at all meetings were either under 30 or over 60. And the ratio of women to men was at most 2 to 1, sometimes less.

What Do Individual Artists Want?

The form each artist completed included a list of 19 potential resources or services. Artists were asked to select the five most important to them. Below are the 19 items, ranked in popularity, along with the percentage of artists who selected each:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Events that bring artists together | 64% |
| 2. Public events that promote local artists | 60% |
| 3. Exhibition space | 48% |
| 4. Joint Marketing Strategies | 47% |

5. Health Insurance	37%
6. A building that houses many of these resources	35%
7. Juried competitions w/marketing of winners	32%
8. Legal Advice	31%
9. Advocacy in Public policy & arts issues	30%
10. Access to affordable housing/studio space	29%
11. Affordable website design/hosting	27%
12. Career Counseling	21%
13. Discount membership at local cultural institutions	20%
14. Access to performance space	19%
15. Facility for photographing your artwork	17%
16. Studio insurance	9%
17. Access to rehearsal space	6%
18. Dark room	6%
19. Recording studio	5%

In some cases artists did not limit themselves to five selections, though the vast majority did. Asked for other ideas, individuals offered the following: open studio visits, an “incubator” for emerging artists, a network to connect artists to schools, travel opportunities, a dating service and more.

Given the opportunity to join a caucus within the artists’ association, a minority expressed interest, with the following selected most often:

- Artists working in your medium
- African-American
- High tech
- The Artist’s Way*
- Tree-huggers.

When asked what they could contribute to create an artists association, artists chose from a list of 24 ideas. Among the most common were:

- Contact with the media;
- Contact with other artists;
- Envelope-stuffing skills;
- Influence with a cultural organization;
- Organizing/people skills;
- Promotional writing skills;
- Public speaking ability; and
- Running errands locally.

What Do Artists in Small Group Discussions Want?

Small groups varied from 4 to 12 artists. Hosts were selected by the initiators and, because of their considerable conscientiousness, are listed below with thanks:

Kenneth Apelbaum
JoAnne Berkow
Christine Davis
Bess de Farber
Mark Gierok
Caren Hackman
Joy Merrill
Bill Perry
Sam Perry

Beate Rodewald
Tracy Rosof-Petersen
Cindy Rybovich
Terre Rybovich
Jim Sagui
Liz Segall
Vicky Skinner
Cassandra Tanenbaum

Hosts began the session by reading the introductory story (see Attachment B). What follows is the discussion questions and a summation of the subsequent discussion, taken from hosts' notes.

1. In this ideal community, what are the most important elements for you, as an artist?

What significant services does the community provide you?

What role do artists play in our ideal community?

Often the conversation took a broad view. Nothing less than acknowledging the transcendence of art—and welcoming art into everyday activities—was one level of response. To be honored as an artists, allowed to be expert in one's field, is another version. "Only when artists are included in local (governmental) bodies does art become part of the solution. We have to have a presence." The key is advocacy, for some, which gives artists authority. Another pinpointed artists' own attitudes: "Artists in New York don't call themselves local artists," he noted.

For many, the creation of artists' neighborhoods is the goal. And given the recent history of artists driven out of Soho and now Williamsburg in New York, as well as in other cities, emphasis is on artist-ownership and economic empowerment. Moreover, artists prefer to make their living by pursuing their passion. Thus entrepreneurial support becomes a priority. Corporate support, but not ownership, was mentioned as a key potential source of support.

One vision is to transform one neighborhood after another, creating "Bohemian hotbeds" with venues for performing, media, literary and visual art. A goal would be to create a sense of

community, a sense of artists as an institution in order to compete with other institutions for visibility. The celebration of differences, support for individualism, are also emphasized. “Make it and they will come,” was heard repeatedly. One of the meetings included an artist from Miami who regaled his listeners with tales of neighborhoods transformed by converting unused industrial spaces into visual and performing arts spaces.

Often the discussion centered on the importance of having a building—or better yet, a network of buildings across the county. This seemed to be the defining ingredient of a successful artists’ association for many artists. Some envision a “one-stop” café/gallery/services-delivery site, an “artists’ Kinko’s” (or, again, a county-wide network of them) that also allows artists to network and socialize. Others want working space for artists from all fields. Not a single building but a complex of buildings that includes exhibition and performing space. And access to technology that many performing and media artists rely on yet cannot afford individually.

Welcoming the public, with the aim of sharing and educating about contemporary art, is another intention. Festivals that are multi-disciplinary—showcases, art expo’s, book fairs—are among the concepts mentioned here. Coordinate them with SunFest or the South Florida Fair, perhaps. Someone offered the concept of a Day of Healing in the wake of the hurricanes, in which artists create an event that showcases original art as a gift to the well-being of the community.

Often the importance of giving back to the community is emphasized. Artists see themselves adding to beauty, peace, quality of life and other intangibles. Others mention being a conscience of the community, in part because art’s highest value is not its monetary value but its aesthetic or transcendent quality. The motivations of artists are often not material. And some artists pursue their art at considerable expense to themselves. One specific community issue in which artists seem eager to engage is that of quality arts education. The precarious place the arts now occupy in local schools is a genuine concern, and artists would like to play a significant role in that discussion.

Advocacy that impacts local policy-making, that would encourage the creation of artist neighborhoods for example, is a constant in these conversations. As a starting point one artist suggested a blanket policy that local governments arrange for empty retail spaces to be made available to the artists’ association. Many are aware of the strides made in Miami and how the arts have transformed neighborhoods as a result. Ultimately artists envision having a role here in policy-making, planning, zoning. Providing insight and too-often-overlooked expertise in discussions such as those regarding the relocation of Scripps Institute or the development of the Convention Center are two specific ideas.

The role of the local media came up regularly. Artists believe it is the duty of the local media to promote area artists in the same way the media promotes cultural organizations and community endeavors in general. And artists tend to agree that the local media has not met its duty in this regard. Too often the attention of critics is drawn to touring performances or exhibitions, sometimes of national significance but sometimes not. Artists of comparable quality who choose to live in this area are regularly overlooked as a result. It is a priority for many artists that advocacy efforts include working with the media to gain a more balanced coverage of artists' efforts in this community—and ultimately promotion. In part this would entail gaining more critics with a sufficient background in contemporary art and the ability to adequately assess art that is not already well-known and widely critiqued.

Artists' community in the more ephemeral sense is as much a priority as the creation of a physical site or neighborhood. Creating opportunities for artists to discuss each other's work. Making celebrations and events that engage a diversity of artists. Hosting weekly or monthly artist parties that vary to meet a range of cultural tastes and geographic locations—this seems to be a pressing need. Collaboration between disciplines is a constant theme, and artists are eager for such opportunities. Overwhelmingly, artists were delighted to have the chance to sit and share with each other and were eager to create opportunities to continue.

Some conversations focused on the specific:

- Health insurance, a major preoccupation for artists of all ages.
- Access to legal advice.
- Travel and exchange programs both international and domestic.
- A job bank.
- A directory or yellow pages of services artists provide, cross-referenced by profession (i.e., “day jobs”); also include services for artists such as printers, framers, etc. Market the directory. Sell ads, distribute to newcomers to the area, etc.
- Barter network. Buyers' coop. Materials exchange.
- Support for emerging artists in existing and new venues. Arrange for Norton, Kravis, etc. to showcase local artists.
- Cooperative booking program for performers.
- Creating stronger relationships between visual artists and gallery owners.
- Open studios as space for other artists to perform and show. Create local buzz.
- Performance space \$50/month from each artist. Also corporate/business support.
- Community singing groups.
- Film programs.
- Murals.

And included a wide range of services desired by artists:

- Hiring a marketing group to create a joint ad campaign.
- Training artists on how to present themselves as well as their work.
- Help with business aspects of selling and marketing.
- Learning how to obtain and work with an agent.
- Grant-writing training.
- Retired executives/SCORE, business models for success.
- Transportation for art and/or the equipment used to make it.

2. The artists' organization that we created for ourselves—what are the key elements that make it such a success?

Do you engage with the organization on a regular basis? If so, how?

What kind of leadership do we have, and how are major decisions made?

The need for the association to be “by artists and for artists” was a nearly universal—and emphatic—theme in small group discussions. Artists of all types grasp immediately that the difference between the association proposed here and what exists already is artist control. Who runs the organization, how they are selected and for how long a term are topics of considerable concern. Who should attend meetings, and how often meetings are convened, is the stuff of passionate debate. Whether or not artists had experience with other organizations, they wanted to have input in the shaping and maintaining of a democratic association. At the same time it was acknowledged that we should not reinvent the wheel, but rather learn from the many examples of artist associations elsewhere.

The possibility of affiliating with an existing cultural organization—to avoid the effort of creating a new nonprofit organization—was raised in some discussion groups. There is a mix of opinion here. There is also a strong sense on the part of some that local history does not offer many examples of organizations extending themselves to support artists in ways artists want. Overall it seems the potential risks of trusting an existing organization with the artists' vision may outweigh the negatives associated with creating a nonprofit organization. At the same time artists are very interested in collaborating with other cultural organizations in ways of mutual benefit.

Whether or not it is a new nonprofit entity, there appears to be universal agreement that this is a membership organization we are creating, with artist-members constituting the majority if not the total membership. For many, a “Friend of Artists” category of membership for non-artists sounded useful. Some specifically want to establish a role for patrons. Without any prompting, an annual fee of \$100 per artist was suggested at possibly every meeting—preferably payable in installments. Some suggested that fees be partly payable on an in-kind or volunteer basis in lieu of money. Others suggested that all members be requested to volunteer for a certain number of hours.

Members (possibly artist-members only) would elect a Board of Directors, who would serve for a specified term and then rotate off, according to the consensus. The Board would embody the diversity of disciplines represented by the membership, as well as its diversity of geographic location, age, gender and race or ethnicity. Some, but not all, see a need for non-artist professionals (funders, attorneys, accountants, etc.) on the Board.

Members should be welcome at most if not all Board meetings, which should be preceded by ample publicity. Some suggested that all artists be entitled to vote on “major issues.” It was also suggested that chapters be formed that would then hold their own meetings. Repeatedly the notion of a “bottom-up” or democratic approach to decision-making was emphasized.

Interestingly, there was little talk of officers or how the Board would be led. A suggestion that the organization be governed by a king and queen was met with cheers and laughter. And yet, amidst the emphasis on democratic decision-making, many did not even mention the need for paid staff.

The fundamental question of who is an artist (i.e., who is eligible to join) was raised but never answered decisively. There is some concern that the association represent primarily “working” or “professional” artists, though these terms are highly problematic for many artists. More often the concern is that we remain as inclusive as feasible. (During the months of meetings the initiators themselves considered an application process in which applicants submit at least 2-3 samples of their work, along with a signed statement that the works are both original and created within the previous two years. The works would not be juried, but kept on file.) Clearly the question of who is eligible to join remains one of the first to be answered.

Often the concept of a tiered membership was mentioned. Based on clearly defined and objective criteria, an artist’s credentials would place them at one of 3 or 4 levels ranging from beginner to advanced. This would enable a more targeted delivery of services, with an emphasis on helping emerging artists. It also opens new possibilities for attracting and retaining the most successful artists.

Communication is widely seen as the key to success. Email, a web site, regular meetings, a newspaper or newsletter available on the street, and press coverage are some of the ideas of how to reach and engage busy artists. Again, having the support of the local media could mean that artists stay abreast of the association’s events with little effort or expense.

In the end, artists in attendance were seeking a form of organization that is both democratic and unconventional, outside the box, an organization that is a reflection of its membership. And last but not least, they know they will have to figure out how to balance the artist’s devotion to creating with his or her commitment to maintaining a thriving association.

3. What resources did artists bring to bear in the beginning that allowed us to create such a dynamic artists' association?

And what's the most important thing they bring now, several years later?

Again and again, at every meeting, there was vocal and heartfelt insistence that this endeavor would demand commitment and sacrifice in order to succeed. This did not come from the initiators, in fact they were surprised and affirmed by the seriousness of the conversation.

Challenging the stereotype, artists often talked about putting egos aside for a greater good. Artists want to be inspired to give what's precious to them—time, money, donor contacts, media contacts, for example. At the same time, they want to know that this is an organization that merits their sacrifice. “There has to be a hunger for this,” one artist said.

Artists know one of their greatest gifts is in reaching out to fellow artists and imparting their enthusiasm for creating an association. Some have mentioned the need for a degree of healing in the local artists' community. Too many feel they have been “burned” by past promises never fulfilled. Clearly for some it was a significant leap of faith to take time on a Sunday afternoon to attend a meeting hosted by unknowns and called for an unclear purpose. Fortunately these artists seemed to leave with some hope restored. This is of huge importance for the creation of artists' community.

There is also a willingness to bring to bear local political pressure to make the association effective. “Lots of squeaky wheels,” is how one artist termed it. And artists know what a difference local political support can make. Many of them have lived in communities whose administrations played active roles as artist advocates.

Another contribution artists imagined is to stay abreast of what other artists' associations are doing. Some retain membership in associations in other part of the country, and have valuable experience to offer. Others are simply curious to find out what else is out there. In the interest of not reinventing wheels as the association is established, this contribution is especially valuable.

Fundraising events are familiar to many artists of all backgrounds. Too often they are called upon to donate their art (visual or performing) to a charity event and end up making contributions that, proportional to their income, are way beyond that of even the largest donors. And frequently, it was noted, the recognition is minimal. On the positive side there is a rich body of experience on the roles artists can play in fundraisers. In fact there were a number of original ideas of events that artists could create. Often the focus was on creating an alternative “Bohemian” style or culture rather than competing with what predominates in

this community. In general artists seem eager to create events; it seems plausible that fundraising could be just another opportunity for an event.

Artists gave their enthusiasm in the listening sessions, and they look forward to opportunities to provide more of this vital resource. Nearly all of them appeared to leave the meeting more hopeful than when they arrived.

Conclusions/Next Steps

Condensing 10 hours of conversation among 200 artists entails a lot of simplification, even in a report of this length. The intention here is to honor all the contributions in a form accessible to the broader community.

Without question, artists know what they need in order for their work to have resonance. And they know what is available to artists in other communities in the U.S. Fortunately they are committed to living and working here. And we are all the richer for it. What they ask is that they be granted the recognition and the resources that their fellow artists enjoy in other similar locales.

There is, among the artists in attendance, enthusiastic support for the creation of an artists' association in Palm Beach County. The initiators can count on one hand the number of artists who reacted negatively to the idea, amidst months of extensive outreach and communication with artists.

There are lots of things artists want. Many of them are feasible. Not all of them have to be provided by an artists' association. This means there are opportunities for other cultural organizations to create or augment mutually beneficial relationships with artists.

Many artists—especially performing artists—already belong to associations that provide them with services. Ideally this association would develop mutually supportive relations with those associations. And artists will want to belong to both this association and any other that meets their needs. In general, this association should seek good relations with local cultural organizations. Given its unique nature, it is conceivable that it could cultivate new sources of funding, new donors, attracted to the vision of artist empowerment.

The Cultural Council is currently engaged in a strategic planning process and has proposed that a representative of the artists' association participate. The initiators have had several meetings with Rena Minar Blades, the new CEO of the Cultural Council, and found her very interested in artists' input. The opportunities for collaboration seem important, overdue, and should be a priority for a Palm Beach County artists' association.

As announced at the September 19 listening session, the three initiators have successfully completed their plan to convene artist meetings across the county. They have suggested that a steering committee be formed to implement artists' shared vision of an association. While hesitating to define the future, they see three tasks at hand: (1) building a membership base, in other words, securing commitments of support from hundreds of artists, (2) creating a program of events and benefits for members, and (3) cultivating financial supporters.

In keeping with the focus on inclusion, the initiators proposed that steering committee members be selected using a time-honored artists' tradition, the juried process. Artists have been invited to submit brief statements expressing their interest and ability in creating a membership organization of artists. An impartial judge, knowledgeable in nonprofit management, will select the most qualified applicants. Due to post-hurricane difficulties, the period for accepting artists' statements was extended until December 15. A first meeting of the steering committee should take place in early January, 2005.

Written by Terre Rybovich
November 2004

Attachment A:

A Form for Every Artist

Let's build a Palm Beach County artists' association!

Name _____

Address _____ Zip _____

Phone(s) _____ Email _____

1. What two words describe your artwork? _____

Which one of the following categories does your artwork belong in?

Literary

Media

Performing

Visual

2. What resources/services would you most want to see in a Palm Beach County artists' association? Please select up to five from the following:

Career Counseling

Health Insurance

Legal Advice

Affordable website design/hosting

Joint Marketing Strategies

Access to affordable housing/studio space

Studio insurance

Discount membership at local cultural institutions

Advocacy in public policy & arts issues

Events that bring artists together

Public events that promote local artists

Juried competitions w/marketing of winners

Access to rehearsal space

Access to performance space

Facility for photographing your artwork

Dark room

Recording studio

Exhibition space

A building that houses many of these resources

Other: _____

3. What can you contribute to the creation of an artists' association?

- Access to a particular community (e.g. Creole-speaking). Specify: _____
- Connection to people with money
- Contact with the media
- Envelope-stuffing skills
- Fluency in language other than English. Specify: _____
- Fundraising skills
- Influence within a cultural organization. Specify: _____
- Internet listserv management skills
- Meeting facilitation skills
- Note-taking skills
- Promotional writing skills
- Running errands locally
- Website management skills
- I think I'd rather write a check...
- Contact with other artists
- Contact with public officials
- Experience with artists' associations
- Grant-writing skills
- Leadership skills
- Nonprofit know-how
- Organizing/people skills
- Public speaking ability
- Space for parties/events

4. Would you be interested in joining a caucus within the artists association? For example:

- Artists working in your medium
- Spanish-speaking
- Creole-speaking
- African-American
- People of color
- Gay/Lesbian
- High tech
- Agit prop
- The Artist's Way*
- Tree-huggers
- Other: _____

5. Will you commit to telling other local artists about these meetings and the opportunity to create an artists' association in Palm Beach County? If yes, how many artists? _____

6. Any comments? _____

Attachment B: Introduction for Small Group Discussions

Let's do a little time travel. Put our artists' imaginations to work.

Picture yourself several years in the future, living in Palm Beach County. At certain points in the past you had thought about leaving the area, in order to make it in your field as an artist. But now things have changed a bit for the better. This community seems like the place to be, at least for artists. Sure, it helps that the economy picked up. But maybe just as big a difference was made by the artists themselves.

We got our act together. Artists became a force for good in the community. Mostly we did it by creating a community of our own, a shelter so to speak, an association run by artists and responsive to artists. And several years later it continues to thrive.

Now we expect to see original works of art in every part of the county. Plays written by local playwrights and performed by local actors are showcased year-round. Musicians get together with dancers and poets to create new works that you can see regularly in inviting alternative performance spaces. The local film festival is distinguished by the work of local filmmakers. Local museums want to be the entry point to the visual arts of Palm Beach County. There's even an active Art in Public Places program that incorporates local artists of all types in county planning. Artists from diverse backgrounds collaborate so often it's hard to remember a time when we didn't know each other. And as the result of obtaining affordable housing and studio space, artists have created vibrant neighborhoods throughout the county. What a turn-around! Now we get calls from other communities around the country, wanting to know how they can create a dynamic artists' association of their own.

Are you there? Can you picture it all? Now let's get your input...