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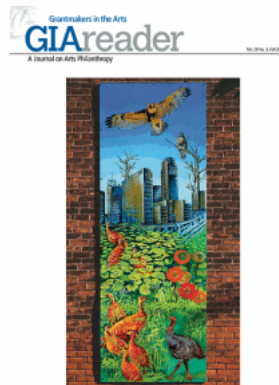
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The Artistry of Systemic Change

New Roles Emerging for Teaching Artists — New Ways to Accomplish Social Change

Richard Evans and Eric Booth

We need to engage with a dynamic world, a world that will not return to a steady state after the challenge. We don't live in a world of change but rather one that is asking us to constantly create.
— Ian Prinsloo, The Rehearsal Process

We know that intelligence requires physicality. It's not separate from that. I think one of the things about art is that, if you engage in it, the physicality changes the way you see things. That's really important. The embodied nature of learning through art is itself an indirect approach to navigating complexity.
— Dave Snowden, founder, Cognitive Edge and the Cynefin Centre for Applied Complexity, Bangor University, Wales

To be a conversion experience, [the work with art] has to be emotional and somewhat traumatic, unsettling enough yet in a safe enough space, allowing you to move forward, to overcome the you that is your nemesis, by using metaphor and simile to develop a system interaction so you see the other in you and you in the other. What's important is the capacity to go deep into the edge of chaos that resides

in each of us and come back out.

— Frances Westley, J. W. McConnell Chair in social innovation, University of Waterloo, Canada

An Expanding Understanding of Artistry

After an era of intense specialization of the arts, our understanding of artistry has begun in the past two decades to expand again. Development of the field of “teaching artistry” has led to artists working experientially in educational, lifelong-learning settings and expanding into health care, corrections, and non-arts professional development. Community artistry has developed “social practice,” the work of artists engaging with communities in the cocreation of participatory art for social impact. “Civic practice” then puts the accent of community-based artistic work on the agendas of non-arts partners. The silos separating the participatory work of artists in community, organizational, and educational settings are coming down, revealing a large, flexible, increasingly adept, and interconnecting field.

Artistic practices have fanned out in these ways in part because the power of art to frame realities from different and unexpected angles has begun once again to be more widely understood. Attention is also increasing because this expanded definition of art is proving to be “useful” — a quality that grabs the interest of pragmatically minded America. What we call “art” has of course been applied to social change for millennia, if not beginning in Paleolithic caves then certainly in Greek amphitheaters and medieval pageant wagons. The power of art over the ages lives as much or more in its processes as in its products. The processes of art and the ways audiences make meaningful connections to its products are comprised of complex ways of knowing the world and making meaning that are inaccessible by other means. Artists make worlds, and (when all goes well) others enter those worlds and make new meaning, changing the way they understand the world they live in.

This fundamental nature of the arts has served humanity over our long history. What makes the current situation different is the surge of interest in *creative reimagining* across all sectors of the economy, and widespread exploration of the contributions artists might make to achieving greater vitality, equity, and inclusiveness within the complex adaptive systems that our communities now consist of. *What might it feel like to live in a community that was creatively imagined in all its interwoven parts?*

Frustration with Traditional Community Planning

In parallel with these developments, momentum has been growing for new approaches to address the stubborn, persistent challenges American communities face. Complex social systems are notoriously difficult to change, even bounded at the local level. Best intentions and best practices (even with best funding) often fail to produce the desired impact. Experience teaches us that reliance on linear planning and rational processes cannot effectively address the tangle of interconnected realities that characterize complex systems nor deliver the discontinuous solutions that complexity requires. High-school education policies may aim to drive up results by “teaching to the test,” but all too often they serve to narrow curricula, stifle creativity and motivation to learn, and turn out less capable graduates of limited range and maturity.

These are not preferred nor comfortable realities, but they are widespread. As top-down, linear planning fails us again and again and the voices of citizens remain largely excluded from agency in decision making, communities are turning to laboratory environments — spaces for deliberate, nontraditional experimentation — to bring divided sectors and separate networks together, bridge differences, and unfreeze the status quo, so that innovative responses to complex community challenges can emerge where they were previously undiscoverable.

The sooner we shed our attachment to what seems logical but doesn't work, the faster we can learn our way to effectiveness in accomplishing the social goals we dedicate our hearts, heads, and organizations to.

Henry Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy”

Imagine someone planning strategy. What likely springs to mind is an image of orderly thinking. . . .

Now imagine someone *crafting* strategy. A wholly different image likely results, as different from planning as craft is from mechanization. Craft evokes traditional skill, dedication, perfection through the mastery of detail. What springs to mind is not so much thinking and reason as involvement, a feeling of intimacy and harmony with the materials at hand, developed through long experience and commitment. Formulation and implementation merge into a fluid process of learning through which creative strategies evolve.

At work, the potter sits before a lump of clay on the wheel. Her mind is on the clay, but she is also aware of sitting between her past experiences and her future prospects. . . .

Even with a single craftsman, how can we know what her intended strategies really were? If we could go back, would we find expressions of intention? And if we could, would we be able to trust them? We often fool ourselves, as well as others, by denying our subconscious motives.

Henry Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy,” Harvard Business Review, July-August 1987

A Possible Synthesis?

These two parallel developments — expansion in the community roles and capabilities of American artists, and the search for new answers to challenges in the complex adaptive systems of American communities — cry out for synthesis. The roots of *artistic development* and of *systems change* are intertwined, and human capability has relied upon this relationship without really understanding it or intentionally deploying it to achieve elusive ends.

Our experience to date has shown us a pair of major barriers to opening up this new frontier. Many people involved in social change carry traditional, limited understandings of what artists might contribute. The unique power of artistic processes to unlock new ways of engaging and acting when navigating complexity has not been adequately recognized as the major contribution to community change efforts that it could be. And in a complementary way, the community practice of artists has yet to be fully grounded in deep-seated creative reflection on the dynamics of complex social systems.

Consider the nature of artistic processes as they are used in the gestation and rehearsal of creative work. Artistic knowing and skills go beyond rational planning and logical methodologies to achieve powerful results that would be possible in no other way. Would you want to attend symphonies and modern dances produced by pure logic, designed by computer algorithm?

The ways systems actually change in the world can fairly be viewed as being at least as much aesthetic, emotional, and intuitive as they are logical. Yet the ways we currently go about fostering such change do not include what is known from artistic processes. When we muster the force to intervene to change a social system, marshaling our resources and plans, we commit ourselves entirely to a scientific method consisting of linear planning and rational processes, setting aside the truth of the way the world and humans fundamentally work.

In the conditions of social complexity that now characterize our cities and communities, using the mechanical metaphors and tools of Newton and Descartes is insufficient, if not downright misleading. It is no wonder powerful results seem so elusive. If such change efforts rarely achieve the sustained adoption of new practices, it is because they fail to engage the whole person and typically ignore the motivating quality of people's emotional responses to new ideas (the word *consent*, for instance, derives from the Latin words for "feeling together").

We need an aesthetic approach to counterpoint the deeply ingrained scientific method. Rather than being grounded in a formal hypothesis that is then tested, art making begins at the "pre-hypothesis" level, releasing the imagination by removing constraints on feeling and action in order to allow original connections to be made, which are then shaped through repeated rehearsal, critique, and improvement. Experienced in the whole body and activating human capacities beyond (and including) the rational, artistic practices can result not only in remarkably innovative approaches to change but also high levels of ownership and commitment to the product or strategy that emerges from the development process.

In all of this, there is a tremendous opportunity for systems change to be reimaged as an artistic process. Artists are sometimes included in social change work, but they are usually enlisted to contribute sidebar or warm-up activities alongside systems analysis and strategy design, or to design arts activities that do little to build lasting local capacity.¹

The creative assets and imaginative methods of teaching artists are rarely tapped in the process design of the systems change work itself. Doing so would be a methodological breakthrough and could vastly expand the applicability of artists' practices to change processes at the organizational and community levels, helping to produce the results we have flailed to achieve. Effectively applying artists' knowing to the heart of social change initiatives could unleash a foundational human power, an open secret that has been overlooked in our determined efforts to help the world work better.

A Set of Essential Capabilities for This Work

Over the past year, EmcArts has convened an international working group of artists and complexity scientists to explore the potential roles of artistic practices as methodologies to propel radical adaptive change in complex social systems. The insights have been remarkable and are being piloted with artists across the country. We have relied upon experienced teaching artists as pioneers in this work, tapping their sophisticated abilities to open up artistic processes and apply them to a wide variety of learning goals. We and these teaching artists recognize that this work redefines "teaching artistry," taking it beyond school settings and lifelong-learning contexts, even beyond community arts projects and social impact programs, where it is usually deployed, into key positions in addressing social challenges that have defied previous best efforts.

Our research revealed deep parallels between the complex forms of understanding and processing inherent in system change work and the essential processes that many artists use in the gestation and development of creative work. But how do we capture and make practical use of these shared roots? The approach we are taking is to identify five human *capabilities* that are critical to systemic work and at the same time are central to the underlying methodology of many artistic development processes.²

Our thesis is that strengthening these capabilities through repeated and extended artistic processes will uniquely empower groups of people pursuing systemic change in conditions of social complexity to generate novel and effective new pathways with momentum for achieving a better world.

We are beginning to see how these five capabilities, scaffolded and applied by teaching artists, can lead to unusual results and transform people's engagement with complex challenges. We have constructed an example of these capabilities in action from our work in many programs around the country.³ We readily admit this story is partly actual and partly in prospect, as it is still so early in the development of this new integrated approach. As we work through each of the capabilities, we will refer back to this example to provide some grounding:

A local artist uses the idea of a "garden" as a potent metaphor for the complex challenge of eradicating food deserts. As an entry point, groups of participants together draw their concept of an ideal garden. These early, relatively traditional images (full of walkways, fountains, trees, play areas) are shared and then unexpectedly discarded, with the instruction now to develop a nontraditional garden concept that reflects the issues and systemic challenges of accessing healthy food. These images are very different — edgy and ardent. Next, access to a derelict plot in the city is acquired, and the various groups go there to turn their new garden concepts into reality — with the stipulation that everything they use has to be sourced from the neighborhood. The resulting patchwork of sculptural images and repurposed materials speaks tellingly to the underlying social challenge, but the ways in which they have been created also draw local attention to the situation in a new and compelling way and provides a rallying place for new thinking and involvement in reclaiming territory for nutrition. The owners of two adjoining plots step forward to turn them into gardens and grow local food. Other symbolic

gardens start to spring up in food deserts across the city and, around them, new community allotments. Zoning laws are changed to permit the sale of in-city, locally grown produce. Neighborhoods are mobilized and motivated at a deep level to eradicate all local food deserts, and previously unimaginable responses are beginning to emerge.

1. Being able to work with the surprises of interdependence and unpredictability

This capability is about recognizing and responding to the dynamics of complex systems: the way that everything is interconnected and mutually influential, often in counterintuitive ways that are difficult to untangle, impossible to predict, and lead to unintended, perverse consequences; the way there is no single center of action, and we all contribute to how and why the system operates as it does; the way that deeper, submerged patterns or shaping forces are disguised by the immediate confusion or attraction of the behaviors we can see.

A successful piece of art is inherently in and of itself a complex system, built on forging complex interrelationships and containing many emergent truths. We see this a lot in big place-based novels. There is no single narrative thread to *Middlemarch* or *Ulysses*; rather, the curious and compelling lives we encounter are artfully interconnected within the system of the town or city (the real subject perhaps) to produce evolving feedback loops and an inexorable probing into hidden motivations. "Plot creation" for systemic change needs to embody these qualities.

In our example, the images in the symbolic gardens embodied and made visible the underlying forces that together resulted in food deserts, disrupted entrenched assumptions that limit perception and discovery, and transformed the understanding of these dynamics among everyone involved.

2. Being able to weave new networks and make imaginative connections

Disrupting established networks and forming new ones to connect like-minded people across difference are well-documented ways to influence what happens in complex systems and gain momentum for change. Networks are also metaphors for ways of apprehending deeper patterns in the world, and metaphor is the currency of art. By their very nature, metaphors link disparate things unexpectedly — reframing experience by proposing identity between things that are normally separated ("My salad days, when I was green in judgment" ⁴).

When a group becomes adept at knowing the world through metaphor, they take a first step toward actively creating new system connections and new disruptive potential. Imaginative connections drive the formation of unlikely new networks. As Robert Kegan remarked, "A metaphor is interpretive, but it is an interpretation made in soft clay rather than in cold analysis. It invites the client to put his hands on it and reshape it into something more fitting to him. . . . Drawn to put his hands to reshaping it, he is engaged in reshaping the very way he knows."⁵

In our example, we see this reshaping happening as the garden designs are developed by groups who have never before worked together but now share a challenging collective goal. Imaginative connections are then further provoked through the act of sourcing materials from community members. And the gardens and allotments, as they grow, form a new network of shared enterprise, a microcommunity that is at once artistic, cultural, and fun — and robust enough to achieve new zoning laws.

3. Being able to let go of advance planning in favor of experimentation and discovery

To come to grips with complexity — where the future is unpredictable — means embracing "learning by doing," using repeated small experiments to discover new insights and possibilities. It is in fact a return to our humanity, a move from the mechanical back to the organic, but it is very hard for groups of people to work together without devising a plan in advance. John Dewey wrote about "flexible purposing," asserting that the very nature of creative process means you will end up with different solutions than you initially expected.

Artists embrace these "emergent strategies" intrinsically, working with multiple and contradictory "hunches" as they weave networks of metaphor, probe the interdependence of their material, and impose real discipline and craft to gradually shape subjective insights into objective forms that have meaning for others. X-ray analysis reveals to us the often wildly different moves that painters make before they arrive at the final surface, and improvisation remains at the core of play development.

For most of us, working together this way is unfamiliar and scary, making us feel vulnerable and exposed as incompetent. But the early stages of artistic creation provide a socially acceptable container for us to let go and engage in intuitive discovery — the stakes seem lower — enabling mixed groups of adult participants to work together on journeys of exploration that many would find extremely difficult in more traditional formats.

Our example shows how an artist creates conditions that support participants in adopting and sustaining an experimental mind-set (sometimes called "enabling constraints" by teaching artists) — from the two sets of drawings (low-stakes tryouts) to the more demanding experiment of foraging for materials and the semi-improvised crafting of them, from which meaning gradually emerges. And little could be more emergent than the network of gardens and committed residents that comes into being.

4. Being able to make generative use of sustained uncertainty

Moving away from traditional planning-based approaches for social change toward a framework of repeated experimenting and rapid learning means questioning our ingrained assumptions, holding strong views lightly, and entering a realm where ambiguity and uncertainty rule. This capability is quite different from merely tolerating ambiguity while driving toward resolution: it means making active use of multiple simultaneous approaches as the way to go deeper into the system, to plumb unexpected strategic potential.

This is the systemic capability perhaps most easily recognized as central to artistic purpose. Artists are among the planetary beings most adept at entering the unknown, asking a lot of questions, living with extended ambiguity, not allowing form to emerge too quickly, and not rushing to simple or obvious solutions. If we are to navigate complexity with purpose, we need this preparedness to remain unsettled before settling, we need to let go of assumed constraints on action, and we need to let the discoveries shape us, not the other way around.

We might say this is the central premise of most effective thrillers, from *Rashomon* to *Memento*: the filmmaker takes us along a path of generative discovery, withholding closure as we piece together elements of truth from the multiple ambiguities. For John Keats, these qualities constituted the “negative capability” that he saw Shakespeare as possessing so enormously.⁶

In our example, the artist nurtures the taste for exploration without determined outcomes by scaffolding the steps of exploration, building success upon success, making each stage bolder. The artist acts like the filmmaker, directing us as artist-participants to literally piece together possibilities for our metagardens from materials we ourselves discover (after the initial gesture that pulls the rug from under our preferred images). Also notable is the *indirect* approach to the challenge of food deserts, a characteristic of working in complex systems, where the dynamics that need to change are submerged and cannot be tackled head on.

5. Being able to rehearse new pathways and dispassionately let go of our favorite ideas

Relishing the interdependence of things, generating imaginative connections, becoming experimental, and being able to move forward in sustained uncertainty are all vital capabilities for successful change efforts in complex systems, and all of them are inherent in many artists’ practices. But they are not enough. We also need to be able to take what emerges from initial experiments and subject it to repeated testing, changing the parameters each time, but not too much, while carrying out continuous evaluation of what we are trying. This stage of the process — we might call it “rehearsal” — means having the insight and mental toughness to amplify promising experiments, while closing others down, even if we were really committed to them at the start.

This discipline of “killing the darlings” is age-old advice to the artist. Writer Annie Dillard puts it baldly: “The part you must jettison is not only the best-written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have been the very point. It is the original key passage on which the rest was to hang, and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin. . . . It is the beginning of a work that the writer throws away.”⁷

The artist in our example prefigures this capability at the start by having us invest in creating our ideal garden designs and then discard them in favor of something far less comfortable or secure. Later, we return to our garden imagining (after two rounds of practice) to create our gardens not with tools and materials well suited to our new alternative designs but almost randomly, serendipitously, with discarded objects — in themselves a metaphor for all the letting go we have had to agree to along the way.

By getting inside these journeys, disciplines, and sacrifices as artists together, we can discover and design truly leveraged system interventions, not just ones that are attractive in the short term, and then together we have a chance of seeing our strategies escalate in effectiveness over time. And individually we can apply our newfound capabilities as “artists for systems change” to other complex challenges, drawing in new participants.

George Saunders, on writing

A work of fiction can be understood as a three-beat movement: a juggler gathers bowling pins; throws them in the air; catches them...

The writer, having tossed up some suitably interesting pins, knows they have to come down, and, in my experience, the greatest pleasure in writing fiction is when they come down in a surprising way that conveys more and better meaning than you’d had any idea was possible. One of the new pleasures I experienced writing this, my first novel, was simply that the pins were more numerous, stayed in the air longer, and landed in ways that were more unforeseen and complexly instructive to me than has happened in shorter works.

...Something like this had happened in stories before, but never on this scale, and never so unrelated to my intention. It was a beautiful, mysterious experience...

Why do I feel this to be a hopeful thing? The way this pattern thrillingly completed itself? It may just be — almost surely is — a feature of the brain, the byproduct of any rigorous, iterative engagement in a thought system. But there is something wonderful in watching a figure emerge from the stone unsummoned, feeling the presence of something within you, the writer, and also beyond you — something consistent, wilful, and benevolent, that seems to have a plan, which seems to be: to lead you to your own higher ground.

George Saunders, on writing Lincoln in the Bardo, Guardian, March 4, 2017.

What Does All This Mean for Effective Design? What Might This Kind of Artistry Look Like?

We are now experimenting with how these Janus-like capabilities — facing toward systems change and toward artistic creation at the same time — might be advanced in imaginative community development efforts, placing teaching artists at the center of the work. In developing this field, two things are turning out to be crucial: recognizing the place of both primary and secondary creative processes, and creating extended arcs of artistically driven strategy formation.

In exploring how imagination propels creative work, how aesthetic and scientific methods can be conjoined, and how “art” relates to “craft,” many writers have distinguished between primary and secondary processes.⁸ Primary processes are those that generate new ideas — we tap into some aspect of ourselves and come up with original raw material. Secondary processes work with that raw material and shape it into products with impact. The poet has many ideas in a poem (results of primary process), and the poem may or may not have impact (results of secondary process). Accordingly, we are working with artists to devise creative sequences that encompass and respect both types of process.

The work begins with short activities that meet three basic threshold criteria of artistry and introduce the pleasures of all three (experiencing pleasure in the process is essential for the long arc of complex problem solving): they offer a shift in our everyday perspective on the world, they provoke unexpected connections, and they demand that we suspend our judgment. Arts activities of this kind, we find, usefully pre-echo the five capabilities and enable groups to get into the groove of this unexpected approach (as happened in our earlier story with the two rounds of garden drawing).

To have a longer life and stimulate growth in capabilities, artistic entry points can be designed as the beginning of longer arcs of work, each approach being scaffolded and reapplied repeatedly to different stages of the work — going deeper each time, combining imagination and craft to develop and amplify the creative engagement into substantial strategic outputs. Such activities, consistently reintroduced, contribute to the development of an artistic sensibility in groups working together. By repetition and variation, they support the group in generating multiple ideas (and thus getting better ones) throughout the process, in getting used to sparks of apprehension and seeing the world afresh metaphorically, and in bringing critical insights to experimental hunches. In short, the activities accelerate the development of all five essential capabilities.

At the end, the alternative systems-oriented strategies actually adopted may or may not directly involve the arts; the point is that they were conceived using artistic processes as the unique means of discovering and developing the new approach. And the ways of working with artists to achieve these strategies become important new tools for the future, to be applied afresh with new challenges.

Many questions remain for further exploration with artists across the country as they work with community-based change agents. How do we build on artistic entry points? How can we extend and maintain the generative ambiguities without taking the earliest rational way out? How do we move from the primary artistic work of discovery toward the secondary work of shaping, critiquing, and refining that is usually relegated only to logical consideration? How do we create longer sequences of artistic development that introduce the discipline of creating within constraints and gradually move toward significant form and objective meaning? And how do we do all this while moving from initial artistic entry points toward the specific challenge to be addressed?

Einstein, the mathematician-physicist who totally relied on aesthetic strategies, was widely quoted about the essentialness of imaginative work throughout his scientific processes. And when stuck, he often picked up the violin to feed himself aesthetically. He said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research."⁹

If the synergy of the scientific and aesthetic methods could provide the greatest twentieth-century insight into complex physics, surely that approach can create breakthroughs in solving intractable twenty-first-century social challenges.

Einstein and teaching artists rarely inhabit the same paragraph. Yet, we have a feeling that the work we are piloting with artists has some feel of disrupting the settled assumptions of several fields into a new relativity about the way arts, artists, and artistry work in complex social change: the way that through and with artists we can bend vision around blockages that have stopped social change before; the way the unseen inchoate forms through which human nature really works can directly serve our social development.

Endpiece

In this research work, we stand at the threshold of new understandings and opportunities for significant new artistically infused designs for substantive change in our complex communities. But it is early days — we are still probing and experimenting. Part of our interest right now is to bring together more examples of the five capabilities in action, experienced both through artistic development and as methods for systemic change work. Perhaps we do not yet have them in full view? Perhaps we have missed something equally fundamental as these? If you have been involved in work that seems to you to embody one or more of these capabilities in the context we have been describing, please let us know. This article is posted on www.ArtsFwd.org (<http://www.ArtsFwd.org>), and there is a place for you to post responses and share your own experiences. We look forward to the continuing dialogue!

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Eric Booth is a teaching artist and an arts learning consultant with many programs, organizations, states, and foreign countries. An author of five books and many articles, he was awarded the Arts Education Leadership Award by Americans for the Arts in 2015.

NOTES

1. See Richard Evans and Karina Mangu-Ward, "Introducing Community Innovation Labs: A New Approach for Harvesting the Power of the Arts to Unlock Complex Problems in Local Systems (<http://www.giarts.org/article/introducing-community-innovation-labs>)," *GIA Reader* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 41–46.
2. We use the term *capability* in partial reference to the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on human capabilities, which Nussbaum defines as "the freedom to achieve valuable outcomes." Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
3. We owe much here to the inspiration of artist/curator Constance White, with whom we are working in Dallas.
4. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, act 1, scene 5.
5. Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
6. "The ability to live in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." John Keats, letter to his brothers, 1817.
7. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
8. The psychologist Abraham Maslow was the first to write about this distinction, in *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1968).
9. Albert Einstein, "What Life Means to Einstein," interview by George Sylvester Viereck, *Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929.

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Grantmakers in the Arts holds public policy and advocacy as one of its core funding focus areas. As part of this work, we find one of the most important roles we can serve in benefitting our members and the arts grantmaking field comes by way of our public policy and advocacy work. On this podcast, we are glad to be joined by special guest Althea Erickson, director of Sol Center for Liberated Work, Center for Cultural Innovation, and Eddie Torres, president and CEO, Grantmakers in the Arts. They discuss recent lobbying and advocacy efforts of GIA, navigating how shifting priorities can influence GIA approach to advocacy, and opportunities for you to support current legislation.

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