The Creative Class of Color in New York

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Recent studies on New York’s creative sector have established that the arts are a key asset in the city’s economic portfolio. *Culture Counts: Strategies for a More Vibrant Cultural Life for New York City* (2001); *Creative New York* (2005); and *The Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Impact on New York City and New York State* (2007) provide ample evidence that the diverse number of cultural institutions, arts-related businesses, and artists in New York generate employment, attract tourism, and enhance the city’s quality of life. Cultural diversity is frequently mentioned as a chief component that attracts tourism and maintains New York reputation as a global creative capital. However, missing from these reports are data on artists that can inform us on how well artists of Asian, African, Latino, and Native American descent are faring in New York’s creative economy.

Those of us who work in New York’s culturally specific and community-based institutions find it ironic that the population of artists who practically embody diversity have not been counted among the city’s assets. One reason may be that urban policy makers who draw from Richard Florida’s formulas for sustaining a creative city buy into his contention that class, ethnic, race, and gender biases erode as cross-discipline citizens find it ironic that the population of artists who practically embody diversity have not been counted among the city’s assets. A creative class of people I study use the word “diversity” a lot, but not to press any political hot buttons. Diversity is simply something they value in all its manifestations. This is spoken of so often...that I take it to be a fundamental value marker of creative class values. Creative minded people enjoy a mix of influences. They want to hear different kinds of music and try different kinds of food. They want to meet and socialize with people unlike themselves, trade views and spar over issues.”

Florida’s observation that creative people value diversity generally rings true. In all my years in the art world I have seldom come across bigots or homophobes and found that male chauvinists could be re-educated. Nevertheless it is hard to ignore that New York’s creative class is stratified along racial and ethnic lines.

There is a creative class of color — no actually a creative community of color in New York. Whereas Florida’s archetypical creative-class denizen is apolitical and esteems diversity for its entertainment value artists of Asian, African,
KEY FINDINGS

Gender Breakdown
65% of the respondents were female; 35% male; 0 transgender

Ethnic Breakdown (respondents were allowed
to check multiple identifiers)
7.5% African
33.8% African American
0% Arab American
14.8% Asian
19.3% Asian-American
13.4% Caribbean
4.3% Euro American
20.3% Latina/o
12.1% Latin American
7.2% Native American

Time in NYC
45% report living in New York City for 10 years or more
26% of respondents are native New Yorkers
20% have lived in New York City 10 to 5 years
8% have lived in New York City less than 5 years

Age
40% 30–39
29% 40–49
15% 50–59
10% 20–29
3% 60–65
1% over 65

Households
69% are single heads of household.
11% have households with children.

Education
56% College graduates
30% M.F.A.
30% High school
16% Some college
2.2 Ph.D.
0.0 M.B.A.

Income levels
26% $25,000–40,000
23.8% $15,000–25,000
23.3% $40,001–65,000
20% $15,000 or under
6.3% $65,000 or more

Percentage of yearly income derived
from artistic work
47% under 10% to none
29% between half and 10%
22% all or most

Employment
47% self-employed
36% employed in education

24% employed in not-for-profit arts organizations
3% employed in commercial galleries or auction houses.
14% directors or founders of not-for-profit institutions
37% belong to an arts collective

Housing
75% rent
69% report that half or more of their income goes
toward housing costs

Health Care
38% have health insurance through employers
17% pay for their insurance
33% lack insurance coverage

Disciplinary Breakdown
45% identified themselves as visual artists
31% media artists
24% literary artists

Internet Marketing
52% have websites

Exhibition Opportunities
Artists identified ethnic-specific, community-based, and artist-run galleries as most receptive to displaying their work; corpo-
rations and commercial galleries were the least receptive.

Participation in Civic Life
82% report they are regular voters.
63% taught an arts class or workshop
59% organized local arts events, giving artist talks and participating in panel discussions.
54% donated artwork or labor to benefit not-for-profit organizations; of that number
46% report donating to more than 5 events/organiza-
tions in the last two years.
47% received stipends of $250 or less for rendering services such as exhibiting, performing, giving talks, or sitting on panels.
37% received no compensation for services.
21% sat on peer-reviewed funding panels.
13% report operating a local business.

Statement of Needs
84% of the respondents who are currently looking for workspace cannot find a studio within their affordable price range of under $500.
79% report using part of their home as a workspace.
53% report needing accounting/business skills.
54% report needing website design and management skills.
38% report needing entrepreneurial skills.

Top Issues of Concern
81% funding for the arts
75% housing costs
61% health care costs
57% employment for artists
The UAI applicant pool, which resembled the “majority-minority” demographics in New York, was ideal for conducting a preliminary research study on the city’s creative class of color. Drawing on over one thousand applicants, the Urban Arts Initiative awarded individual grants in literature, media arts, performing arts, and visual/interdisciplinary arts — all the major disciplines that make up New York’s arts sector. Between July and September 2008, one thousand past and current UAI applicants were invited to complete an on-line survey that I created in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of artists and arts administrators drawn from the UAI consortium. 325 artists responded.

The survey provided a demographic profile that generated vital information on the socio-economic resources that artists contribute to New York as well as data on their needs. Among the questions we sought to answer were: what are the median age, income, and educational levels of the UAI applicant pool; where are artists finding employment; how many have medical coverage; what networks do UAI artists utilize to display/market their work; how much of their earned income is derived from sales; how are artists coping with the city’s affordable housing and/or studio shortage; what types of resources will artists need to sustain their creative enterprises in New York?

Summary of Findings

The findings of the UAI survey indicate that this population is largely (65%) female, between 30 and 50 years old, college educated, civic minded, and active in their local communities. 82% report they are regular voters; 63% taught an arts class or workshop; 59% organized local arts events, giving artist talks and participating in panel discussions.

UAI artists report that ethnic-specific and community-based galleries were most receptive to their work and are not finding similar opportunities to exhibit or find employment in the commercial galleries. 47% describe themselves as self-employed; 38% seek entrepreneurial training; 26% report that they were a founder or director of a not-for-profit organization; and 13% report operating a local business.

This data suggests that there may be unseen economic opportunities for artists to start up local businesses with training and encouragement.

There are several professional development programs in New York that train artists on circulating their work in the fine art marketplace. Notwithstanding the recent economic downturn, it is unlikely that artists will be able to fully support themselves in a centuries-old system that relies on intermediaries like art dealers, agents and museums to find patronage. Marketing of work and seeking employment through the internet is standard practice today. Moreover the results from the UAI survey found that the majority of artists of color were not connected to the commercial gallery circuit. Sectors where artists of color found the most employment were in education, not-for-profits, and social services. A professional development program could be tailored to build those assets and networks that focus on social entrepreneurship and to provide artists with access to existing successful networks of artist-run businesses and not for profits that can serve as models for their own enterprises. Additionally, the UAI professional development program should include training in advocacy and community organizing thus supplying the UAI population with tools and strategies to form productive alliances within their communities on common social welfare issues such as affordable housing, healthcare, employment, environmental justice, and LBGT rights.

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NOTES

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