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## A BLADE OF GRASS

Nurtures Socially Engaged Art

By Ann McQueen

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the Animating Democracy website for other [Funder Portraits](#) and [Resources](#).

[Listen to a podcast interview](#) by Ann McQueen with A Blade of Grass Executive Director, Deborah Fisher.



**Animating  
Democracy**

A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

**A Blade of Grass** (ABoG), launched in 2011 as a service organization, supports socially engaged artists working in partnership with communities to create social change. While it isn't primarily a grantmaker, each year ABoG makes fellowship awards—\$20,000 stipends for specific projects paired with strategic support, assessment tools, video documentation, and other tailored resources—to up to 10 artists or artist collectives. In 2013, ABoG inaugurated a second program of Distinguished Artist Fellowships to make larger multi-year awards to artists or artist collectives working at a significant scale. Mel Chin was the foundation's first Distinguished Artist.

ABoG also seeks to foster dialogue and promote a deeper understanding of socially engaged art among foundations, donors and, especially, artists. It does this through an extensive calendar of public programs, most held at its New York offices, as well as online debates, journals, and reports posted on its website.

Operating as a public charity, ABoG also raises awareness by raising funds. The nonprofit, launched with a generous \$5 million seed contribution from Shelley Frost Rubin who opened the Rubin Museum of Art with her husband Donald in 2004, actively works to engage other donors who share the founder's commitment to social change.

In 2015, A Blade of Grass will support eight artists with \$160,000 in fellowship stipends. An additional \$400,000 will fund public programs and the documentation, assessment, and training of that year's fellows.



*We provide resources to artists who demonstrate artistic excellence and serve as innovative conduits for social change. We evaluate the quality of work in this evolving field by fostering an inclusive practical discourse about the aesthetics, function, ethics, and meaning of socially engaged art that resonates within and outside the contemporary art dialogue.*

— A Blade of Grass mission statement

**M**ost organizations and individual philanthropists that support the arts restrict their giving to nonprofits—orchestras, dance companies, youth arts education programs, public art agencies, and the like. While some of this money will reach individual artists through commissions, contracts or salaries, these grants don't go directly to artists.

A Blade of Grass (ABoG), a public charity and service organization rather than a foundation, turns this practice upside down by eschewing 501(c)(3) organizations in favor of individual artists and unincorporated artist collectives. Going a step further, it avoids art made in studios or connected to the commercial gallery or presenting systems, looking instead to art that is about idea, process, and social change. This is art that lives in the real world of social problems. This is art made on the streets or in homeless encampments, coffee shops, and wellness centers, art that is co-created by artists working with the people affected by those problems.



2014 ABoG fellow Laurie Jo Reynolds organized and collaborated with former and current inmates at the Tamms Correctional Center to launch Tamms Year Ten, a campaign to shut down the prison. Inmates participated in a community-based art group. [Read more here.](#)





## THE GENESIS

Shelley Frost Rubin and her husband Donald began collecting Himalayan art in the mid-1970s, ultimately assembling a museum full; the Rubin Museum of Art opened in New York's Chelsea neighborhood in 2004. They are also avid collectors of Cuban art, work that celebrates the trade union movement, video art, and many other categories. But their engagement with art and other cultures is not solely about acquiring objects. The practical, everyday application of art, whether as a Buddhist shrine or a mural rallying workers, is a closely held interest.

Shelley Rubin, a board member of Human Rights Watch, also sees a connection between that organization's international work and the ability of art to bear witness and instigate change by elevating issues and engaging affected communities. This expanded notion of contemporary art based in social practice is the basis of A Blade of Grass, which Shelley launched with a generous \$5 million seed contribution in 2011.



Deborah Fisher  
Executive Director

Executive Director Deborah Fisher, an artist and formerly the Rubins' art and philanthropy advisor, guided the initial inquiries by formulating a list of core questions:<sup>1</sup>

- How do we best support work that values process over product? That consists of interactions between people? That mimics the forms of daily life so fully that it's sometimes hard to call it art?
- Is it feasible for artists to enact social change? What do artists working in communities accomplish?
- How do we evaluate this work? In terms of its artistic excellence? Its efficacy? Both?

Rubin, Fisher, and the nonprofit's newly appointed board members understood that their best work would be based on direct feedback from their constituency. Practicing artists, whether working in studio or social practice, were first engaged through a broadly disseminated survey. Then, ABoG initiated two experimental

grant programs—one focused on organizations and another on artists—each seeking to support innovative work made and presented outside formal commercial systems.

ABoG’s advisory committee of thought leaders—funders, creators, presenters, and producers—kicked things off by selecting two rounds of organizational grantees<sup>2</sup> best described as activist, community-based, and artist-centric. While it no longer operates a program for organizations, this early effort informed staff thinking about artists, artist collectives, and the system of supports for artists who are actively partnering with communities.

The most impactful experiment proved to be [Artist Files](#), a one-time grant cycle designed to generate dialogue aimed at informing the future program. In the summer of 2012, an independent curator selected 20 New York artists, each following a social practice but working in very different ways, to participate in an open conversation. The dialogue with these 20 artists (much of which is posted on the foundation’s website) deepened lessons garnered from the earlier survey with more concrete information on the artists’ practice, including how they thought about and approached their audience and how they made a living. As it became clear that many artists supported their work either by self-funding or by participating in projects in exchange for visibility or the imprimatur of an influential curator, Fisher led an internal discussion, asking how do we best support work that values process over product?

The board turned the question back to the artists; working with the same budget, the Artist Files format would change based on their direct input. Some were in favor of dividing the funds equally, while others argued for pooling the money for a collective project. Ultimately, most agreed that all artists, each named an Artist File Fellow, would receive a \$750 stipend; a publication, along with online profiles of each artists, would provide visibility; three \$10,000 unrestricted grants would be awarded based on criteria drawn from the public dialogue; and staff time would be devoted to active learning relationships with the Fellows<sup>3</sup>.

ABoG’s early listening and engagement with its constituency also affirmed the staff’s and board’s level of comfort working with artists who engaged with institutional structures and power in new, often disruptive ways. Even more importantly, it shaped the agency’s own outreach practice. For the last several years, a series of

free public programs, most held at the New York office, have introduced new audiences to the work of socially engaged artists and sparked conversations that dig deep into meaning, value, methods, and challenges.

Its website, blog, and other social media platforms were designed to take this discourse even further. Soon a broader audience for socially engaged art—a community of donors, institutional partners, community leaders, and collaborators—began to emerge. ABoG, as it intended when it incorporated as a public charity, began to encourage others to invest, support, and sustain artists that actively engage in the work of social change.

After a year of intense dialogue, programming, grantmaking, and outreach to new audiences, ABoG's operational model had emerged: Apply, Attend, Discuss, Support.

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## MEET THE 2014 ABOG FELLOWS FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

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**MEL CHIN**



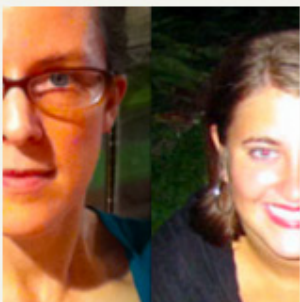
**BRETT COOK**



**PABLO HELGUERA**



**FRAN ILICH**



**NORENE LEDDY & LIZ  
SLAGUS**



**JAN MUN**



**LAURIE JO REYNOLDS**



**JODY WOOD**



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## APPLY

*How do we best support work that values process over product? That consists of interaction between people? That mimics the forms of daily life so fully that it's sometimes hard to call it art?*

**A**rtists have one opportunity to apply for a fellowship each year. The rigorous selection process was formally established in 2014 when a panel of readers—an artist, community organizer, arts professional, scholar, and an ABoG representative—narrowed over 500 letters of inquiry down to 50 applicants. These artists/collectives were then invited to submit full applications to be reviewed by a different, but similarly composed, selection committee whose recommendations were sent on to staff and board for interviews and final selection of seven artists/collectives. This process was refined further in 2015. Now, while its reach continues to be national and even international, half of each year's artist cohort will be drawn from applicants living in New York City.<sup>4</sup>

The fellowship awards pair project support of \$20,000 with assessment tools, online profiles and video documentation, ongoing strategic consulting, promotional support, access to contacts and facilities, and other resources tailored to each artist's expressed needs. ABoG's 2015 budget allocates \$160,000 to eight artist stipends and \$150,000 to additional support services for the fellows. In 2016, it hopes to fund 10 fellowships.

But the organization's commitment to artists' success begins well before its grants are made. Prior to its deadline, ABoG hosts workshops offering potential applicants a chance to meet staff, ask questions, and learn more about the decision making process. Lifting the veil of secrecy further, the website includes details about the selection criteria—artistic excellence, capacity to enact social change, viability in everyday life, fit with fellowship resources—that its reviewers use to evaluate proposals. Examples of successful Letters of Interest and a list of “Top Reasons Proposed Projects Were Not Chosen” add to its transparency.

ABoG also created a Distinguished Artist Fellowship to make larger multiyear awards to artists/collectives working at a significant scale. In 2014, [Mel Chin](#) became the

first Distinguished Artist for his [Operation Paydirt](#)/Fundred Dollar Bill Project, a “social sculpture” that engages children, families, and communities in building consensus and educating lawmakers about lead poisoning prevention and remediation. Fundraising to support future Distinguished Artists is currently underway.

The nonprofit’s outlook is progressive, but it doesn’t promote a particular social change agenda. As Deborah Fisher notes,

“it’s the artists’ job to look at the world, point to fissures, and present novel solutions. The artist needs to tell us what the issue is. Our social change agenda is open.”

The issue areas addressed by ABoG’s Fellows vary widely. Gender and sexuality, homelessness, housing, immigration, and race are fissures without straightforward solutions; thus, there is no expectation that its fellowships will fund an entire project. Rather, the service agency’s support focuses on the creative individual who has an ongoing commitment to a particular need and idea for change; resources are allocated for the evolution or next iteration of that idea.

For example, since 2010 Mexican writer and media artist [Fran Ilich](#) has focused on Diego de la Vega, described as cooperative media conglomerate that includes Spacebank, a virtual community investment bank. ABoG’s 2014 fellowship supported a part of this work, the Coffee Co-op, which connects Chiapas coffee growers to New York markets and service industry laborers to create alternative economies and develop economic sustainability.



➔ Fran Ilich, Gabriela Ceja and collaborators at the South Bronx Holiday Market representing the Coffee Co-op, December 2014.

Similarly, [SexEd](#), the work of collaborators Norene Leddy and Liz Slagus, presents another case of art that doesn’t look like art. Working together since 2008, the pair has developed pedagogies that combine art, reproductive health, and participatory tools. ABoG’s fellowship supported their residency at one of New York’s high school-based health centers where they focused on student-generated themes such as HIV/AIDS, gender, healthy relationships, pleasure, and consent.





## ATTEND/DISCUSS

*Is it feasible for artists to enact social change?  
What do artists working in communities accomplish?*

In addition to supporting the working lives of specific artists, ABoG develops public programs—an investment of about \$250,000 in 2015—that encourage artists and their community collaborators, academics, philanthropists, and others to join in the investigation into the meaning, value, and on-the-ground reality of social practice art.

Aesthetics of Doing confronts issues such as authorship and ethics that are common to social practice art while the Parallel Fields series features conversations between an artist and a non-artist who follow different paths to similar concerns. Both programs live on in videos posted on the foundation’s website. Similarly, ABoG’s [DISCUSS](#) is a web-based forum that includes a quarterly journal of in-depth essays, a series of moderated debates among thought leaders, and transcripts of interviews with fellows’ community collaborators.

In 2014, one Aesthetics of Doing panel asked if socially engaged art was necessarily progressive while another delved into questions of effectiveness and measurement. In the same year, program director Elizabeth Grady moderated a Parallel Fields conversation between Senegalese chef [Pierre Thiam](#), owner of a successful New York catering business, and artist Dawn Weleski, whose Pittsburgh-based restaurant [Conflict Kitchen](#) serves the cuisine of countries in conflict with the United States. How does food facilitate political and social dialogue? How does dining unite us and communicate cultural difference at the same time? Is the dinner table a viable tool with which to enact real social change?

Each year’s public programs and online forums are based on a theme drawn from trends seen in proposals, funded projects, and dialogue within the field at large. ABoG’s 2013/14 theme of “Activism” focused on an artist’s “effort and intent to enact social change through his/her work.” The next year’s theme, “Future Imperfect,” grew out of recent grantees’ work to reimagine government, economic, and social systems. By early 2016, the nonprofit will release a book based on the

issues and ideas explored through its first theme and class of fellows. In subsequent years, additional publications will profile the work of all fellows and distinguished artists to create an extensive archive of social practice artists.



2014 fellow [Jody Wood's](#) *Beauty in Transition* project established a mobile beauty salon that served New York City homeless shelters. By providing beauty services, including a hair wash, cut, color, and style to willing participants, the project aimed to challenge the reductive label of homeless and give dignity back to participants during a challenging transitional period. [Read more.](#)



## SUPPORT

**N**o support organization or philanthropy aspires to be alone in its work. As a public charity—something like a cross between a community foundation and a nonprofit such as Creative Capital—ABoG is governed by a broadly representative board, makes its publications and most programs publically available, and seeks and receives contributions from individuals and foundations.

Only a few years from its founding, ABoG has just begun to extend its fundraising beyond its founder and her immediate circle, yet already boasts a long list of patrons. While this includes the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in support of its public programs and the Home Depot Foundation, the bulk of its support comes from individuals, principally those who make, exhibit, and collect contemporary art.

Making the case for support can be daunting. Development director Ellen Staler has more than 18 years of experience with arts nonprofits and so is all too aware that scarce arts funding tends to be concentrated at the top on legacy organizations. How do you sell [Laurie Jo Reynolds](#)' art about prison reform or [Jody Wood](#)'s work on the social isolation of homelessness? How can ABOG make the case for funding the next Distinguished Artist Fellowship?

Staler and Fisher are finding that the work resonates with philanthropists who give to create change. They may not think of the work as art, but can be engaged through the issue area.

**“Investing in artists that are bringing light to your issue can move your ball forward in an interesting, more impactful way,”**

Fisher tells them, noting that a donor interested in healthcare reform may relate to 2014 Fellow [Brett Cook](#) whose Reflections of Healing project promotes health equity through participatory public art and wellness clinics. Creating a patronage base is challenging—this is art about experience, “the same thing as dance and theater”—but increasingly possible.



## MOVING FORWARD

*How do we evaluate this work?  
In terms of its artistic excellence? Its efficacy? Both?*

2015 marks the first year ABoG staff and board aren't doing everything for the first time. With the luxury of a full calendar of programs already laid out, they're deepening their focus on fundraising and turning their attention to evaluation.

In a world obsessed with outcome measurement, ABoG faces a particular challenge. It isn't funding an exhibition, performance, or classroom of at-risk children; it isn't commissioning a play, a poem, or a piece of public art. Supporting artists focused on social change means that, as Fisher notes,

**"There's no 'thing' here. The process is the important thing. We try to make it more visible."**

This visibility is the work of its website, public programs, and publications, which document and disseminate artists' processes of social engagement.

In addition, ABoG has formalized a three-phase assessment process to support each artist's individual inquiry and surface key lessons to strengthen its public programming.

First, ABoG introduces its fellows to action research, a participatory methodology for self-assessment based on measures defined by each artist. Next, fellows meet quarterly to provide feedback, talk about community engagement strategies, and jointly assess each other's projects. The nonprofit, which began by questioning artists about their practice, now encourages them to interrogate their own work.

Finally, ABoG retains a consultant who looks at each project through an ethnographic lens. The resulting interviews with the artist's stakeholders and project participants along with the consultant's own observations are the basis for interim and final reports that are a resource for the artist and fodder for the annual publication.



## CONCLUSION

Even as its choice to organize as a public charity and artist service organization, rather than a grant making foundation, ranks this nonprofit as creative and audacious as the social practice artists it supports, the calendar pages are turning. Shelley Rubin's seed funding, along with the gifts of other donors, assures that A Blade of Grass will carry out its ambitious agenda through, at least, 2020; after five publications, five years of programming, and up to 50 fellows, it may sunset.

At this early point in the organization's lifecycle, it's as hard to foresee its impact as it is to measure the social and aesthetic value of the art it promotes. This work is necessarily cumulative and ongoing, like the learning pulled from its public discussions and internal assessments. The publications and the lessons embedded in the artists themselves assure a legacy. Not unlike building a collection and creating a museum to house it, A Blade of Grass is building the field by gathering and providing resources to artists engaged in social change, making their work visible, and developing an audience that understands and supports them—all in service to its long-term goal of fostering a broader, more inclusive dialogue about contemporary art.



2014 fellow Jan Mun waters The Fairy Rings at the ExxonMobil, Greenpoint Remediation Project Site. The installation uses fungi to break down long-chained toxins into simpler less toxic chemicals at the molecular level in polluted environments. The installation is commentary on how technology, nature, and humans can transform, adapt, and innovate. [Read more](#). Photo by Mitch Waxman.

## ENDNOTES

(1) Fisher, Deborah, Seed Change: Our First Year—Founding Concept, p.4.

(2) A Blade of Grass 2013 organizational grantees included the Center for Artistic Activism, the Center for Urban Pedagogy, the Laundromat Project, Flux Factory, Freedimensional, More Art, and No Longer Empty, This Side of Paradise. In 2014, ABOG made awards to Arts East New York, the Foundry Theatre, and Not An Alternative.

(3) The advisory committee selected 2013 Artist File Fellows Nobutaka Aozaki, Kambui Olujimi, and the artist collective Housing Is A Human Right to receive \$10,000 grants. The 2013 Artist File Fellows also included finalists Daniel Bejar, Tracy Candido, Nicky Enright, Sean Fader, Alicia Grullon, Heather Hart, Kendal Henry, Nate Hill, LuLu LoLo, Matthew Morrocco, Leon Reid IV, Shane Aslan Selzer, Sin Kabeza Productions, Bayeté Ross Smith and Will Sylvester, Thomas Allen Harris, Ed Woodham, and Risë Wilson.

(4) Please see [www.abladeofgrass.org](http://www.abladeofgrass.org) for profiles of the 2014 and 2015 Fellows.

All photos courtesy of the [A Blade of Grass](#). Used with permission.

### ANN MCQUEEN



Principal at McQueen Philanthropic, an advisory service for foundations and nonprofits working in the arts, Ann McQueen has over 20 years experience in philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. She is an active member of her community and serves on the board of Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation's arts grant-making, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector.

Launched in 1999, Animating Democracy is a core program of Americans for the Arts. Animating Democracy works to inspire, inform, promote, and connect arts as a contributor to community, civic, and social change. Over the past 15 years, Animating Democracy has supported, through regranting, a wide range of arts organizations doing compelling civic engagement work, implemented national research, and developed field resources and publications. Animating Democracy is frequently called upon to serve as program adviser, researcher, and funding/research partner. In all of our work, Animating Democracy brings to bear Americans for the Arts' unique strengths in research, policy, professional development, visibility, and advocacy.



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