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By CultureWork, on November 1st, 2013

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Coming of Age: Access and Equity in American Arts

[Jennifer Armstrong and Mitch Menchaca](#)

*America is coming of age. Note the many changing aspects of America. A maturing America means a nation conscious of its arts among all its people....in no other way can Americans so well express the core and blood of their democracy...in terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy, or for the well-endowed museum, the gallery, or the ever-subsidized regional professional theatre. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live....if we are seeking in America, let it be a seeking for the reality of democracy in art. ~ Robert E. Gard (1966), *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan*, p. 4.*

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Nearly fifty years ago, Robert E. Gard, Wisconsin community arts pioneer, challenged Americans to ensure our arts were for everyone, in every part of the country. The past two to three decades have seen great strides in diverse community-building, but it is still an

unfinished conversation. How diverse are our art makers, leaders, audiences, funders, educators, and students? How equitable is funding for arts and culture? How accessible are the arts for every person living in the United States? Where are we succeeding, and where are our deepest challenges? As America indeed changes at a rapid pace, now is the time for communities nationwide to intentionally and thoughtfully investigate, evaluate, and set forth action agendas around the ideas of access and equity.

[The Association of American Cultures](#) (TAAC) was founded more than 25 years ago to convene artists and cultural workers that are reflective of our pluralistic society to inform and advocate for cultural democracy. TAAC's vision is:

- Equal participation in policymaking
- Equitable funding for all cultural institutions
- Elevation in multicultural leadership
- Essential networks that impact cultural policy

TAAC's work moving forward will continue a focus on the increased awareness of the impacts of global connections and changing demographics, including the generation gap, multiculturalism, and sense of place that will strengthen the ability of those that shape, administer and promote artists and artistic organizations to ensure a sense of continuity and influence in a rapidly changing world.

TAAC's last two [Open Dialogues](#) convenings centered on the topic of cultural democracy in the 21st century and how people, places, and policies are shaping the face of our communities. There are four different generations living in the country, but how does a new generation, one raised in a much more inclusive and multicultural environment, influence this conversation in the 21st Century? In addition, cultural identity may be clearer to some people than it may be to others. Although many identify with their race or ethnicity, others, especially in younger demographics, identify more strongly with other elements of their life, including religion, sexual orientation, or rural/urban roots.

The emerging generation of leaders in the non-profit arts field has been cultivated by several national, state, and local service organizations, from [Young Nonprofit Professionals Network](#) to [Independent Sector](#). [Americans for the Arts' Emerging Leaders Network](#) can be traced back nearly 15 years ago to the Winston-Salem Arts Convocation in 1999, a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the local arts agency movement and an exploration of where we are heading next. 100 delegates were invited to come together to envision the next fifty years of the field. Four delegates under thirty years of age spoke up and expressed concern that younger voices were not included at similar vision casting convenings across the country. Younger arts professionals were excluded from conversations to build the present and future of the field. Those delegates wanted to dispel the myths and raise awareness that younger leaders in the field were in fact making an impact. They saw a need for increased professional development opportunities and to be part of a network of diverse younger leaders who could grow in the field together. Leadership development for the emerging generation in the field was not a priority, and very few young leaders had the support to attend national conferences. Also lacking was a peer network, similar to those of more senior leaders, to exchange ideas. Younger arts leaders requested an increased focus on their own career development; a peer network; to be at the table with other leaders of various experiences and ages to learn together; to have greater opportunities to advance, change, or create the agenda; and, ultimately, to build a collective future.

Today, Americans for the Arts Emerging Leaders Network works to identify and cultivate the next generation of arts leaders in America. Through professional development and peer networking opportunities on the national and local level, the program strives to enhance the leadership capacity of its members while recognizing their enthusiasm, creativity, and potential. This network has significantly changed how emerging leaders are welcomed into, nurtured, and connected to one another within the arts industry.

A new generation is rising, working with the ones before them, to ensure art has a significant

and meaningful place in the rural landscape. [Art of the Rural](#) (AOTR), formed in 2010, is a collaborative organization with a mission to help build the field of the rural arts, create new narratives on rural culture and community, and contribute to the emerging rural arts and culture movement. Through interdisciplinary and cross-sector partnerships, AOTR works to advocate for engaged conversation and policy that transcends imposed boundaries and articulates the shared reality of rural and urban America. [The Rural Arts and Culture Working Group](#) grew out of [The Center for Rural Strategies'](#) Rural Assembly in 2011 as a voluntary collaboration of artists, writers, curators, cultural workers, arts advocates, intermediaries, and funders from across geographies, cultures, and disciplines. A group forty-strong assembled in the summer of 2012 at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Massachusetts to create and advocate for a new narrative of the rural arts and culture that considers rural-urban connections, cultural and agricultural sustainability; the role of rural youth; racial and ethnic inclusiveness; and the necessity of creating fresh cross-sector collaborations. What they are beginning to build is a peer community focused on rural arts and its cultural applications. The Arts and Culture Working Group and AOTR have identified priorities that include celebrating the diverse ways in which the arts empower and enrich rural communities, emphasizing the importance of rural youth in the arts and the role young people can play in rural cultural and economic sustainability, and examining rural and urban relationships.

Collaboratively, these visions have taken shape. The momentum has grown, support for the work has grown and diversified, the structures have formalized, the dialogues have spread, engagement has increased, the ownership and leadership are more distributed, and new tools and resources have been developed...over time. They began with questions. Questions of equity, access, and democracy that led to explorations, that led to investments, that led to movements that changed everything. From individuals in their own pocket of the universe with feelings of isolation and underestimation to a strong, supported, and large network of leaders with greater opportunities, peer sustenance, visibility, and influence. Are we still seeking the reality of democracy in art in America? Where and what is our next reality check? How far along will we be in another fifty years? We get to decide.

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Author Note

Jennifer Armstrong is the Director of Community Arts Development for the Illinois Arts Council Agency, working with local arts agencies, arts service organizations and community development stakeholders across the state to help build a strong, creative and connected Illinois. Jennifer serves as Vice Chair for The Association of American Cultures and the Robert E. Gard Foundation, and was a co-founder and past Chair of Americans for the Arts Emerging Leader Council. She has previously directed two local arts agencies in Illinois and was program coordinator in the Department of Dance at Arizona State University.

Mitch Menchaca is the chief operating officer and head of member services for Chorus America, the national advocacy, research, and leadership development organization for choruses, choral leaders, and singers. Prior to Chorus America, he served as the director of local arts advancement at Americans for the Arts and as the senior director of programs at the Arizona Commission on the Arts. Mitch serves as chair for The Association of American Cultures, a trustee for the Robert. E. Gard Foundation, and is a 2009 fellow and current faculty coach for the Center for Progressive Leadership, a national political training institute that develops diverse leaders who can effectively advance progressive political and policy change.

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