

This Nonprofit Is Willing to Bet that Art Can Change the World

Isaac Kaplan May 1, 2017



2017 ABOG Fellows (clockwise, from top le): Freeman Word. Photo: Jennifer Korman Photography; Aviva Rahmani. Photo: Joe Ga ney; Ashley Sparks. Photo: Courtesy the artist; Rick Lowe. Photo: John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; Ronny Quevedo. Photo: Argenis Apolinario; Stephanie Dinkins. Photo: Courtesy the artist; Hello Velocity. Photo: Courtesy the artists; Jackie Sumell. Photo: Courtesy the artist; Courtesy of A Blade of Grass.

“The artists we’re working with are interested in actively engaging with structures that impact people,” says Deborah Fisher, the executive director of the non-profit A Blade of Grass (ABOG). That’s a fairly concise way to describe much of the work generated by the group’s fellowship program, which has, since 2013, awarded a total of \$580,000 in stipends to artists like Dread Scott, Simone Leigh, and Rulan Tangen.

These artists don’t simply critique power from a distance or within the safety of a museum’s walls—they engage with institutional structures out in the world. That makes the financial support of ABOG even more vital: Socially engaged art comes with its own logistical, financial, and conceptual difficulties. While there is a growing infrastructure to bolster this type of work, the support network is still relatively small; a little money can go a long way.

On Tuesday, ABOG will announce its 2017 class of fellows—solo artists and one collective—chosen from a pool of hundreds of applicants. Each will receive a \$20,000 stipend along with additional support for their projects (access to a network of fellows, for example). Proposals include everything from incubating sustainable immigrant-run businesses in Athens as part of Documenta 14 (Rick Lowe) to a “musical car race” that explores identity through performances in small Southern towns (Ashley Sparks).

Among the 2017 winners is Freeman Word, who plans to use the funds to develop the Zakatu Madrasa, a community space that will be sited in a to-be-determined location in St. Louis's North Side. Not linked to any single religion, his madrasa is an educational space, with a library and the opportunity for intergenerational mentorship within the community, with younger members creating and exhibiting artwork in the space (and being paid for their efforts).

Beyond the ABOG award money, the madrasa will depend on book sales and financial pledges from community members. "People will only continue to pay for what they believe is providing valuable service or output to the community," he says. Word has already received the additional necessary commitments to ensure funding—an important achievement given a concern with socially engaged art is that the projects can leave participants in the lurch if the seed grant dries up.

Word drew inspiration from, among others, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and scholar Jessica Gordon Nembhard, whose book *Collective Courage* charts the history of African-American economic cooperatives, like mutual aid societies, back through slavery. "There's a very real tradition I'm borrowing from," Word says. "It's not innovation, even if it feels like innovation."

The past and present fellows I spoke to made it clear that socially engaged art is something of a misnomer; it ignores the simple fact that in most communities, art is always "created for someone other than yourself," as artist Rulan Tangen puts it. (An ABOG fellow in 2016, Tangen used her grant for a project titled *seeds:ReGeneration*, which explored indigenous artistic practices in community gatherings, and culminated in a harvest ritual.)

ABOG stresses accountability and visibility—collaborating with artists to create videos and written materials that describe and document their work. While the organization stresses letting artists lead, the goal is to measure and quantify the success of the projects: Part of the criteria is that the artists are working with communities and stakeholders. ABOG engages in field research, working with the artist to find a third party (a professor, another artist) versed in any given subject area who can document events, speak with local residents, and report on how the fellowship is engaging its target audience.

Grassroots engagement is the hallmark of ABOG endeavours. For Higher Sails, Ronny Quevedo is working in the South Bronx with La Morada, what one might call a socially engaged restaurant (it features activist artworks and a lending library). A group of local teenagers will participate in a 12-week workshop to create a signage for La Morada, dissecting the neighborhood's history as well as the pressures it currently faces.

The project, Quevedo says, is consciously informed by artists like Jenny Holzer, as well as the wheatpaste-postering efforts of past artist-activist groups. It's also a refreshingly nuanced way of engaging with the Bronx itself, highlighting the long-standing creative talent that has always existed in a place the art world can often still think of as a "frontier" awaiting artwashing (see Lucien Smith's maligned "Piano District" branding event, for one example).

Also among the 2017 fellows is Aviva Rahmani, who argues that many entrenched political issues can be addressed with artistic thinking and a focus on human relationships. "It's a question of how you look at systems so that you're taking the skills from conceptual art and social sculpture and applying them to a problem," Rahmani says.



Ronny Quevedo, Higher Sails sign for Sergio Grajeda Mechanic, Albuquerque, NM, 2015, digital print in dibond. Created in partnership with Working Classroom youth artists. Photo courtesy of the artist. Courtesy of A Blade of Grass.

Her installation and performance work *Blued Trees Symphony*, which began in 2015, blends artistic and legal structures. She has painted trees along pipeline routes, in the hopes of using the Visual Artist Rights Act and copyright law to halt or disrupt the construction of oil infrastructure. (She and her legal team expect the first court case to unfold in Virginia.)

Engaging with the courts or other systems of power is a familiar tactic for ABOG-supported artists. Celebrating the lineage of someone like Mierle Laderman Ukeles—who, since the 1970s, has served as an artist-in-residence with New York’s Department of Sanitation—the group has worked with artists who have partnered with the city agencies and institutions, like the Department of Homeless Services (Jody Wood) and the AFL-CIO (Sol Aramendi).

Admittedly, not everyone is fully supportive of projects that aim for social engagement. Engaging with power poses its own questions, given that agencies and institutions can often be complicit in perpetuating systems of inequality. Critics see socially engaged practice as more of a band-aid than a fundamental shift.

While noting that these points can be valid, Fisher says that “we don’t have the luxury of scrapping these huge institutional systems.” Art, she argues, can push and subvert ingrained systems of power in fresh directions. She points to the collective *Hello Velocity*, a 2017 fellow that is developing *Gradient*, a system that lets users pay for purchases on a sliding scale based on their income. “We’re all complicit in capitalism,” Fisher says. “In order to change that we have to reimagine it while we’re living in it.”

They recognize that engaging so overtly with capitalism and commerce is something artists—especially socially conscious ones—prefer to avoid completely. But, said Hello Velocity’s Lukas Bentel, “If you want to talk about something it’s always better to get your hands a little dirty.”

Then there is the additional benefit of deploying art to tackle these problems: It acts as shield for bureaucracies or commerce platforms that otherwise wouldn’t dream of experimenting. Take 2014 ABOG fellow Jody Wood’s project—a mobile van that provided empowering beauty care to homeless people in New York. Or Jackie Sumell, a 2017 fellow, who is creating a “mobile prison abolition unit” that looks to create dialogue between the incarcerated and the wider public. Or Stephanie Dinkins, who is planning to work with people of color to understand how algorithms tend to replicate the biases of society, before ultimately designing a fairer artificial intelligence.

Socially engaged art is always full of contradictions. Its practitioners strive to make an impact—but also tout their ability, and perhaps willingness, to fail. They challenge systems of power—but must work within those systems in order to have real effect. But these points of seeming fissure are actually the source of socially engaged art’s power, not simply as a strategy, but as a form. As Fisher puts it, “Art is a place where we can hold contradictions and tensions.”