

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

# 2016 Conference Reflections

At the 2016 Conference, over 650 arts education leaders gathered in Chicago to advance equitable access to the arts and forge new strategies for transforming our communities. Below are select reflections from delegates at the conference, including perspectives from a youth delegate, a funder, and a teaching artist. These reflections represent some of the viewpoints that are not always center stage at the conference, so we highlight them here to reinforce their importance. To read other thoughts and share your own reflections, please visit the dedicated member forum thread: <http://bit.ly/2hraBlr>.

## Reinforcing the Role of Art in Changing Lives

ALEJANDRA SAENZ, Youth Delegate & Program Participant in Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble, Creative Action

My favorite thing about attending the Guild conference was seeing all of the adults who were eager to learn how they could improve their facilities and programs. At the conference, I learned what goes on behind the scenes in forming the structure for Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble (CLYTE), the program I take part in at Creative Action in Austin, TX. Seeing what made CLYTE feel so safe gave me a deeper understanding of what goes on in terms of building strong relationships with your peers and educators. I also learned more about facilitation, activism in the arts, and using art as a tool to educate youth. I learned how important art really is in our daily lives, as well as our educational lives.

One thing I recommend is using more youth voices, asking youth more questions, and asking more young people to attend. I'm not only referring to Chicago youth, I also recommend inviting or welcoming youth from other places and programs. Furthermore, I'd be interested in "youth friendly" seminars that might focus on facilitation, team building, and advice on holding discussions. Finally, I wish I could've learned more things about team building and what goes on to make the youth trust you as an adult. I feel that those types of activities may improve this already wonderful and educational conference.

Some of my favorite parts of this conference were the two keynote speakers. Dr. Bettina Love's speech was so beautiful and educational; I still reflect on her words and draw lessons from it. It really reminded me how important my brownness and activism is to the arts, as well as how we can use art to make social justice more accessible. Kevin Coval's speech, as well as his student's performances really made me think. It was all very real; it made me think about how important art is as an outlet. This was also true for Kuumba Lynx. Their performance piece gave me goosebumps, and it really informed me on what was happening around Chicago. The mix of rhythmic beats, acting, image, and music made it easy for me to understand. It was beautiful, moving, and accessible.

The youth panel I participated in (Creative Youth Development: What's In a Name?) was very important to me because it gave me a chance to express what I enjoy about the program I attend, and provide advice on what other organizations could think about to improve their own programs. As the panel was nearing its end, I wish I had more time to speak! Meeting the two very talented students from Little Black Pearl was very exciting! It was nice to have a small conversation with these students about what we like about our program, as well as our city. I also attended Kevin Coval and Malcolm London's seminar. The ice breaker activities

were really exciting and fun to do. Kevin Coval made me realize how the literature taught in schools is not diverse, as well as being very outdated and not exciting.

The conference had a major impact on my life. I realized that I don't necessarily want to go to college in Texas, or stay in Texas for that matter. I saw how beautiful the city of Chicago is. I realized that I may want to be a teaching artist. It made me realize my deep appreciation for the arts, activism, and education. It reminded me how much Creative Action has done for me, and how much I love being there. I want to give young people a safe place to be themselves and share their art, because I know how much it meant to me. The youth are always looked down on, and we often have no help or hope in our adults. It would be really uplifting for our youth to see how interested and passionate these adults are, and how committed they are to helping us grow in a safe and positive way.

## Now More Than Ever: The Political Act of Building Community

TRAVIS LAUGHLIN, Senior Director of Programs, Joan Mitchell Foundation

Hindsight and reflection can help us recognize manifestations of serendipity. The recent election has required me and many people across the globe to reflect and even prepare for what hindsight may reveal four years from now. It was reflecting on this election that triggered my recognition of the serendipitous aspect of the location of this year's National Guild Conference and how the history of that location, Chicago, colored my experience. In many ways, Chicago's history underscores the fact that time spent in purposeful community—much like the time I spent at the Conference—is an important and vital political act.

Chicago, for me, is the place where radical concepts of community, power, and protest hold strong in historical memory. This is the city where protesters took to the streets in 1968 to fight for change; where the police murdered Fred Hampton; where founding members of the Weather Underground were born. For me, being at the conference at this pivotal political time was welcomed serendipity.

Thinking about the convergence of time and place—the 2016 election season in Chicago—I cannot help but find gratitude for the way the Guild has positioned the conference as not only a space of community gathering, shared ideas, and connection but also as a call to action to address the real and challenging issues facing arts education. This is a conference for individuals seeking to challenge the status quo and to stand up to injustices. It was definitely serendipitous that we convened in Chicago in this particular year.

Perhaps the most impactful moment for me, the moment that truly underscored the power of this conference and the importance of community, was the town hall at the Stony Island Art Bank. This unique program allowed conference attendees to be in a community space and in community with the individuals who create and activate this spectacular art space. Those of us Guild members present for the town hall experienced the power and impact of the space not just through the stories of the fantastic panelists but through our immersion in the physical environment and through our interactions with the community members. For a moment we were literally in community with the community.



There is power in this and it is essential that we build upon that experience.

Similarly, I was reminded of the importance of convening and creating space for open and honest dialogue during a session I facilitated, “Funding the Teaching Artist Field: A Long Table Conversation.” I invited members of the Guild community to literally come to the table and speak openly around the topic of funding teaching artists. Much like the town hall, space was given for sincere interaction and opportunities to celebrate the work being done as well as to challenge those supporting the work. In this space funders were asked to be accountable to the teaching artists, which, to me, felt like a significant shift in the conversation. As a funder I was reminded of the importance of convening and how funders should use their resources to bring communities together and encourage difficult conversations that lead to deeper understanding.

Collectively, community can make significant change. Collectively, community can force the dominant paradigm to shift. Fred Hampton knew this and so did those in power who murdered him. This conference, in this place, at this time, reminded me of that. It is my hope that we in this field remember the power of convening with purpose; that we continue to come together in community with the intent of activating spaces and one another.

## Strengthening Teaching Artistry through Community Engagement

JEAN TAYLOR, Lead Teaching Artist, Lincoln Center Education

Upon arriving at the National Guild Conference in Chicago this past November, I eagerly looked over the detailed agenda for the four days and was greatly impressed by the scope and organization of the conference offerings. As a colleague of mine said when I showed her the program after returning home, “How could you possibly decide what to attend?” Yes, it’s true. I often wished I could be in two places at once.

I had attended two previous conferences (Los Angeles ’14 and Philadelphia ’15) and found them to be valuable experiences on multiple levels. I left the conferences with fresh perspectives, new questions, and an authentic sense of community. This year, I took particular note of the seven conference “tracks” (Arts in Education, Community Partnerships, Creative Youth Development, Leadership Development, Next Level, Social Justice, and Teaching Artist Development). I am a teaching artist. I knew I would spend the majority of my time in the TA Track, however having the ability to consider my work within these other contexts was illuminating and helped me create my own personal pathway through the conference.

### My Individual Experience at the Conference

A mentor of mine, Dr. Maxine Greene, often wrote and talked about the need for public spaces where a community-in-the-making could come together to learn and grow from each other:

*There is an effort to invent a situation in which there can be spaces for doing spaces for attending, spaces for becoming . . . and spaces for action . . . action in contrast to behavior, means taking an initiative, beginning, setting something in motion. — MAXINE GREENE, Variations on a Blue Guitar, p. 142*

I believe this is what the National Guild conference does best—offers us spaces for doing, attending, becoming, so we can return to our home sites and take action.

Happily I can say, that the above process beautifully conveys my conference experience.

### Specific Takeaways

I spent the full pre-conference day in the company of wonderful administrators and artists under the guidance of Michael Rohd, the director of The Center for Performance and Civic Practice. The workshop, *Devising Civic Practice: Cross-Sector Partnerships and Responding to a Community’s Self-Defined Need* was like a big open door for me.

As a teaching artist, I have spent much of my time working in K-12 classrooms and in facilitating professional development workshops for teaching artists and educational partners. Even the international consultancies I have facilitated have been primarily with other teaching artists and/or educators.

In recent years, I have found myself drawn to learning more about teaching artist work designed for and with communities. Many of my National Guild conference experiences have helped fill in the gaps in my understanding and have impacted my teaching artist practice overall. That said, I feel the pre-conference workshop I attended this year deepened my appreciation and inspired my thinking around teaching artistry especially in community and public settings. I am aware of more possibilities for engagement and authentic exchange. The distinctions drawn between studio practice, social practice, and civic practice gave me new ways to look at my artistic work and my teaching artist practice—reminding me yet again of the potential fusion between the two.

### Notes in the Margin

I still take the majority of my notes on a yellow legal pad. The benefit for me is that the hand to pen to page seems to help me include nuances in my note taking that are difficult to capture on a laptop. Perhaps even more importantly, the legal pad gives me the opportunity to jot down significant words and phrases in the margins.

Throughout the conference I found myself quickly scribbling down thoughts on how best to apply strategies I was learning to the programs I work in at home. I jotted down questions and connections that would help me share new information and perspectives with my teaching artist colleagues at Lincoln Center Education.

As I look over my yellow pad and the notes in the margin from the 2016 Conference, here is a sampling of what I found:

*What does listening mean? In your practice, in your organization, in your life?*

*Classroom as community*

*Aligned Values*

*Synergistic rather than hierarchical*

*Beautiful struggle*