

SEE CHANGE THROUGH ART:

The Leeway Foundation



MISSION

The Leeway Foundation is committed to art making as an integral part of social change, to movement building, and anti-oppression work where Leeway is accountable, accessible, part of and governed by, the communities Leeway's programs support.

HISTORY

Founded in 1993 with an initial gift from Philadelphia-based artist Linda Lee Alter, Leeway was created to support women artists in the Philadelphia area. Over the past decade, the foundation grew its commitment to supporting social change through art and expanded its mission to support both women and transgender people who make art as a means for transforming individuals and communities.

LEADERSHIP

Board members: Amadee L. Braxton, Gretjen Clausing, Naima Lowe, Patience Rage, and Virginia P. Sikes, Esq.;
Denise M. Brown,
Executive Director

MORE INFORMATION

www.leeway.org

What is art? What should art bring to the community? How, exactly, should the artist bring that art, and the message it contains, to the community?

The Leeway Foundation, with its mission to make art an integral part of the movements for social change, finds itself in a unique position among Philadelphia arts funders.



Brinae Ali, Art and Change Grant '07

Its founders and its board are committed to giving women and transgender* artists the opportunity to change society through their art. The foundation values, as its mission statement emphasizes, "fearlessness in action, speech, and self-examination... breaking down boundaries and barriers with creativity, respect and openness to the process."

Established in 1993 by Philadelphia artist Linda Lee Alter, the Leeway Foundation originally funded women in what can be viewed as conventional "fine" arts, such as painting, sculpture and photography. In the last five years, however, with the approval of the donor family, the focus of the foundation has dramatically shifted its view to the expansion of what art is and its social ramifications.

NO SINGULAR FORMULA

Leeway, for example, has viewed gardening as an art, and in the last several years has given grants to three women gardeners who have used their art to affect social change. Betty Leacraft, of West Philadelphia, created "Gifts from Mother Earth," combining fabric design with her gardening. Leeway's Art and Change Grant allowed Leacraft to share stories of traditional medicinal plant remedies by creating quilts depicting the histories of those remedies and then sharing the stories with young people in her West Philadelphia community.

Though Leeway is expansive—allowing artists to self-define their disciplines—the Foundation requires potential grantees to be quite specific in the social change they hope to affect, and how exactly their art will do that.

* "transgender" encompasses trans, transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, and Two-Spirit people, and more generally, anyone whose gender identity or gender expression is non-conforming and/or different from their birth-assigned gender

FAST FACTS

LEEWAY IS...

- Committed to examining and illuminating the relationship between art and social change.
- Invested in art that has extraordinary vision, as well as art that expands the notion of art and the artist's place and connection to communities.
- Committed to expanding the notion of art beyond the traditional canons
- Dedicated to exploring the role of the artist and how their participation and investment in community forwards the kind of world we want to see.
- Devoted to building strong relationships with an international community of artists, curators, presenters, and producers, who are working at the nexus of art, culture, and social change.

FUNDING PROGRAMS

- **Art and Change Grant (ACG):** The project-based Art and Change Grant provides up to \$2,500 to fund art for social change projects and opportunities.
- **Leeway Transformation Award (LTA):** The \$15,000 Transformation Award, offered annually, honors artists who have demonstrated a commitment to creating art for social change for five years or more.

"We don't ask people for resumes. In fact, we discourage people from including them in their applications," said Leeway executive director Denise M. Brown. "Instead, we ask people to give us five-to-ten seminal experiences in their lives. They can be anything: personal, political, artistic."

Those seminal experiences, then, said Brown, should lead to a notion of how the grantee's art will connect with social change.

"What is the potential actual impact of the work? What are the ways in which the artists work in communities?" said Brown. "We think that the people doing this type of work are somehow outside of the studio and are connected to other people doing their work."

MAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Alie Vidich is moving out of the studio and connecting with the community with her 2010 Leeway Art and Change Grant grant. Her dance project is entitled "Constants," which will highlight historical events along the Schuylkill River and the impact of those events on the people who have inhabited its West Philadelphia banks from the days of the Lenni-Lenape to the present. Vidich will perform and will also give her audience a chance to be "perform-

ing participants" in hopes of raising awareness of the effects of having a river as a resource in the community.

"In some ways, these are the same principles that one uses in community organizing because the intention is to create opportunities for new and emerging people," said executive director Brown. "They may have just been doing studio work but now can think of ways of how they can use their practice differently."

Leeway's transformation was part of a generational transition. Founder Alter wanted to involve her daughter, Sara Becker, a writer, in the organization as well. Brown said Becker was interested in how art could do more than just entertain—to have it serve social and political change. Alter and the foundation directors

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—DENISE M. BROWN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



(Above) Denise Brown, Lee Alter, Sara Becker and Gretjen Clausing

gave their approval, and by 2005, Leeway was encouraging all grant applicants to show not only their art proposals but their social missions as well.

"We had lots of meetings and developed a new set of criteria and guidelines for the grants," said

CONTACT

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list online.

Brown, a Brown University graduate who came to Leeway during that time, having been associate director of the Bread and Roses Community Fund, where Becker was a community funding board member. "So the idea was that in terms of the constituency, it would still be artists, but now there would be this added criteria of doing work that had some underpinning of social change or social justice values."

BEARING AN ARTIST'S SOUL

Monique E. Hankerson, of Germantown, will use her 2010 Art and Change Grant this year to produce "A Voice That Bears a Likeness to My Soul," an art book with photographs, poetry and prose that will tell the stories of ten homeless Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Philadelphia youths. Hankerson hopes to induce those seeing her art to become advocates of what she believes is an "often-neglected" segment of the community.

"What was really interesting to me is the process, because I had been on other panels where basically the decision-making was based on the artist's resume and not so much about the work and how the work was going to be used."

— GRETJEN CLAUSING
BOARD MEMBER



(Above) Eva Agbada, Art and Change Grant '09

(Below) Beth Pucinella, Transformation Award '09

"Although we talk of art and cultural practices, what underlies that is a form of movement building," said Clausing. "It elevates the role of the artist or cultural movement."



Brown feels that foundations like Leeway are necessary if art is to be viewed in its proper social context. The trick is to find and encourage artists who already have an idea about the art they want to create and how to use it as a vehicle for social change.

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"I always say that in many ways, the people who apply to us define what an art or cultural practice looks like," said Brown.



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