

REPORT: DEMOCRATIZING THE (FOLK) ARTS NONPROFIT WORKPLACE
Sunday, 28 February 2016, 5-8PM
South Oxford Space Great Room
138 South Oxford Street, Brooklyn, NY

Overview

On Sunday, February 28th, 2016, beginning at 5PM in the Great Room at South Oxford Space, 138 South Oxford Street, Brooklyn, New York, the New York Folklore Society welcomed approximately 20 attendees, some who had come from as far as Philadelphia, to a folk arts forum convening local and national arts and labor leaders for panel presentations and an open forum on the topic of “Democratizing the Arts Nonprofit Workplace.”

Presenters included Andy Kolovos, Co-Director of the Vermont Folklife Center; Selina Morales, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project; Lisa Rathje (Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education); Cooperative Developer and Strategist Joe Rinehart; and UAW Local 2110 President Maida Rosenstein (Local 2110 represents part-time academics and museum workers). New York Folklore Society NYC Representative Eileen Condon organized and curated this event. Andy’s educational programs colleague at Vermont Folklife Center, Kathleen Haughey, made the trip down to New York City but fell ill upon arrival and was unable to participate.

The presenters approached the Forum’s topic from intersecting approaches, based on their varied work experiences and positions within or in connection with the field of traditional arts administration. The general purpose of the Forum was to generate, and document, a critical conversation about best work practices in the (folk) arts nonprofit field (a/k/a public sector ethnography/culture work). The speakers explored several different schools of thought about how more sustainable and more democratic ways of working together in the field of folk arts could be achieved. Their approaches ranged from

- 1) Changing nonprofit organizational work styles and practices through consultation
- 2) Considering alternative working structures to the nonprofit (such as the worker-owned cooperative and the movement supporting it in NYC) for the traditional arts
- 3) Exploring precedents and prospects for unionizing traditional arts nonprofit organizations

Presentations

Lisa Rathje began by sharing that she, Andy, and Selina had previously participated in Chicago in a national conversation about leadership in the field of public sector folk arts, together with folklorists Christina Barr (Nevada Humanities) and Sally Van de Water (Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage). Out of that conversation, a

“manifesto” was written collectively, and the following questions emerged:

- 1) How can we better foster peer to peer mentoring to sustain ourselves and our work?
- 2) What are the core qualities of leadership that suit the values, ethnics and methods of our field?
- 3) What are the internal mechanisms of healthy organizations, and do they reflect the values and ethics of our discipline?
- 4) In what ways can effective leaders impact or facilitate creative, healthy workplaces?

Lisa and **Selina Morales** pointed to the importance of defining leadership and workplace practices in this value-grounded way and they also described leadership as something more than “ambition” and more than just the acquisition of positions of greater and greater power within organizations. Andy’s and Selina’s organizations had both come through recent upheavals in directorship (PFP’s longstanding founding director having retired two years ago, opening that position to Selina) and Andy having joined a coworker five years ago in a “marriage” of sorts as co-directors of VFC. Through these periods of change, PFP and VFC have both benefitted from consultation with Jenna Peters-Golden from the worker-owned cooperative AORTA (www.aorta.coop – Anti-Oppression Resources and Training Alliance). Selina outlined the “points of unity” that PFP staff generated, with Jenna’s encouragement, as a set of values all staff believed in wholeheartedly, which would serve (and continues to serve) as a foundation for revising the routines and practices in PFP as a workplace going forward. Here is a selection of some points from Selina’s staff-generated list:

We recognize peoples’ multiple and intersecting identities.

Due to overt and covert systemic oppression, many cultures and ethnicities are not valued

Opportunities to practice valued cultural traditions and knowledge enhance lives,, self-

Because of economic injustice and disparity there is a real need to fund artists who are

Care for people, relationships, and artistic connections nourishes us.

We see our work as playing a role in building a world without violence.

We are working towards a world in which folk and traditional artists and practitioners can practice their arts and be valued for it, monetarily and socially.

As Selina explained, the points of unity are still a work in progress, and the list also serves as a reference against which PFP staff can monitor the success of their work, conversations, and collaborations, at present.

Andy Kolovos outlined how he and his co-director, Greg Sharrow, have evolved through a process of hiring more staff, including an educational director and a fundraiser, while asking themselves how to accommodate these new people in a structure that gets the word done. Andy and Greg “flirted” with a “what if there’s nobody in charge? / What if there is no one person who is the boss?” way of working, in which “everyone could have an equal stake in what happens...everyone has a say in major decision making, and where things still get done.” After Andy attended the Chicago meeting of folklorists (which Lisa Rathje described) he, like Selina and her staff, consulted with AORTA to build a decentralized organizational structure. Despite his excitement at having progressed into this structure at the staff level, Andy confessed that he and Greg have realized their group has nevertheless “created a parallel structure,” one which “as far as the board is concerned...doesn’t exist.” They have tried to mitigate this by making sure staff are welcome at board meetings but according to the organizational by-laws, the executive(s) who run the organization remain the primary individual(s) responsible to the board, while the board retains the hiring/firing responsibility over the executive director(s). Having staff at board meetings helps “mitigate” these power dynamics, and helps the board “recognize that staff are people,” Andy quipped. However, staff members are “part of the organization,” he reflected, paradoxically, “more than the board members are.”

From the complexities of power sharing and values-based decision-making in nonprofit workplaces, the conversation moved to **Joe Rinehart**. Joe outlined his experience as a worker-owner at a cooperative bookstore in North Carolina, a cooperative developer at the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, and a cooperative director at the Democracy at Work Institute. His inquiry centered around questions of what “democracy” and “democratizing” could actually mean in relation to workplaces. Democracy, he pointed out, is often equated with “participation,” but teasing these concepts apart can be useful. Democratic work implies the generation of “stronger bonds of accountability” and the “decentralization” of power. But what are those bonds of accountability, exactly, and to whom are they being decentralized?

“Thinking about how we are democratizing wealth is also a huge problem. How can we make wealth more distributed, more evenly controlled, and more community controlled,” Joe asked? “Monetary wealth” could also be replaced by “cultural wealth” in this question. Sometimes, Joe pointed out, there is conflict between spreading participation and spreading wealth. He provided several cases in point based on real organizations he had worked with or within. Lest worker cooperatives be opposed in some sort of utopian manner with nonprofits, Joe teased out the complexities further: large (1000+ member) worker-owned cooperatives can operate with very traditional management structures, which are hierarchical and rely on decision-making from single individuals coming into play from the top down. Likewise, nonprofits and worker-owned cooperatives alike can

operate with participatory discussion being a regular part of worklife, whether or not the major decision-making is made traditionally by executive or more collectively. There can be a “middle ground” in which the participatory work styles can exist within a hierarchical structure where decisionmaking can be alternately executive and collective. In situations in which the “loop of accountability” is long—running from executives through middle management to workers and shareholder, some coops may use unions to shorten that accountability loop, or even an employee advocacy committee, in place of a union.

One motivating factor to consider the worker-owned coop model, as opposed to nonprofits, is the desire for members to “share risk, share reward, and share financial reward much more broadly.” Joe joked that he would like to see a “folk arts for profit” organization come into being, especially one that would support contra dances (his current area of interest in running Brooklyn Contra)! The juxtaposition of “folk arts” and “profit” caused most panelists to smile at this juncture. A for-profit dance hall might work, he said, pointing out that leasing space is one area that can be profitable and sustainable in the arts. Joe wound up by returning to the differences between asking how far one wants to go with creating a participatory workplace culture, versus creating an organization that shares risk and reward in order to share wealth more broadly.

Maida Rosenstein explained that “UAW” 2110, the local for whom she is President, does not serve any auto workers but serves workers in cultural institutions which range from the very large (such as the Museum of Modern Art) to smaller museums and a number of small nonprofits, many of which are involved with publishing rather than involved with the arts directly. Reflecting on the conversations she had been listening to thus far, and the approaches the other presenters had been describing, Maida noted that no approaches presented so far to her view would “preclude” the process of unionization right alongside these other efforts and methods to make work and wealth more democratic. That being said, Maida commented that she found it “amazing” how few cultural institutions were organized in terms of labor, even in the more public institutions.

In smaller organizations or more “rarified” ones like galleries, she said, “unions are virtually nonexistent.” “Most workers who are working in those settings have very little power.” An option of electing board members or changing the work structure “does not actually exist.” These cultural workers “don’t have any ability to make changes in the workplace other than as individuals, hoping to negotiate or navigate a better situation.” So the step that Maida said she would posit is for these people to begin looking at unions. Folk arts, she conjectured, would be a field in which there would be organizations that are “very tiny,” in which people were “expecting no great wealth” but nevertheless, she pointed out, even in small nonprofit there are “often inequities.” “If workers want to obtain changes in their workplace, unionization is the way to go.”

Situations in which the executive director is making a huge salary and the workers are earning very little—“that happens a lot in the nonprofit world,” Maida stated. People also organize unions in situations in which they are not motivated by money, she pointed out, but rather by a desire to change the ways in which they work together—seeking not just a

change to the culture of the workplace, but to reform a workplace that isn't really living up to its mission. In her view, the United States is "losing our democracy in part because we are losing our unions." As fewer and fewer workers have less and less power or voice in the workplace, she said, "not only are workplaces becoming less democratic" but enormous wealth inequalities come to exist, even in nonprofits. Probably not "in the folklore center" Maida guessed, casting a look towards her fellow presenters, who smiled, but "if you look at the Museum of Modern Art, or at a university, you see that the presidents of universities are earning multimillion-dollar salaries." In institutions that are supposed to stand for culture, enlightenment, and education, she observed, "you see incredible wage inequality." She called for an alliance between artists and arts workers with labor and workers' rights advocates, to resist the increasing austerity measures affecting the lives of workers and the poor in the U.S. describing this alliance as a natural "marriage." This concluded the panelists' opening presentations.

Wrap Up of Presentations / Discussion: Andy posed the following question by way of conclusion: If our work in this field of folk arts is based upon values such as partnership, collaboration, and cultural equity, then "why should we have a top down structure, if what we are advocating for in the world is completely different?" "Ethically, perhaps morally," he added, "we have an obligation to think about how we structure the organizations we run, to do the work we do in the world." Maida commented that unionization can bring workers concerns "outward," rather than just focusing upon making their own workplaces fairer. Unions can expand workers' power beyond the workplace, she explained, moving those cherished values to "face outward" into society, beyond that single workplace.

The Forum progressed into more critical "how" questions following this phase, as audience members and the curator posed questions to the presenters about how folk arts organizations and how the field of folk arts might take steps toward unionizing (begin with coalition building, not with protest), how worker-cooperatives might be established (incubation organizations in NYC have free start up programs available), and how nonprofits can continue to democratize and promote equity (such as including regional housing/home ownership in an employee benefits package to up the value of an otherwise low salary). Further New York Folklore Society-sponsored forums will be scheduled in 2016 to explore these more specific, and intriguing, interest areas, to continue the discussion, and hopefully to translate interest into action.

Readers are urged to view the entirety of the four-part video documentation of the Democratizing Forum, which was posted to the New York Folklore Society's YouTube channel just after the event. The link to this documentation was also posted to the national public sector folklore list, Publore, as well as the New York State Folk Arts Roundtable Facebook group, and the NYFS Event Page on Facebook, where comments were encouraged.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgKlvSjblJBmcJ9tOaDwewcMYjB4cCnMm>

Shortly after the Forum, folklorist Amy Mills (Programs Coordinator at the Western

Folklife Center) wrote to Publore to express the following comment of appreciation:

“THANK YOU. . . for making this session available online. It was personally and professionally meaningful to hear how several new leaders are trying to innovate, while paying close attention to pay and power equity. Three cheers for the panel participants, for trying new things and sharing your challenges honestly with us! Fellow early to mid-career folklorists - take time to watch this. It’s a good, grounded conversation about issues that affect our job market and our jobs.”

Report submitted to AFS by Eileen Condon, 17 May 2016.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

Andy Kolovos is the Co-Director and Archivist of the Vermont Folklife Center (VFC). He holds a PhD in Folklore and Ethnomusicology and an MLS, both from Indiana University. After assuming the Co-Directorship of VFC with Greg Sharrow in the Spring of 2011, VFC staff came together around the goal of developing a democratized internal operating structure for VFC that would mirror the values the organization sought to foster in the world at large. In March of 2015 Andy attended a meeting in Chicago sponsored by Preserving America’s Cultural Traditions (PACT), which led to discussions with Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) Director, Selina Morales about similar work being undertaken at PFP. Following PFP's lead, VFC engaged a consultant from AORTA (Anti-Oppression Research and Training Alliance) to guide VFC through the process of developing and formalizing a more cooperative, decentralized staffing structure, and in the reevaluation of legacy HR policies.

Selina Morales is the Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP). She joined the staff in 2010 to manage public programs and now, as Director, tends the mission and vision of the organization. Selina holds a BA in Anthropology from Oberlin College, and an MA in Folklore from Indiana University. Selina is currently completing a dissertation on public interest folklore. Selina has been an invited speaker in university and community settings on social justice and folklore, Latino folklore, folklore and education, community engagement methodology and other topics.

Lisa Rathje is an independent consultant who specializes in ethnographic research and folklife program development. She also provides technical assistance and professional development consultations for individual artists and non-profit organizations. Rathje received her PhD in English with a concentration in Folklore from the University of Missouri. Her areas of interest include folklife, cultural heritage, and ethnographic research methodologies; with research specializations in Afro-Cuban folklife, Pennsylvania cultural traditions, folklife and education, and applying cultural knowledge in social justice efforts. Working as a folklorist with the Institute for Cultural Partnerships, she administered the Fellowships and Apprenticeships in Folk and Traditional Arts Program for Pennsylvania; including technical assistance, program management, site visits, and documentation. At Penn State Harrisburg, she has taught graduate seminars and undergraduate courses in public heritage, folklore, and oral

history. Since 2006, Rathje has served as oral history advisor and videographer for an ongoing research project on Afro-Cuban artist Nancy Morejón and others of her generation. She is the co-curator of Making It Better: Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today, an exhibition which toured the state through 2012, featuring over 40 objects that exemplify how traditional art forms serve as catalyst in contemporary communities.

Joe Rinehart has been dedicated to building collaborative and community ownership since his time working in communities affected by lack of land ownership and the subsequent strip mining in West Virginia. Joe has worked as the Director of Cooperative Business Development at the Democracy at Work Institute establishing their cooperative development program and helping to found and coordinate the New York City Coalition for Worker Cooperatives. Joe has also worked as member of the worker-cooperative Firestorm Café and Books in Asheville, NC, and as an instructor at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, creating curriculum on cooperatives and technological development. He holds a BA in Political Science and History from the University of Southern California, and a MA in Industrial Technology, with a focus on sustainability and community ownership, from Appalachian State University.

Maida Rosenstein is president of Local 2110 of UAW, which represents workers in publishing, the arts, and universities in New York City. For forty years she has worked to organize traditionally nonunion industries, such as magazines, galleries, and museums.

The mission of the New York Folklore Society (NYFS) is to foster the study, promotion, and continuation of the folklore and folklife of New York's diverse cultures through education, advocacy, support, and outreach. To achieve this, NYFS provides technical assistance and professional development programs to the field of folk and traditional arts in New York State (Folklore Graduate Student Internship program, Mentoring and Professional Development program, New York State Folk Arts Roundtable, and targeted initiatives); assists folk and traditional artists and community based cultural organizations for traditional cultural activities (folk arts apprenticeships, newcomer microenterprise); publishes a journal, Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore; supports and presents an annual folklore conference; and assists in the collecting and disseminating of folk cultural knowledge through education and outreach.

www.nyfolklore.org