



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alternative Arts Field Convenes Around Regional Tables

**Playing a national leadership role is to affirm that there is
no one way to do things. Artists are not just the hired guns. It is about artists
having a role in how art is made, how art is supported, and how we are engaged,
to have a place at the table.**

An NPN Board member

As part of its long-range planning efforts, the National Performance Network's (NPN) Regional Roundtables that met in the summer of 2000 marked a rare opportunity for a substantial contingent of the alternative arts field to gather. The purpose of hosting the Regional Roundtables was to hear from those around the country about their current realities, and how a reshaped NPN might help to address common trends and concerns. At this critical juncture in making decisions about its own future directions, the NPN chose to question and hear from those in, and also outside, of the Network. In some ways, the Roundtables were designed to replicate the NPN's Annual Meeting; historically it was "at the NPN table" where partners as well as others in the field voiced their accomplishments, realities and struggles. By considering these informed opinions and valuable insights as it moved forward, it was believed that the NPN would remain vital and relevant to the creation and touring of alternative work. Additionally, in light of the near disappearance of NEA peer panels, which historically provided opportunities for dialogue about trends, these Roundtables served to fight the growing isolation that many cultural workers face.¹

The five Regional Roundtables took place in Cedar Rapids, IA, New Orleans, LA, Philadelphia, PA, Seattle, WA and San Francisco, CA between August 4 and September 14, 2000. Overall attendance was extremely high, especially given the relatively short notice and the requirement for many to travel to other cities in their region. Over half of the almost 60 Partners attended.² A total of 63 cultural workers, including artists and administrators from 23 cities also attended.³ A series of broad-based questions prompted the group discussions.⁴ Participants were charged to focus their discussion on the challenges and needs of organizations and artists, and leadership development, rather than to revisit the history of the NPN.⁵

AN ARRAY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES

The Regional Roundtables celebrated a variety of accomplishments. Some participants were happy to have completed capital campaigns and renovations of space. Some organizations such as Alternate ROOTS had obtained new national funding, while others secured local support including Pew’s Dance Advance, for example. Some had made successful hires that empowered their organizations to grow administratively. Some had instituted alternative approaches to leadership; one spoke of adopting a non-hierarchical structure that involves multiple artistic directors. And numerous talked about successful collaborations with artists such as Swamp Gravy, Rennie Harris, Ruby Nelda Perez, and others.

Yet, challenges abounded. As one Partner said, there is “A constant need to stabilize. It is hard to serve as a shelter for artists, to respond to their needs and match them with needs of the organization. Rents are high and rehearsal space is rare. It takes two jobs, now even three, to make it in New York.” Struggles around maintaining space were particularly complex: financing new or expanded facilities and dealing with the demand that increases in space warrant in budget and staffing. Administrative pressures place demands on an already overburdened staff: to accomplish so much given limited capacity; to retain staff who balance multiple job descriptions; to attract young people who are tempted by well-paying high-tech jobs; and to plan for succession of leadership, as founding directors in their 50’s consider ending their careers with meager or nonexistent retirement packages. Balancing artists’ needs with organizational needs, in a time of dwindling funding, is increasingly complex. The challenge of securing funding is always paramount. Prompted largely by dramatic shifts at the NEA, which hit hard the very constituents that NPN serves—Artists’ Organizations, independent artists and small arts groups—there is need for support for general operating as well as for long-term projects. The field struggles to support new and established artists in equitable ways, at a time when the very terms emerging and mid-career are being questioned and deemed outdated. The sheer isolation that comes from being a cultural worker affects day-to-day operations and knowledge about artists. Because NEA peer

**The gifts are the
artists and partnerships,
which are profound.
The ecosystem that we all
share is a greatness
and a blessing.
The challenge is holding
onto our grounding.**

A long-time presenter

1 Cultural worker is a term adopted by the NPN to describe those who facilitate cultural exchange—including creation, presentation and residencies—and is comprised of artists, administrators, technical staff, etc.

2 Partner is the term for a presenter or artist member of the NPN.

3 The list of attendees can be found in Appendix B. As acting Executive Director and Board chair, MK Wegmann attended all sessions. Suzanne Callahan served as facilitator and Carla Peterson was present to prepare to write NPN’s long-range plan.

4 The list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

5 Direct discussion about and evaluation of NPN varied among Roundtables. When the majority of the participants were Partners, evaluative references to NPN were more frequent.

panels and other networking opportunities occur less frequently, it has become difficult to hear about new artists and art forms, and to obtain valuable peer support.

ABOUT THE REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE REPORT

The following topics are addressed in an overview of the rich and frank commentary⁶ that took place, followed by suggestions for the field.⁷

Artists' Organizations and Spaces: A Vital Yet Undervalued Part of Arts Ecology considered this segment of the field that works hard to identify and support emerging and alternative artists. Artists' Organizations provide a place for art, and funding for the research and development that artists need.⁸ They develop a sense of loyalty with artists, many of whom prefer the intimacy that a smaller venue offers. For these organizations, space has become an enormous crisis as it is being "snatched back" by developers who close out leases and then reap hefty profits by selling. The boom economy taxes alternative arts organizations, prompting them to build or buy structures they don't have the capacity to sustain. While obtaining one's own building has historically been viewed as a measure of success, it instills great responsibility on those who need to finance, manage and maintain the space. Participants suggested sharing best practices in effectively managing facilities and being proactive in educating government and urban planners about the value of smaller organizations.

Administration: The Complexities of Being Cultural Workers generated perhaps the most discussion, as resilient administrators (many of whom were artists) persevere to find ways to create and present work. Visionary pioneers who founded organizations decades ago are part of the "old guard" who appear unwilling to let go of their vision, let alone to have it reinterpreted by younger leaders. This leads to a widespread lack of new administrators who can articulate the value and impact of art and Artists' Organizations. While several models of mentoring young people have been started, participants were quite concerned about the lack of mentorship opportunities and other kinds of professional development. The needs prevail as administrators move up the career ladder because there is also a clear lack of opportunities for midlevel management. Finally, the field is not working to provide for those who are retiring. Participants suggested that staff share workloads and set realistic goals; managers seek professional development; and that the field provide additional mentorship opportunities for developing administrators who encourage leadership and decrease attrition.

6 The quotes that appear in this document are paraphrased from meeting notes.

7 In keeping with the format of the Roundtables, suggestions are intended to be made for the field overall, except for the last section, which relates solely to the NPN.

8 The term Artists' Organizations is used throughout this report to refer to artist-centered or artist-driven organizations that work to support contemporary art. They are distinguished from other kinds of organizations because artists participate equitably in decision-making about programs, funds, and policies. They may be run by artists themselves, or by qualified administrators who provide skills and strengthen infrastructure. Yet the artists' interests, needs, and ways of working are always at the center of operations and serve as the departure point for programs.

9 Please refer to the discussion about this term that appears on page 26.



CHARISSA UEMURA

Pearl Ubungen, *Refugee* Frogtown, 1996

Emerging and Mid-Career Artists: Outdated Terms in an Evolving Landscape. At all Roundtables the interpretations of emerging and mid-career were seriously questioned, and said to be based on funding and touring structures that are no longer in place. They presume the structure of a “ladder” whereby artists can “graduate” to obtain ongoing support. There was widespread agreement that adhering to this terminology and the assumed structure from which it came does more harm than good. Yet despite its mixed interpretations nationally, the term emerging continues to have positive connotation for the NPN. There was consensus that the NPN should remain flexible in its definition of emerging as artists: who create vital work that is “searching,” regardless of their age; exude curiosity about the artistic process; established yet challenge themselves with something new; who create work with challenging political content; regionally based who are emerging on the national scene.

Artist-Presenter Relationships: Assessing Models and Values. All Regional Roundtables acknowledged the changing aesthetic landscape influenced by new ideas, cultural and sociopolitical issues, and technology. A distinction was made about community-based artists⁹ who the NPN has historically funded, and who choose to

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A long-time presenter

work closely over a long period of time with a community, often on a specific issue. Participants suggested that presenters provide mentorship for artists in promotion, booking and touring, and ensure that the artist's voice is prominent in decisionmaking.

Technology: Reaping the Benefits, Keeping up with the Changes explores the impact of technology on art and management. The Internet provides valuable ways to communicate, which can fight isolation and simplify tasks such as contract negotiation. Yet technology brings an ever-increasing expectation for organizations to find resources to purchase new equipment and manage new and unfamiliar software, such as ticket-selling and accounting systems. The field should increase its use of technology to communicate more efficiently, fully support artists, and capitalize on technology's ability to manage information.

Funding: The Value of Providing a Range of Support. Roundtable participants voiced widespread concern that the substantial decrease in NEA funding, coupled with its restructuring and subsequent decrease in peer panels, has meant that there are fewer ways to access support and hear about artists and issues. Participants emphasized the importance of providing a range of funding choices that

are designed to respond to the field's needs. Concern was registered that unrestricted support is increasingly hard to come by, given the growing emphasis on projects; and opportunities for younger artists are extremely rare. Considerable cynicism was expressed about the trend toward funding that prioritizes social impact over the art itself, as well as the growing emphasis on outreach activities more than the creative process and new work. Funders were urged to value community-based art and artists, rather than to support token "outreach" activities in the form of subsidized tickets or master classes. Stabilization programs that fund cash reserves and endowments are important, yet overlook Artists' Organizations' needs for general operating support. Many at the Roundtables have dealt with funders who question their worthiness, expecting them to provide outcome-based data that documents success. Yet artists working in partnership with these organizations have made great strides in helping populations who have not traditionally received such attention or support. It was suggested that we work to ensure funders more fully understand the role of Artists' Organizations and the value of their work in supporting the creative process, and that artists be present for meetings with foundation staff. Finally, the field should charge itself to find new ways to articulate the value of its work to funders in order to counteract being evaluated by more traditional measures used in the social science or corporate fields.

The Role of the NPN: A Shared Value System that Validates Artists and Builds Community. At all Roundtables, widespread evidence illustrated that the NPN has played

a vital role in validating and supporting the significant impact of alternative artists and organizations on the field. People spoke repeatedly and passionately about the role that NPN played in facilitating accomplishments and counteracting at least some of the challenges. The NPN has persevered as one of the few remaining support structures that fosters positive collaborations among presenters and artists and works to fight isolation. Its Partners and leadership work arduously to serve what one participant referred to as “the tradition of the new,” or the alternative arts field, by functioning as what others called a “search engine” for new artists, forms, and work. As a field-driven network it has exuded national leadership in numerous ways. It has played a powerful role in convening, through its Annual Meeting and other gatherings. It has facilitated partnerships by creating a “buzz,” or awareness about artists and their work coupled with the financial means to present and tour that work. Its equitable partnerships with artists guarantee a level of fee support that is respectful of artists’ needs, and serves as a model to developing artists. It ensures artists a place at the table where policy is discussed and decisions made, and provides a platform that connects local organizations and artists to national dialogue. It invests in the creation of art and supports the evolution of artists. It provides mentorship to developing organizations, and a system of peer support. It values diversity of artists and presenters and works to be aesthetically inclusive.

The Role of the NPN: Suggestions for Future Directions. In their recommendations, Roundtable participants urged the NPN to continue to encourage dialogue about, and national exposure for, art forms and artists. Historically, the NPN has connected artists to presenters, and it should continue to advocate for these relationships around a shared value system. The NPN has, and should continue, to play an important role in serving as a bridge among local organizations while also providing national presence. The NPN’s success over the years has supported many artists; yet a challenge remains to invest in and sustain existing Partners, while also allowing for new relationships. Perhaps some tiered level of participation and support could address this dual need. Participants strongly suggested that the NPN play a role in educating and enlightening funders on national and local levels to: understand artists’ impact on community and culture; remain aware of new work; develop a national perspective about artistic trends; appreciate the range of ways to stabilize arts organizations; and understand the impact of funding cuts on the arts field. While the NPN enables presenters to stretch beyond booking mainstream artists who generate larger audiences, the high costs of presenting alternative artists stretch some Partners’ abilities to obtain the matching funds. It was suggested that the fee subsidy might vary according to city. After considerable discussions about reallocating the money from subsidies to commissions, it was decided that a healthy mix of both was best for the field. Finally, it is critical that the NPN considers the possibilities of technology in crafting its new message and in going forth to funders in the larger public.

Conclusion: A Galvanizing Process that Generated Widespread Support. Despite some initial skepticism as the Roundtables commenced and the discussion unfolded, those present rallied around the issues and boldly committed to supporting a newer, more relevant NPN. As one long-time Partner commented at the end of a Roundtable, “I am happily amazed...this is really impressive...I feel good about the commitment here.”