

## DISCOVERY Ep. 14 - (English)

[00:02:38] Hello and welcome to Discovery.

[00:02:40] Knight Foundation weekly series that looks at the creation of informed and engaged communities through the lens of artist in the arts. I'm Victoria Rogers, vice president of Arts, and I'm hosting today's session. Joining me is Laura Zabel, a frequent speaker on arts and community development. She's spoken at places like the Aspen Ideas Festival, the Urban Land Institute and Americans for the Arts convening a 2014 Bush Foundation fellow. She's been named one of the 50 most influential people in the US, not for profit arts, an actor and author and director of Springboard for the Arts. We'll be talking about creative people, power, cultural life and meaning making and the power of artists to impact their communities. If you have questions, please submit them throughout the show. The Zoom use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen through Twitter. Use the hashtag knight live and in the comments section of the Facebook livestream. We'll get to as many of them as we can throughout the conversation. Please do submit them. It really adds a lot to the conversation that we love to have your thoughts. Laura, welcome to Discovery.

[00:03:49] Hi, Victoria. It's so great to see you and great to be here.

[00:03:54] You as well. Thank you for taking your time to do this. You know, now, possibly more than ever, we need strong communities. So Springboard, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, is all about creating communities and artists that have a reciprocal.

[00:04:11] Where artists are key contributors to community issues and are visible and valued for the impact they create for the audience.

[00:04:19] We've posted a link to a study that Springboard and Helicon Collaborative published called Creative People Power. I encourage you to take a look. It's a great report and a framework for combining creativity centered and people centered development to build strong, healthy and resilient communities. So, Laura, we've had a lot of conversations over the years and on our last when we talked about artists being a canary like the canary in the coal mine, given the unemployment crisis, the lack of a safety net and everything else that's going on. How does Springboard help artists make a living and alive and help our communities to connect to the creative power of artists, especially during these moments of almost unprecedented crisis?

[00:05:10] Yeah, I mean, I think that that mission, that purpose of both seeing that the ecosystem and the infrastructure for art and for culture and creativity and meaning making really needs to start both with support systems for creative producers and culture workers and for those mechanisms of connection for people to tap into their own creativity and tap into the creativity and culture of the place where they live or the communities that they're part of. You know, that's that's always been our mission. And you're right, it seems even more important right now. And, of course, you know, we have a huge new challenges and challenges that have been around for a really long time that we're dealing with in that compound each other. Certainly the challenge of the pandemic and the economic crisis, the challenge of racism and police violence, particularly here in the Twin Cities, are just compounded in a way that have created an environment for artists that I think is is I don't know, this word is overuse, but it is pretty unprecedented where, you know, you think about as an individual artist who make a living from teaching in the schools, working in an elder care facility, teaching classes, doing community based work, selling work at markets

or performing on stages. And right now, none of those avenues for connection or economic opportunity are open. So that really demands both new systems of support and kind of illuminate some of the gaps that we have been there for a long time. But maybe that we've overlooked and it also really, I think, in the more optimistic side of things, has really sparked people's creativity and has helped people find new ways of connecting. One thing that I'm really inspired by right now is how much people, artists and other folks, too, are moved to connect even with all of the barriers that exist.

[00:07:04] People are figuring out how to come together, how to have how to make meaning out of what's happening in our world and in our places. And if I have optimism in this moment, it's that I both see artists stepping to the moment and stepping into leadership and also really see people recognizing the value of culture and their kind of deep human need for connection and meaning. Right now.

[00:07:32] So what of the other many programs that you currently offer? Which ones seem to be the most helpful now and sort of and in addition to that. Given this current circumstances, are there new programs that you want to create or how would you change ones that you currently have?

[00:07:52] Yeah. You know, I springboards programs are always really rooted in practicality. And so one of the biggest things we've done in the last six months is around emergency support for artists. So Springboards always had an emergency relief fund.

[00:08:06] And it's been a big part of our work for a long time. Although the scale is really different. So about, you know, in a normal year, we fund about twenty thousand dollars in emergency support to artists. That's usually about 40 artists. So, you know, a few a month since March, we've raised and distributed over a million dollars to over two thousand artists in Minnesota.

[00:08:29] Five hundred dollars at a time. So that's a significantly different scale. But the scale of the crisis and the need for artists to have even that kind of small stopgap help is really, really urgent. And it's I still believe that that kind of direct support unrestricted to literally pay your bills and put food on the table is one of the most important things that we can do, particularly for people who face multiple barriers. You know, artists of color, artists and rural communities, queer and trans arts. As an artist with disabilities are our priorities in this moment because of the ways that the crisis impacts those folks in multiple ways and in compounds existing disparities.

[00:09:14] And then I think so. So on the one hand, there is this idea of direct support and economic opportunity. And then I also think the other piece we're interested in is how do we support artists to meet this moment? How do we support artists to build the channels that help people make meaning, express their grief and pain and joy and connection in this moment?

[00:09:35] So earlier this summer, we were able to do a project in St. Paul called Artists Respond that supported black artists to partner with local businesses to paint temporary murals on boarded up buildings in the sort of thick of the uprising that followed the murder of George Floyd here in the Twin Cities. And right now, we're doing a project called Artists Respond to Social Isolation. That's a statewide project supporting artists to do projects that really help address and combat social isolation, particularly in communities that are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. So elder care facilities, new immigrant

communities, other community communities that are really dealing with isolation in a really acute way.

[00:10:27] So we really feel like artists have the potential and the possibility to provide some of that resource for people and to tend to people's humanity in this moment and to help us really express and make meaning of all the things that we need. We need to address and express with each other. And so really figuring out what are the tangible ways we can do that? What are the practical ways that we can always use this phrase, that springboard get to the doing, you know, rather than talking is not one of your phrases.

[00:11:02] Think it. Do it.

[00:11:03] Yeah. You know, without it, I feel like that comes from Springboards, an organization that's run by and for artists. So everyone on the staff as a practicing artist, my background is in theater and in performance. And I feel like that kind of ethos of the organization comes from our artistic practice. Right. Like, you make work, you make art by doing it. You make theater by standing up with people and trying it, not by sitting around a table and talking about it. And so I think that that kind of artistic process really informs our work at Springboard of, you know, let's get it up on its feet.

[00:11:36] Let's try it. Let's feel the response. Let's see how it works and community and continue to iterate and change as we go rather than needing something to be fully baked or fully finished before it goes out in the world.

[00:11:49] Yeah, that that's a controversial statement for a lot of people that are at least in the fields that I've worked in, especially with classical music. You can't put anything out until it's absolutely perfect. Whatever that means. But I am back to this thing about isolation, because I, I think that so many of us, especially those of us who live alone during this pandemic, feel incredibly isolated at times. And Zoom calls are great. But as we were talking earlier, you miss the nuance. You don't know this behind statements that people make and just human touch prefer another. So when you talk about some of your artists working, whether it's in retirement homes or helping to take care of elderly, what else are you saying that you think is really interesting that people are doing? To connect with others during this, I mean, you brought up theater. I mean, what does theater look like right now? You know, we're seeing a lot of people pivot to digital and sometimes it's great and sometimes it doesn't work. But talk a little bit about what you're seeing from your artist. And people need to know that you're based there and you have another location, but you work with people literally across the U.S..

[00:13:08] Yeah. You know, I think. It's unsurprising, but also still really wonderful to just see the way the ways that artists do innovate. You know, I think no one would wish for this level of constraint. But we know most artists talk about how constraints lead to creativity. So even though, again, no one would wish for these particular set of constraints. But I think artists are being really creative in this moment. And I'm right now, I'm particularly interested in the ways that artists are exploring, you know, outside of the digital realm. So exploring in more analog ways. So whether that's safe and socially distant things that can happen in person or things that use the U.S. mail or, you know, the telephone, where this fall we're actually bringing back a project that we done for a number of years called Community Supported Art that is based on the community supported agriculture model where people buy in and get a share of vegetables. They get works of art. And this year, that's all going to be through the U.S. mail. And the artists are creating work around these three ideas around comfort and care and creativity. So there will be projects that are about

that are specifically designed to be something you can gift to someone else. So to kind of continue that that chain of connections, so you have this connection to the artist and they've given you something that you should pass to someone else. And there will be projects that are really designed to be almost like kits for people to make things at home and really engage their own creativity and then share them potentially digitally with each other. And then works of art that are really personal pieces that people will be able to connect to and have is a part of their lives. And I think those kinds of projects that, you know, I've seen some really great digital performance also, but I'm right now excited about those kinds of projects that bring us back into community with each other in really tangible ways, whether that is in person or through the like an object that can travel to your home from someone else.

[00:15:19] And you can kind of feel that sense of that. Someone made something with care for you and have that kind of reciprocity in the relationship that I feel like is what we all are are really craving right now.

[00:15:32] Yeah, the one that comes to mind for me is costumers at Miami City Ballet made beautiful masks. For people and having having had the luxury of being within their space and watching the beautiful work that they do, that their idea that they wanted to be a part and they wanted to help and this was a way that they could do that. The Choreography Center in Akron created these little boxes that you can go on line and buy, which, of course, I did. And they send it to you. And there are things that you can do about movement. They also sent you a great little bag of coughing in case we're not caffeinated enough in today's world. But it's it is. I'm always interested in the ways that artists are able to express themselves and then edit that really important thing about the connection. You and I have had many conversations about we both believe that vibrant cities. Have to have really good arts ecosystems. But the economic development is not the only thing that artists provide, right?

[00:16:43] Yeah, I think, you know, if there's anything that the last six months has taught us, it's that the systems that we've built in this country are insufficient and not addressing the scale of the challenges. And I think a part of. My feeling is that a part of what has been missing is that we're starting in the wrong part of the conversation. If we're talking about community development or the idea of just health of community, that we tend to start with the kind of transactional fix and we don't start with people's humanity, their own agency and power we don't build from what is already. Creative and rooted in culture in place.

[00:17:29] We don't create systems that are designed to support people to imagine and build their own futures. We tend to start with a kind of transactional fix and some of those transactional fixes are superimportant.

[00:17:42] But I feel like we've really culturally in this country skipped over the kind of foundational root cause, root humanity of people. And a lot of that has to do with culture and meaning making.

[00:17:57] And I think that artists can really play a role in helping us reconnect to that end.

[00:18:02] And the idea of people owning their own artistry, their own creativity, their own cultural practice and their own imagination as a part of each of our own individual power at agency, I think just has to be a part of how we think about what community development means or even economic development. That can't only be about the built environment or

can't only be about who owns land. You know, all the land we're on is stolen. Most of our systems were built by stolen labor.

[00:18:34] And so talking about land ownership or or taking up space and community as how we characterize community development feels like it's never going to get us to the level of change we need.

[00:18:46] We have to kind of roll back to a place where we can acknowledge and honor and support each other's humanity.

[00:18:53] Talk a little bit more about your statement. Meaning making.

[00:18:58] Yes. So we springboard. You know, we could talk for hours and hours about what is art. And it's springboard. We use a definition of art and artists that we borrow from artists.

[00:19:11] Alan Capra, that art is about meaning making in everyday life. And that that's the kind of baseline for us springboards, not an organization that's invested in deciding who is and isn't an artist. In fact, we often play a kind of evangelist's role of trying to help more people acknowledge themselves as artists and where people see the opportunity that and power that can come from acknowledging your own creativity and your own artistry. And because we know that the nonprofit arts system has left a lot of people out.

[00:19:44] And in our kind of quest as artists for validation, we've sort of put some artificial parameters around who does and doesn't give to call themselves an artist that I think of actually hurt everyone. And so that idea of meaning making how we how we make sense of trauma, how we make sense of pain, how we make sense of our history is how we make sense of our joys and prides in our place or in our communities. Those things are really connected to culture and creativity. And that's to me, that's that's what art is. Is that really, really fundamental sense of how we connect to each other and make meaning of our lives individually and collectively?

[00:20:26] And I know that the pushback frequently on that idea then becomes and then where is the value of someone who has spent their life training to be an art, you know, quote, artist who I love as well. But how do you see sort of that? I think it's a false dichotomy, but I think it's something that is expressed. Whether it's a phobia.

[00:20:52] Yes. I mean, plenty of people have expressed that to me over the years.

[00:20:59] I think that I'd first of all, I think it's a false dichotomy. I think, you know, I think those things are mutually reinforcing a whole spectrum of creative activity, of different ways that people own and contribute. I also think that we. Have fallen into a trap where we can where we're mixing up what we call artistic quality, which is pretty much subjective and is rooted in a white Western idea of culture a lot of times when people are using those words. That's what they mean with rigor. Right. Like, I really value rigor of practice. But that can.

[00:21:40] And that spans a whole variety of kinds of practice.

[00:21:43] And, you know, there are people who are tradition bearers and culture bearers who are a whole day and cultural traditions that they have passed down through generations who have spent lifetimes investing in and perfecting those art forms that have



never been acknowledged as artists or don't even have the permission to think of themselves as artists because it's just what they do. But that rigor is there. And that is, I think, what speaks to people and what creates that meaning. So I'm much more interested in the ways that people are committed to and continuing to refine and develop their practice with rigor than I am some outside. You know, an idea imposed from the outside about what quality is. I think that's a fool's errand to try and say that any one person or any group of people can determine what quality is. You know, we all have our own. Things that resonate our own senses of what makes meaning for us. And that's that's where the quality lives. But I am interested in that idea of of rigorous practice and of of people who are committed to doing that, meaning making into the weaving culture and creativity into their lives in meaningful ways.

[00:22:59] Yeah. And I think that having been able to spend time with people whose language doesn't even have a word for art because it's so ingrained in what they do. And it is so valued in that way, especially was a reader for Rassmussen and got to spend some time in Anchorage, Anchorage of that phenomenal museum that is there. And just the displays of the most beautiful, intricate work that is a history of a people. Brown was really it was really fun and it meant a lot in that process. You did mention earlier in the conversation the unrest that certainly the Twin Cities have experienced.

[00:23:47] But what's it like now? Paul?

[00:23:53] Yeah, I mean, I think both in any contextless like this, I feel a huge responsibility to try to represent Minneapolis and St. Paul in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. And I always have to start by acknowledging that my perspective or my feeling about what it is to live here right now is just that, you know, and every person who lives here has a different perspective and feeling about it. And mine is informed by all of my identities and and and relationships. You know, I feel like at this point in October. You know, in the Twin Cities, we are still in the midst of and dealing with both a collective and individual trauma in our community. Both the trauma of the murder of George Floyd, his life, and a kind of collective awakening and realization that that that murder comes from really entrenched systems of racism and anti-blackness that are built into our systems everywhere, but in some pretty particular ways here in Minnesota. And the trauma of watching Beloved. Businesses and organizations experienced damage and destruction in the uprising and some of the backlash to the uprising that followed that.

[00:25:25] And so I think, you know, there isn't. I don't have an answer for what exactly what the outcome is. And there's really no way to kind of put a period on that sentence.

[00:25:35] It's ongoing. And I think our community continues to grapple with and figure out how to push for change, how to do the healing that's necessary to support the communities in the neighborhoods that we care about and how to honor a man's life that, you know, who had a family and to ask to be the symbols of of of this movement and of this moment.

[00:26:02] And that, you know, in the end that all happens in the context of land that that was and is the homeland of the Dakota and in Jewboy people. And and that that that is a long, long legacy of systems that were built to to claim space and lives and resources for the gain of white people.

[00:26:28] You know, I can and I know and I'm glad that I and I know what our conversations, you know, afterwards and just talking with you to check in on a friend as

well as a colleague. And this was how the community did respond and help and that this, again, placing value in the people that are around you and the people that we know and how we see people, that there's so much more there than we can possibly imagine sometimes or. Or C, and frequently, unfortunately, it's through just horrific circumstances that people finally have their eyes open and they start to really see around them. We've got a couple of questions here. So Amy's asking, how do you make more space at the table for BIPAC Voices?

[00:27:26] I mean, I think, first of all, I would rather I think my inclination network at Springboard is in service of trying to support all the tables and rather than creating one table that we invite people to really thinking about how we resource the tables that already exist, particularly in communities of color and in the black community and in the indigenous and native communities, that there are already tables there. And I think that connects to this idea that all communities have creativity and culture, that wealth exists in community already. And part of our job is, as anyone who works in kind of systems are non-profits or philanthropy. Our job should be, I believe, to support the work that's already happening and to support the power and agency of people who are already there. I think, you know, from a really practical perspective, I don't know any way to do that kind of work without starting with relationships and really being in relationship at a really grassroots level. I think as springboards work like Patrice and we work, you know, all across the country in some ways, but in a lot of really specific ways, our work is very place based and in some ways really neighborhood based. So in St. Paul, we've been working on the development of building a new space for culture and creativity and a kind of hub in home for artistic life of our community. And our neighborhood is at the intersection of really everything. I think in St. Paul. It's, you know, immediately to the south of us is St. Paul's historic black neighborhood, Rondeau, which was bisected by the interstate highway construction. Not immediately north of us is a neighborhood called Frogtown, which is St. Paul's historic sort of immigrant first landing place and now is home to a very large population of first and second generation immigrant and refugee families from Southeast Asia.

[00:29:35] We're about three blocks from the state capital and about a mile from downtown. So it really is this confluence of all of these places and part of how we approach the development of that building. I promise this is actually getting to the question it was rather than I think I think a very traditional way of new building development is to invite people to your table, even like really well-meaning, rooted community development says you come to our table and give us feedback on the design of this building. And we tried really hard to kind of flip that around. And we spent an entire year before we did any kind of work on what the building was going to look like or any kind of construction saying, show us. And we just handed over the keys to about 200 different community groups and six thousand people who use this unrenovated car dealership with my euphemism is rustic bathrooms.

[00:30:30] They just another. Yes. A big open box room. We just let people fill it with the creativity and culture.

[00:30:38] And we that gave us the opportunity to learn from our neighbors, from our communities what people wanted out of a space and learn, I think, in a much deeper way than we would have if we had invited people to vote on their favorite design from our architect. It allowed our architects to do that learning as well. And now that we are.

[00:31:01] You know, Under-construction, I know that that building is really rooted in the hopes and dreams and the vision of the people in the community and that they'll continue

to contribute to it and continue to help us refine and develop it towards something that is its highest and best purpose. Certainly the highest and best purpose of any vacant used car dealership, an enormous parking lot that you could have.

[00:31:25] I would agree with you. One last question here from Margaret. And question is, how do we engage the arts to help the healing that we need without putting the burden on the artists themselves?

[00:31:40] Pay them. That's the first thing. Like I said, an optical and I am truly practical.

[00:31:46] Part of it is we got to value this labor and we can ask a lot of artists and then we need to resource them in a competitive spirit way and not just resource them in the project, but resource them to be the leaders that they are in community to step to this moment in all of the ways that we are all. You know, I think there are rhizomes systems that need to change to make that well. So that's one thing.

[00:32:17] The other thing I think that is an approach Springboard uses a lot in terms of supporting artists. That's certainly not the only way.

[00:32:25] But I'm really a fan of lots of little approach. So how do we support a lot of artists to do small experiments or small objects so that we aren't putting the burden on any one person to speak for a whole community or to solve everything? But we're kind of in the process of kind of fertilization or soil tilling with lots of little things that can take root and grow. And that can be these small ways that people can come together and make meaning and do that kind of healing work. I think I think that can also be a way of kind of generating a lot of creative activity, really surfacing new leaders who maybe haven't been called on a lot. I think a trap that a lot of communities fall into is they sort of defer to the same six.

[00:33:10] It's usually six artists over and over and over again who are usually fantastic, really accomplished leaders in their communities.

[00:33:19] But they can't do everything and they shouldn't have to feel the burden of everything falling to them.

[00:33:25] So we have to find ways of surfacing those new leaders and and supporting more people to do that work, as well as things that really help people see that their own creativity can be part of their healing, that it isn't always something that has to come from the outside, but it is also about supporting people's own creative practice and developing opportunities and space and time and resource for people to be able to tap into their imagination and tap into the healing that can come from claiming your own creativity in your own culture.

[00:34:01] We're going to go a few minutes over. I think we should go ahead and show your clip. By space.

[00:34:09] Yeah. So this video we made, this video just to kind of document the before of the building just really quickly, it is a vacant used car dealership. It was vacant for 15 years.



[00:34:21] And we have been in the process for the last two years of this this deep community work and then renovated the building to really put it back into service as an as a hub for our neighborhood and for the broader Twin Cities and country.

[00:34:53] Springboard bought this building for a whole host of reasons. 50 car, asphalt surface parking lot is accidentally preserved public space. The box really appeals, I think, to springboards values of openness and sharing, being it and everything.

[00:35:09] Bring back bring Max expands our mission for artists, make a living in their life by providing opportunities, particularly around access to capital, to a hundred different groups.

[00:35:18] And 5000 people have been through this space in twelve months. It can be a theater. It can be a rehearsal space. It can be a space for workshops and training. It can be an organizing space.

[00:35:28] It can be a market that stands out the most. As far as the pop up markets, we're seeing how big and lively and diverse the room was. A lot of up on this were first time vendors.

[00:35:38] What it has meant is really great meeting space.

[00:35:42] We've had our preliminary Frogtown Rondeau, so the first time the two neighborhoods have come together for anything intentionally. Those initial meetings happened here.

[00:35:52] I'm really excited about spring board coming in and being in it between Frogtown around. This is the place where artists live is where art has always lived. So having the infrastructure now to witness, like you can see, is exciting.

[00:36:05] It was in the spring back that we actually got a chance to host parents from six different regions in Minnesota to come together and figure out how we structurally integrate community, knowledge, authority and leadership into state level public decision making spaces.

[00:36:25] Playing board is doing with Springboks is creating sort of a mutually beneficial relationship with the community, creating space where not only are you welcome in the space, but here, here's the keys.

[00:36:36] Come on in and have your own types of events. How do you see yourself in this space?

[00:36:41] Part of what we're raising money for is, of course, the physical transformation. But I think almost more importantly, we're raising money to make sure that the space stays really accessible, that we can continue to really make sure that the people who built this neighborhood are the people who the space belongs to.

[00:36:59] Once you reopen the space, I can't wait to see who shows up. I think what's really unique about this organization is it's building that it's porous and the work that we do here will be defined by the people surrounding it.

[00:37:12] I feel like this is a moment right now where we have a lot of different forces converging in this country, in the world, finding spaces and opportunities to bring people together, to be able to have these common bonds and really strengthen ties of community. I think it's going to be so important moving forward.

[00:37:37] We can't wait. We are out of time. Laura, I want to thank you so much for being my guest today and DA night production crew Justin Rawal. And Grace, thank you for making the show happen. Next week for Discovery is Preist Sarkar, my colleague and director of arts. She'll be in conversation with Gary Anderson. Gary is the producer director of Plowshares Theater Company in Detroit and co-founder of Black Sea, a national initiative addressing historic inequities in theater. Really hope to see you next week, 1:00 p.m. Eastern. Have a great one. Thank you so much. Thanks.