

**THE INFORMAL ARTS: FINDING COHESION, CAPACITY  
AND OTHER CULTURAL BENEFITS  
IN UNEXPECTED PLACES**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**OF FINAL REPORT  
SUBMITTED TO  
THE CHICAGO CENTER FOR ARTS POLICY AT COLUMBIA COLLEGE**

**MAY 2002**

Alaka Wali, Ph.D., anthropology  
Rebecca Severson, M.A., anthropology  
Mario Longoni, M.A., anthropology

Chicago Center for Arts Policy



600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605

Tel: 312.344.7985 Webpage: [artspolicy.colum.edu](http://artspolicy.colum.edu)

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two years, a team of ethnographers from the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College (CCAP) conducted a research study in the Chicago metropolitan region, investigating adult participation in the “informal arts” (sometimes called “unincorporated arts”). The informal arts encompass such diverse experiences as acting in community theater, singing in a church choir, writing poetry at the local library, or painting portraits in a home studio. These popular creative activities fall outside traditional non-profit and commercial arts experiences, and yet, according to a recent National Endowment for the Arts *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, engage millions of amateurs and professionals alike (NEA, 1997).

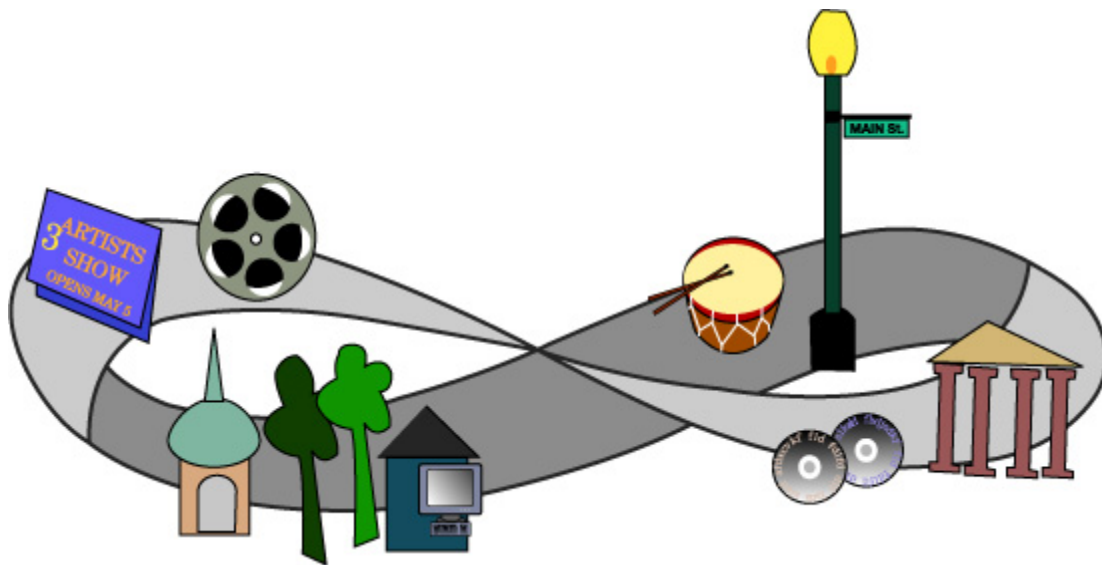
As the researchers discovered, these “hands-on” activities tap people’s creative potential and expand our concept of artistic participation beyond the role of audience member. Based on two years of ethnographic data collection, researchers concluded that the informal arts occupy a significant place in the social infrastructure of communities, helping to build both individual identity and group solidarity.

### GLIMPSES OF THE INFORMAL ARTS FROM THE FIELD NOTES:

- **An African American secretary who writes poetry** saw an ad in the Beverly community newspaper about a poetry reading at the public library, went and was “hooked”. She also writes articles for her church magazine and has published a local cookbook. The ethnographer met her while observing a poetry reading at an Afro-centric bookstore, where she (the secretary) was the featured poet. The poet/secretary mentions that a male co-worker/engineer has illustrated one of her poems; he also presents his drawings to guests of honor during farewell parties at their workplace, a federal government agency.
- **The drumming circle takes place Friday nights**, year round, in a Chicago neighborhood park. The circle is managed by a drummer who works at the park as a music instructor. 30-70 diverse participants sit in a circle of folding chairs on the lawn near the field house (inside if there’s inclement weather), with a variety of drums, tambourines and shakers in hand. Some are professional players, some are hobbyists, some just happen upon the circle – they heard a sound in the distance and followed it. A drummer / public school engineer comments, “I had no musical anything, but I wanted to be more expressive. Now I’m decorating the house and thinking of aesthetic things. I never wore jewelry until I was 40.”
- **At a church on Chicago’s northwest side**, a small, multi-racial group of volunteers organized an arts gallery that features an “artist of the month”, some of whom have never shown their work before. Show openings, featuring refreshments and sometimes live music, are held after Sunday morning services. Dozens of people mingle there, not only at the openings, but also on the other Sundays of the month. A description of the artist appears in the church program, and sometimes fliers are placed on seats. In addition to the gallery, the church provides free studio space to a church garden volunteer / painter, who doesn’t have room for large works in his apartment. This studio is a makeshift space in an unheated storage / tool shed adjacent to the church.

In order to better articulate these artistic experiences, the researchers conceptualized all arts production as existing on an “informal-to-formal” continuum, one that ranges from ephemeral and highly spontaneous activities that occur in unstructured spaces (such as the street or individuals’ homes), to long-established, formally organized cultural production, governed by rules for inclusion and occurring in publicly-labeled “arts” spaces (such as museums, galleries, performance venues and commercial centers). Despite the fact that millions of Americans regularly participate in activities at the informal end of this arts continuum, prior to the CCAP study there had been little research about the social and educational impact of the informal arts.

### *THE ARTS CONTINUUM*



The CCAP study (which concluded in early 2002) found substantial evidence that the informal arts are an important reservoir of social capital, significant for life-long-learning, building civic engagement and strengthening communities. Researchers discovered that in the course of informal arts participation, people are coming together across such social boundaries as economic and occupational status, ethnicity and race, age and geography. Researchers also discovered that participants make use of opportunities generated through informal arts practice to develop social skills and inclinations important to civic renewal. The study found further evidence that the formal (non-profit and commercial) part of the arts sector is closely linked with the informal, each side deriving benefits from the connection.

## **STUDY FINDINGS FALL INTO THREE INTER-RELATED AREAS:**

- 1. BRIDGING DIFFERENCES:** Researchers concluded that informal arts activities help people to bridge social boundaries of age, gender, race/ethnicity and occupational status, boundaries that through historical processes have often been used to sustain structures of inequality. The inclusive character of informal arts practice and the socially accessible localities where it occurs induce trust and solidarity among participants, and promote greater understanding and respect for diversity.
- 2. BUILDING CAPACITY:** Informal arts practice provides important sites for adult personal expression and creativity. In the process, it helps to build individual and community assets, by fostering social inclinations and skills critical to civic renewal. These include greater tolerance of difference, trust and consensus building, collaborative work habits, use of innovation and creativity to solve problems, the capacity to imagine change and the willingness to work for it. Artists practicing in informal settings come from all walks of life and are largely representative of the pluralism of American society. They have high rates of participation in such civic activities as advocating for arts and community improvement causes, voting in elections, and joining voluntary organizations.
- 3. STRENGTHENING THE ENTIRE ARTS SECTOR:** The informal and formal arts operate on a two-way continuum, upon which information, personnel, financial benefits and other resources flow back and forth. While some parts of the formal arts sector make available a variety of resources in the exchange, the informal arts create employment opportunities for professionally working artists, play a “research and development” role, and provide audiences for the formal arts sector. Individual artists, small and medium sized non-profit arts organizations, community-based groups, and public and private non-arts institutions all play significant roles in forging these links.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS**

In order to document the impact of the informal arts, the researchers gathered data relating to three areas of inquiry: 1) the extent to which informal arts participation leads people to interact across social barriers such as ethnicity/race, class, gender and age; 2) the types of skills and inclinations that participants acquire or develop in the course of art-making that could be useful for building community capacity; and 3) the processes through which links are established between the informal and formal sectors of arts production, and any gains arising from the ensuing interactions.

The researchers examined 12 case studies of informal arts activity that involved either small groups or single individuals as participants. Case studies were selected to reflect a variety of art disciplines (visual arts, music, theater and other performance, crafts, and creative writing), and a range of locations throughout the Chicago metropolitan region (including a suburban location). Researchers employed ethnographic techniques that included participant-observation, open-

ended and semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a survey questionnaire completed toward the end of the field research period by 165 of the 310 case study participants (a 53 percent response rate).

This combination of techniques insured triangulation of data sources as a measure of validity, as well as the ability to elicit multi-layered perspectives about the behaviors and practices of artists, and about the deeper meanings and values that participants brought to their work. In addition to the case studies, data was also collected from a variety of available sources, such as from records of public arts agencies, newspaper articles and notices, the United States Census database, and interviews with key figures in arts organizations.

## THE CASES:

<b>TYPE OF GROUP OR NETWORK</b>	<b>LOCATION</b> (Within Chicago unless otherwise indicated)	<b>SIZE OF MEMBERSHIP</b>	<b>TYPE OF SPACE</b>	<b>MEETING FREQUENCY</b>
<b>Chicago Theater</b>	Southwest Side	20 core	Church Basement	According to production schedule
<b>Suburban Theatre</b>	Northwest Suburb	25 core/100 in network	Public Park Recreation Center	According to production schedule
<b>Asian Music Ensemble</b>	South Side	30	Church Basement	Once a week
<b>Quilting Guild</b>	Far South Side	100	Public Park Field House	Once a week
<b>Church Choir</b>	South Side	40-50	Church	Twice a week
<b>Drum Circle</b>	Far North Side	35-70	Public Park	Once a week
<b>Painting Class</b>	North Side	12-15 (at peak)	Public Park	Once a week
<b>Writing Group</b>	Near South Side	15	Public Library Branch	Once a week
<b>Artists Who Share The Same Employer</b>	South Side	Over 100	Large Cultural Institution	Irregular
<b>Individual Visual Artists</b>	Various Locations	8-9	Homes / Studios	Irregular
<b>Masters and Apprentices, Ethnic &amp; Folk Arts</b>	Various Locations	4	Homes / Studios	Irregular
<b>Hip-Hop Artists</b>	North Side/ West Side	6-8	Homes	Irregular

## THE INFORMAL PART OF THE ARTS CONTINUUM: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

- **KEY FINDING -- A HIDDEN ASSET**

As demonstrated by other research at the national level and confirmed for the Chicago region by this study, informal arts activities are largely hidden from public view. In part, this is because government and private sector agencies don't generally maintain systematic databases of community assets.

Recent studies and reports on the state of the arts in American society have focused on diagnosing health and well-being by measuring audience participation, employment, and revenues generated by the established commercial and non-profit parts of the sector (c.f., *The Performing Arts: Trends and Implications* a Rand Research Brief: The Rand Corporation, 2001). Surprisingly little quantitative or qualitative data exists on the nature and size of participation by people in actual *art making* outside of the officially labeled spheres of arts production. Indeed, much of what we term “informal arts” occurs beneath the radar screen of standard data collection practices for indicators of civic life. While there is ongoing data collection at the local, state and federal level on indices such as the physical health of populations, labor force participation, inflation rates, and the like, there is virtually no standardized and consistent data collection on either arts production, or on other asset-based indicators of community well-being. Thus, these activities remain largely invisible from view.

The study authors nonetheless conclude that arts production in the “informal” sphere is far more ubiquitous than the scant attention it receives in the broad public media would suggest. Using a combination of techniques and sources (such as informant interviewing; focus groups conducted with artists and arts leaders; advertisements and notices collected from neighborhood venues throughout the metropolitan region; administrative data culled from entities such as the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and the Chicago Public Library system; as well as a search of 13 city-wide and neighborhood based newspapers), the researchers discovered a significant presence of informal arts production in a majority of Chicago's community areas.

The relative visibility of arts practice (both formal and informal) is not uniform across the region. In some Chicago areas, clusters of arts activity are more readily visible than elsewhere. In addition to the downtown area (Loop), among the most widely recognized of such clusters are those in the vicinity of Bucktown (Logan Square & West Town), Pilsen and East Pilsen (Near West Side), and in the communities of South Shore, Lincoln Park and Lakeview. These places contain a mix of *both* informal and formal sites for arts production (for example, festivals, classes, residential spaces, galleries, and a range of performance venues).

The apparent clustering of arts activities in these areas attracts people, and so a certain density is achieved that would appear to facilitate arts practice. Indeed, study informants indicated that they frequented classes or attended performances in some of these localities, and, if they lived in other parts of the city, that they knew more artists in localities than in their own neighborhoods. Newspapers also tend to list arts activities in these localities more frequently than for other parts of the city. Despite the “clustering” effect, however, study participants indicated overall that they had trouble finding information they needed about training opportunities, spaces for practice and available resources.

Research indicated nevertheless that supposedly “arts-poor” areas outside of the cluster localities still contain significant amounts of informal arts production. In the community area of Grand Boulevard, for example, statistically represented as one of the more “impoverished” neighborhoods in Chicago (median household income was \$7,907 in 1990, population has decreased by 22 percent between 1990-2000), where one of our case studies was located, there are 78 places of worship with choirs, arts programs and classes in the major park in the neighborhood, a creative writing program at the public library, a coffee house that hosts regular spoken word open microphone performances, and several service organizations that are either offering arts programs or promoting neighborhood artists.

In Roseland, another south side “impoverished” community, where two case studies were located, there are over 100 places of worship, most of which have choirs; ceramic and music classes in park district locations, as well as ongoing craft activities; a regular poetry reading at the local police district headquarters, and dance classes, writing groups and crafts workshops at the public library branches. On the Southwest side, also an area that has low visibility with respect to arts production, mixed-income and largely working class neighborhoods, there are bars that host Karaoke nights, a polka club, arts classes and other activities offered in the parks, a theater group located in a church basement, as well as dance, craft-making, decorative gardening at the public library branch, and an Eastern European folk dance group that operates out of a local cultural center.

The researchers discovered that in these locales, where arts production is not widely known or publicized, existing groups must struggle harder to recruit new members, making extra efforts to enlist family and acquaintances from members’ own networks. On occasion, groups will use such strategies as “advertising” widely around the city for participants (for example, in the case of a church basement community theater, which advertises audition calls citywide). Still, the very existence of arts production, despite its common invisibility, is indicative of the ubiquity of the phenomena, and points to the need for more systematic data collection on these types of community assets.

## EVERYONE WELCOMED: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE INFORMAL ARTS

- **KEY FINDING -- A DIVERSE GROUP**
- People who participate in the informal arts come from all walks of life, reflecting a diversity of demographic characteristics such as occupation, age, race/ethnicity, and gender.

The demographic profile of study participants exhibits broad diversity, drawing from most segments of the larger society. Interestingly, the level of education is high, as over 90 percent of participants had at least a high school degree (compared to 88%, Bureau of the Census national figures for 1998), and up to 80 percent had some college education (compared to 65.6% nationally, also for 1998). Otherwise, there was a range of age, occupation, income, ethnicity and fairly equal representation of gender at most of the case study sites.

Among respondents to the survey, for example, 23 percent were in an education-related profession, 20 percent were in an arts, design, entertainment, sports or media related occupation, and about 10 percent each were either in management, administrative support, business, financial, computer, or sales-related occupations, while other occupations were represented in smaller numbers. Within these occupational categories, there was further diversity with respect to status. Study participants included highly trained professionals, clerical staff, low-wage retail and service employees, and construction workers, among others. Eighteen percent were retired, 7 percent were homemakers, 8 percent were students, while close to 5 percent were unemployed and looking for work.

Household income of survey respondents ranged from under \$10,000 (5 percent) to more than \$100,000 (6 percent), with over 50 percent of respondents in the \$30,000-\$75,000 range. Additionally, the ethnic diversity of the total study population was proportional to the national ethnic composition, although ethnic mix differed in the different case studies. Interestingly, age diversity was commonplace at all 12 of the case study sites. At all twelve sites, there was considerable occupational and income diversity as well. Of the twelve sites, nine had fairly equal gender representation (the quilting guild and the painting class members, on the other hand, were primarily women, while the hip-hop artists were mostly men). Racial and ethnic diversity was perhaps the least common, with five of the twelve case studies including a more balanced mix of African-Americans, Latinos and whites in the group membership.

Demographically, the study participants reflected the pluralism of American society overall. Participants were civic minded and engaged in a variety of activities. For example, in the survey response, over 85 percent reported having joined or given money to an organization or a cause, 86 percent reported having voted in presidential or local elections, and 80 percent reported having signed a petition. Significant percentages also reported volunteering, attending public

meetings, writing letters to newspapers, and attending block club meetings. We might contrast this with the popular perception of the American public as “apathetic” (for example indicated by voter turnout rates). In the 2000 election, for example, Illinois voter turnout was 48.9 percent as opposed to 57 percent in 1992 (Bureau of the Census). Voting levels in the 2002 Illinois primaries, on the other hand, were less than 40%. Close to one-third of the survey respondents indicated that participation in arts activities had led them to act on behalf of causes for other neighborhood resources.

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES FOR THE SAKE OF ART

### **KEY FINDING -- BRIDGING DIFFERENCES**

Informal arts activities help people to bridge social boundaries of age, gender, race/ethnicity and occupational status, boundaries that through historical processes have often been used to sustain structures of inequality. The inclusive character of informal arts practice and the socially accessible localities where it occurs induce trust and solidarity among participants, and promote greater understanding and respect for diversity.

The high degree of diversity and the practices found in informal settings are significant. This suggests that arts activities in the informal sector may contribute to civic renewal, by breaking down social and geographic barriers that are the product of historical constructions of inequality. Ethnographic research at the case study sites revealed some of the reasons why art making in informal settings may be a catalyst for bringing diverse people together across social boundaries, for promoting trust and solidarity among participants, and for encouraging a respect for diversity itself.

The authors found certain distinctive factors that characterize informal arts practice and that may also nurture and sustain diversity. These include: *the common interest and intrinsic passion that people have for making art; the metaphorical space of informality that permits participants to engage with the arts in a non-intimidating manner; the greater ease of access to physical spaces where informal arts practice occurs; and the types of strategies used to recruit new participants.*

At all twelve case study sites, people spoke frequently of the joy and satisfaction they attained from making art. The ethnographic research at these sites and the subsequent survey data also made evident that people are willing to expend considerable time, effort and resources to participate in artistic production. People regularly traveled long distances (sometimes across the length of the city, or from Indiana and the western suburbs to Chicago’s near south side, or from the northern suburbs to Chicago’s north side), sometimes employing public transportation in lengthy trips to attend rehearsals or classes, or in order to give performances.

Survey respondents also indicated that, on average, individuals spent well over \$1000 annually on training materials, supplies, class or workshop fees, and travel expenditures. Some 75 percent of respondents disclosed they had set aside a room in their homes for arts practice. Individual artists (such as those practicing in the visual arts, or master-level artists transmitting ethnic and folk arts skills to apprentices) often practiced their art after coming home from a regular job and on the weekends. All of the case studies involving groups of artists scheduled weekly and sometimes twice-weekly rehearsals or practice sessions, usually in the evenings and sometimes also on weekends (these schedules intensified close to performance dates). For those involved in administrative duties on behalf of the group, even more time was spent at business meetings. In addition to the group activities, most of the artists also spent time at home practicing or perfecting their skills.

This passion to create apparently leads people to search out and join groups regardless of their location or composition. While visibility of location (for example, in areas recognized as “arts-rich”) facilitates boundary crossing, it can also occur under more adverse circumstances. For example, the drumming circle and the painting class, both located in neighborhoods known for artistic activity, attracted participants from all dimensions of diversity (e.g., age, occupation, ethnicity/race, and gender), without much effort on the part of the organizers. Yet, even the least apparently visible of the activities, such as the choir of a south side church located in an area perceived as “arts-poor”, drew participants from as far away as the northern suburbs, and was diverse with respect to age and occupation. Two of the more specialized groups — the Asian music ensemble and the quilters’ group -- also drew diverse participants intent on pursuing this particular art form. The Asian ensemble, specifically, drew in people from every region of the city and the suburbs, across a wide spectrum of age and occupation. The quilters’ group attracted two men, who despite the popular stereotype of quilting as a “woman’s activity”, wanted to participate and were welcomed into the group.

The generally inclusive character of informal arts practice—what the study authors term the metaphorical space of informality – appears a powerful facilitator in bringing people together to engage in arts making. The study documents that in case after case, barriers to participation are low at the informal end of the continuum (i.e. no set level for training, no rigid criteria for skill level or prior experience). Indeed, informal arts groups are constantly seeking new members, regardless of where they come from or what their other characteristics may be, while individual artists are often seeking to expand their own networks. Each of the case study groups (including the cluster of individual visual artists) contained participants ranging from complete novices to highly trained professionals with years of experience in the art form.

## THE THRILL OF IT ALL:

- “I have to dance to get them the message that I’m here. When I dance I’m giving them the message that it’s okay. It’s okay to let it all out. It’s okay to express yourself. I just love people and for me it’s like being connected – reconnected to them. I’m passionate about it because we go to work all week and then come (here) and we say we did not forget. We still exist. We’re still living life.” – *Male drummer*
- In the moment when I am writing something, especially if I know it is good, and that people could really attach themselves to it, I feel like I am a mother, actually giving birth to my child...I feel like I am bringing life, a new idea, to somebody. It is a great feeling to me. I am all excited on the inside, and I am proud of myself...I love what I do. I wouldn’t change it or trade it for anything in the world.” – *Woman writer*

Other aspects of informality that emerged as significant included the flexible nature of participation (people could leave for periods of time and then return), cost-scaling (i.e. people could determine the degree of financial resources they wanted to commit to the activity, because set fees for classes or participation were generally minimal or non-existent), and a high degree of autonomy in practice (participants did not usually exercise authority over others in the group with respect to their style of the art-making).

Beyond merely bringing people together, the informality of the arts activities also permits people to transgress normative patterns of interaction, and gain insights into lives and perspectives different from their own. In this context, otherwise normative patterns of hierarchy—(class or occupational status, gender role, age/seniority) do not seem to operate. Instead, active efforts are made to level these differences or to reverse the normative patterns. Thus, women felt empowered to take leadership roles within organizations, African-American or Latino members, despite being in the minority, sometimes exerted authority or made decisions affecting production, young people teased older members of the group or shared knowledge, and members were accorded respect for skill, talent or effort, rather than for class status.

In addition to the metaphorical space of informality, the physical spaces in which informal arts activities take place are important factors for promoting diversity. In addition to the diverse sites where the case studies are located, the authors also found informal arts activities in such venues as coffee houses, police stations, office buildings, social service agencies, and the street. Not surprisingly, informal arts activities in the more public places (such as parks, public libraries and the streets) attracted more diverse participants. At these sites, people often joined after “stumbling across” the activity and watching rehearsal or art production. The drummers in the park, for example, were constantly inviting passers-by to join in the circle, while at the public library the writing group finally decided that they would limit the overabundance of interested observers to those who were seriously considering joining. At the work place site, fellow workers who overheard a group rehearsal would peek into the room and sometimes join in the music making. Public spaces also seemed to create a sense of “ownership”, with participants

stating that they felt these places were for everyone. The fact that the locations are often *not* associated with “arts” activities seems to also increase people’s comfort about participating. Ethnographers observed that people quickly appropriated the space, giving it a meaning or value that created a zone of safety in which they could take risks with creative expression.

Finally, the recruitment strategies employed by groups of informal artists can also themselves lead to diverse composition and sustained participation. While artists in our case studies most frequently recruited new members from their personal networks, they also had to reach out more widely in order to sustain their organizations. Recruitment strategies included offering classes (advertised in local periodicals and on websites), performing at venues outside of the neighborhoods where the group is based, and, in a few instances, joining larger loose coalitions or membership organizations.

The study documents that the nature of the interactions between participants does lead to an increased awareness of the value of diverse perspectives. Over 80 percent of respondents to the survey indicated that making new friends was one of the significant benefits of interacting with diverse people in the course of art making. Close to 70 percent stated that they gained a greater understanding of different people, 62 percent felt they were exposed to new arts opportunities, and 50 percent said they gained exposure to places they would not otherwise have known or traveled to. Overall, ethnographic research documented that informal arts activities are characterized by sociality. People frequently met each other outside of practice or rehearsal, sharing meals, communicating through e-mail, hosting parties or attending performances.

## **A LATENT POTENTIAL: ACQUIRING SKILLS AND DEVELOPING CAPACITIES IMPORTANT TO CIVIC LIFE**

### ***KEY FINDING -- BUILDING CAPACITY***

Informal arts practice provides important sites for adult personal expression and creativity. In the process, it helps to build individual and community assets, by fostering social inclinations and skills critical to civic renewal. These include greater tolerance of difference, trust and consensus building, collaborative work habits, use of innovation and creativity to solve problems, the capacity to imagine change and the willingness to work for it.

The study documents an array of skills and inclinations acquired or developed during the course of informal arts practice. The ethnographers found that one of the reasons people acquire skills and build on inclinations is because of people’s constant striving to improve their artistic

proficiency, regardless of existing skill level. As do other practitioners, artists working in informal settings strive to achieve art's "illusion" of a seamless and unforced aesthetic experience. Additionally, artists gain organizational skills as they confront the need to nurture and sustain informal arts practice (whether as individual practitioners or within organized groups) in the face of scarce resources and at times daunting invisibility.

Artists obviously derive significant personal benefits from informal practice, such as enhanced technical and artistic skills, personal enrichment and a more meaningful personal life, overall. Significantly, the study also found that people acquire important skills and develop inclinations applicable to a healthier civic life. These include collaborative work habits, the use of innovation and creativity to solve problems, the nurturing of tolerance, the capacity to imagine social change and the willingness to devote time and resources to achieving it. The mechanism for developing these skills likely lies in the regular creation of art. For example, the need for constant practice/rehearsal, or other honing of skills in a voluntary setting leads to the development of techniques for giving and taking criticism as a way of knowledge sharing and collective improvement. In turn, this action requires people to listen to each other, creating momentary spaces of trust, and opening the way for collaboration.

Another technique the ethnographers documented was the ability to quickly find alternative solutions to problems (for example substituting materials, improvising texts, re-thinking design, or re-structuring roles). These strategies were developed in all of the case studies, in the contexts of both collective and of individual practice. As an interesting example, the individual visual artists interviewed by the ethnographers discussed how they used networks of colleagues to provide criticism and encouragement for their work. In the case studies involving groups, both problem-solving and the giving and taking of criticism were ritualized, such that they were regular features of rehearsals or practice sessions. And at the work place site, artists reported often applying problem-solving skills developed in the course of informal arts practice to their regular work.

#### **GLIMPSES OF THE INFORMAL ARTS FROM THE FIELD NOTES:**

- “We want to take things to the next level...It wasn't till I hooked up with these guys that I started thinking I could do this seriously. They taught me how to make music... You could look at it like a tree. We got the middle and we are all like branches... We got each other's back... We all believe in each other. Works together like the roots of a tree...” – *Rapper and DJ artist*
- “To be successful in acting – and I mean satisfying, not money-wise – you have to be willing to go outside yourself and do things you wouldn't do in ordinary life. When I got the job selling tax annuities, the guy said, ‘Can you stand up and talk to a group of teachers?’ And I said, “If I can drop my pants in front of an audience, I think I can do that.” - *Actor, former beautician and now a retired tax annuities salesman*

Researchers found that certain capacities, such as tolerance for difference and the ability to imagine social change, were nurtured by the informal nature of the arts practice. Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents reported meeting people of differing skill levels in the course of their arts practice. Respondents averaged a 5.07 on a 1-7 scale (with a median of 5) when asked about the degree to which participation in arts activities had increased their tolerance towards less skilled artists. Only 32 percent of survey respondents indicated tension around different skill levels as a primary tension in their group. Ethnographers found that the use of humor to deflect or recognize differences, the physical structuring of space (for example using circle formations), the sharing of equipment and supplies, and the conscious “orchestrating” of techniques to absorb the varying range of skills were all methods used to nurture inclusion and tolerance for difference.

In most of the case studies, the ability to envision change, while not explicitly expressed, was evident in the actions and outlook of participants. For example, most refused to accept the categorization given to them by the wider society as “leisure-time” or “hobby” artists, or even “amateur” artists. Rather, people expressed a sense of self-assurance and a striving toward the best that characterized their efforts. The necessity of persisting against obstacles such as lack of funds, lack of time, and impermanence of performance, rehearsal or studio space, impelled artists to critically examine the social structures and power relations within which they live, and to strengthen their organizational practices in response. In a few instances recorded by the ethnographers, these inclinations were transferred to activism on behalf of both arts-related and other causes. As indicated by the survey data, “civic-mindedness” was definitely a characteristic of the study population.

## INSTANCES OF ACTIVISM:

- **The artist is a 50 year old Puerto Rican painter / day care instructor / former factory worker** who talked of how a church group that visits the sick and elderly on Chicago's north side visited her when she was recuperating from an operation. "They saw my paintings and told me about a volunteer-run gallery for art shows at the church". This was the genesis of her first-ever show, held at the church gallery. "And now I'm one of them, who visit sick people, and I like that. I'm fixing Christmas stockings and gathering things to put in them for the seniors. I'm asking the parents from the day care center to donate things."
- **A kindergarten teacher and drummer explains** that, "as I learn to play my drum, I am finding my own voice. When I can make my drum sound the way I want it to, I will no longer be afraid to speak." Since making that statement, she has initiated efforts to help the homeless through her school. She has also presented papers at a professional conference, much to the surprise of her principal, who admitted his belief that she would never make a public presentation almost convinced him not to hire her.
- **A Native American visual artist engaged in political organizing** to improve neighborhood conditions. She says she draws on her experience as an artist working in informal settings to frame the organizing work she does in the community. "We ran a candidate...well, we only got 25% of the vote. But even though we didn't win, we did get a lot of things done. Every time we had a coffee [a meeting in people's homes where the candidate would speak], the streets would be fixed there the next day. We may not have reached our goal, but we accomplished other things. That comes from being an artist. I've learned people aren't going to like some things, and some things I don't show."
- **A janitor / drummer starts to speak out** about the loss of jobs in his industry, as the public sector turns to increased privatization and outsourcing of services.
- **A rapper conducts a petition drive** to obtain a Hip Hop show on a local college radio station.
- **A quilters' group lobbies successfully** to increase safety and parking access at the public park facility where the group meets.
- **A writer persists** in applying for grants from a variety of sources, despite repeated rejections.

## FORMAL/INFORMAL: MOVING BACK AND FORTH ON THE CONTINUUM

### ***KEY FINDING – STRENGTHENING THE ENTIRE ARTS SECTOR***

The informal and formal arts operate on a two-way continuum, upon which information, personnel, financial benefits and other resources flow back and forth. While some parts of the formal arts sector make available a variety of resources in the exchange, the informal arts create employment opportunities for professionally working artists, play a “research and development” role, and provide audiences for the formal arts sector. Individual artists, small and medium sized non-profit arts organizations, community-based groups, and public and private non-arts institutions all play significant roles in forging these links.

Chicago’s arts scene is replete with stories of now well-recognized artists or arts institutions that began as or were influenced by informal arts practice (e.g., among many other examples, the pop singer R.Kelly, who initially sang in his church choir, the Steppenwolf Theater, which began in a suburban church basement, Chicago’s Second City, whose improvisational work was influenced by the “theater games” system developed by Viola Spolin, who herself adapted a similar approach she encountered while attending settlement house classes at Chicago’s Hull House). Less understood are the pathways by which informal arts practice contributes to the “formal” (commercial and non-profit) part of the sector, including by nurturing and sometimes helping to sustain professionally working artists. In turn, the formal part of the sector may facilitate art making for people at the informal end of the continuum. The ethnographic research revealed that these pathways are multiple, varied and complex, and involve not only arts organizations, but other public agencies and private institutions. For the most part, the links are tenuous, vary in duration and often go unrecognized. They center around such aspects as skills training, provision of space, audience building, and “research and development”, being sometimes reflected in the efforts of individuals to move back and forth along the continuum.

The study documents the significance of professionally working artists and of public and private institutions as sources of instructional opportunities. Among informal arts survey respondents, 26 percent were enrolled in classes or other training programs during the time of the study. Study participants sought out classes or training in a wide variety of venues, such as at colleges and universities, secondary schools, public parks, and even faith-based institutions. Museums, public libraries, visual art galleries, professional theaters and other performance venues were also mentioned as sites for training. In all of the case studies involving group arts practice, participants either brought in or otherwise worked with “master” teachers, formally trained artists, or full-time professionals that offered instruction or direction to the group. These individual teachers not only contributed to enhancing individuals’ technical skills, but also helped create non-authoritarian spaces in which people felt free to experiment, take risks or explore new dimensions of their art practice. In turn, teachers interviewed by ethnographers

stated that they also valued working in the informal sphere, because they gained freedom to experiment and were not limited to institutionalized methods of teaching or practice.

The role that community-based non-profit arts organizations, together with some non-arts institutions, play in facilitating space and other resources for informal practice cannot be overstated. Community performance groups, neighborhood cultural centers, neighborhood music schools, social service organizations with arts programs, and many others support and often showcase informal arts practice. Again and again, public parks, local libraries, places of worship, coffee houses, school classrooms, office settings, bookstores, and studio spaces at community-based organizations were among those mentioned or observed as valued and desired locations for informal arts practice. Institutions providing such spaces seemed to also benefit from the increased use and the positive attitudes that accrued to the institution.

However, the data also showed that the availability of these types of spaces and resources is not stable and that individuals and groups frequently have to search out new arrangements. Ten out of the twelve case studies (all except the church choir and the painting class) have had to change locations at one time or another in their history, and some have moved two or three times. Others have no regular space at all (e.g. the hip hop artists, the visual artists and some of the master-level ethnic and folk artists training apprentices in their heritage traditions). Anger and frustration was expressed when access to such venues was curtailed as a result of budget cutbacks, or through institutional or policy changes.

Not surprisingly, the data also showed that artists practicing in informal settings frequently attend arts events at both formal and informal venues. Among survey respondents, close to 70 percent had attended performances at a public park or other open-air facility within the past year, 58 percent had visited a museum, 48 percent had gone to the theater, 45 percent had seen a performance at a college or university, and 40 percent had attended a gallery exhibit. Clubs, coffee houses, concert halls and dinner theaters were also ranked popular. A little over 50 percent of respondents indicated that they had been very inspired by attendance at artistic events. Some 76 percent of respondents indicated that they were more inclined to attend performances because of their own participation in art making. Ethnographers also recorded numerous instances of study participants speaking about specific performances they had seen, arts events they were planning to attend, and sharing reviews of shows or of the work of individual artists. The researchers did not find evidence, however, of any coherent audience-building strategy by formal arts institutions targeting the informal arts, or of any consistent outreach efforts.

Finally, the ethnographers documented a variety of efforts and strategies used by artists in the informal sphere to attain a foothold in the formal sphere, either through recognition by the non-profit institutions or through commercial production. The hip hop artists, for example, produced their own compact discs, which they distributed at radio stations, publicized at performance venues, and marketed at record stores, on the street and in clubs. Groups also strove to perform at venues that would give them more visibility; visual artists banded together to put on shows in rented or bartered gallery spaces; actors auditioned for roles in major productions as well as in community theaters; and poets and writers either published their own works or submitted them to literary journals. Despite aspirations on the part of some, researchers found few artists who succeeded in moving from the informal to the formal end of the continuum.

In the aggregate, these informal activities make important contributions to the arts-related economy, from the buying of supplies, to investing in training, paying admission fees and the like. In addition, the informal arts continue to play an important research and development role in contemporary culture, (as recently indicated, for example, by the cross-over of hip-hop art forms from the informal to the formal, and likewise in the popular resurgence of “roots music” from various parts of the country). Despite these impacts, the researchers did not find evidence of extensive recognition of the flow between the informal and formal. Researchers found no widespread recognition of informal arts practice within the informal arts world. The researchers did not find widespread recognition of the informal arts as an important source of creative nurturance and as a market contributor on behalf of the formal arts.

## **CONCLUSION: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

What are the implications of the study findings for policy discussions about arts advocacy and civic engagement? Researchers discovered that, despite their positive characteristics and potential, the informal arts remain largely hidden from view, while the energy and creative contributions of artists in this part of the sector remain unrecognized and untapped. Obstacles such as scarce resources, insecurity of space, insufficient access to affordable training or production sites, and a dearth of information about existing opportunities are common. To remove these barriers, to enable greater participation and to fully realize the potential of the informal arts, the study authors offer a series of policy recommendations.

- **Integrate arts practice in community development** - The informal arts can be a significant component of strategies designed to expand and build upon social capital in communities. Many communities have abundant but underutilized capacity-building potential, including rich connective networks and other social assets. Yet, community development strategies are often focused exclusively on physical infrastructure and economic development, lacking intentional strategies to expand and build upon existing social structures. Policy makers, community activists, philanthropic entities and others working to invigorate civic life should make concerted efforts to integrate arts practitioners from across the continuum into asset-based community development efforts. Clearly, the creativity and problem-solving skills, the high level of civic-mindedness, and the personal satisfaction that artists demonstrate can be tapped for more effective approaches to improving both efficacy and expanding social capital. Linking arts practice to other aspects of urban development will serve to increase both the spaces of arts practice and the spaces for community empowerment.
- **Remove barriers to informal participation and enhance access** - To meet the high interest that clearly exists, public officials and urban planners should seek ways to expand resources, facilitate access and provide opportunities for informal participation. Institutions that already intersect with informal arts practice should be supported in their efforts to sustain and expand activities. Classes and other arts programs in such places as public parks

and local libraries, as well as in private venues such as neighborhood cultural centers and other community-based sites, need to be increased, not decreased. Cultural facilities, materials, equipment, educational opportunities and clear information should be made as widely available as possible, so that people who want to participate have an opportunity to do so in a variety of structured or unstructured ways.

- **Build arts advocacy coalitions across informal - formal divides** - While arts advocacy has rightly promoted the civic benefits of strong non-profit and commercial arts organizations, these strategies should be expanded to include advocacy for the informal arts. If the arts are ever to be fully recognized for their contributions to the public interest, broader coalitions in support of the arts must coalesce across divides of professionalization and specialization. Sharing of increased resources, information and decision-making across the full span of the arts continuum will assist the development of such coalitions, and lead to more effective advocacy in support of the arts as necessary and vital components of civic life. For this to happen, cultural policies in support of informal practice must be developed that are compatible with the rights of all artists working professionally to be fairly compensated for the value of their creative work.
- **Make the informal arts more visible** - Despite its popularity, informal arts practice remains largely hidden from view. Civic leaders and leaders of arts communities, including those representing small to large-scale non-profit or commercial arts institutions, should make efforts to publicly recognize and remark upon the value of informal arts practice. More inclusive terminology and practice is needed to insure that the continuous nature of arts production (rather than simplistic dichotomization) is valued and upheld.

In part, this will require clarity in the use of descriptive terms, especially those that carry multiple, sometimes pejorative meanings (i.e., “amateur” and “professional”, which may be used to simply distinguish employment status, but may also be interpreted as referring to levels of artistic proficiency). The authors of the study themselves found it a challenge to settle on neutral terminology. While informal arts participants are often self-taught, some are academy trained. Whether self-taught or school-trained, some are highly accomplished, others less so. Some may not be equipped for a successful career in the arts, some choose not to pursue one, while others are impeded from achieving one. Yet others slip in and out of professional employment, but are involved in the informal arts throughout. Given the complexity, it will be particularly important to develop descriptive terms unburdened by intended or inadvertent pejorative meanings. In order to navigate this complexity, it will be helpful to understand the “informal” in informal arts as involving the “process” and the “context” of art-making, not, as a threshold matter, the “product” of the activity, nor the characteristics of the artist’s training.

- **Collect missing data on social impact of the arts** - Finally, further research, both ethnographic and quantitative, needs to be conducted in Chicago and elsewhere, to collect systematic data on the assets created by arts production and the obstacles faced by artists. Trends in cultural policy limiting valuation of arts activity to direct economic factors needs

to be complemented by ongoing investigation into the mechanisms and pathways by which art making creates value in individual and civic contexts. Social science research of this character (i.e. on the social context of arts production) should be carried out, and will be essential if a strong political case is to be made for public and private economic support for the arts. Additionally, systematic measures need to be developed to determine the efficacy of arts practice as part of asset-creation and effective community development.