

Sowing the Seeds of Positive Change— A Dialogue on YBCA’s Mission on Nourishing Arts and Community

by Gordon Fung



Meklit Hadero; Penelope Douglas

A Conversation with Meklit Hadero & Penelope Douglas: What does the true act of community investment look like?

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Sara Fenske Bahat, Chair of the Design MBA program here at CCA, moderated a conversation with Meklit Hadero and Penelope Douglas of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Hadero, who runs programs for YBCA, describes the “interdisciplinary arts center” as a space “for people to come together to contemplate and activate the power of arts and culture” and as a space that “centers artists who work in service to their communities.” For her part, Douglas leads strategy for the center and is currently thinking through a “shared future model” and the “long arc” of change. Fenske Bahat, who is the Board Chair of YBCA, guided the conversation around the implications of “sustaining art and cultural ecosystems.”

Artists hold the crucial key to spark positive changes in society through their creative expressions. Though being determined to serve their communities, artists are often facing financial concerns. With limited budgets, local organizations, like small businesses and local unions, are unable to compensate the artists’ efforts. Financial supports from cultural investors can provide affirmation to artists’ contributions through funding community art projects. Meklit Hadero and Penelope Douglas, two leading social entrepreneurs in the cultural sector, shared their valuable experience doing community investment work at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (hereafter, YBCA). Sara Fenske Bahat, Chair of Design Strategy MBA of CCA, moderated this conversation on Feb 25, 2021.

Meklit Hadero, an active Ethio-jazz musician and songwriter, serves as the Chief of Programs at YBCA. She strives to steward the institution by making collaborative and creative spaces for artists. Hadero believes that the intersection of art and social change sparks limitless possibilities for society. Residing in the San Francisco Bay Area, Hadero is inspired by the multicultural community, where polyphonic voices intertwine. The diversity here sparks the electricity in her passion for cultural activism, taking a role in curatorial activism. Hadero, as a cultural ambassador, honors her East African heritage by featuring artists from the Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrant communities in Oakland. With the support of YBCA In Community—an initiative by YBCA—Hadero curated *Home [Away From] Home* in 2014, a weekend-long art installation celebrating the voices of the African diaspora.

Penelope Douglas, Chief of Strategy and Revenue of YBCA, has worked extensively as a social entrepreneur and pioneer. As a multifaceted administrative curator, she has held positions as the founding partner of CultureBank, and as the senior executive and board chair of MissionHub and SOCAP. Answering the differences between YBCA and other big-name contemporary art centers, Douglas points out that YBCA especially emphasizes community investment. Under the leadership of Deborah Cullinan—CEO of YBCA—the team discusses questions like how an art center can support the local community and beyond; and how a cultural institution can take responsibility to redevelop as part of the community.

CultureBank in YBCA is a new investment paradigm in arts cofounded by Cullinan and Douglas. It envisions an equitable future where every community member shares valued cultural assets, as wealth inequality incapacitates less privileged people's social mobilities and the phenomenon of such is heavily intensified under capitalistic society. The formation of CultureBank stimulated the pair to think about new forms of investment. In Douglas' belief, artists are the best people to represent social changes in their community. YBCA, as a center of community for artists, creates the conditions for more productive community investment. Once the artist takes the initiative to lead the local community in improving the livelihood of the neighborhood, the community can collaborate alongside the artist and determine what actions can lead to the greatest good. The invested asset hence supports both local artists' living and community. Douglas, with her extensive knowledge in social investment, wondered why most investment ideas in the art world eventually lead nowhere, as the lack of sustainability is not uncommon in a one-off grant. After the investor supplies the financial support for the project execution, the work is complete and that's the end of the story. Seeing this lack of endurance, Douglas, Cullinan, and the YBCA team strive to devise lasting tactics to support artists through self-sufficiency.

To effectuate lasting community investment, YBCA gifts \$250,000 to selected artists for their influential community art projects through the artist-led Giving Circle—a BIPOC-led artist cohort. Unlike other one-time grants that benefit one single artist, the Giving Circle aims to foster collective welfare through cyclical grant funding. YBCA is not involved in the artist's decision-making process: the artist holds total control and sole responsibility to manage the project. Having peace of mind, the artist can focus on designing the project to create positive transformation and the greatest impact for the community within which they're working. Christy NaMee Eriksen, an Alaska-based multidisciplinary artist, is the awardee of the 2020 Artist-led Giving Circle Cohort. NaMee owns Kindred Post, a post office and community space in downtown Juneau that sparks social connections between the local residents. Inspired by her father who was a postman, NaMee embraces a sense of belonging, engagement, and cohesion with the community. Through the multifaceted aspect of the community space, NaMee brings the community together and encourages them to initiate positive social changes by emphasizing social justice. Kindred Post, on top of promoting environmental and societal awareness, annually donates 10% profits from their Social Justice Hustle collection to support justice causes. The gift shop showcases merchandise made by Indigenous artists—from face masks, to postcards, to tarot cards—to promote traditional Native Alaskan styles of art.

Recalling another recent example, Hadero highlights YBCA's collaboration with *Painting the Void (PtV)*, a mural project to brighten up San Francisco. In response to the lockdown, the partnership promotes public health messages through community art. YBCA launched the SF Creative Corps alongside the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development in 2020. YBCA administers the performance art component of the project and pays local performance artists, while PtV matches artists with boarded-up businesses to create temporary murals. The selected artists serve as Community Health Ambassadors and promote safe practices in public spaces through their creative expressions—performances, music, and dances—on top of the murals. So far, there are more than 130 murals created in San Francisco, more than 150 artists involved, and over 250,000 square feet covered. The SF Creative Corps embellishes the city's joy and beauty, and provides financial support to artists who struggled under the lockdown. Hadero gives a special shout-out to Cullinan (CEO of YBCA), for developing the Creative Corps and piloting it with the State of California. The collaboration

also brings social cohesion to public space, provoking the public's awareness to start acknowledging artists' determining role in fostering positive changes. Hadero believes the project serves as an important touchstone for transitioning community investing into statewide initiatives in the future.

Generosity to artists and community art is sparse; engagement and support that nurtures artists' practices long term are even rarer. YBCA, under foresightful leadership, is consistently accomplishing its mission to promote positive social changes for artists and their communities through community investment. Investment models with such tremendous mutual benefits and sustainability, hopefully, can inspire more investors to take responsibility for promoting the community's pursuit of well-being.

Gordon Fung is a composer, folk-instrumentalist, and cartomancer, pursuing a BFA in Individualized Studies to bridge the multi-disciplinary practices for creating installations, performance, and conceptual works.



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