

ART SY

## How These Collectors Are Supporting Culture outside of Art World Centers

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Installation view of works by visiting artist, Krista Franklin, at the Center for Afrofuturist Studies. Courtesy of PSi.

The philanthropists and collectors Bridgitt Evans and Charlotte Wagner, who helm major charitable nonprofits, have teamed up to provide essential funds for small cultural organizations beyond the art world's power centers.

first round of funding from their joint effort will award five organizations in five different states with \$40,000 over the next two years: the Atlanta-based art publication *Burnaway*; the Coleman Center for the Arts, an art space and residency in York, Alabama; Iowa City's community art center Public Space One; Minneapolis's *Kunsthalle*-like Midway Contemporary

Art; and the SPACE art center and residency program in Portland, Maine. They are the inaugural recipients of the VIA Art Fund and Wagner Foundation's Incubator Grant Fund, a five-year grant cycle that will see up to \$1 million given to 25 American arts organizations with annual operating costs of no more than \$2.2 million.



Charlotte Wagner and Bridgitt Evans. Photo by Susan Young

“We worked to truly understand who each entity served locally and how they also were part of a broader contemporary art discourse,” Evans said.

Evans and Wagner offer a model for a new wave of art patrons looking to support communities outside of major urban areas with significant donor bases. They noted the scarcity of support mechanisms for the arts in the U.S. as one of the key factors as they thought about where their foundations' support could be most impactful.

“We’re really trying to be very intentional about looking for organizations outside of New York and Los Angeles and San Francisco,” Wagner said. “Unequal distribution of cultural resources is a real challenge to social justice: If you really truly believe, as we do, that access to culture is important to well-being and neighborhood health, then having unequal distribution creates a social injustice.”



Bianca Beck and Sascha Braunig, *Untitled*, 2019. Photo by Luc Demers.

For many of these organizations, funds from the unrestricted grants will not just help cover costs, but will provide essential wiggle room so they can take a long-term view. With some of their baseline costs covered for two years, they can afford to examine how their activities can bolster the art ecosystem locally and nationally.

“[This grant] gives us the breathing room to bring our core collaborators—artists, community, and staff—to the table for longer-term organizational planning,” said Jackie Clay, the executive director of the Coleman Center for the Arts.

Clay noted that this type of support from major national funding organizations has been rare for the Coleman Center because it speaks to a relatively small community. “When we have 20 to 50 folks at an event, it may not sound like much, but there’s only 13,000 in the entire county,” she explained. “We have to use rubrics beyond audience attendance to measure the work we’re doing in the community and with artists.”



Making Art in Public Workshop with artist Zarouhie Abdalian. Courtesy of the Coleman Center for the Arts.

For Erin Jane Nelson, *Burnaway*’s executive director, the grant is an affirming recognition of the enormous value of art organizations in communities beyond New York and Los Angeles. It’s also encouragement to be more ambitious and proactive about the publication’s future. “We don’t want to only be an Atlanta art blog, but to really cover the South,” she said. “The grant will help us bring on regional editors—a Lowcountry editor, an Appalachia editor, a New Orleans editor; that’s a model we’d like to expand throughout the region so that we have more people at the table and to truly represent the region.”

For Iowa City's Public Space One, the grant is coming at a crucial juncture. The organization, whose best-known initiative may be its Center for Afrofuturist Studies, recently bought two historic houses and has built a new media studio. John Engelbrecht, Public Space One's executive director, said that "it allows us to look one to three years out instead of three to six months down the road."

"When we received word of this award, our team got to immediately finalize the rest of our 2020 budget, moving items from the 'If fundraising budget allows' column to the 'We're now gonna do this' column," Engelbrecht added. "We see this as a tipping point for real sustainability for us."



Erin Jane Nelson, Chauvin Garden, 2018, DOCUMENT

For this inaugural round of funding, the Incubator Grant Fund received 142 letters of inquiry, from which 40 organizations were invited to submit full proposals, 30 of which led to interviews with organizational leaders and some site visits. The final stages of the process involved meeting with the groups' board members and evaluating their relationships to their local communities; the five grantees were selected from a pool of seven finalists. Organizations that submitted letters of intent represented 33 states and Puerto Rico. The Northeast accounted for the lion's share of respondents (45 percent). Though organizations with annual expenses of up to \$2.2 million were invited to apply, 61 percent of applicants had budgets under \$500,000.

"We're looking to find those meaningful, influential models, whether it's their exhibition program or the way they're structured or even their business plan," Evans said. "What is it about this organization that makes it one of those where we can invest a couple of years of general operating support, and it's going to empower them."

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