

Arts, Culture, and Community

Urban Institute, Maria Rosario Jackson

Mr. Kojo Nnamdi: Hi, I am Kojo Nnamdi. Coming up on Public Interest, when we began this series on America's cities with the Urban Institute, you probably thought it would be all about the usual litany of problems facing urban areas. Well, surprise, surprise, because one of the characteristics that our urban areas are most notable for is their celebrations. We celebrate everything. And as the country's cultural diversity grows, the celebrations grow, in number and in artistic variety. But what is their value? Do they make our neighborhoods friendlier, safer, healthier, better places to live? Let's talk about it after the news.

(News Break.)

From WAMU at American University in Washington, this is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi.

For too many years, culture and art were defined from the top down, happening only on theater stages, museums, or in opera houses. Fortunately, we are now expanding our definitions of art and culture, understanding that community festivals are art as much as a Broadway performance is. Rather than simply being consumers of art also and culture, we are now being participants in it. But while we may inherently understand that community art has a value, defining that value can be difficult. After all, it is an intangible, whether it is a harvest festival in the Midwest or a Day of the Dead celebration in an East Los Angeles area, these community events clearly matter to the folks involved. But what is their value in the greater scheme of things? Do they make their communities, yours and mine, better, safer, healthier places to live in?

As part of our series on Public Interest in conjunction with the Urban Institute, today we look at community celebrations and their impact on urban life. And joining us to do this is Maria-Rosario Jackson. She is director of the Arts, Culture, and Community Programs at the Urban Institute. Good to have you here, Maria—

Ms. Maria-Rosario Jackson: Thank you.

Mr. Nnamdi: And joining her in our Washington studio is Richard Kurin. He is director of folk life and cultural heritage at The Smithsonian Institution. Good to have you too here, Richard.

Mr. Richard Kurin: Nice to be here, Kojo.

Mr. Nnamdi: Joining us from the studios of KUSC in Los Angeles, California is Tomas Benitez. He is executive director of Self-Help Graphics. Tomas, welcome.

Mr. Tomas Benitez: Thank you very much.

Mr. Nnamdi: Maria, it seems to be a typical problem and it is not limited to the poor in neighborhoods and in urban areas, though perhaps it is most especially evident there, and that is that if there is no theater or museum, people who live there think there are no cultural institutions. You argue that this is dead wrong. What do you mean?

Ms. Jackson: Over the past five years, some of the work that the Urban Institute has been engaged in has been focused on trying to understand what is the role of arts and culture, particularly in neighborhood life. And we started out that effort by doing several things, one of which was a series of focus group discussions with artists, residents, arts administrators and others involved in community arts practices around the country, in various neighborhoods around the country. And we did some pilot discussions to try to refine our questions early on, in Oakland, California, as a matter of fact.

Listen in Real Audio

Listen to this program in the Real Audio format. The Real Audio player is required and can be downloaded and installed for free from the [Real Audio Web site](#).

Document date: December 15, 2000

Released online: December 15, 2000

And, initially, we set out to figure out if we are going to focus on arts and culture and try to understand how art and culture matter at the neighborhood level and how it is or isn't an important dimension of community life. We first need to understand how it is that people interpret art and culture in their community, what kind of art and culture is there. And what we did, we asked a question fairly naively initially, we asked what kinds of arts and cultural activities, things exist in your neighborhood, and people responded, "We don't have any. We don't have any museums. We don't have any theaters," or what have you.

And we knew that we were asking the wrong question because what people were responding to was not about arts and culture. It was about places and venues that validate activities and expressions as art and culture. So we changed the question, and we started asking what kinds of creative expression, cultural expression exist in your neighborhoods? What things do you value because they are moving or inspiring or beautiful? And then the conversation got very rich and people started talking about all kinds of creative expressions that were part of their everyday experience that were integrated with worship or community development or other things that they value in their life. And it became very clear that art and cultural participation is in many ways inextricable from other parts of community life.

Mr. Nnamdi: They stopped talking about buildings and started talking about people—

Ms. Jackson: Right.

Mr. Nnamdi: —in very many respects. But for many years, Richard, people had a definition of art and culture as things outside of ourselves. That seems to be changing. Why do you think we are reevaluating our notions of what art and culture are?

Mr. Kurin: Well, I think in some respects there is a kind of a cultural, democratic movement afoot. That is I think that people are struck by the globalization of what they perceive to be culture around the globe, and people are searching for their piece of identity, their piece of history, their piece of heritage in this world. And sometimes through the mass media, finding one's place can be a little bit difficult. So I think we are seeing a kind of assertion, we are seeing that in the United States, we are seeing that around the globe as well, as people seek to assert a sense of their own identity and their own creativity.

And I think with that, starting to look at themselves and saying, well, we cook foods, we have songs, we have traditions, we have stories. Aren't those of some value in this world? And indeed they are. It is usually those kind of grassroots expressions that are often picked up by others within the community and outside the community and made into published stories, films, hit music, and so on. And we have seen that in a number of artistic genres. So I think people are starting to recognize the processes within themselves, and they are also finding the venues where they can express it, whether it be through the Internet or homemade video movies or starting their own recording company by having a double cassette player or floating stuff on the net. So people can now have the opportunity to see their culture be projected on a larger national and global screen.

Mr. Nnamdi: That is what you characterize as cultural democracy, the ability of more and more people to have their cultural expressions exposed to public view.

Mr. Kurin: Well, and to get into that exchange with other cultural groups so that you can have this ongoing idea of cultural commerce, a trading in ideas. I think the world is far more culturally juxtaposed than it ever was before. And if we go to any of our modern cities, I think we see that.

Mr. Nnamdi: Tomas Benitez, just this past Tuesday, your neighborhood celebrated the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe. I think this was December 12th, which would make it this past Tuesday. How do community festivals like that draw people in and what impact do they have on the community as a whole?

Mr. Benitez: Well, I think that the very purpose of these activities may have started in—well, in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, it was very much a faith-based celebration that came out of Mexico and has been celebrated by sons and daughters of Mexico that are now living in the United States and are part of the American mainstream and continue that practice.

But in doing so, we fall into the very process of homogeny where we will take something that is unique and project it into our own interpretation. And so it allows for access. And it can be one and the same, both remaining a faith-based celebration but it also has secular overtones. It is very much the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is not only the mother of the Americas but symbolically in the culture, beyond merely Catholicism and the confines of the church, has taken on a cultural embracing. These kinds of celebrations are indeed that.

We have been asked to come to the opera and come to theater, and I love the opera and I have studied Shakespeare. What we are doing is essentially the same thing. We are saying, "Come to the bayou and learn about these things. Come and learn about this part of the culture." So in that sense it resonates the openness and access to what is our contribution to the greater American cultural mainstream.

Mr. Nnamdi: You might also want to talk about November 1st and that is the Day of the Dead celebration and how what was Mexican is now being a new American community tradition?

Mr. Benitez: Well, indeed, it is not unlike the same process of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other celebrations in other paradigms. Day of the Dead was both pagan and Christian in its formation, and became a cultural tradition in Mexico. About 30 years ago, the group of artists that were part of the whole Chicano movement embraced this celebration as an opportunity to not only promote the cultural, I think identity, but to also recognize the contribution of art and culture as elements of culture-building, or as I like to say, art-based

community making.

And so taking on the de los muertos, which is a paraphrasing of the celebration of death as being a part of a natural cycle of life, artists began the celebration and over time from the northern variant, it has become its own kind of tradition. That still is always changing. Culture is not static, it is changing every year, every time. There are always adverbs to it. We now have the Day of the Dead closely connected with recognizing, for example, losing people through the AIDS epidemic. Things that were permuted that are part of the celebration, add to it, and again it is that same process. So it is very much artist based.

Mr. Nnamdi: Tomas Benitez is executive director of Self-Help Graphics. He joins us from the studios of KUSC in Los Angeles, California. In our Washington studio, Richard Kurin, director of folk life and cultural heritage at The Smithsonian Institution. And Maria-Rosario Jackson, director of the Arts, Culture, and Community Program at The Urban Institute.

Mario Rosario, clearly, the impact of community celebrations is visible, nevertheless often intangible. How do you measure the impact that art and culture have on a community?

Ms. Jackson: That is an issue that we have been struggling with for several years now at the Institute. And I think it is a process that includes not jumping to measurement in terms of quantification or even completely qualitatively capturing something immediately. But I think what we are working on and has to happen first is some clear articulation of what it is that we mean by cultural participation. And I think often when one thinks about cultural participation, immediately one jumps to consumerism or in a sense audience participation. And from our work in local communities around the country, it is so clear that people participate in lots of different ways, not just as audience and consumers but as creators, as teachers, as judges, as supporters of arts and culture.

And all of those forms of participation have to be understood as important and valid aspects of cultural participation. So getting more clarity on what we mean by cultural participation and then the kinds of art forms that we want to consider in trying to capture what goes on at the neighborhood level is also very important, where an individual experience and an art museum is likely to be very different in terms of what it means or what value it has as compared to collective art-making practices in a public sphere. There are different kinds of cultural participation. So being able to be articulate about what you mean when you say cultural participation. What kind of participation may be likely to render what kind of outcome is something that we are interested in grasping and really harvesting the wisdom from the field where there are a lot of community-based artists who are professional or not professional, as well as arts administrators, community builders and other people who are involved with this kind of activity at the local level, that have their own assumptions about why they do what they do, how they do it. But I think there hasn't been an opportunity to harvest the wisdom from the field and have it inform how we think about program development or policy development when it comes to urban issues and neighborhood improvement agendas.

Mr. Nnamdi: Well, you know there are a lot of people who view these things in mathematical terms and would like to see you quantify in some way, shape, or form exactly what this is doing in a community. We can't do that right now because we have to take a short break but before we do that, I should remind you that you can call us at 1-800-433-8850. You can e-mail us at pi@wamu.org. This is one in a continuing series of life in urban America that Public Interest is undertaking in conjunction with The Urban Institute. So once again, our number: 1-800-433-8850. We are going to take a short break, then we will be right back.

(Commercial Break.)

Mr. Nnamdi: Welcome back. We are talking about community celebrations that take place across urban America. They involve art. They involve music. They involve a variety of cultural expression. And we are trying to assess the impact that it has on the community in which it takes place. Maria-Rosario Jackson, you were saying that at this point we cannot quantify that. Does that mean that for the time being, we have to look more at anecdotal evidence or what other kinds of measures are you looking at?

Ms. Jackson: Well, I wouldn't say that you can't quantify it at all. I mean I think that there are important ways that you can have hard information about how art and culture are present in neighborhood settings and how people participate. There is work at The Urban Institute that is looking at reassessing how we think about cultural participation and using more expansive definitions of art and culture. So there are efforts underway to quantify cultural participation, if you will. But I think it is naive to assume that everything can be adequately captured using quantitative methods.

Mr. Nnamdi: Demographics.

Ms. Jackson: Well, quantitative methods exclusively when, in fact, one of the things that we are working very hard on is how do you temper quantitative information with qualitative information. If what you are interested in is getting a full picture of what is going on, you can't rely exclusively on numbers.

The other thing is that we have to look carefully at our social science methods to see if they can adequately capture what it is that we are interested in, and also to look to other fields, the humanities and the arts themselves as a way of documenting participation in art and culture at the community level.

Mr. Nnamdi: Because, Richard Kurin, in the final analysis we are talking about how these things affect the quality of life, but I guess skeptics always want to see hard information and it is often difficult to do that on quality of life issues. So what do we do?

Mr. Kurin: Well, I think we look at the behavior of people in terms of what people think is happening and how

they make decisions based on what they think the quantities are. For example, right now you have seen since the 1970's about 5,000 new museums come into place. Now these are not all big national museums. A lot are modeled on the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum.

Mr. Nnamdi: Here in Washington.

Mr. Kurin: Here in Washington. And a lot of neighborhood museums where what Maria is talking about in terms of a lack of institutionalization, all of a sudden the community says, well, maybe we do need a performance place to encourage local theater or poetry slams or plays or to show our neighborhood history.

We have seen this also overseas. In Cape Town, very moving, the District 6 Museum which is a way at the community level of preserving a history that the Apartheid government was trying to wipe out.

Well, we have seen a profusion of museums around the country. The Smithsonian, where I work at, hundreds of requests coming in for people who want help in starting their museum in their places. And I don't know, we have worked with now 55 or 60 organizations around the country.

But I think this kind of notion of local level museum building comes out of both a desire to express oneself in the world, as well as some economic analysis that is being done at the local level that is saying, okay, these kind of museums or theaters or community celebrations do bring in tourists. Cultural tourism is a big industry. And people are looking to control that industry. And there have been studies that show, well, if you spend \$100,000 on this community festival or if you lay out \$2 million and develop this museum, you will bring in "X" amount of visitors to the city who will spend "X" amount of days in the city and therefore generate hotel rooms, generate restaurant meals, generate other kind of purchases that in the end are usually profitable. And people are investing in these things. People are making those investments in culture.

Mr. Nnamdi: But, Tomas Benitez, when we talk about community celebrations, we are often talking about festivals in which a lot of ordinary citizens in the community can participate. And, clearly, individuals who participate in events like the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe get a benefit, even if it is just the enjoyment of doing so. However, do such celebrations have a larger benefit, a benefit that presumably serves the larger community maybe even beyond the immediate geography of the neighborhood?

Mr. Benitez: Well, I think that is an inherent benefit of these kinds of celebrations. To pick up on what both Maria and Richard were saying earlier, by looking at trends, by looking at the impact, we might be able to somehow measure the scope of what the activity has been. And what comes to mind in terms of building community is the tremendous, tremendous development that has gone on across the country in terms of reviving riversides and river walkways and river destinations. Community celebrations I think in essence provide that same thing where as these unique things are taking place over time, and we have access at all levels, at the professional as well as the citizenship level, what we are also seeing, as an expansive audience and a purposeful indicator I think of the impact of these things, has been that we see, for example, at the Day of the Dead celebration, our diverse audience of the year with people coming from throughout all sources of communities beyond geography, all sources of communities beyond diversity. That thing resonates back in terms of the ambassadorial issues that speak to the very heart of what our culture does, which is create and conduct means of which we can communicate within each others' identities. So I think that there is beyond the recreational and participation, it is very much part of building up the American capital in general and does have a very much widespread impact.

Mr. Nnamdi: The telephone number again, 1-800-433-8850. Our e-mail address: pi@wamu.org.

Richard Kurin?

Mr. Kurin: Yes, I was thinking of this, of looking at what other rational business type people do in terms of looking at cultural activities. Right now, we are working in New York City—New York will be on the mall—this center at the Folk Life Festival, and working with a guy, Howard Milstein in New York who has built up the theater district. He has helped community groups in Harlem, donates to the New York Public Library. So when I asked him, I was having a conversation, this was a businessman and here is tremendous support over several generations now for culture, and I am saying, "Well, is there a hard economic reason for doing this?" And in some way, yes, there is a benefit. If there is lively cultural activity going on, if the city is a flutter in this kind of cultural activity, it is good for tourism, it is good for the real estate market. This is good. But in talking to even this Howard Milstein, I said, "Well, why do you really do it?" And his idea was that, well, if we encourage this kind of creativity, then the streets of our city become really pathways to knowledge, to beauty and wisdom. This is incredible to me to kind of hear that that kind of concern is out there. And I think it is. Ultimately, it does bear on the quality of life. And if there are community groups active, if there are theater groups active, if there are museums active, I think in the end everybody benefits.

Mr. Nnamdi: Maria-Rosario?

Ms. Jackson: Well, one of the things that I think was most important that we learned during the first two years of one project that has been focused particularly on moderate, low-income communities around the country, in looking at arts and culture in those neighborhoods, was that, yes, art and culture have to be defined broadly. And it has to be reflective of the values and the realities of the communities that we are interested in understanding. It takes place in venues that range from traditional cultural venues to parks, churches, community centers, clinics, sometimes. And there is a wide array of activity that ranges from informal to formal, amateur to professional.

And I think that one of the most important themes that came out, with those themes that I just laid out, is that art and cultural participation also are infused with multiple meanings simultaneously by the people who

engage in them. So while an art activity or an art piece may have value in and of itself intrinsically as art, it also can carry other values that people will ascribe to it. So, for example, in a neighborhood if one of the things that people say is a valuable expression of creativity is say drumming and dancing that is part of a youth group, that activity can be evaluated and appreciated for its technical and aesthetic qualities. At the same time, it could be understood as a team-building activity or a leadership development activity or a way of celebrating or commemorating, creating group identity and group memory. So there are all of these different meanings that can simultaneously be carried by this activity.

So when you start talking about social impacts, it is complex because what you have to deal with is not only the motivations that people bring into the activity but also sometimes the unexpected outcomes that will follow.

Mr. Nnamdi: Quite different from trying to assess what an individual visit to a major museum might have as an impact on an individual. But joining us now by telephone is Liz Lerman, who is the founder and the artistic director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Liz Lerman, good to have you here.

Ms. Liz Lerman: Well, thanks for having me.

Mr. Nnamdi: And we are talking about the impact that arts activity and community celebrations can have on communities. Can you talk a little bit about why you were invited into communities where there are serious differences of opinion, such as your Portsmouth, New Hampshire shipyard project?

Ms. Lerman: Well, that was actually a particularly amazing example of this because it is hard to imagine a modern dance company in a shipyard. But in fact the community was concerned because this particular shipyard, which is a 200 year old federal facility, was on the closing list and they were concerned that with its closing not only would there be this economic decline but also what was going to happen to all the stories and all the people.

And we were invited to come and listen to the stories and try to figure out a way for people to communicate to each other in this time of stress. As it turned out, the shipyard was not closed.

But one story, just to give people a feeling for it, there was a lot of issue about whether we could even get into a shipyard because it is separate from the community. It has incredible security clearances and all of that. And I was brought to meet the commander, and I had 10 minutes with him. And he turned to me and he said, "There are a lot of people in our town who don't understand this shipyard. They still think it is the 50's, it is very secret. They don't understand why we dress the way we do. They don't know why we are doing what we are doing. They are very confused, they think we are really secret." And I said to him, "Sounds to me like you are talking about modern dance." And with that, we giggled and we began what I would call a literacy project where because the dancers needed to find ways to communicate about what happened on the shipyard, what actually goes on in the nuclear facility, people in the community needed to try to see it as something not an eye sore and not a toxic dump, which it was. It was very interesting.

Mr. Nnamdi: Talk about the effect of redefining what an individual's own activities or a group's own activities may be as art or as important, what effect can that have on the individual or the community as a whole?

Ms. Lerman: Well, again, if I stay a little bit with the shipyard.

Mr. Nnamdi: Sure.

Ms. Lerman: It is interesting how people in their ordinary lives, first of all, maybe don't always see the poetry of it. In order to do this project, we went into many different groups. One group we worked with were the officers' wives. So the women from the company and I went and met with these wonderful women. We sat in a circle and the first thing one of these women said to us, "We are the most liberated women in America." Well, I didn't think that. So at least— I mean not until I met them. The next thing she said was, "We birth our babies. We change the tires, one right after another." That is because the men are all out on the submarines around the world, and these women basically are taking care of everything.

So in that moment, what I saw happening was, first of all, we were able to say back to them the beautiful poetry she had just said. And, secondly, huge stereotypes were breaking down right and left between us, which I think is a very important thing to understand about these kinds of art projects is that art is one of the great translators for people to really see each other.

Mr. Nnamdi: This is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi. We are talking with Liz Lerman. She is the founder and artistic director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. She joins us by telephone. Joining us from Los Angeles, California is Tomas Benitez. He is the executive director of Self-Help Graphics. In our Washington studio, Maria-Rosario Jackson, director of the Arts, Culture, and Community Program at The Urban Institute. And Richard Kurin, director of Folk Life and Cultural Heritage at The Smithsonian Institution.

Liz Lerman talking about the effects that this can have on individuals in the community. There is a clip that I would definitely like you to hear. It is about one of the people effected by what Liz Lerman does in dance.

Voice: When I retired from teaching when I was 62, I read an article in a paper and they were asking for people to come to audition who were wheelchair dancers. No experience required.

Mr. Nnamdi: No experience required. Tomas Benitez, as we said, it may be anecdotal, but it is clear that many people, like the individual we just heard, become involved with community celebrations first. And then what happens is that they get more involved in their communities generally. They learn discipline, organizing, shared vision. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Mr. Benitez: Well, I have seen it happen over and again in my career. I have humbly been witness to that with the artists. The group that I work with at Self-Help Graphics, which is predominately a group of visual artists coming out of East LA, where they have translated the things that they know from their communities and their homes into their formal education and now into their profession as well as their advocacy. I have also seen it coming out of the places that we go to. For example, we have worked with Pastoral, a community-based group associated with the Delores Mission in one of the most economically-depressed areas of Los Angeles, much less East LA. And I have seen leadership emerge from there where people who came in as participants have stayed with it, have developed skills, and are now in leadership positions where they are organizing, for example, a paper cutting group because they have become infused with the benefit and value of that. And they are now using that to help organize fellow citizens in their community. So over and again we have seen that happen.

And we have seen intergenerational experiences where normally what will happen, this Monday, I dragged my kid to go see an opera. In this case where we are doing workshops in the community, kids are dragging in their parents and they are working in an intergenerational context. And so they are demonstrating leadership.

So I think that what we are seeing is that very kind of thing where people are drawing from the community that they are from and developing their skills outwardly.

Mr. Nnamdi: Lauren in Griswold, Connecticut. Lauren, you are on the air. Go ahead, please?

Caller: Hi, thanks for taking my call. I wanted to mention about a group of people that I am part of. It is called the Norwich Arts Council, and we are in Norwich, Connecticut. And what we have been trying to do for the past 10 years is use the arts to revive the community. Norwich has been a rather depressed little town in eastern Connecticut. And over the past couple of years, there have been some more organizations that have come into the downtown and it looks very promising. Theater groups, galleries are starting to open up in downtown Norwich. And we are opening for a total and complete revival of this little town.

And I was wondering—you sort of talked about it when you were talking about Portsmouth, it sort of reminded me of what is going on in Norwich.

Mr. Nnamdi: Okay, well, we will see if we can get a response to that but it will have to wait until after the break, which is coming right up. But, Lauren, thank you very much for your call.

The number you can call to participate in this discussion is 1-800-433-8850. You can e-mail us at pi@wamu.org. We will be right back.

(Commercial Break.)

Mr. Nnamdi: Welcome back to our conversation on arts and community celebrations and their impact on communities.

Richard Kurin, our last caller just used an example of how arts is being used to revive a part of the town of Norwich, Connecticut. Care to comment?

Mr. Kurin: Sure, I think there is a lot of cases like that around the country and even increasingly around the world. The National Endowment for the Arts has done several studies on that, looking at the economic impact of arts in the community. And I think taking what Maria and Tomas and I have said already, I think it is a matter of considering those arts in their broadest form. So many of the arts practiced in the community aren't going to have any economic impact. They are done to preserve identity and preserve family and community and so on. But a lot of the arts do. And I think increasingly people are taking control of the arts in their community so that they are one of the beneficiaries of that. This is very important.

I think some international perspective is important here as well. The World Bank, I guess about a year ago or so announced an international program to try to look at culture as a means of economic development around the world, feeling that in many cases our model of economic development has been the culture is inimical to it. It is a barrier to development. And somehow then you have to overcome people's culture in order to get them to develop economically.

I think if you look at the American food scene, and you say, my God, where is American food in all this? Thai food has become Americanized. Hawaiian regional cuisine has become Americanized. Chinese food has become Americanized. Pupusas has become Americanized. Indian food has become Americanized. That in a way, if we even used food as a model for that, we can see how that has led to the development of restaurants. It has certainly led to a vibrant economy. And it hasn't been from the suppression of people's culture. It has been from its encouragement.

And I think that might provide some kind of model for saying, yes, people hold within them resources, culture is a resource to be used for economic development but also civic development and participation.

Mr. Nnamdi: Maria-Rosario?

Ms. Jackson: Well, I think if you want to understand the role of art and culture in communities at the city level, at the regional level, the thing that is so important is to not to view art and culture in a bubble exclusively but to pay attention, and I think this underscores what Richard was saying, to pay attention to how art and culture intersect with other dynamics. Yes, it intersects with an economic dynamic. It intersects with a family development dynamic. But I think we are at a loss when we try to understand art and culture as something separate and apart from the rest of our lives. And that when you do that, there is little chance that

you can really see how it is inextricable, as I said before, from so many of the other things that we care about.

Mr. Nnamdi: Allow me to go to the telephones again. Susan in Phoenix, Arizona. You are on the air, go ahead, please?

Caller: Hi, I am so glad you have this public forum. I would like to speak about the national status I have had. I am a portrait painter. I would be a master in a union shop. I was brought to the status by privilege of being able to see the museums of the nation. In LA, I went to not only the great museums, but I could go to the symphony at the student rate. From there I was recruited to the art schools, the continuum of art schools, and I got a scholarship to go to Oakland California College of Arts and Crafts, which is the oldest art school.

Mr. Nnamdi: Okay.

Caller: Out of school, I went into the phone book and I got jobs because of the cross-cultural make-up of the people—

Mr. Nnamdi: Okay, Susan, we do understand that you have had an innovative artistic life but where is this going?

Caller: Well, unfortunately, I am in poverty because I have been legally classed pretty much as a vagabond, and I have no social status.

Mr. Nnamdi: Are you saying that this is a problem that artists generally are undergoing?

Caller: Yes, I think there are excessive fees being charged for artists to apply for grants, to be at festivals. When I got commissions, I went from here back to Los Angeles and the Meredith Music industry commissions and city hall here took them away because they had worked hard on the wall and they didn't like—

Mr. Nnamdi: Well, I think, Susan, one of the things we are talking about during this hour are artists who in their communities are managing to find ways of expressing themselves and having an impact on those communities. The discussion about how artists are making a living and whether or not they are getting the kinds of licenses that they need to get is a discussion for another show. But thank you very much for joining us.

Tomas and Liz Lerman, what she mentioned, what Susan mentioned caused me to think about another issue and that is, Tomas, you mentioned taking your son to the theater. And there are those who will say that very often we are talking about poor communities here where people want theaters and museums. And what you seem to be saying is you don't have to have them, just take your own culture and understand its value. Is that what you are saying?

Mr. Benitez: Well, I think that what we need to go back to is the premise which is that the things that we do in the community that we live in are not in juxtaposition to some of the mainstream, traditional view of art resources, like the theater, opera, and ballet. And by no means am I saying that those things are not important or shouldn't be part of our landscape. For a number of reasons, they are not a part of our landscape. And there are good reasons as to why we have civic centers in which these large institutions are there.

You will find within these institutions nowadays that there are initiatives which reflect their outreach and their willingness to access a broader community. The Latino initiative at MOCA, the brand new Lipman Gallery at LACMA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I'm sorry. And Placido Domingo over at the LA opera are all indicative I think of the fact that in the mind-set of the mainstream, they recognize that a more diverse audience is a stronger institution. And, indeed, a nexus of community-based organizations, activities, and groups in tandem with large institutions.

So by no means am I saying it is not necessary. What I am saying is by doing what we do and evaluating the thing we do— and going back to something Richard said, which is for example, that not only does it have multi-purpose but that that does not devalue the thing we do. Adding value to something because it has utility is important to understand.

Mr. Nnamdi: Indeed, that allows me to ask Liz Lerman about the Hallelujah Project because you lead a professional modern dance group that focuses on expressing the concerns of communities through dance.

Ms. Lerman: Right, I was just going to say that in effect I represent another version of this because I grew up professionally trained thinking I was going to be in the ballet world, and woke up over a period of time and realized that actually I felt to some extent my own art form was dying, that it become so isolated, so away from people's lives that the questions I started to raise were who gets to do the dancing? Who says dancing should only be done by very young, very thin, mostly white, hair pulled back in a certain way kind of girl.

Mr. Nnamdi: Certainly not I.

Ms. Lerman: Exactly. Well, of course, and then I asked what are we going to dance about, what stories? Do we still want to see more Swan Lake or are there other stories we could tell? Then I began to wonder, well, where should we do the dancing? Does it have to always be in theaters? Can't it be in basements? And, of course, once I started asking these questions, I realized the dances are happening all around us. And that is what made me begin to say I am going to take this professional world that I know and move out into the world and see other things. And the Hallelujah Project is one example of that.

In this case, what we do is we enter communities. We are brought in in lots of different ways. But enter communities and work with people. And the question—usually we start with some kind of question. In this case it is what do you want to be in praise of? What around you is something you want to celebrate? And frequently actually what we hear is the stories that have to do with celebration after a hard time endured. It is very interesting. So it is not just the party. You hear about a long history too. And in each community we go in, we are building new dances that grow out of the stories that we hear from people.

Mr. Nnamdi: On to Raphael in Montauk, Long Island. Raphael, you are on the air, go ahead, please?

Caller: Yes, good afternoon.

Mr. Nnamdi: Good afternoon.

Caller: I am calling with regard to a celebration that I have taken part in for the last several years. This is the Sixth Annual Save Our Gardens or Odyssey for the Earth it is called. And this happens to be the Winter Pageant 2001 coming up. It is created by Earth Celebrations.

Mr. Nnamdi: Is this a national celebration?

Caller: Excuse me?

Mr. Nnamdi: Is this a national celebration or a community-based celebration?

Caller: Oh, this is definitely a community-based celebration. Earth Celebrations is centered in the lower east side of Manhattan. But the celebration embraces the community gardens throughout the New York City metropolitan area, which over the last several years have been highly polarized with—

Mr. Nnamdi: And sometimes under siege.

Caller: Excuse me?

Mr. Nnamdi: And on occasion under siege.

Caller: Absolutely, demolished in many cases, a magnificent oases of community endeavor within these neighborhoods, many times replacing drug infested places of gatherings. So this is a fantastic effort on the part of the community to redeem these spaces and to keep them as sacred spaces.

Mr. Nnamdi: What form does the celebration take?

Caller: How long?

Mr. Nnamdi: What form does it take?

Caller: Oh, all of the costumes are made by hand. It is an illuminated pageant and it goes in celebration of the gardens of the community, of the city itself and certainly of the earth. It is rather a magical mystery tour that goes from garden to garden throughout the lower east side.

Mr. Nnamdi: Okay, Raphael, thank you very much for your call. This is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi.

On to Tom in Indianapolis, Indiana. Tom, you are on the air, please.

Caller: Hello, Kojo. Thanks for letting me join the discussion.

Mr. Nnamdi: You are welcome.

Caller: I want to talk a little bit about I am a landscape architect, and I specialize in urban design and community design in urban settings. And a lot of the things that you are talking about are really close to me in that, obviously, the physical place becomes very important. And often I talk about essentially we make our places and then they make us. We need to keep some of those places in order to keep our culture. I guess what I am getting at is you were talking about hard evidence earlier, that just the number of people that go to see special festivals on a yearly basis says something about the fact that they are missing those festivals at home and that they are looking for some of that cultural— or the enlivening part of their communities and they have to go somewhere else to get it.

And I know some of that is simply a result of particularly—

Mr. Nnamdi: I am not sure I understand the point you are making. Do you, Richard Kurin?

Mr. Kurin: No.

Mr. Nnamdi: Because I don't understand the relationship between the places that you apparently are interested in designing and the fact that people who are seeking cultural space, when we are talking about cultural space, we are not necessarily talking about physical space. We are talking about what Richard Kurin characterizes as cultural democracy, people simply having the opportunity to express the concerns of their cultures and communities.

Caller: Right. Well, I think in some cases, for example, we were talking about lower income neighborhoods are ones that often need the infusion of these cultural elements that we are talking about.

Mr. Nnamdi: No, I don't think that is what we are talking about. We are saying that the cultural elements already exist in those neighborhoods. What is beginning to happen now is that they are being given value and recognized for the artistic integrity that are inherent in them. Maria-Rosario?

Ms. Jackson: Well, I wanted to comment I think less on this last call and more on the previous one where the gentleman was talking about festivals and your whole notion that cultural space isn't just physical space but something else that is more than that. I think festivals are particularly important in communities where there are not physical spaces that can readily be understood as validating mechanisms for art and cultural participation.

Some of the work that I have been doing, actually in connection Tomas Benitez in east Los Angeles, has underscored for me the importance of culminating celebrations and festivals as in fact validating mechanisms for activity that happens locally. So it is terribly important that, yes, people make things and they create together but there is this culminating activity in which there—there is this culminating activity in which there is validation, both internally and externally.

Mr. Nnamdi: Speaking of culminating activity, we are about at that point right now. Quickly, Richard Kurin?

Mr. Kurin: Well, I think one of the points about all of this is that American culture is so infused with a juxtaposition of so many cultures in the same space. And the marvel is through culture, that is a form of communication, peacefully, where we can share ideas and values. It is much better than people living in the same place and killing each other and communicating through violence.

Mr. Nnamdi: Richard Kurin is the director of Folk Life and Cultural Heritage at The Smithsonian Institution. Maria-Rosario Jackson is director of the Arts, Culture, and Community Program at The Urban Institute, in conjunction with whom we at Public Interest bring you this series on urban America. Tomas Benitez is executive director of Self-Help Graphics. And Liz Lerman is the founder and artistic director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Thank you all for joining us.

Public Interest is produced by Diane Vogel, Terry Cross Davis, and John Haas. Diane Vogel is the acting managing producer. Our engineer is Karen McManus. Dorie Anesman is on the phones. You can visit the Public Interest website at www.wamu.org or e-mail us at pi@wamu.org

This has been Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi.

Other Publications by the Authors

- [Urban Institute](#)
- [Maria Rosario Jackson](#)

Usage and reprints: Most publications may be downloaded free of charge from the web site and may be used and copies made for research, academic, policy or other non-commercial purposes. Proper attribution is required. Posting UI research papers on other websites is permitted subject to prior approval from the Urban Institute—contact publicaffairs@urban.org.

If you are unable to access or print the PDF document please [contact us](#) or call the Publications Office at (202) 261-5687.

Disclaimer: *The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Copyright of the written materials contained within the Urban Institute website is owned or controlled by the Urban Institute.*

Source: The Urban Institute, © 2012 | <http://www.urban.org>