



**New York City Council
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations
Off-site Hearing - Oversight – Art and Culture as a Catalyst for Political and Social Change**

Wednesday, May 4, 2016, 1:00 PM – Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Auditorium, Brooklyn Museum
Testimony Presented by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs
Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl

I am Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl of the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, here today to testify on the impact that art and culture have on the social and civic fabric of our communities. I'd like to thank Chairman van Bramer and the members of the committee for highlighting this critical topic. I am joined here today by a number of colleagues from DCLA. The Brooklyn Museum is a fitting venue for today's hearing, given the *Agitprop!* exhibition currently on view.

My testimony today will divide the topic into two categories: art and cultural programs that explicitly address social justice, and the broad range of social benefits that result from engagement with art and culture. The first category encompasses programs that serve high risk populations, like youth involved in the court system or students in low-income communities. So here are some examples:

- Carnegie Hall's rightly lauded **NeON Arts Partnership** with the Department of Probation. Neighborhood Opportunity Networks – or NeONs – are centers located in all five boroughs that bring together community organizations, government agencies, local businesses, and residents to connect people on probation to opportunities, resources, and services. Thanks to Carnegie Hall, NeONs offers young people access to programming in a range of artistic disciplines, including dance, music, theater, visual arts, poetry, and digital media. This helps to develop creative, social, and emotional skills, and build positive peer relationships. I've seen this program in action firsthand – it's incredibly powerful to give these young people the chance to inhabit an identity beyond that of "court-involved youth." While in these programs, they are artists, creators, and collaborators. And studies back this up, showing that at-risk youth who participate in arts programming have improved social interactions and attitudes toward school, fewer court referrals, and better self-esteem. We plan to share examples of this research on the DCLA Facebook page after the hearing if you'd like to learn more.
- We have a strong partner in the City Council on supporting these programs. Council Member Laurie Cumbo's **Art as a Catalyst for Change Gun Violence Program** is one example, providing funding to engage youth with afterschool arts programming in communities afflicted by gun violence. The **Cultural Immigrant Initiative**, spearheaded by the Speaker and Chair Van Bramer, is another Council initiative making a major impact in our communities. This program celebrates the diverse forms of cultural expression that our residents bring from all over the world, sometimes bringing immigrant artists out of the shadows and onto the stage.
- Earlier this year, the **Administration for Children's Services** testified at a hearing held by the Council's Committees on Juvenile Justice and Cultural Affairs. That hearing highlighted a number of ways that the arts benefit some of our most vulnerable populations. These included writing and acting programs that empower youth to create their own stories and see them come to life; dance programs that build relationships and self-confidence while introducing participants to the fundamentals of movement; and music programs that let youth show off new skills to friends and families as they develop and grow their

abilities. Cultural organizations that receive City support also welcome these youth offsite, providing access to performances and exhibitions that every New Yorker should have the opportunity to experience.

These are just a few examples of the important work our cultural community is doing in neighborhoods across all five boroughs. Through the Cultural Development fund and Cultural Institutions Groups, we support hundreds of other programs that enrich the lives of residents and bring the transformative benefits of the arts to every single neighborhood in our city.

As I've said many times before, we appreciate the economic value of the arts – attracting visitors from around the world to our cultural organizations. We also understand the personal value – the almost spiritual impact that a great work of art can have on an audience. Somewhere between these important cases for the arts, there is the social value of the arts. This includes what community-based cultural groups are doing all over our city each and every day. An appreciation for this full spectrum of benefits – from the personal, to the neighborhood, to the regional – provides a powerful argument for the arts. Under this Administration, my agency has launched or expanded a number of programs to measure and promote these benefits so that we can better understand and support the organizations doing this important work. All of us have an obligation to ensure that every New Yorker has the opportunity to experience the full breadth of benefits that engagement with art and culture can bring.

- The de Blasio Administration's number one priority when it comes to the arts is supporting **arts education in our public schools**. I know that the Council shares this commitment. We announced an increase in funding – allocated in partnership with the Council - in the very first year of the Administration, and since then we've brought the White House's national **Turnaround Arts** program to four high need programs right here in Brooklyn. Turnaround Arts is a three year, intensive arts education immersion program that incorporates the arts as part of a strategy to improve education outcomes for underperforming schools. Participating schools are also partnered with celebrity artists to work with students and generate excitement for the arts. In fact, the celebrity artist partnered with P.S. 165 Ida Posner in Brownsville – Paula Abdul – was rehearsing a dance routine right here in the Brooklyn Museum with some of her students last month.

A robust arts education is the foundation of our city's creative life, and we look forward to building on this commitment with our partners in the Council. While we want to emphasize that we believe creative activity to be intrinsically good, the value to our city and our students is multifaceted. Mountains of evidence show the benefits that quality instruction in a wide variety of artistic disciplines can have on such diverse skillsets as problem solving, creative thinking, and even math and languages. Again, we will post examples of this research on Facebook. We owe it to the next generation to make sure they have the opportunity to paint, write, sing, dance, perform, imagine, and create.

- Another program that invests in the arts as a path toward greater social equity is **Building Community Capacity**, or BCC. This program seeks to strengthen the organizations and cultural networks that connect residents in targeted neighborhoods. BCC takes a collaborative and comprehensive approach to building cultural capacity by bringing together local stakeholders from across sectors for trainings, workshops, public programs, and more. We announced in January that East New York, Cypress Hills, and Brownsville will be the first neighborhoods to host this new DCLA program. We want local cultural groups to be deeply engaged in the community planning process currently underway there.
- Another way that the Council proves itself a powerful ally and agent for change in our communities is **SU-CASA**. This program was expanded this year to become the largest creative aging program in the country, reaching older New Yorkers in all 51 Council Districts. And again, we aren't just crossing our fingers that these programs have concrete benefits for participants. Research tells us that there are a number of very real benefits that our older adults gain from participatory creative programs. These include positive effects on age-related cognitive functioning and general health, decreases in anxiety and depression, and

improvement in overall well-being. We also plan to post examples of this research on DCLA's Facebook page.

- Another Council partnership is the **Cultural Afterschool Adventures** Program. Recent increases in funding for CASA represent a major investment in arts education, providing kids all over the city with meaningful cultural programming at the end of the school day. Thanks to this and increased funding for other initiatives, DCLA's current budget is among the largest in the agency's history.
- A number of our other programs are based on the notion that there is an undeniable good – social, moral, economic – in opening up the arts for everyone. For example, our **Public Artists in Residence**, or PAIR, program has placed artists-in-residence at the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Mayor's Office of Veteran's Affairs, and soon, the Administration for Children's Services. These artists are focused on addressing civic issues through creative practice, bringing new ideas and energy to City services. There is broad consensus that the arts belong in certain areas of the services provided by government, such as education. With PAIR, we hope to open the door for creative practice to have a role in addressing an even wider range of civic and social issues.
- As a government agency, we seek solid data to drive our actions. This is why we have championed the **Social Impact of the Arts Project** (SIAP). This program based out of the University of Pennsylvania has made major progress in compiling a comprehensive report on what cultural services are provided in New York City. They are assessing where the services are and what impact they have on our communities. In this new study, SIAP is looking to capture the impact of not only the 1,200 or so nonprofits that are eligible for City funding, but thousands more cultural service providers that engage New Yorkers in the neighborhoods where they live each and every day. In other cities – most notably Philadelphia – SIAP has uncovered some remarkable results which we will share on Facebook. Communities with strong cultural engagement show signs of broader revitalization such as lower poverty without social displacement, better child welfare outcomes, and reduced signs of ethnic and racial strife. For an arts lover and government official, this is truly exciting stuff. We expect a report from the SIAP team later this year.

My staff and I have been able to cover a lot of new ground. This wouldn't be possible without the support and encouragement of a huge range of partners, including Chair van Bramer and his colleagues in the Council. So thank you again for the opportunity to highlight this important work and for the chance to remind everyone how much more there is to do. I'm happy to answer any questions you have at this time.