



WOMEN OF COLOR IN THE ARTS

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Immigrant Artist Initiative
Findings and Recommendations for Future Survey Research
presented by Kaisha S. Johnson

Acknowledging People and Contextualizing History

First and foremost, it is important to note that immigrants make up a large and influential portion of the New York City population. In fact, major economic, social, political and artistic developments of this city can be attributed to immigrants. As of 2013, according to the NYC Department of Planning report, *The Newest New Yorkers*, over 37 percent of New York City residents were born in another country. That represents 3.07 million people. This noteworthy number of foreign-born residents mirrors the actual whole population of cities like Chicago and cannot begin to reflect those whose children or grandchildren readily identify as second or third-generation immigrants.

In a city as culturally diverse as New York, the term “immigrant” still often takes on varied and loaded meaning. “Immigrant communities” is often read as: immigrant communities of color. These two groups, although having some shared demographics and overlapping characteristics, are not mutually interchangeable. But they are often conflated due to a longstanding history of institutionalized oppression in this country. So there is a special lens that is required to both see and understand the information presented in this report. It is interesting to note that in the pilot survey sample administered by WOCA, 37% of those polled self-identified as being of South Asian origin, followed by almost 21% percent of those that identified as having immigrated from Europe.

The large population of European immigrant artists can most likely be attributed to the leniency in which European citizens were allowed to immigrate to the United States prior to the mid-1960s. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, created new policy that changed immigration quota systems and somewhat helped to equalize these systems that previously favored White immigrants only. The Immigrant Act, however, ushered in an unprecedented flow of Black and Brown immigrants from countries previously restricted from entering the United States. Undoubtedly, a sizeable portion of those Black and Brown immigrants settled in New York City continuing their social and professional practices, including that of artists.

Cultivating Trust

In order to help amplify the voices and presence of immigrant artists, it is important to work in community with those populations that have been historically underrepresented and

disenfranchised, particularly as it pertains to funding and access to resources in the grand arts ecosystem. That being said, however well-meaning, to separate immigrants as “others” in a greater landscape of art making and arts practice has the potential of undermining the contributions of these insanely creative and influential residents. So, it recommended as Dance/NYC moves forward with the immigrant artist initiative, to do so with a set of shared values that reflect those of the communities Dance/NYC is looking serve. It is also equally important to openly articulate, in both words and deeds, a commitment to always operate from a place of equity where organizational patriarchy is erased from the equation of community engagement.

One cannot express enough the level of trust and transparency that is required in working with any community outside of one’s own, but particularly with immigrant communities given the current hostile and volatile environment of the United States. The aforementioned Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which celebrated its 50-year anniversary just a few years ago, is currently being dismantled bit by bit; and with the rescinding of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) there is a clear message being sent to immigrants far and wide that providing information about their status as immigrants - whether official citizens, residents or otherwise – may be cause for immediate concern. Clearly, this gives immigrant artists justifiable reason to not make readily available personal information.

Cultivating trust with immigrant artists and creating partnerships within immigrant communities that have already established trust, will be critical for Dance/NYC to further engage with immigrant artists, particularly those not working under the auspices of a larger institution and/or working outside of the typical not-for-profit structure. The non-profit structure is mentioned here because it denotes that those that are working within this structure may already have inroads into how the non-profit dance industry works and some means in which access and navigate it. This, however, does not readily denote that this same group of artists has access to the dance field’s resources.

Calling on Community

WOCA called on its community through a number of its existing relationships and partners in the arts field. The importance of surveying the dance field in partnership with organizations and individuals that are already working within and/or with immigrant communities, and have garnered trust within those communities, cannot be overemphasized. These organizations helped WOCA in identifying artists and organizations that were working independently and generally outside of the non-profit industrial complex. Some of those organizations that offered assistance included:

Asian American Arts Alliance
Baryshnikov Arts Center
Bronx Council on the Arts
Bronx Music Heritage Center

Brooklyn Arts Council
Center for Bronx Non-Profits*
Center for Traditional Music and Dance
CityLore
CUNY Dance Initiative
Dance Theater Etc.
Flushing Town Hall
Kupferberg Center for the Arts at Queens College
Lincoln Center Education
New York Folklore Society
Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance
Staten Island Arts Council

**The Center for Bronx Non-Profits sits at the foot of the Bronx on the campus of Hostos College and has deep connections within the borough to provide support to those working in non-profits and those that are working outside of the 501 (c) 3 structure but looking to obtain pathways for expanded resources.*

Collecting Data

WOCA collected data for the immigrant artist working list, in addition to the subsequent working list of education programs for immigrant students, via personal interviews with artists, direct recommendations from partners and, finally, from the results cultivated from an online pilot survey. The actual data collection took place over a period of two months following two months of preliminary research to poll partners and artists on the viability of such an initiative while examining potential roadblocks and outcomes. During this initial two months, drafting a pilot survey that would help inform the recommendations listed in this report were collated with the help of trusted advisors.

The amount of time dedicated to preliminary research and data collection for this type of initiative is atypical and *not* recommended. It is highly recommended that if Dance/NYC moves forward with a more in-depth study, a required - and at minimum - mandatory year of on the ground community building needs to take place with multiple people leading the charge, respectively in each individual borough of NYC.

Strategizing Communication and Outreach

Not unlike many individuals, each immigrant artist community has a distinct set of needs, operates within distinct hierarchies (or not) and subscribes to distinct values. These factors should be direct considerations and road maps to how information is gathered. Additionally, outlining a clear account of how artist information will be utilized and shared is also equally important.

WOCA relied heavily on phone interviews and online communication, with some face-to-face interaction with artists and partnering organizations. The lifeline of some immigrant

communities literally lay in the streets. Communal gathering points such as schools, laundromats, and places of worship serve as hubs where information is exchanged. Other immigrant communities rely heavily on digital media to share information. Artists are seemingly savvy with utilizing social media and online platforms to further their work, but depending on who the message is for, immigrant artists are privy to the best mode of communication for their various communities. Dance/NYC should utilize this same approach and framework for both collecting and disseminating information.

Outlining Recommendations for Survey Questions

In a pilot survey administered to a small sampling of artists across the boroughs, WOCA asked a myriad of short questions framed by the need to amplify immigrant artist voices for the sake of wider advocacy and engagement. The recommended questions for a future survey appear in the pilot survey which is attached to this document. The most salient points of inquiry - outside the collection of basic demographics (ethnicity, age, gender) - are the following:

- Place of residence versus place where dance practice takes place (performed or executed)
- How one identifies in their professional practice (dancer, choreographer, educator/teaching artist, dance administrator)
- The length of professional engagement in dance exclusively in NYC
- Professional employment status as a dance practitioner (full-time, part-time, independent or project-based)

All of these questions (and their subsequent answers) speak to potential sustainability in the field, giving some clues that various economic factors - which could include rising rents due to neighborhood gentrification- are keeping artists from maintaining their personal lives and professional practice within the borders of the five boroughs of New York City. (It is no revelation that residents in most recent years, particularly artists, have been driven out of the city and into places like Westchester, upstate New York, and New Jersey.) These questions give guidance that finances, obviously, can play a formidable role in personal and professional viability in the city known for its artistic outpourings.

Analyzing and Contextualizing the Data

In this particular sample survey, despite the level of depth of some of the questions presented to survey participants, those that did self-identify as immigrant were willing to answer a questionnaire such as this and, further, were open to deeper engagement – given the possibility of further exposure, professional opportunities and funding. One hundred percent (100%) of those survey participants responded with their direct contact information for future follow-up. Again, please keep in mind, however, that this type of response rate can squarely be attributed to the fact that survey respondents participated in the survey based on the credibility of the administering organization and its partners. These partners assured

transparency of process and a clear handling of information that could be openly perceived as sensitive.

From the small sample set data of the pilot survey WOCA collected, it was clear that the majority of artists working professionally in dance resided in Manhattan. (Please note that this could be due to numerous factors.) In the past, one may have been able to make an assumption on another's financial status based on having residence in Manhattan - previously the borough with the highest rents per capita. Today, we cannot make clear assertions about an artist's economic status based on neighborhood of residence as many neighborhoods in most boroughs face exponentially increasing rents. Currently, some rents in parts of Brooklyn outprice those of rents in once exclusively coveted Manhattan.

The openness and willingness of survey respondents to share information points not only to the trust factor – it also demonstrates that the need for resources, financial and otherwise, supersedes all. It is evident that funding is key for the personal and professional development and sustainability of artists - particularly immigrant dance artists, whom for some are already operating from a deficit.

Condensing Conclusions/Contrasting Conclusions

The work ahead for Dance/NYC in the realm of immigrant artists, particularly around investigating those that are operating “under the radar” or outside the scope of the non-profit sector, may be long. To create inroads for success, trust and transparency are essential. A knowledge of communities and an understanding of their history are key. Trustworthy, verified and reputable partners are crucial. And organizational values, articulated through both words and deeds, are critical.

Before this research was initiated it was clear that immigrant artists were not properly represented in the overwhelming homogenous arts landscape that regularly gets seen, heard and funded. Recognizing that this statement is completely antithetical to the findings and recommendations provided above, continued inquiry of why immigrant artists are not properly represented is probably a poor use of time. A multi-pronged approach to advancing advocacy for these communities of artists by continued promotion and sustained visibility of their work would be more effective. Further, getting resources directly into the hands of immigrant dance artists that need it, is paramount.