

Nurturing Socially  
Engaged Art

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**A BLADE OF GRASS**

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Cover: 2015 ABOG Fellow Suzanne Lacy's *De tu Puño y Letra*, a large-scale community organizing project in Quito, Ecuador that culminated in a public performance in a bullfighting ring with hundreds of men and women speaking out publicly on violence against women. Photo: Raúl Peñafiel



2015 ABOG Fellow Mary Mattingly's *Swale*, a mobile food forest grown on a 130-ft. by 40-ft. barge, invites the public to cultivate fresh food as it travels through NYC harbors and acts as a setting for conversations about food and public policy. Image: RAVA Films

## FOREWORD

A Blade of Grass is the first arts nonprofit that focuses exclusively on socially engaged art.

Our programs are designed to support and amplify the work of artists who are collaborating with multiple stakeholders, at an ambitious scale, to enact social change.

Through the ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, we partner with artists who engage in creative activism; prototype utopian futures; heal communities that struggle with systemic oppression; and both imagine and model collaborative, innovative solutions to intractable social problems.

In addition to acting as a platform for the creation of sensitive content about socially engaged art, the ABOG Fellowship provides the direct financial support artists need to thrive. ABOG's public programs, documentary films, field research, publications and web content illuminate each project, tell the stories of

participants, and contextualize the artists' work in a variety of wider conversations—everything from city planning, to colonial history, to contemporary art theory.

**ABOG Fellowship artists are changing what art is, who it's for, and what it does.**

We see tremendous value in the way socially engaged art stretches our understanding of what is possible, both in a contemporary art context and in everyday life. Socially engaged artists are challenging our understanding of art. This challenge puts art and artists into direct, collaborative service to communities, which has concrete, generative effects. Artists who share the creative process can model alternatives, change perspectives, and create symbolic shifts that inspire deeper commitment.

Our goal is to propel this provocative direction by telling inspiring stories that bring new audiences to socially engaged art; enriching the discourse around socially engaged art; and conducting consulting and advocacy that enables artists to be effective agents of change in institutional collaborations.



Images from a *Here to Stay* projection night featuring anti-gentrification artwork developed in community-led workshops and projected onto buildings in NYC's Chinatown, organized by 2015 ABOG Fellow Chinatown Art Brigade. Photos: Joelle Te Paske



2014 ABOG Fellow Fran Ilich's Digital Material Sunflower currency and a bag of Diego de la Vega coffee, part of the artist's focus on alternative economies and barter-based community-building in Zapatista and NYC activist communities. Photo: Fran Ilich

ABOG Fellowship  
artists are  
changing  
what art is,  
who it's for,  
and  
what it does.

# OUR MISSION

**We provide resources to artists who demonstrate artistic excellence and serve as innovative conduits for social change. We evaluate the quality of work in this evolving field by fostering an inclusive, practical discourse about the aesthetics, function, ethics and meaning of socially engaged art that resonates within and outside the contemporary art dialogue.**



Day laborers were integral collaborators in 2015 ABOG Fellow Sol Aramendi's *Apps for Power* project, which developed a mobile app that allows users to safely report and share information on wage theft and abusive employers. Image: Courtesy Jornaler@App



## HISTORY

A Blade of Grass was founded in 2011 with a generous seed contribution from Shelley Frost Rubin, who was driven to support individual artists who share the creative process in ways that promote civic participation and discourse. Shelley's bravery and leadership as a philanthropist, and her specific interest in expanding audiences for art, creative approaches to social change, and the role of community engagement in enacting change, deeply inform our vision and mission.

ABOG began by listening and learning. We conducted a broad survey of over 500 artists; sought feedback from a spectrum of funders, organizational presenters and producers, and scholars; and assembled an Advisory Committee of thought leaders at the intersection of art and social change. This Committee developed *Artist Files*, a pilot granting program in 2012 that was designed to generate an open dialogue with twenty artists about the nature of their work. This dialogue yielded a collaborative budgeting



Artist Files grantee *Housing is a Human Right* was co-founded by artists Rachel Falcone and Michael Premo as a multimedia and oral history project that acts as an ongoing documentary portrait of the struggle for home. Image: Ms. Ward's Eviction Defense Rally in Bedford-Stuyvesent, Brooklyn, August 2011.

Photo: Michael Premo

process between the selected artists and the ABOG board and staff, in which the artists helped to determine institutional priorities.

Through the dialogical process of *Artist Files*, we determined that socially engaged artists actively collaborate with institutional power, make work that is not best understood through a traditional exhibition context, and are best served through active partnerships that go beyond financial support.

Based on this knowledge, we established the ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art in 2013 to support artists, while simultaneously creating content about socially engaged art projects. The ABOG Fellowship, now entering its fourth year, holds an annual nationwide open call and partners with eight ambitious projects each year. And the Fellowship generates a variety of public programs, dynamic web content, documentary films, field research, and publications, in addition to providing direct project support. This content is designed to foster critical dialogue, bring new audiences to socially engaged art, and advocate for artists working in collaboration with institutions, communities, and other stakeholder groups.



Client admiring newly styled hair as part of 2014 ABOG Fellow Jody Wood's *Beauty in Transition*, in which a mobile beauty salon housed in a former box truck offered free personalized services to homeless New Yorkers. Image: RAVA Films

This unique approach to presenting and supporting socially engaged art has swiftly positioned ABOG as a leader in its field. We are honored to partner with institutions such as the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, the New Museum, the Queens Museum, the Oakland Museum of California, New York University, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, and the University of Illinois, Chicago. We are proud to have grown from our initial seed contribution to a family of over 100 institutional and individual supporters including the National Endowment of the Arts, David Rockefeller Fund, and Agnes Gund. And we are excited to see our content reproduced by *Upworthy*, *Atlantic Magazine*, *Artforum*, and New Museum/MIT Press.

## **OUR MODEL**

A Blade of Grass is a hybrid arts organization that creates web and print media, public programs, and research about socially engaged art projects; advocates for artists working in the expanded field; provides professional development and resources to artists; and also provides direct financial support to socially engaged art projects.



FIELDWORKS Executive Producers RAVA Films onsite at 2016 ABOG Fellow Simone Leigh's Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter convening at the New Museum, September 2016. Photo: Joelle Te Paske

**This unique model enables us to holistically and thoughtfully support art that is particularly challenging to traditional arts institutions. Here's how:**

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## **Context**

A primary role of arts organizations is to act as a physical and social context for art to be seen and discussed. Socially engaged art happens in its own context, so we can't simply act as a venue. Instead, we create a variety of interpretive stories about socially engaged art projects. We also create programs and outings that bring new audiences to projects, or that illuminate the perspectives of participants.



2015 ABOG Fellow Nigel Poor and collaborators from the *San Quentin Prison Report* in the San Quentin media lab, where they create original audio pieces about life inside prison for broadcast on public radio. Image: RAVA Films

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## Listening-Based Partnership

Each context and project has a unique set of power dynamics, goals, and sensitivities. Both artists and participants are taking risks in these projects—this is why this work is so exciting! To honor these relationships and risks, we listen first, and stay in dialogue to create smart, respectful windows into each project.



Stylists and clients inside the *Beauty in Transition* mobile beauty salon. A project initiated by 2014 ABOG Fellow Jody Wood, *Beauty in Transition* offered personalized hair care and beauty services to homeless New Yorkers. Image: RAVA Films

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## Cooperation

We feel that artists are particularly effective agents of social change, even if they work symbolically or at a very small scale, when they share the creative process. Artists who co-create with non-artist partners enable people to imagine a different and better world. This is why we prioritize collaborative process in our decision-making criteria, engage in deep research about how artists collaborate, and tell stories about these collaborations from the participant's perspective.



2015 ABOG Fellow Suzanne Lacy's *De tu Puño y Letra* project gathered hundreds of men and women in a bullfighting ring in Quito, Ecuador to speak out publicly about violence against women. Image: RAVA Films

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## Agency

Arts organizations traditionally cultivate and hold a space of artistic freedom, and position artists as singular visionaries. This approach isn't as valuable to artists who act as community catalysts, set clear goals, and are accountable to multiple stakeholders. Instead of artistic freedom, we cultivate artistic agency by respecting and holding artists accountable to their unique change goals through artist-led field research. And we provide a variety of professional development resources that are geared toward helping artists work effectively in communities.



A teen artist creates a video game as part of 2015 ABOG Fellow The Plug-In Studio's *The Street Arcade*, a collaborative new media art project that used the medium of video games as a platform for young artists in Chicago to explore social issues important to them, and culminated in a public projection event with the local community. Image: RAVA Films

## GET INVOLVED

### **We want you to take part in participatory art!**

- Enjoy our free web content, public programs, and short films, and follow us on your social media channel of choice to learn more about all things #sociallyengagedart.
- If you're an artist who is enacting social change, we encourage you to apply to our open call.
- Contact us to make a tax-deductible donation, purchase a copy of our first publication, or to host a screening of our FIELDWORKS series in your community.
- Join our Fellowship Council to receive regular project updates and special invitations to experience the transformative work artists are doing in communities.



Visitors explore *Swale*, a floating food forest created by 2015 ABOG Fellow Mary Mattingly. Image: RAVA Films

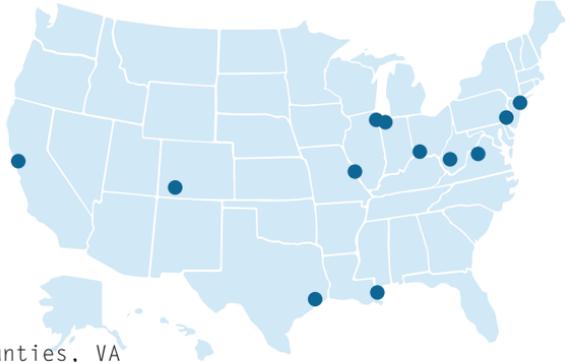
# **THE ABOG FELLOWSHIP FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART**

The ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art supports artists who are working in leadership roles, in direct partnership with communities, at an ambitious scale, to enact social change. It is an active, artist-led partnership that generates content, programming, and research about projects; professional development resources; dedicated learning experiences among a cohort of peers; and direct financial support.

## Project Location

### United States:

Oakland, CA  
San Quentin, CA  
Durango, CO  
Chicago, IL  
Gary, IN  
New Orleans, LA  
St. Louis, MO  
New York, NY  
Cincinnati, OH  
Philadelphia, PA  
Houston, TX  
Augusta + Amherst Counties, VA  
Boone County, WV



### International:



**Fellowship projects become the focus of:**

- A short, engaging documentary film directed and produced by RAVA Films
- Field research that utilizes collaborative action research methodology
- Web content and public programs
- A biennial publication
- Curriculum and advocacy
- Two dedicated opportunities to engage a cohort of peer artists

To realize this partnership artists receive \$20,000 in minimally restricted project support.



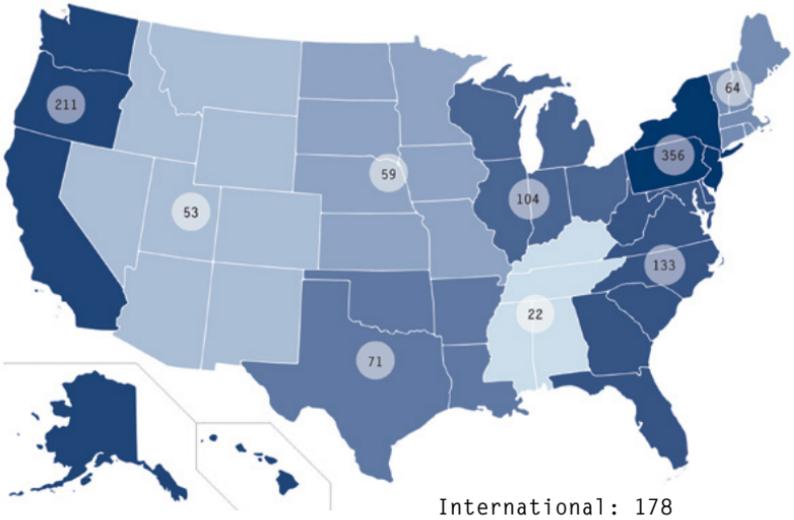
A participant contributes to the community response wall as part of 2014 ABOG Fellow Brett Cook's *Reflections of Healing* project, which promoted health equity through participatory public art installations and wellness clinics in Oakland, CA. Image: RAVA Films

## **THE ABOG**

## **OPEN CALL**

ABOG Fellowship applicants are actively solicited via a national open call that yields around 500 proposals per year. They are selected through a competitive three-stage application process from June-January that includes external review committees that change annually.

These applications are a rich source of data for understanding where artists are working, the forms socially engaged art projects take, and the array of social issues artists find important to address collaboratively.



## Applicant Region

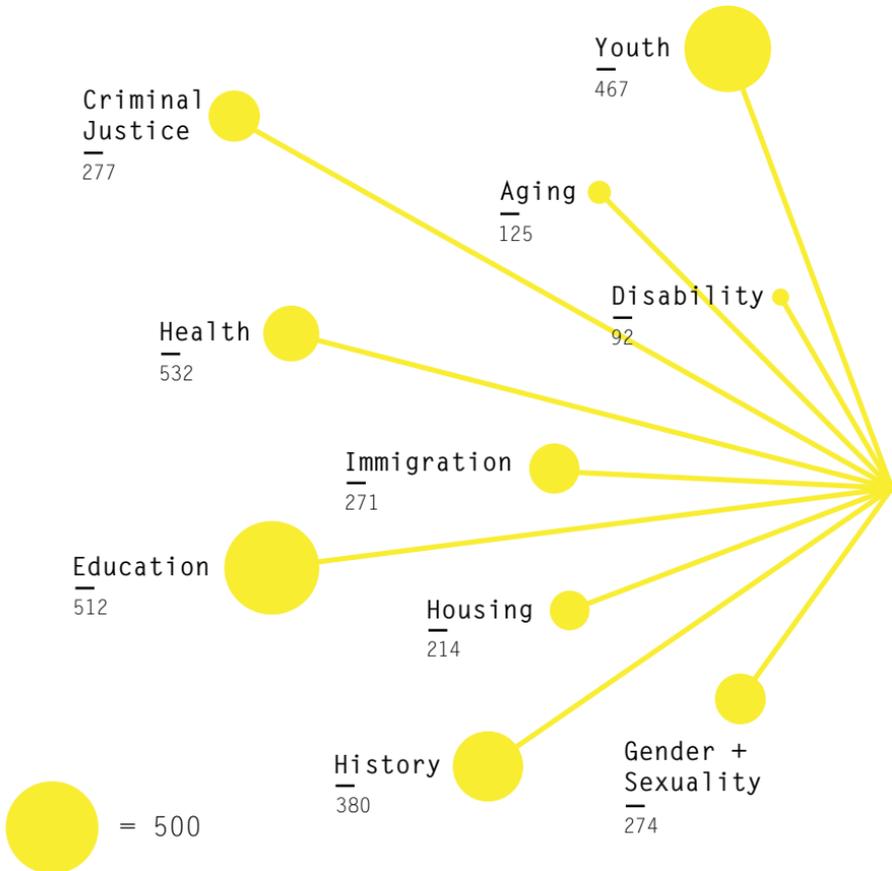
Since the first ABOG Open Call of 2013, **1,918** applications have been received from across the country and abroad.

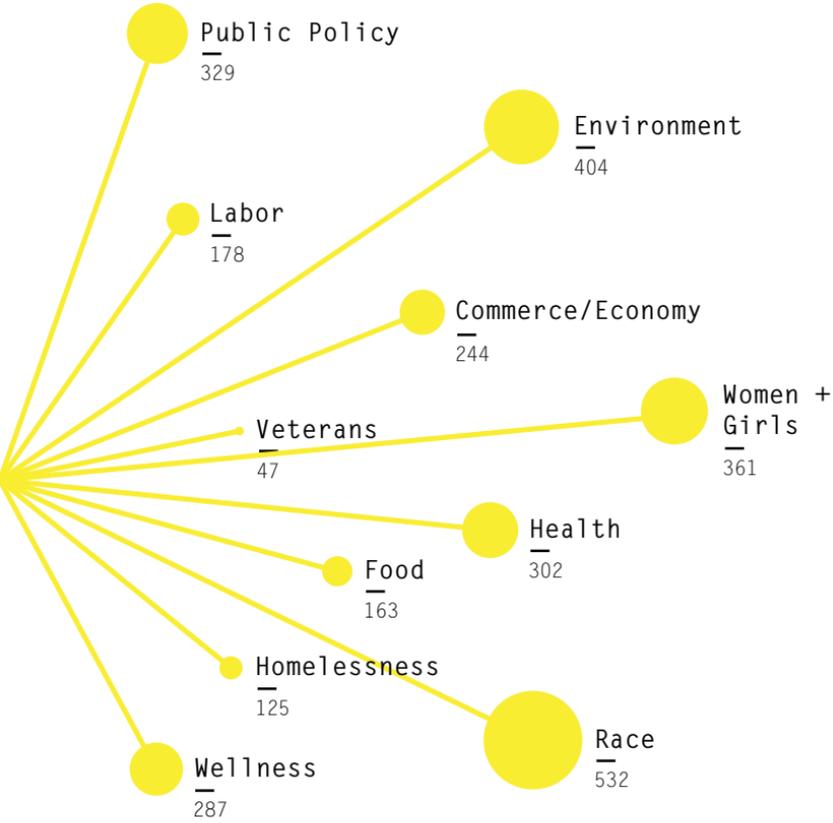
- East North Central: 104
- East South Central: 22
- Middle Atlantic: 356
- Mountain: 53
- New England: 64
- Pacific: 211
- South Atlantic: 133
- West North Central: 59
- West South Central: 71
- International: 178

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## Social Issue

ABOG Fellows imagine, model, and execute solutions to a variety of social problems. Social issues are self-selected by applicants in the first stage of the application process.







A still from *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, 2014, a performance by 2015 ABOG Fellow Dread Scott. Scott's ABOG Fellowship supported the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, a project that aims to reenact Louisiana's German Coast Uprising of 1811, the largest rebellion of enslaved people in American history. Image: © Dread Scott

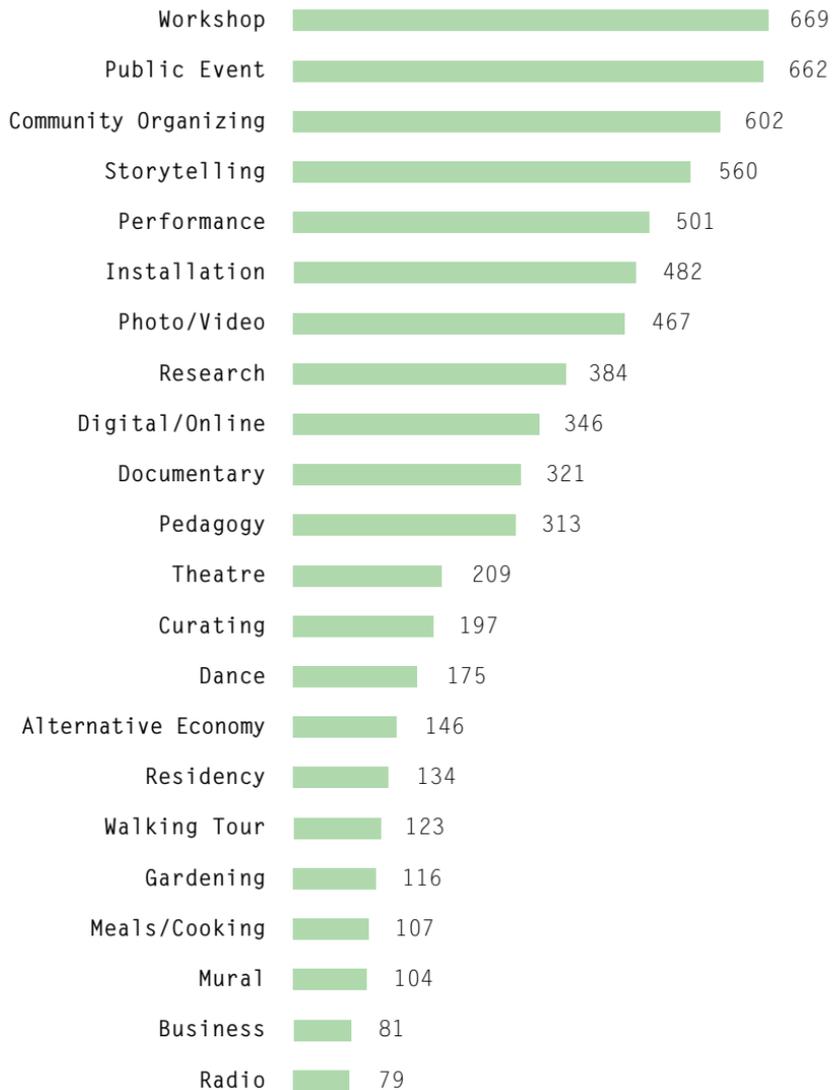


## How Artists Work

Prospective Fellows also create a variety of creative responses to social problems. A social practice project can be anything from activism to legislation. It can take the form of a game, a class, a community center, restaurant, or alternative economy. In each case, both the creative process and its product are relevant to specific people within the context of their everyday lives.



Poster for the Jornaler@ App, a project by 2015 ABOG Fellow Sol Aramendi and collaborators. Image: Courtesy Jornaler@ App





*Swale*, a floating food forest created by 2015 ABOG Fellow Mary Mattingly.  
Image: RAVA Films



An aerial photograph of a dark blue lake. In the top left corner, there is a rocky shoreline with some green vegetation. A small boat is visible on the water, leaving a white wake. The text 'FIELDW' is overlaid in large white letters on the right side of the image.

**FIELDW**

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**A BLADE C**



**WORKS**

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**OF GRASS**

## FIELDWORKS

FIELDWORKS is a short documentary series directed and produced by RAVA Films that explores the beauty, rigor, and impact of socially engaged art.

Our films have been screened nationally at venues such as the Oakland Museum of California, Parrish Art Museum, and MassArt. They have also been showcased by *Upworthy*, *Atlantic Magazine*, *Artforum*. Every FIELDWORKS film is always available at [www.abladeofgrass.org](http://www.abladeofgrass.org), or Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/abladeofgrass>.

Email us at [info@abladeofgrass.org](mailto:info@abladeofgrass.org) to organize a screening in your community!





Top: Performance as a part of Harriet's Apothecary Healing Village, organized by 2015 ABOG Fellow Adaku Utah and collaborators. Harriet's Apothecary is an intergenerational, healing village led by Black Cis Women, Queer and Trans healers, artists, health professionals, magicians, activists and ancestors that continues the healing legacy of Harriet Tubman. Image: RAVA Films

Bottom: Drone footage by 2015 ABOG Fellow Laura Chipley and collaborators, produced for the *Appalachian Mountaintop Patrol*, an environmental watchdog multimedia education initiative in Boone County, WV that documents environmental contamination resulting from coal and natural gas extraction. Image: Laura Chipley/RAVA Films

# 2014

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**Mel Chin**

**Brett Cook**

**Pablo Helguera**

**Fran Ilich**

**Jan Mun**

**SexEd**

**Jody Wood**

Stills from 2014 FIELDWORKS films, featuring (top right, clockwise): Fran Ilich, Jan Mun, SexEd, Jody Wood, Pablo Helguera, Mel Chin, and Brett Cook. Courtesy RAVA Films.

# FIELDWORKS

a blade of grass films



# 2015

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**Sol Aramendi**

**Laura Chipley**

**Suzanne Lacy**

**Mary Mattingly**

**The Plug-in Studio**

**Nigel Poor**

**Dread Scott**

**Adaku Utah**

Stills from 2015 FIELDWORKS films, featuring (top right, clockwise): Adaku Utah, Mary Mattingly, Suzanne Lacy, The Plug-In Studio, Nigel Poor, Dread Scott, Laura Chipley, and Sol Aramendi. Courtesy RAVA Films.



## **PUBLIC**

## **PROGRAMS**

Our public programs are inclusive forums designed to investigate the meaning, value, and challenges of socially engaged art. A primary goal is to build comprehension and a shared language around the practice that is relevant and inspiring to audiences both within and outside a contemporary visual arts framework.

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### **Aesthetics of Doing**

A panel discussion series targeted to contemporary art audiences that tackles the thornier aspects of social practice like ethics and authorship.

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### **Parallel Fields**

A conversation series that pairs an artist and a non-artist who are addressing similar social issues in very different ways.

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### **Reports from the Field**

A look inside Fellows' socially engaged art projects, highlighting the voices of community participants and collaborators.

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### **Fellowship Workshops**

Skill-based workshops for prospective Fellows and other artists interested in social practice.



Telesh Lopez from Caracol Interpreters Coop (far left) provides simultaneous interpretation for English-speaking guests at Reports from the Field: Apps for Power, with (left to right) 2015 ABOG Fellow Sol Aramendi, Maria Figueroa, Felix Guzman, Nadia Marin, Omar Trinidad and Elizabeth Grady, February 2016.  
Photo: Joelle Te Paske



Decolonizing Workshop with 2016 ABOG Fellow Rulan Tangen, January 2017.  
Photo: Joelle Te Paske

## **DISCUSS**

Like our public programs, our website and social media platforms are designed to explore how socially engaged art functions in everyday life.

Our new and improved online discussion forums are designed to amplify the themes presented by our Fellowship projects and public programs and invite broad participation.



Participants in Pedro Reyes's exhibition pUN at the Queens Museum read "The Blessing of the Bees," a poem written by Jesús del Toro. Published as part of essay "The Urgency of the Unseen" by Laura Raicovich in *Fertile Ground*, January 2015. Photo: Ramiro Chavez, courtesy Queens Museum

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**Fertile Ground**

A periodic journal featuring in-depth essays on issues relevant to the field.

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**Growing Dialogue**

A series of moderated online debates among thought leaders in social practice.

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**Reports from the Field**

A look inside the voices of community participants and collaborators in Fellows' socially engaged art projects.



Walter Jones, 2016 ABOG Fellow Frances Whitehead, and Deb Backhus as featured in “Planting a Creative Community Lab Orchard in Gary, Indiana,” Reports from the Field, published January 2017. Photo: Courtesy Frances Whitehead

2016 ABOG Fellow Frances Whitehead’s *Fruit Futures Initiative Gary* brings together community partners, religious groups, and academic institutions in Gary, Indiana to build a network of community orchards and conversation about cultural futures beyond conventional re-development strategies. Image: Soil sample from the Emerson area of Gary showing typical topsoil on lake plain soils, excellent for fruit growing. Photo: Frances Whitehead



## PUBLICATIONS

### FUTURE IMPERFECT

Framed by project participants and some of the discipline's most important thinkers, *Future Imperfect* is an indispensable new resource that weaves together accessible scholarship and leading examples of socially engaged art. Christian Viveros-Fauné considers social practice in a business context, Greg Sholette debates its progressive bona fides, Charles Esche ruminates on its utopian claims, and Grant Kester explores the tension between theory and practice. Essays by Deborah Fisher, Laura Raicovich, Jan Cohen-Cruz and Elizabeth Grady analyze the institutional context for the art, exploring the ways that it affects organizational structure, how its impact can be assessed, and curatorial perspectives.



*Future Imperfect* weaves together accessible scholarship and leading examples of socially engaged art.

Participant voices play a key role, as “Reports from the Field” are featured for each of the artist projects, including those by Mel Chin, Brett Cook, Pablo Helguera, Fran Ilich, SexEd, Jan Mun, and Jody Wood. Sections on each of these projects include an informative description and rich illustrations that open a window onto the artists’ practice. Additional contributions by Ben Davis, Tom Finkelpearl, Rick Lowe, and Nato Thompson help to frame the discourse, interrogating questions like ethics and effectiveness. With a foreword by Shelley Frost Rubin.



Dominic Willsdon, Tom Finkelpearl, Laura Raicovich, Rick Lowe, Ben Davis, and Shannon Jackson at Public Servants in the Future Imperfect Book Launch, New Museum, January 2017. Photo: Joelle Te Paske

# SUPPORT A BLADE OF GRASS

## ENACT SOCIAL CHANGE

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### **Join the Fellowship Council!**

Your support goes directly towards the ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, projects that are strengthening communities, and improving lives. As an important part of our community we are excited to keep you informed of project developments. You will receive two guest invitations for First Feast, our annual spring Fellows welcome; an invitation for two to Reports from the Field, a VIP reception in January to catch up with the Fellows; an artist studio visit, and a curated tour of The Armory Show.

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### **Support Free Public Programming!**

A Blade of Grass offers a minimum of 8 programs annually that are free and open to the public. These public programs investigate the meaning, value, methods and challenges of socially engaged art. We foster dialogue through rich content and experiences that are inclusive and instructive to both art practitioners and the general public. Contributors to our public program will have priority seating and be invited to a private reception with program participants.

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### **Unrestricted Gifts are awesome!**

A Blade of Grass has become widely recognized for our Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, our stimulating public programs, scholarly journal and publications. Unrestricted gifts are so important, allowing us the flexibility to direct funds to areas of organizational need. As a thank you, you will receive an invitation to our VIP tour of The Armory Show highlighting galleries and artists whose work focuses on social justice issues.

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### **Be an Alchemist!**

Join us in November for the Alchemy Awards, our annual benefit dinner honoring leaders in the fields of contemporary art and social practice. Alchemists love to party!

### **For more information please contact:**

Nicholas Cohn, Director of Development  
ncohn@abladeofgrass.org | 917-923-7982

## LEADERSHIP

### Board of Directors

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## ABOG FELLOWSHIP ALUMNI

### 2017

Stephanie Dinkins  
Hello Velocity  
Rick Lowe  
Ronny Quevedo  
Aviva Rahmani  
Ashley Sparks  
Jackie Sumell  
Freeman Word

### 2016

Xenobia Bailey  
Black Quantum Futurism  
Courtney Bowles  
& Mark Strandquist  
Chinatown Art Brigade  
Joseph Cuillier  
Simone Leigh  
Rebecca Mwase  
& Ron Ragin  
Rulan Tangen  
Frances Whitehead

### 2015

Sol Aramendi  
Laura Chipley  
Suzanne Lacy  
Mary Mattingly  
The Plug-In Studio  
Nigel Poor  
Dread Scott  
Adaku Utah

### 2014

Brett Cook  
Pablo Helguera  
Fran Ilich  
Jan Mun  
Laurie Jo Reynolds  
SexEd  
Jody Wood

### **Distinguished Artist Fellow 2013-2015**

Mel Chin

# GRATITUDE

## Groundbreakers

Agnes Gund  
Eva Haller  
Shelley Frost Rubin  
Linda Schejola

## Supporters

American Chai Trust  
Lois + Bob Baylis  
Gavin Berger  
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Eileen Caulfield Schwab  
The Cygnet Foundation  
Jessica + Edward Decker  
Abigail Disney  
Douglass Durst  
Andrew Edlin  
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Tom Finkelppearl  
Rella Fogliano  
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Lukas Haynes  
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Sarah Murkett



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 Richard Simon  
 Lee Skolnick +  
 Jo Ann Secor  
 Manon Slome

Courtney Smith  
 Katie Sonnenborn  
 Sarina Tang  
 Katie Wilson-Milne

## FIRST FIELD

**We are forever grateful to the visionary First Field of individuals who supported the ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art in its first year.**

Annette Blum  
Kim Brizzolara  
Tom Finkelpearl  
Michael Fisch  
Basha Frost Rubin  
Roxanne Cason  
Andrew Edlin  
The Home Depot  
Foundation  
John E. Osborn  
Lisa Schejola + Jeffrey Akin  
Daniel Schwartz +  
Csongor Kis  
Richard Simon  
Katie Wilson-Milne  
Caron Atlas  
Sigmund R. + Elinor B. Balka  
Lois + Robert Baylis  
Roberto Bedoya  
James Benjamin  
Janisa Brunstein  
Cindy + Ed Campbell  
Emebet Cheru

Jessica Decker  
Ruth Giorges Cheru  
Beatrice Coron  
Hannah Entwisle  
Allison Feuer  
Jack Feuer  
Ben Feuer  
Miles Feuer  
Fine Arts Club of Grant  
MacEwan University  
Olivia Georgia  
Anne Germanacos  
Ellen Gesner  
Julia Gesner  
Rachel Gesner  
Lisa Gold  
Scott Grinsell  
Gale Grinsell  
Ray Grinsell  
John Hatfield  
Naomi Hersson-Ringskog  
Lauren Hochman  
Ronnie Hochman

Jeremy Hochman  
Joshua Hochman  
Kemi Ilesanmi  
Alfredo Jaar  
Marisa M. Jahn  
Juliette Kleiman  
Ken Kleiman  
Koshin + Chodo  
Bob Krasner  
Ava Krasner  
Jesse Krasner  
Carin Kuoni  
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Luke McFarland  
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Ivana Mestrovic  
Ari Peskoe  
David Polakoff  
Paul Ramirez Jonas

Amanda Rubin  
Donald Rubin  
Laurel Rubin  
Alyana Rubin  
Danil Rubin  
Marat Rubin  
Gloria Sanchez  
Nelson Santos  
Steven Schindler +  
Susan Kath  
Eileen Caufield Schwab  
Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz  
Marina Staiano  
Ellen Staller  
Karen Stults  
Sarina Tang  
Derrick A. Te Paske  
Liz Valentin  
Rachel Weingeist  
Leticia Williams  
Beverley D. Zabriskie



Nurturing Socially  
Engaged Art

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