

A Blade of Grass Announces Plans to Restructure Its Operations and Program In Response to Financial Challenges Spurred by the COVID-19 Pandemic

New York—September 29, 2020—A Blade of Grass, the national nonprofit that supports socially engaged art, announced today it will begin a multi-year restructuring process in October 2020. Following six months of financial challenges spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and related nationwide shutdowns, the organization determined that it can no longer sustain its work and staff and will need to substantively alter both its operating model and programmatic scope to ensure its future ability to support artists. As part of this process, A Blade of Grass will lay off its current five-person full-time staff in October and cut salary and benefits for its Executive Director, Deborah Fisher. The decision, made by Fisher with support from the Board of Trustees, comes at a moment when many smaller nonprofits and alternative art spaces are facing existential threats due to disruptions in their regular fundraising activities and the increased need for financial support across the arts landscape.

A Blade of Grass, which for nearly ten years has supported the work of socially engaged artists, is most readily recognized for its Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art. Through the program, eight artists are annually awarded \$20,000 each to develop and implement art projects that illuminate and address the critical social, political, and economic issues faced by different communities. The organization also conducts research and advocacy about socially engaged art, stages public programs, and produces a wide range of films, interviews, and other content, including a biannual magazine, to build audiences for and discourse about the work of artists, community leaders, and other creative and civic partners.

As part of its restructuring, A Blade of Grass will sunset its fellowships, with the 2020 Artist Fellows announced in March of this year serving as the last cohort in the program. The organization has provided the 2020 Fellows with their full cash awards and will carry through project-related commitments. Over the course of its upcoming 2021 fiscal year, A Blade of Grass will pilot a commissioning model, in which it takes a more active and collaborative role in bringing a smaller number of projects to fruition, and will continue with a focused slate of content development and public programs related to these commissioned works. It will also engage in listening sessions with artists in and outside of its community to better understand their needs, so that it can further determine a model and approach that is both fiscally sustainable and responsive to the real-world concerns of working artists.

“A Blade of Grass was founded on the belief that art is everywhere and for everybody, and that artists are essential to creating healthier, more just, and sustainable communities. In a moment when socially engaged artists have a particularly critical role to play, we are also being faced with the reality that arts funding, in its

current form, is precarious precisely because the arts are perceived as serving too few,” said Fisher. “While we could not have predicted these circumstances, we have to deal with the moment as it exists and make the difficult but necessary decisions now to establish a more sustainable model that will allow the organization to continue to fulfill its mission and the commitment it made to supporting socially engaged art and the artists who create it. These are painful choices, but ones that will help ensure that there is a future for the organization and therefore new opportunities on the horizon.”

Facing Financial Realities

An early advocate for socially engaged art, A Blade of Grass embraced the beauty and power of an artform that is created collaboratively and rooted in developing the high-trust relationships necessary to foster civic engagement, community organizing, and movement building. At the same time, the organization’s leadership recognized that socially engaged art can be difficult to define by traditional artistic standards and therefore artists practicing it often find themselves at a disadvantage in securing needed funds.

In response, the organization established an innovative hybrid model that paired direct funding of artists’ projects with programs, experiences, content, and research that introduces this vital work to donors and grows the community of support. Because most donors—whether individuals, national foundations, or government agencies—prefer to donate to artists, programs, or projects directly, the model has always been challenging to uphold and the organization relied heavily on in-person events, trips, and experiences to secure the majority of its approximate \$1M annual operating budget. With COVID-19 bringing in-person fundraising to halt, A Blade of Grass found itself approximately \$300,000 short of its annual budget in fiscal year 2020. To buttress its budget in the period from April to July, leadership cut organizational expenses by \$100,000, secured PPP funding to support staff salaries, and dipped further into its operational reserve funds.

With COVID-related restrictions continuing to hamper its normal fundraising efforts, and with no clear conclusion in sight, A Blade of Grass faced an existential dilemma. The organization could continue to draw down its operational reserve, which would allow it to continue to operate largely unchanged for approximately another eight to ten months. Such a decision would secure some jobs in the near-term and allow for one more cycle in its Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, but would likely mean sunseting the organization as whole within a year—only deferring the full range of layoffs and permanently concluding its support for artists.

Following several months of evaluation and discussion between Executive Director Deborah Fisher and the Board of Trustees, leadership determined to take another, equally difficult, route: to dismantle A Blade of Grass in its current form—its model, program, and, unfortunately, its team—and rebuild it, with the same core mission but a different, more sustainable operating model. The decision would mean tough choices in the near-term but a better set of opportunities in the long run. Leadership made this choice with the belief that

now more than ever, artists have a concrete role in developing solutions to seemingly intractable social challenges, and that artists engaging with these issues need more consistent and sustainable support into the future.

Staff were notified two months in advance of impending layoffs, which will go into effect on October 15. All five of the affected full-time staff members will be given an additional pay period's worth of severance, the option to keep computer equipment, and will maintain health benefits through November 1, 2020. In the immediate, Fisher, who has been with the organization since its inception in 2011, will be the only full-time staff member and will take a 10% pay cut and relinquish all of her benefits. One full-time associate-level position will be created in the coming months—a role that was offered to the current staff.

Establishing A New Future

Establishing a future for A Blade of Grass is intrinsically tied with the organization's ongoing belief in the importance of socially engaged art practice and its growing relevance in a moment of social, political, and economic upheaval. In the coming year, Fisher will be responsible for piloting a new operational model and programmatic approach as well as for fundraising for A Blade of Grass's future.

Going into the process, the organization will be experimenting with a commissioning model, in which it can forge deeper and more engaged relationships with artists and the communities they are working in. Commissions may come in the form of long-term projects, programs, or research and content development. The vision is to take an expansive listening-based approach to engaging with artists and making their work more visible and to embrace a wide range of possible outcomes, so that the organization is using its limited resources to be most responsive to creative needs. While A Blade of Grass anticipates that this effort will drive it to more local relationships in the very near-term, it remains open to collaborating with artists across the United States.

The commissioning approach also offers new avenues for fundraising, an essential element to A Blade of Grass's ongoing viability. Organizational leadership knows from experience that specificity of focus can have a significant impact on identifying revenue sources and commitments. By working more actively and directly on a smaller range of projects, it can present a clearer set of objectives to prospective funders, increasing the likelihood of securing funds. The project specificity will also enable it to apply for new funds and grants for which it was previously not eligible.

Equally important, Fisher will be leading a range of listening sessions with artists, community leaders, and other prior and prospective partners. In making the difficult decision to restructure, the organization is committed to establishing a model and approach that engages with the current realities and is responsive to the needs of artists and our universally changed circumstances. A Blade of Grass has throughout its history

been successful in bringing together direct support for artists with content creation that further illuminates their work and this underrepresented artistic field as a whole—a largely singular approach. It intends to bring that same spirit of innovation and openness to experimentation to developing its new methodology, with the artist perspective centered at its core. The organization remains open to creating new systems that could be much different than what it is currently considering, and recognizes that it may decide to operate in a manner that is currently largely unexpected.

“As we begin on this new path, we are going to do what we’ve always done—listen to artists. We have always been most successful when we’ve positioned artists as leaders and co-creators in our work, and developed programs, content, and experiences that respect and respond to the realities and needs of their projects,” said Fisher. “This is a challenging moment, and it is demanding that we ask big picture questions about why we all need art, where it needs to be right now, and how we might best support and amplify the important work artists are doing to share the creative process within communities. We have to listen, and learn what artists need and what the future holds, so that we rebuild in the right direction. Our success depends entirely on being open to an unknown future, and on remaining in service to the important work artists are doing.”

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