

# East Bay Community Foundation

## Weaving Artists into Community Fabric

By Ann McQueen

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development goals, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the [Animating Democracy](#) website for other Funder Portraits and [Resources](#).

Listen to a [podcast interview](#) by **Ann McQueen** with **Diane Sanchez**, Director of Community Investment, East Bay Community Foundation.

View the Profile: [Rock Paper Scissors Collective](#).

*The [East Bay Community Foundation](#) makes grants to artists and artist-centered nonprofits to assure that East Bay's multi-cultural, multi-racial artists have the resources they need to advance their community-based practices, tackle social issues, and give back to local audiences. The foundation's arts grantmaking of close to \$250,000 is drawn from three donor-supported funds that, despite separate awards processes, work synergistically to advance art that grows out of and impacts the East Bay community. The Macpherson Fund for Small Arts Organizations, an endowed fund, supports community-based nonprofits with a strong volunteer component and/or that present art growing out of Oakland's various racial or ethnic traditions. Open Circle Foundation, a supporting organization, supports artists with deep community roots and a history of commitment to social issues beyond their artistic practice. The East Bay Fund for Artists, a field of interest fund, supports commissions for new work and requires a 1-to-1 match from individual donors. Despite limited financial resources, East Bay's model grantmaking program is guided by an understanding of the power of art and cultural equity, coupled with deep staff knowledge of the local arts scene.*



Rock, Paper, Scissors Collective in Oakland, CA, formed by a group of emerging artists, offers low-cost or free classes, such as one with St. Vincent de Paul on making new fashion out of old clothes.

The [East Bay Community Foundation](#), established in 1928 and now stewarding about \$370 million in assets, has more than 500 separate funds, including permanently endowed funds, donor advised funds, supporting foundations and affiliated city-based community funds. All together, these funds distribute between \$55 million and \$70 million a year. Most of its discretionary grants—about \$1 million a year—go towards “enhancing economic opportunities for adults and families” and “preparing young children—from birth to third grade—to succeed.”<sup>1</sup>

In the arts, East Bay’s grantmaking is entirely donor supported. Three separate funds—the Open Circle Foundation, a supporting organization; Macpherson Fund for Small Arts Organizations, an endowment; and the East Bay Fund for Artists, a funder initiative and field of interest fund<sup>2</sup>—together distribute close to \$250,000 annually through separate grant making rounds.<sup>3</sup> All three are centered on cultural equity and access for artists, no matter their linguistic, racial or ethnic background and on artist-driven work that is based in, reflects, and gives back to the East Bay community.



Diane Sanchez, Director of Community Investment, East Bay Community Foundation

How did this shared strategic focus on East Bay artists emerge from three very different donors or funder groups? “It’s about weaving,” Diane Sanchez says, “braiding everything together with common themes and unifying principles.”<sup>4</sup>

Diane Sanchez served on the board of the East Bay Community Foundation in Oakland, California for eight years before joining its staff in 2000. As its Director of Community Investment, she works with individual donors and helps shape the foundation’s grantmaking strategies across all sectors, paying particular attention to its support for the arts.

Diane has watched the East Bay arts scene evolve for more than 20 years. San Francisco’s high costs, she reminds us, drive many young artists to Oakland, which now claims the country’s

*The East Bay Community Foundation, established in 1928 and now stewarding about \$370 million in assets, serves the donors and communities of Alameda and Contra Costa counties in California. Its total grant making, including discretionary and donor advised awards, ranges from \$55 to \$70 million a year. Most of its discretionary funds, about \$1 million a year, are devoted to advancing economic opportunity for adults and families in need and preparing young children to succeed.*

highest concentrations of artists per capita.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of this region’s lively, socially conscious arts scene is easy to find. Public art and music venues are ubiquitous. The [California College of the Arts](#) awards degrees in community arts. Monthly art walks known as [Art Murmur](#) draw thousands to Oakland’s gallery district for receptions, street performances, one-night art installations, and social and political activities.

But Sanchez also notes that local artists and small artist-led nonprofits have very few

grant opportunities. Under her leadership, the community foundation, as the repository of funds with a conscious focus on the region's multi-cultural, multi-racial arts scene, has begun to change this. "What I have done is use my knowledge of the arts in East Bay, my knowledge of trends in the arts, and the purposes of these [three] funds. ... I've woven them together to allow synergy among them and to be able to roll up a greater impact than if all three were randomly making grants."

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## MACPHERSON FUND FOR SMALL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

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One of the community foundation's donors endowed the Macpherson Fund for Small Arts Organizations, launched in 1997, to continue support for the kinds of community-based nonprofits that had long been the focus of her volunteer work. The fund, which has a particular interest in nonprofits with a strong volunteer component and/or that present art growing out of Oakland's various racial or ethnic traditions, generates about \$100,000 a year. This was distributed in grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 through a typical responsive process until the 2008 recession when grantmaking had to be suspended. The endowment's balance had fallen below the value of the original gift; any spending would jeopardize its ability to last into perpetuity.<sup>6</sup>

A year later when it was prudent to resume making grants, Sanchez and her staff faced one of philanthropy's perpetual challenges: how to maximize the value and impact of distributed dollars without challenging the administrative capacities of nonprofit or foundation. High rates of denied requests serve neither. Since the 2010 cycle, she has reached out to the cohort of previous grantees, along with a few new organizations that meet the fund's strict criteria, to invite proposals. In the meantime, Sanchez and her staff are developing crisper guidelines with a letter of inquiry process to make it easier for small and sometimes all-volunteer agencies to apply.

The tenor of Macpherson grantmaking as well as the vibrancy of the East Bay arts scene is evident in a selection of current and past grantees:

- [Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California](#), which presents writing workshops, classes in calligraphy and traditional Persian music, film series and cultural celebrations.



Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir. Photo: Matt Beardsley

- [Oakland Asian Cultural Center](#), in the heart of the city’s Chinatown district, presents performances, workshops, festivals, classes and school tours featuring the art and culture of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans.
- [Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir](#) is a multi-racial interfaith group of vocalists that performs locally and internationally and is on call for the community, offering solace and songs of hope, unity, and justice in times of crisis.
- [Shotgun Players](#), with a full-time staff of five, is a company of artists that commissions and supports the development of new plays while presenting a full season of affordable theater.
- [The Great Wall of Oakland](#) is a 100 foot by 100 foot projection installation that curates and screens videos—“cutting edge motion art”—by international and local artists, as well as students from the Oakland School for the Arts, every first Friday during Oakland Art Murmur.

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## THE OPEN CIRCLE FOUNDATION

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The [Open Circle Foundation](#), East Bay’s largest single source of arts funding, is artist-funded and artist-focused. Now in her 70s, painter Dorothy C. Weicker established Open Circle in 2001 with income from the sale of two sculptures by Spanish artist Antonio Lopez Garcia. She had supported fellow artists, sometimes giving directly, sometimes through a third party, for a long time. Now, by establishing Open Circle as a time-limited, independent supporting foundation<sup>7</sup> with its own nonprofit status and board of directors, Weicker benefits from the advice and administrative capacity of the community foundation while continuing to direct support to East Bay artists.

There are two East Bay Community Foundation staff members—Sanchez and associate program officer Nicole Kyauk—on the Open Circle board. Three practicing artists—two visual artists, including the founding donor, and an educational consultant who writes books for children—complete the governance team.

When this group began making grants in 2004, there wasn’t a particularly clear focus, just the simple mandate to support good nonprofits, good projects and good artists. Initially, the grants list included school-based and out-of-school youth development projects, as well as arts-based experiential learning and literacy programs. Most awards were in the \$5,000 to \$7,000 range and, with only about 20 applications a cycle, the process was manageable. But after the community foundation developed a website for Open Circle, it became more broadly known; requests grew to 50 or 60, a heavy docket that far exceeded available funds, staff’s administrative capacity, and the volunteer board’s endurance. Open Circle’s interests evolved, too. As the



board met at site visits and came together at the community foundation to discuss specific requests, it began to look more deeply at the role of individual artists in the East Bay community.

In mid 2012, Open Circle Foundation published new [guidelines](#), noting that because “times are increasingly difficult for individual artists and collaborating artists working in collaboration to find support for their projects, we are moving away from funding organizations to funding artists.” It would continue to make grants once a year, but now, it would focus on “artists working in communities where they have deep roots in the community and on issues where they have a strong history of commitment beyond their artistic practice.”

That the focus is on the work, not the issue, is clear from Open Circle’s guidelines. The website does note an interest in “innovative, site specific, well placed, original work” and in 2011, it awarded the cities of Oakland and Berkeley \$100,000 each for public art projects. It also has an affinity for “artists and projects that reflect on and use the natural environment as themes.” But Open Circle is not explicitly an environmental funder, nor is it specifically focused on public art. There is no over-arching goal. “We’ve elected not to be consistent,” Sanchez notes. Instead, its funding is motivated by a commitment to East Bay’s diverse pool of artists and, as the guidelines note, a desire to support their “projects as part of a circle of vision, engagement and creation.”



Combat Paper Project. Silk screen printing on handmade paper made from uniforms. Photo: [Combat Paper Project](#) website.

Open Circle’s grant making process changed along with its guidelines. The applicant, with a fiscal agent or their own nonprofit status, begins by submitting a budget and a two-page Letter of Inquiry (LOI) that responds to three core questions: “How does the project fit with or extend your current practice? How are you connected to this community or issue? Who are your partners in this work?”<sup>8</sup> This screen, coupled with more precise funding criteria, narrows the applicant pool, making the process more manageable and freeing the board and staff to concentrate on what matters most—the

art makers and their projects. The new process also eases the burden on the artist applicant as only a handful will be asked to submit work samples and additional details about their project, partners, plans for outreach, and the presenting venue or location.

Next, the board comes together for about a week of site visits—studio visits—to the applicant artists. They will also make return visits to artists who’ve completed work with an Open Circle award. Sanchez describes these as thoughtful, personal, and deeply satisfying artist-to-artist conversations.

At the end of the week, the board sits down in a typical panel process to review work samples and talk about what they've seen. Nuts-and-bolts issues of budgets, feasibility, and grant size come up as they tabulate rating sheets and match their preliminary decisions against available funds. Through all this, the board is clear that it doesn't want to hinder the artist by making small grants that require a lot of additional fundraising; its awards are now \$20,000 to \$50,000. Still, Open Circle is "never the only funder. We want to fund projects that will be completed because they've been scoped and budgeted properly," Sanchez says. But as the board's panel process narrows the applicant pool down to the final four grantees, "It's about supporting artists and supporting good work. ... At the end of the day, it's about innovative, interesting work in communities by artists whose vision excites us."

Open Circle's commitment to supporting community-based, rather than studio-based arts practices shares the Macpherson Fund's interest in smaller, artist-led organizations. For example:

- [Kim Anno](#) is a painter, photographer, and video artist whose work focuses on issues of climate change and the rising sea levels. Open Circle's grant supports "Men and Women in Water Cities," a two-channel video shot at Venice Beach, an Oakland swimming pool and a beach in Durban, South Africa.
- Public artist [Alan Leon](#) received funding for his Temescal Flows mural project, painted on columns supporting an elevated highway in North Oakland to evoke the Temescal Creek, which is now buried in underground culverts.
- [Combat Paper Project](#), led by artist-veteran Drew Cameron, helps combat veterans turn their uniforms into handmade paper and works of art that express their experiences with the military.
- [KALA Art Institute](#) helps artists sustain their creative efforts through residency and fellowship programs, space rentals, exhibitions, and public programming.
- [Rock Paper Scissors Collective](#) is a volunteer-run community arts space in the middle of Oakland's downtown arts scene that offers free and low-cost classes, curated and open submission art shows, and a retail outlet for DIY clothes, crafts, zines, and music.

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## EAST BAY FUND FOR ARTISTS

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The commitment to ethnic and cultural equity and diversity that drives Open Circle and the Macpherson Fund grantmaking is also at the heart of the community foundation's signature arts funding program, the [East Bay Fund for Artists](#). This field of interest fund supports commissions

for new work and, because it requires a 1-to-1 match from individual donors, compels artists to reach out to new donors while asking current donors to increase their historical giving. This matching requirement also encourages East Bay donors, many of whom direct their personal philanthropy through the community foundation, to broaden their giving beyond traditional arts organizations to include edgier art-making.

The fund was launched in collaboration with the [San Francisco Foundation](#) in 2004 as the Fund for Artists Matching Commissions in response to [Leveraging Investments in Creativity's](#) (LINC) [Creative Communities](#) initiative, with additional support from individual arts donors, and the [Ford](#), [William and Flora Hewlett](#), [James Irvine](#), [Surdna](#) and [Wattis](#) Foundations. In its first five years, the initiative awarded \$658,750 in grants of \$5,000 to \$10,000 each to commission 116 new works involving 181 Bay Area artists, triggering \$729,254 in contributions from individuals. "In the beginning, it was just about funding arts organizations. But we discovered that really it was the artists that were driving the process so we opened it up to direct applications from artists with a fiscal sponsor or their own 501(c)(3). Even when an organization originated the application, we sometimes allocated our funds for the artists' fees only."

In addition to its commissioning grants, the initiative also provided collaborative marketing opportunities and presented workshops to help artists share their learning about how to "make the ask." In the beginning, Sanchez reports, both the workshops and the commissioning grants, which require a significant match from individual donors, were a hard sell. "The artists said they couldn't do it, couldn't engage donors one-on-one. Now they are so much more sophisticated about how to reach out to individual donors." And this is true, she says, even of artists for whom English is a second language.



Favianna Rodriguez (center), printmaker, graphic artist, and self-described "agitator and techie working for social change."

The two community foundations<sup>9</sup> reflected on their collaboration and the motivations of individual donors in "[It's Not About You...It's About Them](#)," a 2010 research report about what motivates individual donors to give to art and artists. Compared to donors to large cultural institutions, individuals giving to commissions through the Fund for Artists were more likely to support social justice causes and environmental conservation while aligning themselves with the local community and progressive ideas.

The Fund for Artists' donor-supported grantmaking also reflects this progressive commitment to the environment, diversity, and social justice, while showing the same commitment to individual artists as Open Circle. For example:

- [Los Cenzontles](#), a band, music academy, community space and nonprofit, collaborated with David Hildago of [Los Lobos](#) to create "Songs of Wood and Steel," an album and performance that explores Mexican musical traditions.
- [Favianna Rodriguez](#), a printmaker, graphic artist and self-described "agitator and techie working for social change," works on the leading edge of immigration reform with Oakland's [Eastside Arts Alliance](#) of artists, cultural workers, and community organizers of color, and [CultureStrike](#), a national initiative and magazine on the immigrant experience.
- [AXIS Dance Company](#), which creates and performs work developed through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities, has received a number of Fund for Artists grants for its annual commissioning projects.

The Fund for Artists once distributed \$80,000 to \$100,000 in commissioning grants to East Bay artists through two annual funding rounds. But the support of its institutional donors is dwindling: the Irvine Foundation has a new arts strategy and LINC's support ended in September 2011. Now, only the Hewlett Foundation and East Bay Community Foundation donors remain, making the Fund more modest and, as a result, increasingly competitive. "We are recognizing that we've got fewer resources in the East Bay than we had before," Sanchez says. Just as other sources of artists' funding are drying up, the Fund for Artists will be reduced to one workshop and only one funding round distributing \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year through 2014.

*You have to believe that artists have a genuine vision and important contributions to make to discussions of social issues. ... They have a genuine voice that can elevate these issues.*  
Diane Sanchez

Other changes are under consideration. The maximum grant amount may have to be lowered; grantee artists may have to skip an application round; or, like Open Circle, a Letter of Inquiry process may serve to limit the number of proposals that go before the review panel; or applications may be limited to presenting organizations under a certain budget size. Once again, East Bay is faced with the all too familiar push-pull of resources versus need.

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## CONCLUSION

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What's next for East Bay artists? Of the three funds at the East Bay Community Foundation, only one, the Macpherson Fund, is endowed. The Open Circle Foundation will soon deplete its



resources. The Fund for Artists, a field of interest fund, is a donor initiative once led by LINC, a time-limited initiative to improve the conditions of artists that will close its doors in June 2013. While Hewlett remains for now, the future of what LINC called a “highly successful model”<sup>10</sup> is uncertain.

The staff members of any community foundation can console themselves knowing that there will be new donors and funding sources on the horizon. Indeed, the Fund for Artists may be pivotal to the growth of the foundation’s resources for the arts. The local donors who matched the Fund’s commissioning grants have learned the value of giving to their region’s diverse artists; perhaps the next donor-supported artists fund will come from one or several of them. In the meantime, Sanchez is aware of several testamentary funds that, after the death of the donor, will provide ongoing support for the arts.

Sanchez is philosophical about how a strategic focus on cultural equity and East Bay artists emerged from three very different donors or funder groups. “The shape of our story is based on ... a very finite amount of money. ... That has caused me to think differently. ... You have to believe that artists have a genuine vision and important contributions to make to discussions of social issues. ... They have a genuine voice that can elevate these issues.”

Based on this understanding of the power of art and cultural equity, coupled with a deep staff knowledge of the local arts scene, East Bay Community Foundation has focused on assuring that East Bay’s multi-cultural, multi-racial artists have the resources they need to advance their community-based practice of tackling social issues and giving back to local audiences. This is grantmaking that’s guided by one essential question: how does the artist’s work grow out of and impact East Bay the community?

As Diane Sanchez reminds us, “It’s about weaving, braiding everything together with common themes and unifying principles.” It’s about patching, we might add. It’s about weaving, braiding and patching to create a whole-cloth tapestry of arts funding.



**Ann McQueen**, principal at [McQueen Philanthropic](#), an advisory service for foundations and individuals, has nearly 20 years experience in philanthropy. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation’s arts grantmaking, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector. She is a member of the boards of Boston Natural Areas Network, which preserves and advocates for urban open space, and Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> East Bay Community Foundation website, [www.ebcf.org/about-us/](http://www.ebcf.org/about-us/), retrieved December 4, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> A *field of interest fund* is created by the contributions of several donors to be held and managed by a community foundation for a specific charitable purpose.

<sup>3</sup> Donors to the East Bay Community Foundation also support the arts through their donor advised funds, but these grants are not included here.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Sanchez, Director of Community Investment, East Bay Community Foundation, spoke with the author on November 20, 2012 and January 16, 2013; all quotes are drawn from those conversations.

<sup>5</sup> "[Oakland, California](#)" from Wikipedia retrieved January 17, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act (UPMIFA) provides guidance on investment and disbursement decisions to foundations and nonprofits with endowments. This includes the requirement that they not spend below the original value of the endowment, also known as the "historic dollar value" of the gift, and that investing and spending be at a rate that preserves the purchasing power of the principal over the long term.

<sup>7</sup> A *supporting organization*, also known as a *supporting foundation*, is a separate nonprofit that has public charity status because of its connection with and support of a named public charity, in this case the community foundation. It operates with its own board of directors and is a 509(a)(3) under the Internal Revenue Code.

<sup>8</sup> Open Circle Foundation: how to apply, <http://www.art4environment.org/apply.html>.

<sup>9</sup> The San Francisco Foundation ended its participation in the Fund for Artists Matching Commissions program after the release of the 2010 publication "It's Not About You...It's About Them."

<sup>10</sup> From the LINC website, <http://www.lincnet.net/creative-communities/all-community-challenge-grantees/san-francisco> retrieved January 28, 2013.