

# STANDING FOR CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

## THE USDAC'S POLICY AND ACTION PLATFORM SUMMARY



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# A BRIEF SUMMARY OF STANDING FOR CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: THE USDAC'S POLICY AND ACTION PLATFORM

**THIS CULTURAL POLICY PLATFORM IS OFFERED BY THE PEOPLE-POWERED U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE**, a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging. It emerges from the USDAC's ongoing action research, engaging people across the U.S. in articulating hopes, dreams, and concerns through art and culture.

We offer this platform to amplify ideas that can advance social healing and a future that countless Citizen Artists have told us they wish to inhabit: **CULTURAL DEMOCRACY** grounded in equity and engagement; full **CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP**, belonging without barrier; and deep respect for the **RIGHT TO CULTURE**—expression, participation, recognition—underpinning any just and caring society. We understand **CULTURE** in many senses, but the foundation is a medium for growth for ideas, expressions, individuals, and communities. Ideas are essential to nurture the national conversation needed to reveal the true depth of demand for cultural democracy. Ideas are essential, yes, but without action they are stillborn.

**WE INTEND THIS PLATFORM AS A CALL TO ACTION THAT TRANSCENDS AND UNITES ACROSS LINES OF DIFFERENCE.** *We invite all to endorse, share, discuss, propose, experiment with, and advocate for this platform, which we hope will inspire reflection and action at many levels: national, regional, local, individual.*

*We are ready and willing to assist and collaborate as needed. Please download the full platform at [usdac.us](http://usdac.us). Then call on us to collaborate!*

In this platform, we describe ten ways to advance toward cultural democracy, a social order which embodies and affirms the right to culture in every aspect of our public and private policies; welcomes each individual as a whole, creative person; values each community's heritage, contributions, and aspirations; promotes care, reciprocity, and open communication across all lines of difference; and dismantles all barriers to love and justice.

**EVERYTHING HUMAN BEINGS DO IS ROOTED IN AND SUSTAINED BY CULTURE.** It is the medium for all social action. Culture influences the ways we comprehend and feel

about social problems and challenges. Our stories help to shape the world, either nurturing empathy or foreclosing it. Therefore racism is a cultural issue. Homophobia is a cultural issue. Gender bias is a cultural issue. Climate crisis is a cultural issue. The polarization of wealth is a cultural issue. Cultural policy is the aggregate of values and principles guiding any social entity in matters touching on culture. Cultural policies are most often made by governments, from school boards to legislatures, but also by many private-sector institutions, from corporations to community organizations. Policies provide guideposts for those making decisions and taking actions that intervene in culture or affect cultural life. To address our challenges, we need to engage new experiences, behaviors, and understandings—to change culture to change the world. We need to cultivate social imagination and empathy, two skills central to the work of artists who work for community and equity. To devise fresh and powerful ways to reconceive social arrangements and institutions, we need creativity and freedom.

**THE TIME IS RIPE.** Artists and their allies are showing up everywhere, investing creativity in social and environmental justice. Yet the right to culture is under attack. This nation has experienced a long, painful stretch of punishment and persecution by a system that treats identity as a crime: driving while Black, protecting sacred lands and waters, walking in one's own city, dancing in a public club.

In asserting the right to culture enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we stake two crucial, inalienable claims:

- First, that the right to culture is a fundamental human right regardless of race, gender, orientation, ability, religion, ethnicity, immigration status, or any other personal or collective characteristic.
- Second, that rights are only as real as the resources used to protect, express, and extend them. Widespread awareness, purposeful effort, and significant investment are imperative.

*Please join us. Endorse, share, and act on this platform. Cultural democracy demands nothing less.*

### **1. INSTITUTE A NEW PUBLIC SERVICE JOBS PROGRAM.**

*Twice before—in the 1930s with the Works Progress Administration and the 1970s with the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act—this country’s response to widespread unemployment led to public service jobs.* They put thousands of artists and creative workers (along with those in other sectors) to work in strengthening cultural infrastructure and social fabric, giving all Americans access to social goods that the marketplace deems a privilege for those who can afford them. There is ample evidence that strong arts programs reduce public spending, making them cost-savers even as they enhance quality of life. This case for a Culture Corps is being made via programs in creative aging, arts and health, intensive after-school arts programs, and in correctional institutions.

We call for three innovations: (1) Establish publicly funded public service jobs programs that address cultural fabric as well as physical infrastructure; (2) Expand Percent for Art Ordinances to include artists in residence, community-engaged projects, and creative social cohesion activities led by artists; and (3) Direct existing public service jobs, in both public and private sectors, to employing artists to strengthen cultural fabric and advance social goods. The full platform offers specific suggestions for local-scale experimentation with public service arts employment.

### **2. SUPPORT A CULTURE OF JUSTICE AND EQUITY.**

*Cultural rights are only as real as the resources used to protect, express, and extend them.* Even a glance at the numbers reflects more lip-service than investment in human rights and racial equity through our local, state, regional, and national arts agencies. Private-sector support to artists and groups tilts strongly toward big-budget Eurocentric organizations that can mobilize wealthy patrons. From the municipal level to the national, the picture is the same.

We call for two innovations: (1) Support cultural equity: a fair share of federal, state, and local resources and power for all communities; and (2) Support a national learning community to engage allies for racial justice through online and in-person learning venues; sustainable exchanges engaging individuals, organizations, and communities; and systemic rethinking of institutional biases.

**3. REDEEM DEMOCRACY WITH CREATIVITY.** *The recent presidential campaign revealed a stark and alarming truth: public space is being distorted and democracy eroded by the treatment of big money as protected political speech.*

Virtually all of our systems need an infusion of creativity to enable and serve a vibrant, functioning democracy. The culture of politics needs the full participation of artists.

We call for two innovations: (1) Support arts-based modes of political dialogue and deliberation, modeled on the USDAC Super PAC; (2) Hack democracy with creativity, deploying powerful methods developed through design labs, hackathons, and other collective creativity approaches to call for arts-based redesign of our electoral system to reduce the influence of entrenched money and vastly expand the level and diversity of participation. In a moment marked by both activism on the rise and less than half the eligible voters 17-29 taking part in 2016’s Presidential primaries, democratic participation of young people offers both a pivotal opportunity and concern; these initiatives should be shaped and infused with their participation.

**4. REFORM THE CULTURE OF PUNISHMENT.** *The U.S. has earned the nickname “Incarceration Nation” for our massive prison population, punitive sentencing practices, the scale of our criminal justice system and the associated taxpayer-borne costs.* From people of color being killed in police custody to a school-to-prison pipeline, this is not a single problem, but a complex, interlocking set of problems that deny African Americans and other people of color full cultural citizenship: feeling welcome in one’s own country or community, receiving equal recognition for value and investment in the common culture, equity in cultural representation, and full human rights.

We call for support through a new Creative Breakthrough Fund for artistic creation and learning opportunities to change the criminal justice system, focusing on arts-based projects created to align social attitudes with awareness of Incarceration Nation and its impact, and positive actions to ameliorate and respond to it.

### **5. INVEST IN BELONGING AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP.**

*Our chief cultural deficit is belonging.* How many Americans feel deprived of full cultural citizenship on account of race, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability, orientation, or other categories that experience social exclusion? To sustain a functioning civil society that even aspires to this aim, the challenge of belonging and dis-belonging must be acknowledged and addressed.

We call for five innovations: (1) Public and private entities should adopt a Policy on Belonging (a model policy appears

as an appendix to the full platform); (2) Support long-term artists' residencies at the neighborhood level by artists with experience and skill in community cultural development, engaging both local culture-bearers and visiting artists who share the values of placekeeping; (3) Support community-based centers that engage people directly in art-making and art experiences; (4) support creative use of underused spaces such as schools, houses of worship, and public plazas; and (5) Repurpose disused spaces such as vacant lots and empty storefronts as pop-up community cultural centers. All of these initiatives should explicitly include meaningful roles for young people, who will make our collective cultural future one of belonging or dis-belonging.

**6. INTEGRATE COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE WORK OF ARTISTS INTO ALL SOCIAL PROGRAMS AFFECTING CULTURE.** *Across the U.S., we see rips in social fabric tear communities apart.* Anti-immigrant feeling obscures the positive impacts of immigration; rural communities lose their younger generation for lack of opportunity; in urban centers, people fear crossing the invisible boundaries dividing neighborhoods. These are cultural issues that demand multidimensional creative responses to bring people into authentic, equitable, constructive dialogue.

We call for two innovations: (1) Develop learning experiences and materials that communicate essential content about artists' work and value in advancing social goods, using the language and ways of learning relevant professions favor; and (2) Incorporate artists with relevant skills and experience into all programs and initiatives related to social well-being—policing, education, health care, environmental protection, community development, and other social sectors. Artists can be sustained in these roles not just through paychecks, as we advocate in proposal 2 above, but through subsidized housing and other forms of in-kind support.

**7. SUPPORT ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO NATURAL AND CIVIL EMERGENCIES.** *The USDAC will soon release a Rapid Artistic Response Toolkit offering guidance to artists and creative organizers who support communities facing natural or civil disasters,* be they floods or protests and crackdowns focusing on police-related killings.

We call for three innovations: (1) Ensure that funders, disaster relief agencies, law enforcement, and arts and cultural agencies and organizations recognize the crucial value of arts-based rapid response and begin providing the resources

necessary to sustain it, bridging the gap that currently exists; (2) integrate cultural strategies in longterm recovery and resiliency planning; and (3) Provide adequate training for all parties through higher education and community and professional education programs, equipping artists to respond with creativity and sensitivity to situations that may leave people fearful, confused, or even paralyzed; and equipping relief agencies and responders to support and console affected communities with the power of artistic engagement.

**8. ADOPT A CULTURAL IMPACT STUDY.** *Community development policy is marred by a widespread proclivity to see communities of color and low-income communities as disposable in the face of economic "progress."* Longstanding neighborhoods and cultural and social fabric are demolished to make way for new freeways or sports stadiums. Longtime residents are displaced by gentrification. The disturbing fact is that culture has no legal standing in such decisions, no grounds for protection.

We call on all agencies and organizations with public planning responsibility to adopt a Cultural Impact Study (CIS) for every project with potential negative cultural impact, assessing impact on cultural fabric just as do Environmental Impact Studies with respect to the natural environment. A model Cultural Impact Study resolution appears as an appendix to the full platform.

**9. RECONCEIVE EDUCATION TO SUPPORT CREATIVITY'S CENTRAL ROLE.** *We're emerging from an era in the annals of education in which skills seen as "hard" (science, technology, engineering, math: STEM), those required for certain types of employment and measurable with standardized tests, were valued above other subjects. Increasingly, these notions—that the primary purpose of education is banking knowledge for job preparation, that the most important learning can be acquired by rote—are being discredited.*

We call for four innovations: (1) Recognize and support creativity as an integral capacity for all public and private education; (2) Invest in jobs for teaching artists, artist-educators working in both school and community settings; (3) Include curriculum devised by and for teaching artists and artists working in participatory, community-based contexts in every higher education program engaging artists, starting with first-year orientation; and (4) Support community-based purpose-built curriculum for community cultural development practitioners.

**10. ADOPT A BASIC INCOME GRANT.** *Economic challenges for artists and cultural organizers are the same as for other workers.* The current system mandates overproduction, often exacerbated by under-compensation. This is not special pleading for artists: in virtually every field, decision-makers fail to prioritize necessary time for reflection, restoration, and conviviality. It's a challenge to discern, integrate, and act on cultural development needs or other social goods when competition for survival eats what could otherwise be time for creativity, connection, and pleasure.

We call on Federal and state governments to introduce a basic income grant covering basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, medical care) and available without a means test or conditions. The full platform contains links to a wealth of domestic and international resources demonstrating the workability and affordability of this proposal.

**PAYING FOR CHANGE.** *New initiatives require new infusions of resources.* Our recommendations may touch on differing social possibilities—democratic revival, racial justice, education, and more. But the underlying idea and need are the same, to support art action research and creative innovation in building cultural democracy, addressing climate crisis, bringing about a social compact of justice and equity.

The most serious challenges we face as a culture are extremely convoluted, multifaceted, and resistant to solutions. We certainly need more dialogue and collaboration between Citizen Artists and existing public and private funders and policymakers. And to address our formidable challenges, we need new income sources.

We call for four: (1) An advertising tax; (2) A Robin Hood tax on financial transactions; (3) Public and private funders joining forces to establish a Creative Breakthrough Fund to recognize and support arts-based experiments that can lead to expanded investment in promising innovations taken to scale; and (4) Social Impact Bonds.

**THE DREAM AND REALITY OF CULTURAL DEMOCRACY.** Since the USDAC's public launch in the fall of 2013, we've engaged in serious play, both local organizing and national actions. Community members of every age, race, gender, orientation, ability, origin, and condition have joined in dreaming our ways toward a society that embraces our rich particularity of difference, one that lives out the democratic covenant that champions equity, nurtures belonging, and embraces our full-on potential as a people. We have been

affirmed in core understandings: that culture is the arena in which we can discover and articulate common cause, and that artists can be powerful midwives to the future of possibility so many passionately desire.

The obstacles include rigidly conventional thinking that misses the important connections between art and culture and our collective challenges; and a too-narrow understanding that consigns artists' work to the status of social frill instead of valuing it as essential social imagination and creativity.

We close with a call addressed equally to artists and cultural institutions and to every other individual and group committed to social and environmental justice. Culture is not a special interest. We want to deploy the power of these ideas to advance your aims, working together.

*Please join us. Endorse, share, and act on this platform. Cultural democracy demands nothing less.*

**THIS IS AN ACT OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION. ADD YOURS.**

Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union  
Give me shelter in this fractured Union  
Stitch up these worn bones  
Open my mouth  
Rip this silence from my foreign tongue  
Move this wedge of indifference  
Show me a sign that I am home  
Take away our boxing ring of conflict  
where we bloody each other with pride and prejudice  
Put out a welcome mat

Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union  
For I too am a sister and a prodigal son  
I've walked the earth and need to settle  
Give me space to be  
Let me be  
let me be in this United Place of America.

**FROM POET TRAPETA MAYSON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE 2016 POETIC ADDRESS TO THE NATION**