



# The ARTIST as LEADER

The YBCA's nimble response to the pandemic is reflected in a work installed outside its walls last year for safe viewing: "The Monument of Living Memory," 2020, by Caleb Duarte and Stela Ones. Says YBCA: "Experience the work 24/7. Always free. No appointment necessary."

**Y**ERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS OPENED IN 1993 TO SERVE as the cultural anchor for the Yerba Buena Gardens neighborhood in the heart of San Francisco. Ever since, YBCA has worked to support artists in their role as catalysts for social and cultural change. Since Deborah Cullinan joined YBCA as CEO in 2013, the organization has sought to shift social and political power to artists in service of communities to advance equity, health and well-being.

Cullinan sees artists as an underutilized leadership asset. Just as government often seeks the expertise of business executives, it should enlist artists—and art itself—to help solve society's most vexing problems. "We need the arts to be 100% at the table and

A conversation between Brunswick Partner **PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON** and YBCA CEO **DEBORAH CULLINAN.**

# “THE IDEA THAT ARTISTS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE IN THE WORLD IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN MY PERSONAL LIFE.”

part of the conversation in the Executive Office of the President,” Cullinan says in an interview with Philip Delves Broughton, Brunswick Partner and Group Head of Content, and bestselling author of four books.

Prior to joining YBCA, Cullinan served as the Executive Director of San Francisco’s Intersection for the Arts. Under her leadership, Intersection became a powerful arts-focused community development organization committed to radical partnerships across sectors to achieve equitable community change. She is a co-founder of CultureBank, co-chair of the San Francisco Arts Alliance, Vice Chair of Yerba Buena Gardens Conservancy, Field Leader in Residence at Arizona State University, member of the board of Human-Made, and the Community Arts Stabilization Trust.

## Where were you and YBCA at the start of 2020?

In the summer of 2019, our board officially ratified an organizational transformation for YBCA. This evolution was years in the making, as we steered programming away from siloed artistic disciplines and toward a holistic unification of art and social justice. It was to think of ourselves as a center for art, action and progress.

We were building on a process of opening up. In 2015, we launched a new initiative called the YBCA 100 which begins with a collaborative approach to developing a list of the people and collectives who are most inspiring to our staff and community. Each year, we invite people to nominate everyday heroes—artists, activists and community leaders.

We also started a YBCA Fellows program, opening up a call to artists and creative changemakers to join us in a process of collective inquiry. This was initiated as part of a bottom-up approach to curation and programming as opposed to top-down. Shortly after, we announced a senior fellows program, in which we invested in two artists over a long period of time to help us transform as an organization and to pursue their own lines of inquiry—with few strings attached.

So by the beginning of 2020, we were moving away from transactional relationships with artists to deeper, game-changing relationships, centering these artists as leaders in our organization and working to create the conditions for them to incubate big ideas with the potential to have impact in the world.

## Where did this idea of opening up YBCA come from?

The idea that artists are essential to the change we want to see in the world is deeply rooted in my personal life, and that of everyone at YBCA, and our ongoing work. When I took my previous job at Intersection for the Arts, I did not have formal professional experience in the arts and so I had a fresh perspective, an outsider’s angle.

Intersection was a venerable organization with significant

history and yet it was struggling and disconnected from the community around it. I was struck by the fact that an organization that had been so impactful could be so vulnerable, struggling for relevance and connection.

I learned quickly that many arts organizations seemed to think of arts programming and community programming as separate things. Yet, from my outsider’s angle, the greatest opportunity was to build community and constituency through participation and by opening up the process of artistic inquiry and production to the public. My early lack of experience and, perhaps, naïve perspective, turned out to be my strength. We took the locks off the doors and focused on arts and community development. We created the conditions for artists to do really powerful things, and we have a similar spirit now at YBCA.

At YBCA, our urgency to change was based on a combination of our commitment to the idea that artists and arts organizations can lead the way and a belief that institutions built on a colonial past are capable of change. We are committed to doing the hard work, addressing our history and healing forward.

## In practical terms, what kinds of things does YBCA do now that it didn’t do before?

We acknowledge that we are not a museum and we are also not a traditional presenter of the performing arts. We are trying to be an arts and civic institution that really centers the artist in the community around us.

We created the YBCA 100 as a way for us to democratize our curatorial structure. Our team across the organization engages with the public to determine who makes the list. Our audiences



tell us who they want to see in our programming, and we listen. Only through this collaboration with our community do the true artistic visionaries reveal themselves, and YBCA is then there to support and amplify their work.

Our work is not contained within the physical boundaries of our space. One of the strengths we bring to the public realm is our advocacy—our ability to collaborate across sectors and spread awareness of the crucial role artists and arts organizations can play to create significant change in people’s everyday lives. Just one example, we are the only arts organization involved in the Well Being Alliance, a coalition of 25 organizations working around the country on intergenerational well-being.

Another example of many, we have partnered with several city agencies and community-based organizations to support food justice in our city. We have worked with the Tenderloin Healthy Corner Store Coalition here in San Francisco to help convert liquor stores to stores that make fruits, vegetables and everyday groceries more readily accessible. At YBCA, we deployed young artists into the community to break down barriers and build trust and a sense of connection between the residents and healthier food choices. We also helped transform these stores into beautiful spaces to encourage and inspire the community to frequent.

### And when the pandemic struck?

When I got the phone call that the city was going into shelter in place, we organized immediately into a rapid response to help the organization shift into work from home.

At one point, I went for a walk with one of our senior fellows, the choreographer Liz Lerman, who reminded me that we are most inventive when we are falling. With this in mind, even as the crisis unfolded, I didn’t want to let go of the changes we were already making. In fact, I realized that what was really hard before in terms of organizational transformation might actually be easier now. Because as we were falling and the world was falling apart, we were going to be able to let go of a lot of things.

Our financial situation meant we had to make a lot of hard decisions about people. When our PPP loan ended, we had to let go of more than a third of our staff, most of whom were in positions related to live events. We had no choice but to think differently. Things were not going to be the same.

We rapidly organized ourselves to provide relief to artists. We partnered with three organizations in Oakland—Zoo Labs, Black Joy Parade and Always Win Together—to raise money and get it directly into the hands of artists, particularly artists of color and LGBTQIA+, who were one paycheck away from a life-changing

## “WE ARE MOST INVENTIVE WHEN WE ARE FALLING.”



Artists promoting public health in the Yerba Buena Gardens neighborhood.

# “YOU INTEGRATE THE ARTS AND THE VALUE OF THE ARTS INTO EVERYTHING. YOU ARE A CIVIC LEADER AND THAT IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ARTS LEADER.”

event. We got thank you videos and notes from the artists we were able to grant. We also built the Artists’ Power Center, a digital platform to help artists and cultural workers navigate the relief available, so that they could keep working and stay resilient.

In our community, we worked with the Yerba Buena Gardens Conservancy to quickly create a commission program to hire underemployed artists to create socially distanced and safe art projects that would bring joy and inspiration to our Yerba Buena Gardens neighborhood.

As part of Governor Newsom’s Jobs and Business Recovery Task Force, I was able to connect with him and leaders in his office around the powerful role that artists can play in healing, recovery and regeneration. Building on a pilot program called the SF Creative Corps launched in San Francisco with our Mayor, I was grateful to build on great ideas that were taking shape across the country and work in collaboration with colleagues across California. I am so thrilled that the Governor’s proposed budget includes a \$15 million one-time General Fund to the California Arts Council (CAC) (\$5 million in 2020-21 and \$10 million in 2021-22) to support a state-wide pilot program, California Creative Corps, intended to fuel positivity, regain public trust, and inspire safe and healthy behavior across California’s diverse populations.

Throughout the pandemic, we have been searching for nimble opportunities to marry relief funds with economic opportunities for artists, remaining steadfast to our vision that artists are essential to community health and well-being.

## How do you know it’s working?

Because artists are telling us this is what they need. You look for need and demand. Is what we are offering in service of the needs and demand that people have right now? At YBCA, it is.

## And what did you have to leave behind?

Our work is very much about shifting power in the arts, shifting the way we all understand and help shape and reshape institutions. We want to shift away from inviting the public to participate as a passive witness, to the public helping lead the way.

As we think of the future, we are reimagining YBCA to be an ongoing dynamic, open process environment where artists are invited to share their work with the public. We are building an ecosystem where artists are given the tools to prototype their visions with direct community feedback, all taking place in a public square. We’re essentially opening the doors, centering artists to lead the way, and inviting the public to join us on a creative journey.

## Isn’t that nerve-wracking?

It’s not nerve-wracking for me. But it is for others. Part of the organizational transformation has been to try to address that, to

give as much clarity as we can and to allow people to see the value in these new ways of producing culture.

## Do you worry that your work is becoming too political?

Every choice we make is political. Whom you invite, whom you do not invite, is political. If it’s not political I don’t know what is. So for me, you integrate the arts and the value of the arts into everything. You are a civic leader and that is what it means to be an arts leader.

## When you attend meetings with political and business leaders, what do you say that is most convincing to them?

It’s the strength of the arts that’s convincing. It is the power of the arts to catalyze our collective imagination. It is to say, you need imagination to forge new and better paths forward. How do we help people understand and value the role of artists as provocateurs, people who think outside of boxes? Folks who can work in deep ways to help transform us.

The arts as an economic force may capture some people’s attention, but it doesn’t make us distinct. Many sectors have economic impact, so what makes us distinct has to be understood. This distinction has to be related to what the most pressing issues and challenges are. Why do we matter? I would argue that the arts have the potential to lead the way in terms of racial justice and cultural equity in this country.

Artists of color, indigenous artists, artists who have been working around the most important cultural traditions in our country, we need them to lead the way. At the same time, our institutions are built on a foundation of white supremacy. We have to reconcile with that history and let the artists lead our transformation. Our work as an organization now is to think about what kind of policies and structures we need for us to heal as a country.

## What is your message to the new administration?

We need the arts to be 100% at the table and part of the conversation in the Executive Office of the President. That alone would be extraordinary for our country. You’d have the musicians and the poets and the artists helping to lead the way. We need structures, systems and policies in the arts that help drive healing, racial justice, economic justice, and that work to address climate change. And, we need the arts to be integrated across sector and policy areas into a more equitable and just recovery. The depth, breadth and power of the arts should be fully realized in service of a national agenda to build a better future. ♦

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**PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON** is a Partner at Brunswick and Group Head of Content. His books, including *Ahead of the Curve*, have appeared on *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists. He holds a BA from Oxford University in Classics and an MBA from Harvard Business School.